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A TV debate we'll never see

When Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, invited President Bush to engage in a "direct television debate," the White House predictably responded by calling the offer "a diversion." But even though this debate will never happen, it's worth contemplating.

Both presidents are propaganda junkies – or, more precisely, propaganda pushers – so any such debate would overdose the audience with self-righteous arrogance. The two presidents are too much alike.

Each man, in his own way, is a fundamentalist: so sure of his own moral superiority that he's willing to push his country into a military confrontation. This assessment may be a bit unfair to Ahmadinejad, who hasn't yet lied his nation into war; the American president is far more experienced in that department.

By saying that it's an open question whether Nazi Germany really perpetrated a Holocaust, the Iranian president has left no doubt that he is dangerously ignorant of history. Bush's ignorance of history is decidedly more subtle – though, judging from his five and a half years in the Oval Office, hardly less dangerous.

Ahmadinejad questions whether a huge historical event actually occurred. Bush doesn't bother to question key historical facts. He just ignores them – apparently on the safe assumption that few in the U.S. news media will object very strenuously.

Overall, American journalists pay only selective attention to history. Often they're too busy helping to lay groundwork for the USA's next war effort.

So, we hear little about the direct CIA role in organizing the coup that toppled Iran's democratically elected president, Mohammed Mossadegh, in 1953. Or about the torture and murder inflicted on Iranian dissenters by the secret police of the U.S.-installed Shah for the next quarter of a century, until his overthrow in 1979.

When I was in Tehran last year, during the presidential election campaign that ended with Ahmadinejad's victory, the ghosts of the coup that destroyed Iranian democracy were everywhere. The nightmare of the Shah has been replaced by the nightmare of the Islamic Republic – both made possible by the coup that Washington hatched.

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But the U.S. president copes with such unpleasant history by simply – and simple-mindedly – refusing to acknowledge it. And American news media routinely go along for the detour. The avoidance makes Iranian hostility toward the U.S. government seem totally irrational.

Meanwhile, the commentaries from major media keep echoing unsubstantiated claims from Washington as if they were facts. Even mainstream outlets inclined to urge restraint give enormous ground to the war planners.

On Aug. 25, while ostensibly sounding a note of sobriety about Capitol Hill bombast, a New York Times editorial flatly declared: "Iran's fundamentalist regime and its nuclear ambitions pose a strategic threat to the United States." The newspaper added: "It's obvious that Iran wants nuclear weapons, has lied about its program and views America as an enemy." But it should be no less obvious that the United States and its ally Israel – both with a record of lying about their own military intentions – have nuclear arsenals and view Iran as an enemy.

More hawkish than the Times, the Washington Post printed an editorial on Aug. 24 warning Russia and China that they "should not undercut Western efforts to defuse the Iran crisis by peaceful means." With an oddly menacing twist, the editorial proclaimed: "No responsible power has anything to gain from further tension in the Middle East, still less an eventual war over Iran's nuclear ambitions."

We should remember how the same newspaper wielded its editorial cudgel the last time the White House was laying groundwork for a military attack. On Feb. 6, 2003, the Post – under the headline "Irrefutable" – told readers in no uncertain terms: "After Secretary of State Colin L. Powell's presentation to the United Nations Security Council yesterday, it is hard to imagine how anyone could doubt that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction."

Such limited imagination continues to infuse the Post's editorial outlook – and, for that matter, the world views of most U.S. media outlets. The fantasy of a debate between Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and George W. Bush might be strange, but the reality of American journalism is grotesque as Washington escalates its extremely dangerous confrontation with Tehran.

Norman Solomon's latest book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," was published in paperback this summer. For information, go to: www.warmadeeasy.com