

OCTOBER 2

Iraq is not a quagmire

The uproar over Bob Woodward's new book has intensified the media focus on a basic controversy that's summed up this way: Is Iraq a quagmire?

Like many other debates that flourish in American mass media, the standard answers on both sides are wrong – because the question bypasses human realities.

Most obviously, Iraq is not a swamp; it's a place where real people live and die. They are not metaphors, and neither is their country. Iraqi people exist quite apart from the roles imputed to them by politicians and journalists in Washington.

But "quagmire" serves as a kind of mental framework for where most U.S. media coverage has remained.

Forget the American Century. This is the American Narcissism.

You see, no matter what happens in Iraq, it's mostly about us – spelled U.S.; the United States. We're encouraged to perceive that Iraq is most important, at least implicitly, because of what it means for the USA: its image in other countries, the deaths and wounds of its soldiers, the political strength of the president and, this fall, the likely effects on the midterm congressional elections.

During September, as the Nexis media database attests, the USA's sizeable newspapers and wire services ran articles referring to Iraq as a "quagmire" several times a day. Readers of the New York Times have seen such references on an average of once a week this year. Overall, major U.S. media outlets have associated Iraq with the term "quagmire" thousands of times in 2006.

Some of those references are from war supporters eager to dispute the notion that "quagmire" is applicable to what's going on in Iraq. They challenge the relevance of the word yet do not hesitate to recycle other clichés that were also used in public debate about the Vietnam War four decades ago – and so we hear that the United States must "stay the course" and must not "cut and run."

But to focus arguments on whether the Iraq war should be called a "quagmire" is to flatten moral issues, transmuting them into matters of strategy and efficacy. That may sound like appropriate journalistic attention to practical politics. However, if a war is

wrong, the wisdom of supporting it shouldn't hinge on whether it's a quagmire or a cakewalk.

Criticisms of the war that accuse it of being a "quagmire" can be disputed with lofty calls to persevere – doing the difficult right thing – until conditions on the ground change, the Iraqi government gets stronger and so forth. But opposition to the war that turns on morality cannot be so easily deflected in such ways.

The extreme American self-absorption of the "quagmire" debate lends itself to ostensible solutions that shift – but perpetuate – the U.S. government's central role in the carnage. Reigning political manipulator Karl Rove, whose Machiavellian electoral calculations have had extraordinary leverage over the current administration's foreign policy, is very likely to seek further U.S. reliance on air power that uses the latest Pentagon technologies as blunt and lethal instruments in Iraq.

A key goal will be to bring down U.S. casualty rates and reduce American troop levels in Iraq while the people of that country suffer further deaths and destruction.

If the Iraq war is primarily framed as a problem because of what it's doing to Americans, the "solutions" could make the war seem like less of a quagmire even while more Iraqi people pay with their lives. Media arguments over whether Iraq is a quagmire turn the spotlight away from the human calamities that Iraqis are experiencing on a daily basis, while American taxpayers continue to subsidize Uncle Sam's deadly machinations.

Sometimes the fancy words don't provide the kind of clarity that we need. "Quagmire" may sound sophisticated and realpolitik; many journalists and pundits seem to think so. But that doesn't really get to the essence of the war.

It's not a quagmire.

It's wrong.

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