

DECEMBER 5

Media sham for Iraq war – it's happening again

The lead-up to the invasion of Iraq has become notorious in the annals of American journalism. Even many reporters, editors and commentators who fueled the drive to war in 2002 and early 2003 now acknowledge that major media routinely tossed real journalism out the window in favor of boosting war.

But it's happening again.

The current media travesty is a drumbeat for the idea that the U.S. war effort must keep going. And again, in its news coverage, the New York Times is a bellwether for the latest media parade to the cadence of the warfare state.

During the run-up to the invasion, news stories repeatedly told about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction while the Times and other key media outlets insisted that their coverage was factually reliable. Now the same media outlets insist that their coverage is analytically reliable.

Instead of authoritative media information about aluminum tubes and mobile weapons labs, we're now getting authoritative media illumination of why a swift pullout of U.S. troops isn't realistic or desirable. The result is similar to what was happening four years ago – a huge betrayal of journalistic responsibility.

The WMD spin was in sync with official sources and other establishment-sanctified experts, named and unnamed. The anti-pullout spin is in sync with official sources and other establishment-sanctified experts, named and unnamed.

During the weeks since the midterm election, the New York Times news coverage of Iraq policy options has often been heavy-handed, with carefully selective sourcing for prefab conclusions. Already infamous is the Nov. 15 front-page story by Michael Gordon under the headline "Get Out of Iraq Now? Not So Fast, Experts Say." A similar technique was at play Dec. 1 with yet another "News Analysis," this time by reporter David Sanger, headlined "The Only Consensus on Iraq: Nobody's Leaving Right Now."

Typically, in such reportage, the sources harmonizing with the media outlet's analysis are chosen from the cast of political characters who helped drag the United States into making war on Iraq in the first place.

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What's now going on in mainline news media is some kind of repetition compulsion. And, while media professionals engage in yet another round of conformist opportunism, many people will pay with their lives.

With so many prominent American journalists navigating their stories by the lights of big Washington stars, it's not surprising that so much of the news coverage looks at what happens in Iraq through the lens of the significance for American power.

Viewing the horrors of present-day Iraq with star-spangled eyes, New York Times reporters John Burns and Kirk Semple wrote – in the lead sentence of a front-page "News Analysis" on Nov. 29 – that "American military and political leverage in Iraq has fallen sharply."

The second paragraph of the Baghdad-dated article reported: "American fortunes here are ever more dependent on feuding Iraqis who seem, at times, almost heedless to American appeals."

The third paragraph reported: "It is not clear that the United States can gain new traction in Iraq..."

And so it goes – with U.S. media obsessively focused on such concerns as "American military and political leverage," "American fortunes" and whether "the United States can gain new traction in Iraq."

With that kind of worldview, no wonder so much news coverage is serving nationalism instead of journalism.