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ColdType

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BY DANNY SCHECHTER
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DURING the 60's, some elements of the anti-war movement believed that it was time to bring the war home. The idea — give America a taste of what Vietnam was suffering by launching an armed resistance. Their “blows against the empire” were misguided and self-destructive, as even most of the surviving wannabe guerrilla warriors now agree.

Oddly enough, the Bush Administration has become obsessed with that 60's notion and is applying its tactics to achieve opposite results. They are bringing the war home — by using wartime methods to manage domestic media during the elections, and turn American hearts and minds in favor of their war.

The Republican Party earlier this month announced it is reapplying to domestic politics the lessons learned at the Iraq War Coalition Press Center, the centerpiece of a well-crafted propaganda system.

This is not entirely new. During the war, corporate PR veteran and Pentagon media spokesperson Victoria Clarke told The Wall Street Journal that she was running her operation as if it were a political campaign.

And now that we realize how specious most of the arguments for the war were, we can see that politics and PR (along with oil and regime change) were what it was about. It wasn't much of an armed clash since the other side folded its tent through bribes and bullying when the invasion began, only to reappear when it ended.

Clarke was so impressive at orchestrating the media that a media outlet has now hired her. She joined CNN as a correspondent. (The Pentagon briefer-in-chief during Gulf War I, former assistant secretary of defense Pete Williams, joined NBC News in the war's aftermath.)

Now, The New York Observer tells of an impending merger between military media strategy and domestic news management. Ben Smith reports: "We're looking at embedding reporters, we're looking at new and interesting camera angles," Jim Wilkinson said recently in the quick, confidential drawl reporters got used to at the U.S. Central Command in Doha, Qatar. But while the Republican operative spent much of the year in desert camouflage as General Tommy Franks' director of strategic communications, he's now in Brooks Brothers mufti in foreign territory, New York."

Mr. Wilkinson started last month as the director of communications for the Republican National Convention, which will take place from Aug. 30 to Sept. 2 next year. His office, on the 18th floor over Madison Square Garden, is, according to Smith, "furnished with the essentials: leather-bound Bible, Yankee cap, Fox News on the flat-screen TV."

There are signs that media organizations are waking up or, more likely, being unleashed from the handcuffs of patriotic coverage rituals embedded in war coverage the way those 7th inning renditions of “God Bless America” infiltrated baseball games.

According to the Observer’s Smith, there was rage in the press corps at those Doha briefings, even if we rarely saw it. The BBC film *War Spin* captured it well, but this documentary was not shown in America. New York Magazine media critic Michael Wolff’s on-camera challenge to General Vincent Brooks did come through, but only as an isolated instance.

Smith says he had plenty of company: “Reporters seethed at [Wilkinson] during the war, and not covertly. Reporters there barked and protested. Many are still brutally angry at the ‘No comment’ after ‘No comment’ they received in Doha as their embedded colleagues broke news in the field and Mr. Rumsfeld gave press conferences at the Pentagon. Doha was, to them, a kind of biosphere of non-news.”

Now that some in the press are rediscovering their skepticism, the Bush Administration is shifting strategies — from seducing journalists to bypassing them all together. Frank Rich writes about this in *The New York Times*:

He begins by noting that the President himself says he doesn’t even read the press or watch TV, He told Fox News’ Brit Hume: “The best way to get the news is from objective sources. And the most objective sources I have are people on my staff who tell me what’s happening in the world.”

After nearly three years, reporters who cover politics are realizing there is no there there. Writes Rich: “Until recently, the administration had often gotten what it wanted, especially on television,

and not just on afternoon talk shows. From 9/11 through the fall of Saddam, the obsequiousness became so thick that even Terry Moran, the ABC News White House correspondent, said his colleagues looked ‘like zombies’ during the notorious pre-shock-and-awe Bush news conference of March 6, 2003.”

As criticisms of his policies could no longer be contained, Bush went over the heads of the Washington press corps by doing interviews via satellite with local TV anchors, who presumably follow the details the least. This little trick was first used by his father during the 1992 presidential campaign. The word has now gone to his “team” not to book Administration Bigs on so-called hostile shows like Nightline or Frontline.

Instead, they will continue to rely on the Sunday Beltway blather talk shows as their venue du jour. This prompts Rich to observe: “When an administration is hiding in a no-news bunker, how do you find the news? The first place to look, we’re starting to learn, is any TV news show on which Ms. Rice, Mr. Card, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell and Donald Rumsfeld are not appearing. If they’re before a camera, you can assume that the White House has deemed the venue a safe one — a spin zone.”

The rumblings of dissent within the ranks of more independent media are spreading to mainstream outlets. Rich is just one prominent voice following the rising chorus of media anger that for months has energized commentary at media blogs and webzines such as Cursor.org, Altercation and Media Musings. Perhaps those within the “big news industry” are beginning to take notice.


In this media war, the Administration seems to still be way ahead, but the upstart media Marlins could still vanquish the industry’s powerful imperial Yankees in the next game or the one

after that. Think of the upset at the World Series as a political metaphor.

Just as Iraq policy is unraveling, the Administration's media management strategies unravel with it. Those of us with a memory remember Vietnam, the war in which the media began as a cheerleader and ended up presiding over its own funeral.

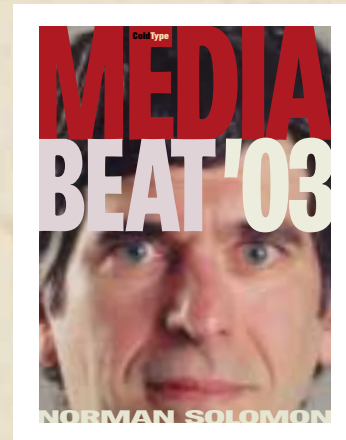
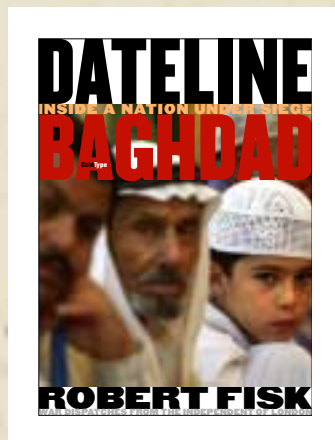
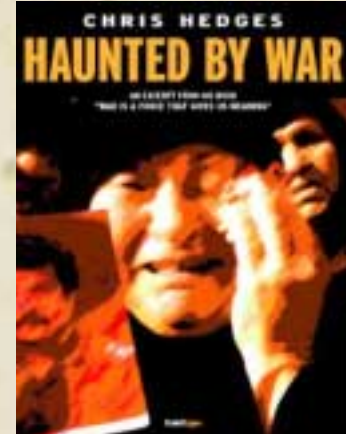
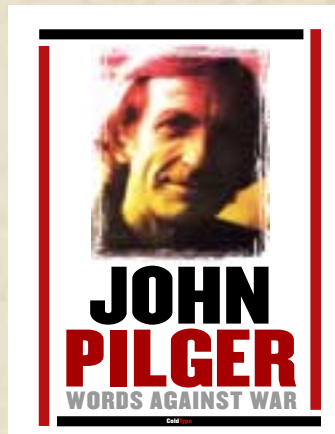
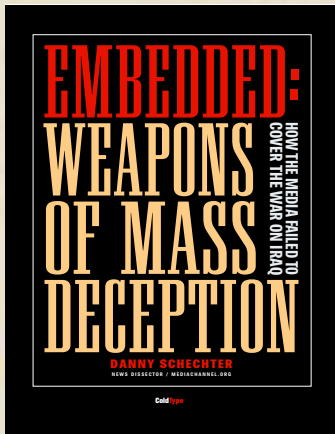
The war has come home.

This is not a parallel that is lost on Mr. Rich who concludes: "At the tender age of six months, the war in Iraq is not remotely a Vietnam. But from the way the administration tries to manage the news against all reality, even that irrevocable reality encased in flag-draped coffins, you can only wonder if it might yet persuade the audience at home that we're mired in another Tet after all.



— *News Dissector* Danny Schechter writes daily for *Mediachannel.org*. His latest book, "*Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception*," is out this week from *Prometheus Books*.

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