


The
Media
Marches
to
War

“Long before
this war on
Iraq is over,
we will know its reassuring
code name. But we will not
know the names of all the
innocent people who have
been killed in our names.”

N O R M A N S O L O M O N

The Media Marches to War

NORMAN SOLOMON

ColdType

Introduction

Norman Solomon has, over the past decade, established himself as a worthy successor to previous generations of American media critics such as George Seldes and I. F. Stone, his weekly *Media Beat* columns providing a much-needed counterpoint to the often partisan political coverage of the U.S. mainstream media.

This collection of *Media Beat* columns from the final months of 2002 highlights the problems that arise for democracy when the most widely-disseminated media have become obsessed by trivialities and, at the same time, have abdicated their responsibilities in helping to create a knowledgeable and informed society.

Instead of engaging the government and people in debate about the build-up to another bloody attack on the people of Iraq, the media seem intent on being cheerleaders for the Bush administration's march to war.

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AUGUST 1, 2002

War and forgetfulness – a bloody media game

Three-and-a-half years ago, some key information about U.N. weapons inspectors in Iraq briefly surfaced on the front pages of American newspapers – and promptly vanished. Now, with righteous war drums beating loudly in Washington, let's reach deep down into the news media's Orwellian memory hole and retrieve the story.

“U.S. Spied on Iraq Under U.N. Cover, Officials Now Say,” a front-page New York Times headline announced on Jan. 7, 1999. The article was unequivocal: “United States officials said today that American spies had worked undercover on teams of United Nations arms inspectors ferreting out secret Iraqi weapons programs.... By being part of the team, the Americans gained a first-hand knowledge of the investigation and a protected presence inside Baghdad.”

A day later, a follow-up Times story pointed out: “Reports that the United States used the United Nations weapons inspectors in Iraq as cover for spying on Saddam Hussein are dimming any chances that the inspection system will survive.”

With its credibility badly damaged by the spying, the U.N. inspection system did not survive. Another factor in its demise was the U.S. government's declaration that sanctions against Iraq would remain in place whether or not Baghdad fully complied with the inspection regimen.

But such facts don't assist the conditioned media reflex of blaming everything on Saddam Hussein. No matter how hard you search major American media databases of the last couple of years for mention of the spy caper, you'll come up nearly empty. George Orwell would have understood.

Instead of presenting a complete relevant summary of past events, mainstream U.S. journalists and politicians are glad to focus on tactical pros and cons of various aggressive military scenarios. While a few pundits raise cautious warning flags, even the most absurd Swiss-cheese rationales for violently forcing a “regime change” in Baghdad routinely pass without challenge.

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In late July, a Wall Street Journal essay by a pair of ex-Justice Department attorneys claimed that the U.S. would be “fully within its rights” to attack Iraq and overthrow the regime – based on “the customary international law doctrine of anticipatory self-defense.” Of course, if we’re now supposed to claim that “anticipatory self-defense” is a valid reason for starting a war, then the same excuse could be used by the Iraqi government to justify an attack on the United States (even setting aside the reality that the U.S. has been bombing “no fly zones” inside Iraq for years).

Among the first to testify at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee’s recent hearing on Iraq was “strategy scholar” Anthony Cordesman, a former Pentagon and State Department official. He participated in the tradition of touting another round of taxpayer-funded carnage as a laudable innovation – “our first preemptive war.”

Speaking alongside Cordesman was Richard Butler, the head of the U.N. weapons inspection program in Iraq at the time that it was spying for Washington. At the Senate hearing, Butler suggested that perhaps the Russian government could be induced to tell Baghdad: “You will do serious arms control or you’re toast.”

Like countless other officials treated with great deference by the national press corps, Butler strives to seem suave and clever as he talks up the wisdom of launching high-tech attacks certain to incinerate troops and civilians. As a matter of routine, U.S. journalists are too discreet to bring up unpleasant pieces of history that don’t fit in with the slanted jigsaw picture of American virtue.

With many foreign-policy issues, major news outlets demonstrate a remarkable ability to downplay or totally jettison facts that Washington policymakers don’t want to talk about. The spy story that broke in early 1999 is a case in point. But the brief flurry of critical analysis that occurred at the time should now be revisited.

“That American spies have operations in Iraq should be no surprise,” a Hartford Courant editorial said on Jan. 10, 1999. “That the spies are using the United Nations as a cover is deplorable.”

While noting “Saddam Hussein’s numerous complaints that U.N. inspection teams included American spies were apparently not imaginary,” the newspaper mentioned that the espionage operatives “planted eavesdropping devices in hopes of monitoring forces that guarded Mr. Hussein as well as searching for hidden arms stockpiles.”

The U.S. news media quickly lost interest in that story. We should ask why. ■

AUGUST 9, 2002

Fending off the threat of peace

To fend off the threat of peace, determination is necessary. Elected officials and high-level appointees must work effectively with reporters and pundits. This is no time for the U.S. government to risk taking “yes” for an answer from Iraq. Guarding against the danger of peace, the Bush administration has moved the goalposts, quickly pounding them into the ground.

In early August, a State Department undersecretary swung a heavy mallet. “Let there be no mistake,” said John Bolton. “While we also insist on the reintroduction of the weapons inspectors, our policy at the same time insists on regime change in Baghdad – and that policy will not be altered, whether inspectors go in or not.”

A sinister cloud briefly fell over the sunny skies for war. The U.S. Congress got a public invitation. A letter from a top Iraqi official “said congressional visitors and weapons experts of their choice could visit any site in Iraq alleged to be used for development of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons,” USA Today reported.

Summing up the diplomatic overture, the front page of the New York Times informed readers that the letter “was apparently trying to pit legislators against the Bush administration” (a pithy phrase helping to quash a dastardly peace initiative). Later on, the article noted that “the letter said members of Congress could bring all the arms experts they wanted and should plan to stay three weeks.”

There may have been a moment of panic in Washington. On the face of it, the Aug. 5 invitation was unequivocally stating that members of the Senate and House – plus some of the best and most experienced weapons inspectors in the world – could go to Iraq and engage in a thorough inspection process. That’s similar to what the White House has been demanding of Iraq for many years.

The news had ominous potential. It could derail the war train gaining so much momentum this summer. But U.S. media coverage matched the bipartisan refusal by leaders in Congress to do anything but scorn the offer.

Even before describing the invitation from Iraq’s government, the first words of the

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USA Today news story on Aug. 6 called it “the latest Iraqi bid to complicate U.S. invasion plans.” That’s some reporting! When our most powerful politicians are hell-bent on starting a war, complete with human misery and death of unfathomable proportions, then the last thing they want is complications before the bloodshed gets underway.

Why should anyone in Washington try to defuse this crisis when we have such a clear opportunity to light such an enormous fuse in the Middle East?

Oh sure, here at home, there are always some people eager to unleash the dogs of peace. Not content to pray, they actually believe: Blessed be the peacemakers. They don’t defer to the machinery of war that grinds human beings as if they were mere sausage. They don’t make peace with how determined the Executive Branch must be – and how sheepish and even cowardly the members of Congress must be – so that the bombs can fall in all their glory.

One of the people who’s trying to impede the war drive is Scott Ritter, a former chief weapons inspector for the U.N. in Iraq. “To date,” Ritter says, “the Bush administration has been unable – or unwilling – to back up its rhetoric concerning the Iraqi threat with any substantive facts.”

In Britain, the press is failing to welcome the next war. On Aug. 4 in the Observer, foreign affairs editor Peter Beaumont wrote: “The question now appears to be not whether there will be a war, but when. The answer is that in war, as other matters, timing is all. For President George W. Bush that timing will be dictated by the demands of a domestic political agenda.”

A news story in the July 30 edition of the Financial Times began this way: “Rolf Ekeus, head of United Nations weapons inspections in Iraq from 1991-97, has accused the U.S. and other Security Council members of manipulating the U.N. inspections teams for their own political ends. The revelation by one of the most respected Swedish diplomats is certain to strengthen Iraq’s argument against allowing U.N. inspectors back into the country.”

Such reporting, if widely pursued on this side of the Atlantic, could seriously undermine the war planners. But don’t worry. The threat of peace is up against good ol’ professional news judgment here in the USA. ■

AUGUST 22, 2002

'Wag the puppy' – new twist in media war

Some people are suspicious that President Bush will go for a “wag the dog” strategy – boosting Republican prospects with a military assault on Iraq shortly before Election Day. But a modified approach now seems to be underway. Let’s call it “wag the puppy.” After a number of GOP luminaries blasted his administration’s war scenarios, Bush claimed to appreciate “a healthy debate.” The president offered assurances that he would consult with Congress rather than take sudden action. But his handlers were simply adapting to circumstances that probably make it impractical for the Pentagon to kill a lot of Iraqis prior to Nov. 5.

Before initiating vast new carnage abroad, the White House wants its propaganda siege to take hold at home. Countless hours of airtime and huge vats of ink are needed to do the trick. Like safecrackers trying first one combination and then another, the Bush team will continue to twirl the media dials till their war-making rationales click.

The most widely publicized critics of attacking Iraq are hardly inclined to withstand the hot rhetorical winds that would accompany the first U.S. missile strikes. Objections from the likes of Dick Arney and Brent Scowcroft are apt to swiftly morph into pseudo-patriotic deference if Bush gives the order for the initial terrorizing launch of missiles against Iraqi cities. And history gives the president ample reasons to believe that most hand-wringing punditry will turn into applause when the Pentagon begins its slaughter.

Delaying war is very different than preventing it. In fact, many of the arguments marshaled in the mainstream media against a precipitous attack on Iraq appear to be accepting the need for the U.S. government to afflict that country with massive violence. Whether on Capitol Hill or in media venues, most of the criticism seems largely concerned with style, timing and tactics.

Quite a bit of flak has also come from pro-war commentators who want Bush to get his militaristic act together. The bloodthirsty editor of The Atlantic magazine, Michael

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Kelly, used his Aug. 21 column on The Washington Post's op-ed page to lament "the president's refusal to wage a coherent campaign to win public – and, let's force the issue, congressional – approval for the war."

While President Bush huddled with hawks at the top of the pecking order at his Crawford ranch, war enthusiasts were on the offensive across the nation's media landscape. Their efforts were adding to a sustained volume of valuable news coverage. The mid-summer media focus on Iraq has offered tangible benefits for Shrub's party – including real progress in changing the subject.

The more that Iraq dominates front pages, magazine covers, news broadcasts and cable channels, the less space there is for such matters as the intensifying retirement worries of many Americans, the Wall Street scandals, and specific stories about entanglements that link Bush or Dick Cheney with malodorous corporate firms like Enron, Harken and Halliburton.

In August, the "healthy debate" over Iraq has displaced a range of negative economic stories from the top of the news. Bush's advisers would hardly mind if a similar pattern held through early November.

For the next couple of months, the president has domestic political incentives to keep "wagging the puppy" while floating a variety of unsubstantiated claims – like references to wispy dots that implausibly connect the Iraqi dictatorship and al Qaeda.

Meanwhile, sending more ships and aircraft to the Persian Gulf region can be calculated to evoke plenty of televised support-our-troops spectacles. With Old Glory in the background as tearful good-byes are exchanged at U.S. military ports and bases, how many politicians or journalists will challenge the manipulative tactics of the commander-in-chief?

Even if the White House doesn't sic the Pentagon on Iraqi people before the November elections, its efforts to boost pre-war fever between now and then could have enormous media impacts with big dividends at the polls. This fall, our country may see something short of a "wag the dog" extravaganza provided by leading officials of the Bush administration. But unless we can stop them, the full-grown dogs of war are not far behind. ■

SEPTEMBER 5, 2002

The Powell Trap: Easing us into war

There's something pathetic – and dangerous – about the crush of liberal commentators now pinning their hopes on Colin Powell. Yes, the secretary of state is a “moderate” – compared to the likes of Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld. But that's not saying much. And history tells us, even if the press won't, that Powell does not have a record as a man of conscience.

Media coverage is portraying Powell as a steady impediment to a huge assault on Iraq. But closer scrutiny would lead us to different conclusions.

Instead of undermining prospects for a military conflagration, Powell's outsized prestige is a very useful asset for the war planners. The retired general “is seen by many of Washington's friends and allies abroad as essential to the credibility of Bush's foreign policy,” the French news agency AFP noted as September began.

Avid participation in deplorable actions has been integral to Powell's career. A few examples:

* Serving as a top deputy to Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, Powell supervised the Army's transfer of 4,508 TOW missiles to the CIA in January 1986. Nearly half of those missiles became part of the Reagan administration's arms-for-hostages swap with Iran. Powell helped to hide that transaction from Congress and the public.

* As President Reagan's national security adviser, Powell became a key operator in U.S. efforts to overthrow the elected government of Nicaragua. When he traveled to Central America in January 1988, Powell threatened a cut off of U.S. aid to any country in the region that refused to go along with continued warfare by the contra guerrillas, who were in the midst of killing thousands of Nicaraguan civilians. Powell worked to prevent the success of a peace process initiated by Costa Rica's president, Oscar Arias.

* When U.S. troops invaded Panama on Dec. 20, 1989, Powell was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He had “emerged as the crucial figure in the decision to invade,” according to British newspaper reporter Martin Walker. Hundreds of civilians died in the first hours of the invasion. Powell declared on that day: “We have to put a

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shingle outside our door saying, ‘Superpower lives here.’ ”

* In late 2000, while Bush operatives went all-out during the Florida recount to grab the electoral votes of a state where many thousands of legally qualified African Americans had been prevented from voting due to Republican efforts, Powell went to George W. Bush’s ranch in Texas to pose for a photo-op and show support for his presidential quest.

Now, journalists tell us that the latest manifestation of Colin Powell’s “moderate” resolve is his stance on Iraq. But the Powell rhetoric about the need for allied support and U.N. Security Council backing can be understood as a fervent desire to line up as many ducks as possible before the shooting starts. Under Powell’s direction, U.S. diplomats – diligently laying down groundwork for war – are brandishing carrots and sticks at numerous countries.

“Access to Qatar’s al Udeid Air Base will be essential to an Iraq invasion,” a Wall Street Journal story reported on Sept. 3. Big deals are being cut. “Qatari officials have told U.S. officials that they want a guarantee that the U.S. military presence in Qatar would be permanent. They also want the U.S. to assume a greater portion of the \$400 million cost of upgrading al Udeid air base for the U.S. Air Force.”

As for reluctant members of the U.N. Security Council, some bloody quid pro quos are on the horizon. In the Journal’s words, Moscow “is expected to seek an understanding with the U.S. that it will have a freer hand in putting down its rebellion in Chechnya and that it will get a portion of the postwar contracts for rebuilding Iraq.”

Powell’s “moderate” approach is in sync with the outlook of Fareed Zakaria, former managing editor of the elite periodical Foreign Affairs, who shares Powell’s interest in urging the return of U.N. weapons inspectors to Iraq – a good PR step in the quest for a confrontation leading to war. “Even if the inspections do not produce the perfect crisis,” Zakaria wrote in a Sept. 2 Newsweek column, “Washington will still be better off for having tried because it would be seen to have made every effort to avoid war.”

Along similar lines, CNN reports, Powell “is working to convince the president of the need to build a strong coalition, similar to the one that existed during the 1991 Gulf War, and win the support of the U.N. Security Council through a new resolution.”

Deadly hawks come in many styles. Some have polished talons. ■

SEPTEMBER 12, 2002

Stepping through the media looking glass

It's always a challenge to see ourselves as others see us – and that's especially true for citizens of the world's only superpower. But we might be truly startled to recognize a mirror-image of the kind of reporting that we take for granted. As an experiment, to peer through the other side of the media looking glass, let's alter a recent news story so that the roles are diametrically opposite. If a fictional country named Qari subjected the United States to the same threats that Washington is now aiming at Iraq, the dispatch would read something like this:

QARI is justified in striking any country believed to be planning an attack against it, Qari's vice president Kcid Yenehc said today, defending his nation's new foreign policy doctrine on pre-emptive military action.

George W. Bush has accelerated the U.S. biological weapons programs and is "actively and aggressively" seeking further development of nuclear warheads, said Yenehc, citing unspecified intelligence gathered over the past year. "And increasingly, we believe Qari will become the target of those activities," Yenehc said.

Top Qarian officials took to the Sunday talk shows as part of President Hsub's effort to convince the public that action against Bush is urgently needed. The officials made the case that the world cannot wait to find out about the American president's development of weapons of mass destruction. "Imagine the deaths of vast numbers of innocent men, women and children," Qari defense secretary Dlanod H. Dlefsmur said.

"We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud," Qari's national security adviser, Azzeelodnoc Ecir, told a national TV audience. She added: "How long are we going to wait to deal with what is clearly a gathering threat against Qari, against our allies and against many other countries?"

Hsub recently addressed the United Nations to build his case for action against the United States. But Qari foreign minister Niloc Llewop said whatever the United Nations decides, Hsub will reserve the right to go it alone against the United States.

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“President Hsub will retain all of his authority and options to act in a way that may be appropriate for us to act unilaterally to defend ourselves,” Llewop said.

Hsub outlined a new doctrine in June, warning he will take “pre-emptive action, when necessary, to defend our liberty and to defend our lives.” Critics, some of them in countries allied with Qari, have questioned whether military action to achieve the Qarian government’s goal of overthrowing Bush from power is legal under international law.

But Yenehc said in the case of the United States, such action is justified. “If we have reason to believe someone is preparing an attack against Qari, has developed that capability, harbors those aspirations, then I think Qari is justified in dealing with that, if necessary, by military force,” he said.

Bush has the technical expertise and designs for more advanced nuclear arms, and has been seeking a type of aluminum tube needed to enrich uranium for such weapons, Yenehc and Llewop said. “He is in fact actively and aggressively seeking to acquire more destructive weapons,” Yenehc said.

The U.S. vice president has denied that his country is trying to collect nuclear material or building up sites that international nuclear weapons inspectors used to visit. Dick Cheney, speaking to reporters in Washington, charged that Qari is seeking an excuse to attack the United States. “They are telling lies and lies to make others believe them,” Cheney said.

Hsub administration officials expressed deep skepticism about giving George another chance to open up his country to weapons inspectors. Officials say Hsub is considering giving George a last-ditch deadline for allowing unfettered access to weapons inspectors.

“The issue is not inspectors or inspections. That is a tool,” Llewop said. “Disarmament is the issue. And we will stay focused on that, and we believe that regime change is the surest way to make sure that George Bush is disarmed.”

Yenehc said that if Qari led an attack on the United States, then Qarian forces would have to stay there for a prolonged period afterward to ensure “we stood up a new government and helped the American people decide how they want to govern themselves until there was a peaceful stability.”

War could be very costly, Yenehc acknowledged. But he added: “The danger of an attack against Qari by someone with the weapons that George Bush now possesses or is acquiring is far more costly than what it would cost us to go deal with this problem.” ■

SEPTEMBER. 26, 2002

Spinning media gears for a faraway war

From the 12th floor of Baghdad's Al-Rashid Hotel, the view is much like the panorama of any large metropolis. Along wide streets, cars are in constant motion. The cityscape is filled with tall buildings and residential neighborhoods. Nothing seems out of the ordinary – except that if all goes according to plan, my tax dollars will help to turn much of this city into hell.

As autumn began, a prominent New York Times article cited “senior administration officials” eager to sketch out the plan: “Officials said that any attack would begin with a lengthy air campaign led by B-2 bombers armed with 2,000-pound satellite-guided bombs to knock out Iraqi command and control headquarters and air defenses.”

That kind of flat language makes for comfy reading. We don't need to be disturbed about the specter of war in a faraway place. But what if the place is not far away?

Looking out at Baghdad's skyline, I think about the terror likely to descend on this city. For some people underneath the missiles, their last moments will resemble what happened at the World Trade Center a little more than a year ago.

Quite appropriately, the media response to 9-11 included horror, abhorrence and 100 percent condemnation. The power to destroy and kill did not in the least make it right.

But now, day by day, the power to destroy and kill becomes more self-justifying as reporters and pundits acclimate to the assumptions of official Washington.

This has happened before. When war appears on the horizon, and especially after it begins, a heightened affliction seizes most news outlets. The media spectacle becomes steady regurgitation of what's being fed from on high. And right now, the nation's media diet is stuffed with intensifying righteousness.

War gets attention. But already, with sanctions, the U.S. government has led a more insidious assault on Iraqi people for more than a decade. How do we grasp 5,000 children a month dying as a result? The grim statistics, even when reported and attributed to such sources as U.N. agencies, haven't made much noise in the media echo chamber.

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On a Saturday morning in September 2002, at the Al-Mansour Pediatric Hospital in Baghdad, mothers sat as usual on bare mattresses next to children languishing with leukemia and cancer. The youngsters are not getting adequate chemotherapy; the U.S.-led embargo continues to block some crucial medications.

Walking through the cancer ward, I remembered the response from then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright when, during a “60 Minutes” interview that aired on May 12, 1996, CBS correspondent Lesley Stahl asked: “We have heard that a half a million children have died. ... Is the price worth it?” Albright replied: “I think this is a very hard choice, but the price – we think the price is worth it.”

Easy to say, or accept, when others do the suffering and dying.

Consequences of the sanctions have been ongoing. The State Department continues to veto some crucial shipments of basic medical supplies to Iraq, including such items as special centrifuges for blood separation, plasma freezers and fusion pumps. After three visits to southern Iraq, most recently in September, an Austrian physician named Eva-Maria Hobiger says in heartfelt imperfect English: “By the support of these machines, the life of many sick children can be saved. It has to be called a crime when innocent and suffering children are the target of policy.”

Now, as with years of sanctions, top officials in Washington – making a “very hard choice” for all-out war – evidently figure “the price is worth it.” Geopolitical talk and strategic analyses dominate media coverage, while moral dimensions get short shrift.

I doubt that an American would find it easy to look the mothers and patients in the eyes at the Al-Mansour Pediatric Hospital. And I wonder what their lives will be like if, as expected, the missiles begin to explode in Baghdad. I don’t want to think about that. It’s much easier to stick with comfortable newspeak about “a lengthy air campaign led by B-2 bombers armed with 2,000-pound satellite-guided bombs.” ■

OCTOBER. 3, 2002

Media guide: How to view the United Nations

News coverage of the United Nations gets confusing sometimes. Is the U.N. a vital institution or a dysfunctional relic? Are its Security Council resolutions profoundly important for international relations – or beside the point because global leadership must now come from the world’s only superpower?

These days, we keep hearing that the United States will need to launch a full-scale attack on Iraq because Saddam Hussein has violated U.N. Security Council resolutions – at the same time that we’re told the U.S. government must reserve the right to take military action unilaterally if the Security Council fails to make appropriate decisions about Iraq.

To clarify the situation, here are three basic guidelines for understanding how to think in sync with America’s leading politicians and pundits:

* The U.N. resolutions approved by the five permanent members of the Security Council are hugely important, and worthy of enforcement with massive military force, if the White House says so. Otherwise, the resolutions have little or no significance, and they certainly can’t be allowed to interfere with the flow of American economic, military and diplomatic support to any of Washington’s allies.

Today, several countries are continuing to ignore large numbers of resolutions approved by the U.N. Security Council since the early 1990s. Morocco remains in violation of more than a dozen such resolutions. So does Israel. And Turkey continues to violate quite a few. But top officials in Rabat, Jerusalem and Ankara aren’t expecting ultimatums from Washington anytime soon.

* Some U.N. resolutions are sacred. Others are superfluous.

To cut through the media blather about Security Council resolutions that have been approved in past years, just keep this in mind: In the world according to American news media, the president of the United States has Midas-like powers in relation to those U.N. resolutions. When he confers his holy touch upon one, it turns into a golden rule

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that must be enforced. When he chooses not to bless other U.N. resolutions, they have no value.

* The United Nations can be extremely “relevant” or “irrelevant,” depending on the circumstances.

When the U.N. serves as a useful instrument of U.S. foreign policy, it is a vital world body taking responsibility for the future and reaffirming its transcendent institutional vision. When the U.N. balks at serving as a useful instrument of U.S. foreign policy, its irrelevance is so obvious that it risks collapsing into the dustbin of history while the USA proceeds to stride the globe like the superpower colossus that it truly is.

“There’s a lot of lofty rhetoric here in Washington about the U.N.,” says Erik Leaver of the Institute for Policy Studies. Pretty words now function as window-dressing for imminent war-making. While the president claims the right to violently enforce U.N. Security Council resolutions, Leaver adds, “there are almost 100 current Security Council resolutions that are being ignored, in addition to the 12 or so resolutions that Iraq is ignoring. What the U.S. is saying here is that it has the right to determine which Security Council resolutions are relevant and which are not.”

Leaver, a researcher with the Foreign Policy In Focus project (www.fpif.org), is outside the usual media box when he brings up a key question: “If the U.S. takes military action using the cover of the United Nations, what is to prevent other countries from launching their own military attacks in the name of enforcement of U.N. resolutions – against Turkey in Cyprus, or Morocco in Western Sahara, or Israel in Palestine? This is precisely the reason why the doctrine of pre-emptive force is a dangerous policy for the United States to pursue.”

When Leaver maintains that “we can’t uphold the U.N. at one moment and then discard it the next,” he’s up against powerful media spin that hails such hypocrisy as a mark of great American leadership on the world stage.

During an Oct. 2 news conference, White House press secretary Ari Fleischer didn’t miss a beat when he tried to explain how the United States could justify blocking implementation of the most recent Security Council resolution about U.N. weapons inspections in Iraq. Fleischer said that the U.S. government’s task could be accomplished with “logic” and “diplomacy.”

From the vantage point of Washington’s reigning politicians and most of the journalists who cover them, it’s quite proper to treat the United Nations as a tool for U.S. diplomacy – war by another means, useful till it’s time for the bloody real thing. ■

OCTOBER 10, 2002

Democrats playing catch-up in media war

Many news stories and commentaries have marveled at the failure of Democrats to seize the high political ground this fall. With the nation's economic stride continuing to falter under a Republican president, the main opposition party should be cruising for a triumph in the midterm elections. Instead, the Democratic Party may be lucky to hold its own in the House and Senate.

The key problem, we're told, is that Democrats come off second-best as defenders of national security and wielders of military might. Republicans have positioned themselves well to exploit their advantage on such issues when Americans vote on November 5. But we ought to be asking deeper questions about why this situation exists.

No political clash takes place in a vacuum separate from the media din. Yet, to hear countless journalists spin the received political tales, they're merely flies on the wall, noting events in the political arena. That pretense is absurd. The behavior of editors, reporters and pundits is crucial to the big dramas of politics.

In recent days – despite the outspoken and sometimes courageous positions taken by some members of Congress – leading Democrats have been shamefully deferential to war planners. If there is an afterlife, the late Americans now weeping at events on Capitol Hill this autumn surely include Sen. Wayne Morse and Rep. Patsy Mink, early opponents of the Vietnam War who refused to put their consciences on hold.

When antiwar Democrats stick their necks out, of course they're targeted by the GOP. But the ferocity of the assaults they undergo is greatly heightened by the dominant militarism of their own party – and of the news media. Head-patting clichés about freedom to dissent don't make up for the dire shortage of media support for pro-peace positions in the face of fierce propaganda attacks.

No one in Congress better symbolizes the convergence of political opportunism and media pandering than John Kerry. Thirty-one years ago, as a Vietnam veteran, he

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denounced the war in Southeast Asia. Today, Kerry is gaining distinction among Democrats as one of the prominent hollow men in the Senate.

It was no surprise on October 9 when Sen. Kerry announced that he would vote for the pro-war resolution. Gearing up for a presidential run in 2004, he never seems to miss an opportunity to make his peace with the next U.S.-led war, as if to cleanse himself from the taint of past principles.

A week before his announcement, Kerry appeared for an hour on MSNBC's "Hardball" program. With a backdrop of earnest young cadets at The Citadel, the graying senator burnished his warrior persona.

"Soldiers who love each other and really fight for each other as much as for anything else, I think that that's what we want to make certain is what happens if and when we go into Iraq," Kerry said. "I'm prepared to go. I think people understand that Saddam Hussein is a danger. But you want to go maximizing your capacity for victory, not beginning with deficits. That's one of the lessons of Vietnam."

Millions of Americans actively opposed the Vietnam War because it was morally wrong, not because it wasn't being won. But these days, while drawing lessons from that conflagration, Kerry goes out of his way to tout a more media-palatable imperative – "maximizing your capacity for victory."

In essence, like most Democrats in Congress, the junior senator from Massachusetts keeps trying to have it both ways – sounding notes of restraint while helping to open the floodgates for a horrendous war. Pieties about democratic procedures spiced the red meat that Kerry spent much of the hour throwing out to the uniformed crowd and the national TV audience.

But in the race to the bloody bottom, Democrats will not be able to keep up with the GOP. By failing to challenge the momentum toward mass slaughter, Kerry and like-minded "liberals" are forfeiting their souls without appreciable political benefit. Because much of its base is inclined to be antiwar, the Democratic Party cannot hope to be united while staying on a path of "me too" militarism.

Inside the amphitheater in Philadelphia at the 2000 Republican National Convention, I was struck by the blood-curdling joy that delegates expressed when speakers voiced enthusiasm for past and future wars. The Democrats will never be able to equal such mind-numbing fervor for military madness. It's tragic that so many seem to be trying. ■

OCTOBER 17, 2002

Polls: When measuring is manipulating

Before decisions get made in Washington – and even before most politicians open their mouths about key issues – there are polls. Lots of them. Whether splashed across front pages or commissioned by candidates for private analysis, the statistical sampling of public opinion is a constant in political life.

We may believe that polls tell us what Americans are thinking. But polls also gauge the effectiveness of media spin – and contribute to it. Opinion polls don't just measure; they also manipulate, helping to shape thoughts and tilting our perceptions of how most people think.

Polls routinely invite the respondents to choose from choices that have already been prepared for them. Results hinge on the exact phrasing of questions and the array of multiple-choice answers, as candid players in the polling biz readily acknowledge.

“Slight differences in question wording, or in the placement of the questions in the interview, can have profound consequences,” Gallup executive David Moore wrote a few years ago in his book “The Superpollsters.” He observed that poll outcomes “are very much influenced by the polling process itself.” And in turn, whatever their quality, polling numbers “influence perceptions, attitudes and decisions at every level of our society.”

In the process, opinions are narrowed into a few pre-fabricated slots. The result is likely to be mental constriction in the guise of illumination.

“Opinion-polling as practiced in the United States ... presents itself as a means of registering opinions and expressing choices,” media critic Herbert Schiller noted three decades ago. His assessment of polling remains cogent today: “It is a choice-restricting mechanism. Because ordinary polls reduce, and sometimes eliminate entirely, the ... true spectrum of possible options, the possibilities and preferences they express are better viewed as ‘guided’ choices.”

Mainstream polls are so much a part of the media wallpaper that we're apt to miss

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how arbitrarily they limit people's sense of wider possibilities. And we may forget that those who pay the pollsters commonly influence the scope of ideas and attitudes deemed worthy of consideration.

In his book "The Mind Managers," Schiller pointed out: "Those who dominate governmental decision-making and private economic activity are the main supports of the pollsters. The vital needs of these groups determine, intentionally or not, the parameters within which polls are formulated."

When the U.S. government takes military action, instant polls help to propel the rapid-fire cycles of spin. After top officials in Washington have engaged in a well-coordinated media blitz during the crucial first hours of warfare, the TV networks tell us that most Americans approve – and the quick poll results may seem to legitimize and justify the decision to begin the bloodshed.

In the case of the Bush administration's plans to launch an all-out attack on Iraq, the U.S. military build-up in the Persian Gulf region has run parallel to a sustained propaganda campaign on the home front during the past several months. Even so, the extent of public support is foggy.

At the end of September, a murky picture emerged from an article in the Washington Post by the director of the big-bucks Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. "Almost all national surveys this year," Andrew Kohut wrote, "have found a broad base of potential support for using military force to rid the world of Saddam Hussein." Yet such generalities can be deceiving. Kohut reported that the Pew Center's latest poll "found that 64 percent generally favor military action against Iraq, but that withers to 33 percent if our allies do not join us."

According to a recent CBS News poll, 51 percent of Americans say that Hussein was involved in the 9-11 attacks. But there's no evidence for that assertion. So, as in countless other cases, the failures of news media to clearly convey pivotal matters of fact – and the unwillingness of journalists to challenge deceptive claims from the White House – boost the poll numbers for beliefs that lack a factual basis.

Polls may seem to provide clarity in a confusing world. But all too often they amount to snapshots taken from slanted angles. ■

OCTOBER 30

Branding new and improved wars

Marketing a war is serious business. And no product requires better brand names than one that squanders vast quantities of resources while intentionally killing large numbers of people. The American trend of euphemistic fog for such enterprises began several decades ago. It's very old news that the federal government no longer has a department or a budget named "war." Now, it's all called "defense," a word with a strong aura of inherent justification. The sly effectiveness of the labeling switch can be gauged by the fact that many opponents of reckless military spending nevertheless constantly refer to it as "defense" spending.

During the past dozen years, the intersection between two avenues, Pennsylvania and Madison, has given rise to media cross-promotion that increasingly sanitizes the organized mass destruction known as warfare.

The first Bush administration enhanced the public-relations techniques for U.S. military actions by "choosing operation names that were calculated to shape political perceptions," linguist Geoff Nunberg recalls. The invasion of Panama in December 1989 went forward under the name Operation Just Cause, an immediate media hit. "A number of news anchors picked up on the phrase Just Cause, which encouraged the Bush and Clinton administrations to keep using those tendentious names."

As Nunberg points out, "it's all a matter of branding. And it's no accident that the new-style names like Just Cause were introduced at around the same time the cable news shows started to label their coverage of major stories with catchy names and logos." The Pentagon became adept at supplying video-game-like pictures of U.S. missile strikes at the same time that it began to provide the big-type captions on TV screens.

Ever since the Gulf War in early 1991, people across the political spectrum have commonly referred to that paroxysm of carnage as Operation Desert Storm – or, more often, just Desert Storm. To the casual ear, it sounds kind of like an act of nature. Or,

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perhaps, an act of God.

Either way, according to the vague spirit evoked by the name Desert Storm, men like Dick Cheney, Norman Schwarzkopf and Colin Powell may well have been assisting in the implementation of divine natural occurrences; high winds and 2,000-pound laser-guided bombs raining down from the heavens.

Soon after the Gulf War a.k.a. Desert Storm ended, the Army's chief of public affairs, Maj. Gen. Charles McClain, commented: "The perception of an operation can be as important to success as the execution of that operation." For guiding the public's perception of a war – while it is happening and after it has become history – there's nothing quite like a salutary label that sticks.

In October 2001, while launching missiles at Afghanistan, the Bush team came up with Operation Infinite Justice, only to swiftly scuttle the name after learning it was offensive to Muslims because of their belief that only Allah can provide infinite justice. The replacement, Enduring Freedom, was well-received in U.S. mass media, an irony-free zone where only the untowardly impertinent might suggest that some people had no choice other than enduring the Pentagon's freedom to bomb.

If you doubt that the Executive Branch is run by people who plan U.S. military actions while thinking like marketers, you're (no offense) naive. It was a candid slip of the tongue a couple of months ago when the White House chief of staff, Andrew Card, told the New York Times: "From a marketing point of view, you don't introduce new products in August." Not coincidentally, the main rollout of new-and-improved rationales for an upcoming war on Iraq did not take place until September.

Looking ahead, the media spinners at the White House are undoubtedly devoting considerable energy to sifting through options for how to brand the expected U.S. assault on Iraq. Long before the war is over, we will know its reassuring code name. But we will not know the names of all the innocent people who have been killed in our names. ■

NOVEMBER 8, 2002

Long day's journey after election night

With Republicans gaining control of the Senate, few analysts doubt that 9-11 set the stage for George W. Bush to lead his party to victory. Fourteen months ago, in the national media vortex, a president widely perceived as simple-minded and problematic suddenly became inspirational.

The massive violence boosting Bush's authoritative aura came in two basic configurations. For U.S. media, the threat of horrific violence aimed at America quickly became the overarching problem of the new epoch. In another category, the Pentagon's awesome capabilities to inflict horrific violence rapidly emerged as a central part of the touted solution.

In such a media atmosphere, a president eager to unleash the nation's military prowess could hardly fail to gain in stature. Bush ascended to the political stratosphere. Much less often mentioned were the media dynamics that rocketed him there.

The violence of 9-11 and the pledged U.S. war on Iraq are mediabookends for the story of Bush's trajectory to the GOP triumph of Election Day 2002. In the closing months of this year's campaign, the specter of an overwhelming military assault on Iraq effectively swept aside other issues -- notably the economic well-being of Americans -- that could have meant big trouble for Bush's party on Nov. 5.

While most Democrats on Capitol Hill voted against Bush's war resolution in October, party leaders such as Sen. Tom Daschle and Rep. Richard Gephardt eagerly went along with the war promoters. When the nation's media spotlight fell on them, Daschle and Gephardt had nothing of value to say. The president, and evidently most journalists, liked it that way. Here was bipartisan unity; the loyal opposition, dutifully serving as the caboose on a war train.

But even on its own craven terms, the can't-beat-'em join-'em approach of harmonizing with the mediaspeak chorus was a dismal failure: America gets two Republican houses of Congress. And, almost certainly, a horrendous war with Iraq.

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About 180 degrees from all the craven blather, a new documentary provides chilling context for what has occurred and what is to come. Michael Moore's film "Bowling for Columbine," now showing at a small number of theaters across the country, is everything that the media-pandering statements along Pennsylvania Avenue have not been. The movie focuses on realities of violence and fear in the United States.

In his latest film, Moore ventures where very few mainstream American journalists have been willing to tread. He looks at links between enthusiasm for guns that are small and enthusiasm for guns that are huge -- weapons that fit in the palm of a hand or on a person's shoulder, and weapons that are launched from jet bombers and military ships.

This country's "gun culture" has many facets. The victims include people randomly shot dead with a handgun or an assault rifle. But the media-framed issues of gun control do not extend to the big guns of the Pentagon.

Major media outlets don't go there. Moore's documentary does. "Bowling for Columbine" is a brilliant movie, adroitly confronting our society's ongoing spirals of murderous violence.

Oh, we have our reasons; our fears and hopes. Those who kill usually do. A domestic cornucopia of violence, the United States simultaneously wields what is, by far, the world's most powerful arsenal: the Pentagon, our tax dollars at work.

Long trapped between the despotic regime of Saddam Hussein and lethal actions of the U.S. government, Iraqi people are in Uncle Sam's cross hairs. With violence, George W. Bush and GOP leaders find the reliable promise of adulatory media coverage and enormous political leverage. Terrorism and war strengthen their hands.

These days, one of the few prominent TV pundits challenging the momentum toward U.S.-taxpayer-funded slaughter in Iraq is MSNBC's Chris Matthews, who offers some clarity about President Bush. "I'm afraid he's riding the tiger with all these hawks around him," Matthews said on Nov. 6, "and I'm afraid he can't stop them."

At this point, there is no evidence that Bush wants to stop the hawks. He's one of them. And the fawning media coverage in the aftermath of Election Day can only embolden his zealotry. Strike up the band, send out the troops, start yet another war in the name of righteousness. Those who mourn will not be ready for prime time. ■

NOVEMBER 21, 2002

Unilateral power - by any other name

Ever since the U.N. Security Council adopted its resolution about Iraq on Nov. 8, American politicians and journalists have been hailing the unanimous vote as a huge victory for international cooperation instead of unilateral action. New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman was close to ecstatic. "For a brief, shining moment last Friday," he wrote, "the world didn't seem like such a crazy place." The United Nations had proven its worth – by proving its value to Washington. Among the benefits: "The Bush team discovered that the best way to legitimize its overwhelming might – in a war of choice – was not by simply imposing it, but by channeling it through the U.N."

But if the United Nations, serving as a conduit of American power, is now worthwhile because it offers the best way for the United States to "legitimize its overwhelming might," how different is that from unilateralism?

Behind all the media euphemisms and diplomat-speak, a cold hard reality about Resolution 1441 is already history: The resolution was fashioned to provide important fig leaves for domestic politics and foreign governments. President Bush and Britain's Tony Blair needed U.N. cover for the war that they're so eager to launch.

To get the Good War-Making Seal of Approval from the United Nations, the Bush administration handed out major plums while flexing Uncle Sam's muscles. You wouldn't know key pertinent facts from the drooling coverage that has saturated American news outlets.

"Backroom deals with France and Russia regarding oil contracts in a postwar Iraq were a big part of the picture," Phyllis Bennis writes in *The Nation*. "And the impoverished nation of Mauritius emerged as the latest poster child for U.S. pressure at the U.N. The ambassador, Jagdish Koonjul, was recalled by his government for failing to support the original U.S. draft resolution on Iraq. Why? Because Mauritius receives significant U.S. aid, and the African Growth and Opportunity Act requires that a

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recipient of U.S. assistance ‘does not engage in activities that undermine U.S. national security or foreign policy interests.’”

The Mauritius episode tracked with broader patterns. InterPress Service reported that nations on the Security Council “voted under heavy diplomatic and economic pressure from the United States.” As recipients of aid from Washington, non-permanent members of the Council “were seemingly aware of the fact that in 1990 the United States almost overnight cut about \$70 million in aid to Yemen immediately following its negative vote against a U.S.-sponsored Security Council resolution to militarily oust Iraq from Kuwait.”

In the British magazine *The New Statesman*, author John Pilger has recalled some sordid details of that pre-Gulf-War object lesson in superpower payback. “Minutes after Yemen voted against the resolution to attack Iraq, a senior American diplomat told the Yemeni ambassador: ‘That was the most expensive No vote you ever cast.’ Within three days, a U.S. aid program of \$70 million to one of the world’s poorest countries was stopped. Yemen suddenly had problems with the World Bank and the IMF; and 800,000 Yemeni workers were expelled from Saudi Arabia.”

Back then, Yemen was not the only impoverished country to feel the fury of an imperial democracy scorned. In Pilger’s words: “When the United States sought another resolution to blockade Iraq, two new members of the Security Council were duly coerced. Ecuador was warned by the U.S. ambassador in Quito about the ‘devastating economic consequences’ of a No vote. Zimbabwe was threatened with new IMF conditions for its debt.”

Fast forward a dozen years: During the autumn of 2002, the U.S. government has compounded the wallop of its prodigious carrots and sticks by pointedly reserving the right to do whatever it wants. And, clearly, it wants to go to war.

Two days after the Security Council resolution passed 15-0, White House chief of staff Andrew Card appeared on NBC and said: “The U.N. can meet and discuss, but we don’t need their permission” before launching a military attack. Meanwhile, on CNN, the Secretary of State had the same message. “If he [Saddam Hussein] doesn’t comply this time, we’ll ask the U.N. to give authorization for all necessary means,” Colin Powell declared, “and if the U.N. is not willing to do that, the United States, with like-minded nations, will go and disarm him forcefully.”

Such proclamations by top U.S. officials blend in with the dominant media scenery. You’re not supposed to notice the substantial ironies and breathtaking hypocrisies. ■

DECEMBER 5, 2002

Media spin can separate war from death

Adozen years after the Gulf War, public perceptions of it are now very helpful to the White House. That's part of a timeworn pattern. Illusions about previous wars make the next one seem acceptable. As George Orwell observed: "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past."

It's not unusual to hear journalists and politicians say that the Gulf War had few casualties. Considering the magnitude of media spin, that myth is hardly surprising. "When the air war began in January 1991," recalls Patrick J. Sloyan, who covered the Gulf War as a *Newsday* correspondent, "the media was fed carefully selected footage by (Gen. Norman) Schwarzkopf in Saudi Arabia and (Gen. Colin) Powell in Washington, DC. Most of it was downright misleading."

In an essay written as a fellow at the Alicia Patterson Foundation this year, Sloyan describes "limitations imposed on reporters on the battlefield" in 1991: "Under rules developed by (Defense Secretary Dick) Cheney and Powell, journalists were not allowed to move without military escorts. All interviews had to be monitored by military public affairs escorts. Every line of copy, every still photograph, every strip of film had to be approved – censored – before being filed. And these rules were ruthlessly enforced."

As December 2002 began, Los Angeles Times media critic David Shaw told readers: "Based on past performance, both by the current Bush administration and by its immediate Republican predecessors, there's every reason to think that if we go to war against Iraq, Washington will exert more control over the media than ever before, using every tactic from manipulation to deception to disinformation."

For the most part, mainstream news organizations are avid participants in such deceit. Their objections are routinely feeble and belated. Even when they occur, media critiques usually steer clear of moral concern. They're much more likely to focus on false claims about technical performances: whether "smart bombs" were truly

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accurate, whether cruise missiles strayed off course, and so forth. But the greatest deception of the Gulf War was far more profound. “In manipulating the first and often most lasting perception of Desert Storm,” wrote Sloyan, “the Bush administration produced not a single picture or video of anyone being killed. This sanitized, bloodless presentation by military briefers left the world presuming Desert Storm was a war without death.”

Now, the Pentagon is in gear for what a pull-out poster in the latest Mad Magazine calls “Gulf Wars, Episode II.” (“Production designed to distract you from the failing economy. Produced by the military-industrial complex in association with Exxon, Texaco, Mobil, et al.”) A key reason many Americans are inclined to go along with the next war is that Episode I seemed like a pretty decent made-for-TV movie. Media references to “Desert Storm” rarely dwell on – or even mention – the human losses during the six-week period of the Gulf War.

But in his excellent new book “Tinderbox,” scholar Stephen Zunes points out: “Most estimates put the Iraqi death toll in the Gulf War in the range of 100,000. Due to the increased accuracy of aerial warfare, the proportion of Iraqi civilians killed was much less than it had been in previous air campaigns. At the same time, because the bombing was the heaviest in world history – consisting of tens of thousands of sorties – the absolute numbers were quite high. Most estimates of the civilian death toll are approximately 15,000.”

What are the likely human consequences of the impending war on Iraq? News media should be asking that question. But the American public remains in the dark.

“The avowed U.S. aim of regime change means any new conflict will be much more intense and destructive than the Gulf War, and will involve more deadly weapons developed in the interim,” said a report issued last month by health professionals with the London-based Medact organization and International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. They warned: “Furthermore, the mental and physical health of ordinary Iraqis is far worse than it was in 1991, making them much more vulnerable this time round.”

The report found that “credible estimates of the total possible deaths on all sides during the conflict and the following three months range from 48,000 to over 260,000. Civil war within Iraq could add another 20,000 deaths. Additional later deaths from post-war adverse health effects could reach 200,000.” And here's another conclusion from the report that major U.S. news outlets keep ignoring: “In all scenarios, the majority of casualties will be civilians.” ■

DECEMBER 20, 2002

Penn in Iraq - image gives way to substance

When they realized that Sean Penn had arrived in Baghdad unannounced, the Western journalists in the city were taken aback. But they ultimately seemed more surprised by the great distance between media images and the man they actually met.

Quite a few other famous actors in the United States have expressed strong opposition to the impending war against Iraq. But so far, only one has traveled there so that actions and words could speak loudly together.

What Sean Penn said is still resonating.

After accompanying Penn to Baghdad and joining him on a wide range of visits – including with UNICEF workers, Iraqi officials, patients in hospitals and young children in schools – I sat with Penn as he wrote on a pad at a restaurant inside the Al-Rashid Hotel. Hours later, he was reading his words aloud at a news conference overflowing with reporters, photographers and TV crews from all over the world.

“I am a citizen of the United States of America,” he began. “I believe in the Constitution of the United States, and the American people. Ours is a government designed to function ‘of-by-and-for’ the people. I am one of those people, and a privileged one.”

Penn spoke quietly, with evident sincerity. This was the time for a kind of summing up. For the most part during his three-day visit, Penn had gone out of his way to avoid the cameras, saying that he would share his thoughts at a press conference just prior to leaving Baghdad.

Now, as he continued with his statement, the room was still. Penn said that he was “privileged to have lived a life under our Constitution that has allowed me to dream and prosper.” And he continued: “In response to these privileges I feel, both as an American and as a human being, the obligation to accept some level of personal responsibility for the policies of my government, both those I support and any that I may not. Simply put, if there is a war or continued sanctions against Iraq, the blood of

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Americans and Iraqis will be on our hands.”

And then, Sean Penn added: “My trip here is to personally record the human face of the Iraqi people so that their blood – along with that of American soldiers – would not be invisible on my own hands. I sit with you here today in the hopes that any of us present may contribute in any way to a peaceful resolution to the conflict at hand.”

At a time when fame is so routinely seen as an end in itself, or as a way to accumulate more wealth and power, Penn has become conspicuous for his willingness to take some real risks on behalf of peace. Predictably, the vilification began immediately from jingoistic media outlets like Fox News Channel and the New York Post. Distortion is a big business.

When our country appears to be on the verge of war, stepping out of line is always hazardous. All kinds of specious accusations fly. Whether you travel to Baghdad or hold an anti-war sign on main street back home, some people will accuse you of serving the propaganda interests of the foreign foe. But the only way to prevent your actions from being misconstrued is to do nothing. The only way to avoid the danger of having your words distorted is to keep your mouth shut.

In the functional category of “use it or lose it,” the First Amendment remains just a partially realized promise. To the extent that it can be fulfilled, democracy becomes actual rather than theoretical. But that requires a multiplicity of voices. And when the drumbeat of war threatens to drown out all those refusing to harmonize with it, the imperative of dissent become paramount.

Sean Penn has described the challenge well: “I would hope that all Americans will embrace information available to them outside conventional channels.” And, speaking personally, he expressed the desire “to find my own voice on matters of conscience.” ■



About Norman Solomon

"The Habits of Highly Deceptive Media," the latest collection of Norman Solomon's syndicated media columns won the George Orwell Award for Distinguished Contribution to Honesty and Clarity in Public Language. The award, presented by the USA's National Council of Teachers of English, went to Solomon's ninth book. In the introduction to that book, Jonathan Kozol wrote: "The tradition of Upton Sinclair, Lincoln Steffens, and I.F. Stone does not get much attention these days in the mainstream press . . . but that tradition is alive and well in this collection of courageously irreverent columns on the media by Norman Solomon . . . He fights the good fight without fear of consequence. He courts no favors. He writes responsibly and is meticulous on details, but he does not choke on false civility."

Solomon's op-ed articles have appeared in the Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Newsday, New York Times, Boston Globe, Miami Herald, USA Today, Philadelphia Inquirer and Baltimore Sun. His articles have also appeared in the International Herald Tribune, Canada's Globe and Mail and the Toronto Star.

He is also the co-author, with Jeff Cohen, of "Wizards of Media Oz: Behind the Curtain of Mainstream News" and "Through the Media Looking Glass." He also co-authored "Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in News Media," and "Killing Our Own: The Disaster of America's Experience With Atomic Radiation".

An associate of the media watch group FAIR (www.fair.org), Solomon is executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy (www.accuracy.org), a nationwide consortium of policy researchers and analysts. His weekly commentary Media Beat is archived at www.fair.org/media-beat.

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