

Misreporting the Iraqi uprising

By Danny Schechter

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It's the oldest story in the world: What goes up must come down. All the bluster, PR, "positive" press, bullying, distortion, deception, and military tough-guy bluster cannot keep a flawed policy afloat. The invasion of Iraq, sold as the "liberation of the Iraqi people," was always a B-rate production with a bad script, flawed characters, and no third act.

Despite all the Bremer ballast served up about how only a handful of Saddam-worshipping, al-Sadr-loving, Al-Qaeda-following fanatics stand in the way of a U.S.-imposed democratic paradise, the reality on the ground suggests otherwise. A Sunni-Shia opposition movement is emerging, and gathering steam.

The body count climbs with every passing hour. As of April 7, more than 30 U.S. soldiers have been killed and 24 wounded. At least 160 Iraqis are dead.

For the most part, the U.S. media, even while reporting on the deterioration of the situation in Iraq, continues to echo the Bush administration's desired media message. The White House spin puts all the blame for the violence largely on Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who has been described as an unrepresentative, mentally unbalanced mullah bent on violence. He is depicted as a hothead, an outlaw and a terrorist. But this demonization rarely has been backed up with documentation or detailed analysis.

Behind the details of the various firefights and clashes, behind the coverage of a U.S. missile that struck a mosque or even the barbaric images of American military contractors hanging on a bridge is a context that most of our media outlets have missed.

American reporters, for the most part, have not been given access to the battlefield. There was only one embedded reporter, Tony Perry from the Los Angeles Times in Fallujah. Some network reporters have acknowledged that it is not safe to leave their offices. In other words, reports on the situation in Iraq are coming out of Pentagon press offices.

"We're being told a convenient and self-serving [story about] a few barbaric 'isolated extremists' from the 'Saddamist stronghold' of Falluja who killed four contractors," claims Rahul Mahajan, author of several books on Iraq, in his report from Baghdad.

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“The truth is rather different,” Mahajan writes. “Fallujah, although heavily Sunni Arab, was hardly in Saddam’s pocket. Its imams got into trouble for refusing to obey his orders to praise him personally during prayers.” According to the author, Falluja became a hotbed of resistance on Apr. 28, 2003, when U.S. troops opened fire on a group of 100 to 200 peaceful protesters. Fifteen protesters were killed.

“They claimed they were returning gunfire, but Human Rights Watch investigated and found that the bullet holes in the area were inconsistent with that story — and, furthermore, every Iraqi witness maintained that the crowd was unarmed. Two days later, another three protesters were killed,” writes Mahajan.

So, looked at from a Middle Eastern perspective, this uprising was seen in defensive terms, not offensive. It was triggered by U.S. military actions, which were perceived by Iraqis as acts of war against them.

Sam Gardiner, a retired Air Force Colonel and teacher at the National War College, says, “We have to remember that this was not spontaneous. We started it. It began when the CPA decided to exert a degree of greater control. Moves were made against Moqtada al-Sadr, then into Falluja. With al-Sadr, the sequence was first his newspaper, then the arrest of a deputy.”

The significant conclusion, however, has to be that we did not have control of the country, Gardiner said.

“We are seeing fighting of a new character. In Ramadi, it was an attack of around 100 against a Marine position. That’s new. In Falluja, we’ve seen the bad guys fight to hold defensive positions. That’s new,” says Gardiner.

Colonel Gardiner is not optimistic about the odds for coalition forces to cope with this new style of combat: “We have to keep in mind that the military and political leadership in the United States have been terrible at assessing the situation in Iraq, going back to when the plan for the invasion was put together. I’ve not heard any good assessment of what’s going on now.”

This type of perspective is all too often missing in media coverage.

“If the reporting on the U.S. military campaign is fundamentally flawed, its meaning is often obscured,” writes Robert Fisk of *The Independent* in London. “The grim truth, however, is that the occupying powers are now facing insurrection of various strengths in almost every big city in Iraq. Yet they are still not confronting that truth.”

For the past nine nights, Fisk reports, the main U.S. base close to Baghdad airport — and the area around the terminals — has come under mortar fire, “but the occupying powers have kept this secret.” They would prefer to tell us that the U.S. occupation is working, that democracy is right around the corner.

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Dahr Jamail, who writes for the website Electronic Iraq, blames U.S. media coverage for reinforcing government propaganda. “[T]here is a horrendous disparity between what is really occurring on the ground and what the Western corporate media chooses to report,” he wrote last week.

Jamail recently spent nine weeks in Iraq working as a freelance independent journalist. In many of his dispatches he tells of Western media either mis-reporting or not reporting stories entirely.

“The signs were glaring – from the parking lot full of parked white SUVs in the middle of the day, supposedly used by the CNN and Fox news crews, to the absence of ABC, NBC, or CBS media crews at any of the sites of the news stories I was covering. Even stories that were on the front pages stateside are regularly being covered from the press room and not the field,” he wrote

But now, reality is fast intruding on the military and the media. The ‘we-are-winning-the-war-for democracy’ news frame is no longer credible.

As the Tet offensive negatively affected perceptions of a U.S. victory in Vietnam, this uprising in Iraq is having the same effect around the world. Confidence in the US mission is being shattered with every firefight and civilian and GI casualty.

The American people have been watching all of this in horror from afar, but not being told what’s really going on. As the casualties continue to climb, the truth may be harder to miss.

Danny Schechter writes a daily blog on [Mediachannel.org](http://mediachannel.org). His latest book, “Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception” (Prometheus Books), examines media coverage of the war on Iraq.