

Iraq scandals: Media failures are next

By Danny Schechter

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In July of 2004, much of what was left of the pretexts and rationalizations for the US invasion of Iraq had unraveled.

- Richard Clarke, President's Bush's own Terrorism coordinator went public with a view of the war as evidence of a FAILURE of policy. It was, he charged based on insider knowledge, not only NOT part of the war on terror but undermining of it.

- Experienced Military leaders like General Zinni and others condemned it as military FAILURE.

- A Senate Committee in the US and a commission headed by Lord Butler in the UK catalogued extensive intelligence FAILURES. The Senators condemned what they called "group think."

These critics – including the 911 Commission – remain relatively narrow in their approach focusing on problems or process and organizational defects. Few look at the larger picture or dare to hold politicians directly accountable. The Butler Commission specifically exonerated Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Critics consider many of these inquiries as part of a cover-up, not signs of serious investigation to expose wrong doing and, more importantly, its consequences. In Intelligence circles, this is called a "limited hang out" in which some disclosures are dribbled out to avoid revealing more while creating an illusion of real candor.

Take the New York Times, on July 16, it admitted editorially "we were wrong about the weapons." But what about the rest of its coverage which underplayed civilian casualties, missed much of the reasons for the Iraqi resistance, was behind on the torture story etc. Ditto for the Washington Post whose ombudsman faulted underreporting of demonstrations

In my soon-to-be-released film WMD, (www.wmdthefilm.com) based on my own book length study of the coverage of the war, leading antiwar organized Leslie Cagan says that was not the problem: "What there was not decent coverage of was the analysis. What we were trying to say about what was wrong with the war, why we never should've gone to

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war, why the war needed to end, what was driving – the motor force behind the war. That analysis never got into the mainstream media.”

Orville Schell, the head of the Journalism Department at Berkeley explained said that’s because media outlets “ not only failed to seriously investigate administration rationales for war, but little took into account the myriad voices in the on-line, alternative, and world press that sought to do so”

The “group think” cited by the Senate was not confined to agencies of government. This apt phrase could as easily be applied to the one institution charged by our Constitution with scrutinizing official failures: the media.

To the list of institutional failures, we can now add the powerful U.S. news industry which gave the war its legitimacy and organized public support for it by a pattern of over hyped and under critical reporting in which jingoism often substituted for journalism.

As US public opinion turns against the war, and world condemnation increases, some voices in the media are now being heard as their scandalous complicity of the media and the military finally becomes an issue.

With a few prominent media institutions acknowledging their flawed coverage,, others are likely to follow. Even as the essential media frame of support for US policy overseas, and a propensity for news managers to follow the government’s lead in setting the agenda, dissent is growing and it is likely that the mea culpas now being seen in the pages of the New York Times and Washington Post will grow into the larger chorus and then forge a consensus.

Like with the War on Vietnam, what was once a vocal minority’s view will work its way into the mainstream and find broad acceptance.

This process of ideological shift was first defined by the German philosopher Schopenhauer who understood that: “All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as self-evident.”

The process usually starts with a few individuals whose skepticism is rewarded with recriminations and even dismissal. In the news world, it began with the firing of small town newspaper editors and cartoonists who dared to dissent. Few nationally known newspeople came to their defense.

Popular TV talk show host Phil Donahue next, purged by MSNBC for his anti-war programming. That network’s most heavily promoted correspondent Ashleigh Banfield was “taken to the woodshed” when she questioned the coverage at a talk at Kansas State University. The network later dropped her.

Soon, Pulitzer prize winning war correspondent Peter Arnett was fired for saying on Iraqi TV what he was also saying on American television – that the US military was

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underestimating Iraqi resistance. That view, which has now been accepted, was branded then as treason and worse. Arnett was targeted first by Fox News and later made the subject of a campaign by the Free Republic website which flooded NBC executives with demands that he be fired.

Critics of the war were not just ridiculed. They were ignored and marginalized. Former BBC chief Greg Dyke (who was forced to resign because of a scandal involving BBC reporting which was later found to be baseless) said that of 800 experts interviewed on US TV in the run up to the war and during the US invasion only 6 challenged the war. A Study by FAIR of 1716 on air sources cited on TV News in this period, 71% supported the war, only 3% opposed it.

This lack of balance on TV – the medium that most Americans turn to for their news has yet to be acknowledged, explained or apologized for even as some TV journalists reluctant begin to admit they were wrong. When CNN's Christianne Amanpour charged that her own network and others were muzzled, no TV correspondents came to her defense or offered their own experiences. Recently CNN's Wolf Blitzer admitted "we just weren't skeptical enough." To his credit Fox's Bill O'Reilly admitted (not on Fox but on Good Morning America) that he was wrong on WMD's too.

These media failures have opened the door and a mass market for counter narratives and other media offering alternate and suppressed information. Speaking of Michael Moore's film Fahrenheit 9/11, Guardian columnist George Monbiot said: "The success of his film testifies to the rest of the media's failure." San Francisco Chronicle writer Tim Goodman charged that "Fahrenheit 9/11" is rattling the cages of established journalism. He calls it a "bell tolling for many mainstream journalists."

"Now, as anyone who remotely follows journalism and media understands, Moore's documentary and the perception that it gave viewers something they couldn't get on, say, The Nightly News or from the New York Times, rattles practicing journalists to the core."

This is a cage that needs to be rattled at a time when the comedy channel is more credible than most News channels. Media has gone from being a complaint to an issue. Already Fox is under attack in Robert Greenwald's new film OutFoxed.

For a trifecta, watch for WMD

News Dissector Danny Schechter writes a daily blog for Mediachannel.org. His new film WMD (wmdthefilm.com,) is making the rounds of festivals. His book "Embedded Weapons of Mass Deception" (ColdType.Net) was the first book to examine the media failures in Iraq. (Prometheus press)