

TELLING THE TRUTH AT A MOMENT OF TRUTH: US NEWS MEDIA AND THE INVASION AND OCCUPATION OF IRAQ

ROBERT W. McCHESNEY

A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy; or, perhaps, both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance; and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives. (James Madison¹)

The notion of a free press, of an institution that monitors those in power and those who wish to be in power, that ferrets out truth from lies, that draws public attention to the pressing issues of our times, is a cornerstone of liberal democratic theory. In practice, even in liberal democratic capitalist societies, press systems have never accomplished these laudable goals, though certain press systems, usually through progressive activism and reforms, have come much closer than others. The primary internal impediments to a viable free press have been private ownership of the media, and the drive to maximize profit, often through selling advertising. The primary external barriers are the difficulty of promoting a participatory democratic political culture in a class-divided society, as well as the constant pressure, direct and indirect, that elites put on the press to have it support elite aims. Radical press criticism, beginning most notably in the work of Marx, has never rejected Madison's notion of a free press.² To the contrary, the gist of radical press criticism has emphasized the irreconcilable nature of the free press ideal with a capitalist society.

The greatest test of a press system is how it empowers citizens to monitor the government's war-making powers. War is the most serious use of state power, organized sanctioned violence; how well it is under citizen review and control is not only a litmus test for the media but for society as a whole. Those in power, those who benefit from war and empire, see the press as arguably the most important front for war, because it is there that consent

is manufactured, and dissent is marginalized. For a press system, a war is its moment of truth.

With regard to the United States, it would be difficult to exaggerate how deeply concerned the founders were with limiting the war-making power of the government, of keeping the president in particular under strict control by Congress. The founders were no friends of egalitarianism or democracy – but they were resolutely opposed to tyranny. All of them learned from Montesquieu that history from Greece and Rome to modern times had repeatedly demonstrated that a state's existence as a self-governing republic was incompatible with becoming a militaristic empire defined by secrecy and hierarchy. And they understood that a viable free press was the only mechanism that could provide citizens with the precious commodity most frequently denied them by their governors: the information necessary to control those with the power to send the nation's children to their deaths on distant killing fields.

It is the press that is singularly responsible, therefore, for the maintenance of civilian control over the military, and the prevention of empire run amok. When the US Supreme Court considered the meaning of freedom of the press in the Pentagon Papers case in 1971, Justice Potter Stewart wrote: 'In the absence of governmental checks and balances present in other areas of our national life, the only effective restraint upon executive policy and power in the areas of national defense and international affairs may lie in an enlightened citizenry – in an informed and critical public opinion which alone can here protect the values of democratic government'. Such great words and sentiments notwithstanding, the track record of the US media over the past century in relation to US overseas wars, and the broader role of the United States in the world, has been dreadful. Time and time again the system has spread lies and half-truths and crushed dissent, which more often than not proved to be justified by the facts. In the United States, honest reflection is always done with hindsight, premised on the notion that we have learned from the past and that these problems in the media have been eliminated. After putting this pattern in historical perspective, this essay analyzes the US media coverage of the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003–2005. As we shall see, in this moment of truth for a free press, the truth was almost nowhere to be found.

MANUFACTURING CONSENT FOR WAR

Beginning with the 1898 Spanish–American War, the United States has engaged in scores of foreign military operations and several major wars involving the deployment of US troops. In nearly all of these major wars – the Spanish–American War, World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Central America proxy wars of the 1980s, and the first Gulf War – a clear

pattern emerged: the President wished to pursue war while the American people had severe reservations. In nearly every case the White House ran a propaganda campaign to generate public support for going to war, a campaign that bent the truth in line with the view that the ends (war) justified the means (lies). This is not to say that all of these wars by definition were improper. A powerful case, for example, can be made for US participation in World War II. But even in that case, President Roosevelt was concerned that the American people would not fall in line no matter how strong the evidence. So, as the saying goes, he 'lied' us into war.

The news media were placed in a recurring dilemma in each of these wars. The administration was pursuing aggressive propaganda campaigns to whip up popular support for war, and a key battleground was winning favourable press coverage. The news media in each case were presented with the dilemma of either challenging the administration pro-war line, demanding hard evidence for claims, digging deep to see that the full story was put before the American people, or going along more or less with the pro-war line. In principle, credible journalism should hold the nation's rulers to the same evidentiary standards it holds the enemies of the nation's rulers. We take no pleasure in reporting that the news media in nearly every case opted for Plan B. In the case of Vietnam, where the Pentagon Papers and the taped sessions in President Johnson's office document the shameless duplicity of the government, the willingness of the news media to parrot administration lies was a thorough abrogation of the requirements of a free press, with disastrous consequences for millions of lives. At journalism schools, these episodes are considered embarrassing moments in the history of US journalism, and not dwelt upon in the curricula. What is dwelt upon is the reporting that challenged official fiction years after the lies were told and the lives were lost.

The explanation of why the news media fail to get the fundamental facts before the American people concerning the decision of whether to go to war, be it in 1917, 1941, 1950, 1964, or 2003, are deep-seated. One could argue that the patriotic impulse is such that any journalism will have the strong tendency to 'root for the home team', as some have put it. But this analysis begs the question of why the patriotic impulse exists in different forms at different times, why some in society express it more fervently than others, how the patriotic impulse is enforced, how it manifests itself through media institutions and professional practices, and how we explain the exceptions. In short, the patriotic impulse explanation leads to far more questions than answers.

To explain the woeful coverage of US wars requires a look at the broad crisis in journalism I have analyzed at length elsewhere.³ By the early 20th century and thereafter, major news media were large commercial organizations and therefore tended to be conservative institutions. Those who owned

and managed these firms tended to be comfortable with the world view of those atop the social structure, because that is where they also resided, and were supportive of government policies that were understood to advance those interests. Moreover, most media owners did not want to be accused of being unpatriotic or treasonous. The system had done well by them. From a structural or sociological perspective, one would not expect that commercial news media organizations would pose a critical challenge to a strong pro-war campaign.

But what about the editors and working journalists who composed and edited the news? Some of them proudly hailed from the working class. Certainly they had no similar allegiance to the policy imperatives of the elite. To the extent that they had a certain autonomy from the implicit and explicit institutional prerogatives of the owners, the nature of press coverage was far less certain. Here we might even expect some stubborn interrogation of the powers-that-be. Regrettably, that has only rarely been the case. The primary problem has been the emergence of what is called ‘professional journalism’, which coincided with the emergence of the United States as a global military power. All of the limitations of the version of professional journalism that solidified its hold on newsrooms in the United States by the 1940s – reliance on official sources, fear of context, and the unstated ‘dig here, not there’ mandate – worked in combination to make professional journalism a lapdog more than a watchdog as the drums of war beat louder.

The factor most scholarship emphasizes in this regard is professional journalism’s reliance upon official sources. If people in power are debating an issue, journalists have some wiggle room to root around and explore it. If people in power agree on an issue, presuppose it, or do not seriously debate it, it is almost impossible for a journalist to raise it without being accused of partisanship and pushing an ideological agenda. So it is rarely done, and when it is done it is dismissed as bad journalism.

The ability of official sources to determine the range of legitimate debate is a regrettable tendency for most political stories, but it is nothing short of a disaster for the coverage of the US role in the world. For here ordinary citizens rely to an even greater extent upon the media than they do for domestic politics, where their daily experience can provide some corrective to skewed press coverage. Moreover, there is typically a greater consensus among ‘official sources’ on the US’s benign role in the world than there is on any other issue, except, perhaps, the greatness of US-style capitalism as the only legitimate way to organize an economy.

There are two fundamental presuppositions – actually, articles of faith – that guide US foreign policy. They are accepted by ‘official sources’ in both political parties, and they are almost never questioned in major US

news media. The first presupposition is the notion that the United States is a benevolent force in the world and that whatever it does, by definition, is ultimately about making the world a more just and democratic place. This is a pleasing assumption, and it puts a necessary fig leaf over what may be less altruistic aims. This presupposition also makes it possible for there to be almost no debate or discussion of the actual role of the United States in the world. Many Americans accept the official story that the United States is a benevolent giant, attacked on all sides by powerful evil-doers. That the United States accounts for almost half of all military spending in the world; that US military spending dwarfs the second largest military power by a factor of eight; that the United States has hundreds of foreign military bases in literally scores of nations: all of this is largely unmentioned and unknown to Americans. It is simply assumed away. And that leaves most Americans largely clueless about how the United States is perceived in the rest of the world.

The second article of faith that is generally unquestioned by the American media is the notion that the United States, and the United States alone, has a '007' right to invade any country it wishes. The United States also reserves the right to 'deputize' an ally to conduct an invasion if it so desires. Otherwise other nations are not permitted to engage in the invasion business. This presents a small problem for the political elite and for the news media. After all, the UN Charter and a number of other treaties signed by the United States prohibit the invasion of one nation by another unless it is under armed attack. Moreover, the US constitution characterizes treaties as the highest law of the land, so that if the United States violates international law, it arguably warrants presidential impeachment. To top it off, in popular discourse the United States proudly promotes itself as favouring the rule of law, and a main argument against all of its adversaries is invariably that they ignore treaties they have signed. That is, in fact, sometimes used as a rationale for a US invasion.

This is not to say that there is not highly competent and quality reporting on US foreign policy, only that it tends to stay within the parameters of what official sources consider legitimate. The truly great reporting, from people like I.F. Stone and Seymour Hersh, went boldly outside these parameters. (And some of the best reporting on the United States role in the world, not surprisingly, comes from American reporters working outside the United States, where reliance upon US official sources as the basis for legitimate news and opinion plays a much more limited role.)

In combination, the limitations of professional journalism, the influence of owners, the linkages of media institutions to the power structure of society, and the internalized elite presuppositions, have led to what can only

be characterized as a palpable double standard in coverage of the US role in the world. None have demonstrated this more convincingly than Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent*.⁴ Stories that support the aims of US policymakers get lavish and sympathetic treatment; stories of similar or greater factual veracity and importance that undermine US policy goals get brief and unfavourable mention. As Howard Friel and Richard Falk have demonstrated in their research, the US news media, including the most respected newspapers like *The New York Times*, turn a blind eye to US violations of core international law, while having no qualms about playing up the violations of adversaries. It would be nearly impossible for the coverage to be more unprincipled.⁵

THE CONTEMPORARY CRISIS IN JOURNALISM

The problems with US media coverage described above were evident from the 1960s into the 1980s, the so-called golden age of professional journalism. Press coverage exhibited severe flaws even when the newsrooms were relatively flush with resources and had as much autonomy as they ever would. The main developments in journalism over the past two decades that have eroded professional journalism – corporate consolidation and organized right-wing attacks on the ‘liberal media’ – have only made the situation worse.

The corporate downsizing and cutback epidemic has been especially hard on international coverage. The sharp reduction in the number of foreign correspondents working for US news media has been a familiar story over the past two decades. These are positions that cost a lot of money, and to the managers in charge they don’t seem to generate any black ink on their corporate balance sheets. Moreover, managers argue that people don’t seem to care if there is less international coverage, or if what passes for international coverage has less to do with politics and more to do with easy-to-report natural disasters and plane crashes. So from the corporate worldview, axing these positions is a no-brainer.

The resulting problem with not having many foreign correspondents with a familiarity with the language, history and customs of the regions they are covering has become painfully clear over the past fifteen years. When conflicts break out in the Balkans, Africa, South Asia or elsewhere, US news media have few if any reporters on the ground to provide context for the story. This means that there is less capacity for journalists to provide a counterbalance to whatever official story Washington puts forward. At its worst, foreign reporting becomes celebrity journalists and anchors being airdropped into a crisis area and shepherded around by representatives of the US government. This is not a recipe for independent journalism.

The right-wing critique of the ‘liberal’ media has not helped matters either.

Anti-war criticism of a Democratic war-maker from the right, though rare, is kosher if framed in hyper-nationalist terms. Thus Sean Hannity attacked Clinton's Kosovo war in terms he later characterized as treasonous when they were used by others about President Bush's Iraq war. A constant theme of the right-wing critique of the 'liberal' news media is that journalists are insufficiently patriotic; this translates into journalists being extra-sensitive to prove their nationalist credentials. Again, this is not conducive to critical analysis of foreign wars.

The combined effect of commercial and conservative attacks on professional journalism is to undermine the formal adherence to a neutral and non-partisan position. This does not mean mainstream media can become explicitly partisan to the left; that is more unthinkable than ever. Nor does it mean that most news media have dropped their formal commitment to political neutrality. It means that there are a growing number of media that push a partisan pro-Republican political agenda, often under a thin veneer of being 'fair and balanced'. So the Fox News Channel, Sinclair Broadcasting, the *New York Post*, the *Washington Times*, the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, and most of talk radio, all serve as standard-bearers for the Republican right. They aggressively promote right-wing policies and bash Democrats who get in the way. In coverage of Republican wars this translates into aggressive pro-war posturing and wholesale rabid condemnation of anti-war criticism as unpatriotic or treasonous. Because the rest of the news media tend to be timid by comparison, this right-wing phalanx sets the tone for coverage to an extent that is out of proportion to its size. And the rest of the press becomes even more hesitant to contradict the government line.

All of this came together in the coverage of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Despite the massive amount of attention the news media devoted to the topic – it was arguably the biggest US news story in a half-century – coverage was heavily propagandistic. Elementary questions about the administration's performance in failing to prevent the attack were not pursued. Hard looks at the relationship of the Bush Administration, the US government, Al Qaeda and other Mideast governments were all but non-existent. Even to broach the question of why the terrorists attacked the United States – as if there might be a rational explanation beyond the idea that these were madmen who hated us 'because of our freedoms' – was dismissed as implicitly condoning the attack and mass murder.

Guided by the Bush Administration and 'official sources', within hours of the 9-11 attacks, these terrorist acts had been converted from vicious crimes against humanity, from criminal acts of terror, to acts of war. The War on Terrorism entailed a push for a broad militarization of society and, imme-

diately, for the invasion and bombing of Afghanistan, a nation that did not attack the United States on 9-11.

The truth about 9-11 is still largely unknown. But what pieces have emerged, mostly in the margins, and with all too little pressure from mainstream media, suggest that much of what was presented as received wisdom in the months following the 9-11 attacks was incorrect, if not nonsense. The testimony of Richard Clarke as well as the report of the 9-11 Commission both highlight the negligence of the administration in failing to stop the terrorist attack or in addressing it properly afterwards. One can only imagine what mainstream media, egged on by Fox News, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, talk radio, and the *New York Post*, would have done to a President Gore or a President Clinton in a similar situation. In the immediate aftermath of the 9-11 attacks, courtesy of a hyperventilating press, President Bush was reborn as a cross between Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill.

The press was eating out of the Bush administration's bowl. If media truly constituted the most important front in modern war, the stars were in alignment for a bold invasion that had been atop the wish list of the main Bush foreign policy advisors for years, but was once thought too politically controversial to accomplish: the invasion of Iraq.

BUILD-UP TO THE INVASION OF IRAQ

It was in this environment that the United States was able to launch an invasion and occupation of Iraq on entirely bogus grounds. The three major justifications offered explicitly and implicitly by the Bush Administration to generate public support for the war were: (1) that Iraq illegally possessed weapons of mass destruction and was poised to use them on the United States in the immediate future; (2) that Iraq had been somehow connected to the attacks on 9-11, so pursuing Saddam Hussein was a rational next step in the campaign against bin Laden; and (3) Iraq was the leading terrorist state, 9-11 notwithstanding, so the War on Terror had to go through Baghdad.

The second and third claims were unsubstantiated on their face, and borderline preposterous. The Bush Administration was careful about making these claims in any official setting, but utterly shameless about turning to these claims to win support on the home front. The legal case the United States made for a 'pre-emptive' invasion of Iraq was the issue of Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction capable of being used against the United States. This case was made with considerable fanfare, both for domestic audiences and to generate global support, but there was significant evidence undermining its credibility. As is now established beyond any and all doubt: there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the Bush administration pushed its claims with little concern for evidence, and the news media participated

in this fraud to an appalling extent. (The May 2005 disclosure of the pre-invasion British intelligence Downing Street memo that provided damning evidence about how the United States was cooking intelligence to justify the invasion of Iraq – the ‘smoking gun memo’ – was the final nail in a well shut coffin.) This episode has been diagnosed in detail, and is now considered one of the darkest moments in the entire history of US journalism.

Omitted, too, in the coverage was the inescapable fact that the US invasion of Iraq violated international law.

The media institutions themselves were hawkish. The *Columbia Journalism Review* subsequently reviewed the editorial pages of the six top dailies that influence public opinion – including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* – and determined that all of them failed to hold the Bush administration to an adequate standard of proof. *Editor & Publisher* determined that of the top 50 daily newspapers in the nation, not a single one was strongly ‘anti-war’ on its editorial page.

The reliance upon official sources to frame the debate and set the agenda is mostly responsible for the disgraceful press coverage of Bush Administration lies. As Jonathan Mermin put it in a brilliant essay in *World Policy Journal*, conventional journalism means ‘journalists continue to be incapable of focusing on an issue for perspective on US foreign policy that has not been first identified or articulated in official Washington debate’. Here it is important to note that most Democratic leaders did not assume an anti-war position, so there was little countervailing framing coming from officialdom. Mermin scoffs at the idea that elite consensus justifies journalists regurgitating the government position uncritically: ‘The absence of opposition to a Republican military intervention among Democratic politicians is not persuasive evidence that the policy is sound, or even that presumptively informed and thoughtful people believe it sound’. What it adds up to, in clear contradiction to the spirit and intent of the First Amendment, is ‘if the government isn’t talking about it, we don’t report it’.⁶

A comprehensive analysis of the sources used on TV news in the weeks leading up to the US invasion – when a significant percentage of the US population was opposed to an invasion – showed that 3 per cent of the US sources employed were anti-war, and over 70 per cent were decidedly pro-war. A Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) survey of nightly news coverage on NBC, ABC, CBS, PBS, CNN and Fox during the first three weeks after the invasion found that pro-war US sources outnumbered anti-war sources by 25 to 1. Moreover, the on-air experts that TV news relied upon were generally ‘establishment’ figures and so by definition uncritical.⁷

Press coverage reached its nadir immediately preceding the invasion. In February 2003 Colin Powell went before the United Nations to make the

definitive case for invading Iraq. Powell provided little verifiable evidence for his extravagant claims. Six months later, Associated Press correspondent Charles J. Hanley fact-checked Powell's speech, and 'utterly demolished' it, as *Editor & Publisher* put it.⁸ Regrettably the best journalism all too often tends to be in post-mortems, when the political consequences are minuscule. At the time of Powell's speech, when the fate of peace hung in the balance and when independent experts were puncturing most of his claims, the news media regurgitated Powell's points and praised them for their veracity in a manner that could not have been exceeded by Stalin's stooges. Gilbert Cranberg, formerly of the *Des Moines Register*, has compiled a comprehensive study of the press coverage of Powell's speech. Among the terms used by the leading American papers to describe the merits of Powell's case: 'a massive array of evidence'; 'a sober, factual case'; 'an overwhelming case'; 'a smoking fusillade ... a persuasive case for anyone who is still persuadable'; 'an ironclad case... incontrovertible evidence'; 'an accumulation of painstakingly gathered and analyzed evidence'; 'succinct and damning evidence ... the case is closed'.⁹

In past wars like Vietnam, apologists for gullible press coverage could argue that the news media had no way of knowing that the Johnson Administration was lying to them, and that the Gulf of Tonkin incident was a ruse. Such was not the case with Iraq. At every step of the way there was an impressive amount of material in the international press and on the internet that contradicted the Bush administration's line. (For example, consider the powerful and immediate rebuttal to Powell's UN speech by Glen Rangwala of Cambridge University.)¹⁰ It was all but ignored. Former Marine and Republican weapons inspector Scott Ritter – who spent years on the ground in Iraq – carefully repudiated all of the Bush Administration claims;¹¹ as a result he was subject to a character assassination campaign that made it easier for a news medium to turn to celebrities like country music singer Lee Greenwood, action movie star Chuck Norris or ex-football player Mike Ditka as if they were credible experts. A journalist did not have to be I.F. Stone to see that there was something fishy about the official story; all she had to do was keep her eyes open and her critical faculties working.

Moreover, unlike Vietnam, the invasion of Iraq was met by a massive anti-war movement in the United States *before* any bullets were expended. Hundreds of thousands of Americans took to the streets in February 2003 to protest the planned invasion of Iraq. Following the familiar pattern for dissident opinion, press coverage was minimal and dismissive.

MANAGING THE HOME FRONT DURING WAR

Perhaps the most striking development in press coverage of the invasion and war was the policy of 'embedding' journalists with military units, so they could see first-hand how the war was developing. Proponents of the policy argued it would protect journalists from enemy fire and make it possible for them to get stories that would be otherwise unattainable.

Embedded reporting in combination with full throttle jingoism on US television news made it difficult for journalists to do critical work. 'I think the press was muzzled, and I think the press was self-muzzled', stated CNN's Christine Amanpour, arguably the most respected foreign correspondent on US television, a few months later. 'I'm sorry to say, but certainly television and, perhaps, to a certain extent, my station was intimidated by the administration and its foot soldiers at Fox News. And it did, in fact, put a climate of fear and self-censorship, in my view, in terms of the kind of broadcast work we did'.¹²

The problems continued after the formal defeat of Saddam Hussein's army during the liberation that immediately became an occupation. The US news media were caught entirely by surprise. Indeed, the term 'occupation' had never been used prior to the invasion. Mermin quotes PBS's Jim Lehrer, who defended this omission: 'The word occupation ... was never mentioned in the run-up to the war. It was liberation. This was [talked about in Washington as] a war of liberation, not a war of occupation. So as a consequence, those of us in journalism never even looked at the issue of occupation'.¹³

At the same time, it was imperative for the Bush Administration that the best possible spin be put on the war, that it be regarded at home as a success, especially with an election coming up. The one great advantage the Bush Administration had was that it could use its power to heavily promote stories that painted the picture it wanted to be seen, and by remaining quiet it could pour water on those stories it did not wish to see developed. When information continued to emerge discrediting the Bush administration's rationale for the war, and the nature of the 'liberation', like the 'Downing Street memo' of British intelligence, the White House sealed its lips, Democrats meekly obliged, and reporters had little to work with. As a result journalistic mountains were converted into molehills.

Conversely, stories like the toppling of the Saddam Hussein statue in Baghdad, President Bush dressing up in flight-suit drag and appearing below a giant 'Mission Accomplished' banner, the 'rescue' of Jessica Lynch, as well as the capture of Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi election of early 2005, all got lavish attention at the time such attention was needed. Each of these was held up as a critical juncture, the moment the tide was turning and the Bush administration's policies were being proven 'right'. But, in each instance, the

passage of only a few days or weeks would reveal that the tide had not turned – and that the administration’s approach remained as ill-fated as ever.

Consider the prison torture scandal at Abu Ghraib prison. Award-winning Associated Press reporter Charles Hanley broke a story on US torture of Iraqi prisoners in fall 2003, but, as Mermin notes, it ‘was ignored by the major American newspapers’. Hanley explained to Mermin that his ‘was not an officially sanctioned story that begins with a handout from an official source’, noting at the same time the ‘very strong prejudice toward investing US official statements with credibility while disregarding statements from almost any other source’.¹⁴ Hanley’s story featured Iraqis recounting their personal experience at Abu Ghraib. It did not provoke a Bush photo-op in a warden’s costume in front of Abu Ghraib, or a steady stream of official press releases drawing attention to it. When it finally was broken with photographic evidence by Hersh and CBS News in the US, the story received plentiful coverage. But it was a classic case in which the line of investigation stopped at low levels, and exonerated those in charge of the overall policy. Without any push from official sources the story faded away. Indeed, it went unmentioned during the 2004 presidential campaign debates.

One year after the Abu Ghraib story broke, Seymour Hersh reflected on the whitewash of extensive and persistent US war crimes, which he among others has documented, and the role the US media played. ‘It’s a dreary pattern’, Hersh wrote. ‘The reports and subsequent Senate proceedings are sometimes criticized on editorial pages. There are calls for a truly independent investigation by the Senate or the House. Then, as months pass with no official action, the issue withers away, until the next set of revelations revives it’. There were ten official military inquiries into Abu Ghraib, but they ‘are all asking the wrong questions ... The question that never gets adequately answered is this: what did the president do after being told about Abu Ghraib?’¹⁵

A major area of tension between the Bush Administration’s wish to paint the rosier possible picture and the responsibility of reporters to present a more accurate picture of what is transpiring in Iraq is the reporting of the war’s toll in human lives. The US government wishes to minimize the public’s awareness of the human cost of the war, both to the Iraqis and to US soldiers. Wary of Vietnam-like images, the Bush Administration fought to keep this information strictly out of public view. Iraqi casualties were not recorded, and reporters have been unable to get to the places where most of these casualties occur. As a result, Michael Massing notes, journalists have been ‘exceedingly cautious’ in making estimates.¹⁶ While few US journalists had any interest in this subject, the respected British medical journal *The Lancet* published a study by Johns Hopkins University scholars who estimated the Iraqi civilian death toll at 100,000 in October 2004, before the second siege

of Falluja, with a majority of the deaths due to US military actions.¹⁷ The report caused a tempest for a day or two, as it exceeded the figures accepted by US news media by a factor of seven or eight. But the issue died quickly enough, as no US official source wished to dwell on this topic. This lack of interest in keeping an accurate accounting of Iraqi civilian deaths tends to undermine the official claim that this war is motivated by a great concern for the welfare of the Iraqi people.

MEDIA MOMENT OF TRUTH

Although US journalism, especially in coverage of wars, tends to run in packs, it is not monolithic. Even at its worst there is usually an exception that proves the rule. In addition, among the ranks of journalists are many highly principled and courageous reporters, who entered the profession not to serve as a conduit for those in power, but to shine a light on those in power on behalf of the citizenry. As the dissonance grew between the official story offered by the White House and largely regurgitated in the media and the actual horror story on the ground in Iraq, many journalists took a hard look at media performance and the state of the profession. By the end of 2003 the *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Editor & Publisher* and other leading industry publications or journalism reviews – not to mention the first rate work done by groups like FAIR and publications like the *New York Review of Books* and *The Nation* – had presented probing criticisms of media coverage of the war.

In early 2004 the *New York Times* made the unprecedented gesture of offering a mea culpa for its flawed coverage of the weapons of mass destruction controversy, while the *Washington Post* allowed its media reporter, Howard Kurtz, to write an extended critique of its coverage.¹⁸ Each newspaper implicitly acknowledged its role in leading the nation to war on bogus grounds, yet neither explicitly took responsibility. The confessions were halting and unenthusiastic, but, in a field where admissions of fundamental error are about as welcome as getting root canal surgery without a painkiller, they sent a powerful shot over the bow of journalism nationwide. This occurred on the heels of Howard Dean's rise to the top of the Democratic field, running on an essentially anti-war platform, and when observers were beginning to use words like 'quagmire' to describe the US occupation of Iraq. The apologies were the tip of the journalistic iceberg. Many journalists were appalled by the war, humiliated by the poor performance of the news media, and frustrated by the Bush Administration's deception. Some critics predicted that the working press would get a wake-up call from the scandalous coverage of the Iraq war and turn its anger on Bush in advance of the November election. If there was going to be room for more independent and critical coverage of the US war on Iraq, in early 2004 conditions in newsrooms were as ripe as they ever would be.

Alas, it would not come to pass. The impulse for media self-criticism is quickly tempered by the deeply ingrained institutional realization that it is not healthy to encourage the public to keep the hood up any longer than necessary so they can inspect the engine. Few other major media took the bait and pursued the issue of how the media were complicit in sponsoring a devastating and illegitimate war. It was difficult to avoid Danny Schechter's conclusion that the mainstream press made minimum concessions on its Iraq coverage as a form of damage control. It had no interest in laying out the whole truth.¹⁹

The *New York Times* certainly wanted to get the incident in its rear view mirror as quickly as possible. The *Times* quietly removed Judith Miller (the reporter whose uncritical and whole-hog reliance on extremely dubious sources in 2003 gave tremendous legitimacy to the Bush Administration's lies about Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction) from her beat, but she was not formally censured. Miller herself was unapologetic. 'My job isn't to assess the government's information and be an independent intelligence analyst myself', she is quoted by Mermin as saying. 'My job is to tell readers of the *New York Times* what the government thought about Iraq's arsenal'.²⁰

The way journalists adapted to the coverage of the occupation of Iraq was not to tell the truth and let the chips fall where they might. As one Baghdad correspondent for a large US newspaper told Massing in October 2004, 'the situation in Iraq was a catastrophe', a view shared 'almost unanimously' by his colleagues. A widely circulated email that September by Farnaz Fassihi, a Baghdad correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*, was a devastating critique of the US war, 'a foreign policy failure that will haunt the United States for decades to come'. Fassihi concluded: 'The genie of terrorism, chaos and mayhem has been unleashed onto this country as a result of American mistakes and it can't be put back into the bottle'. Massing notes that other US correspondents in Baghdad were startled at the attention Fassihi's email received. 'Everyone was marveling and asking what we were doing wrong if that information came as a surprise to the American public', one of them told Massing.²¹

Such a candid view of conditions in Iraq was regarded by the evolving conventions of professional journalism as partisan, unprofessional and not objective – regardless of whether or not it was true – because it was a thorough repudiation of the Bush administration position. It was not *balanced*, 'balance' being defined not by the evidence but by accommodation to powerful interests. This point cannot be overemphasized: the balance editors employed had nothing to do with the evidence, and everything to do with keeping the Bush administration and the political right off their backs. 'Every story from Iraq is by definition an assessment as to whether

things are going well or badly', a US newspaper correspondent in Baghdad told Massing. 'Editors are hypersensitive about not wanting to appear to be coming down on one side or the other'.²² (There is little evidence that appearing too pro-administration on the war caused many editors to shudder in fear.) Once Fassihi's email was spread across the Internet, the *Wall Street Journal* received pressure to remove her from the beat because she could no longer be regarded as 'objective'. Fassihi was immediately sent on a vacation until after the November US election, though the *Journal* stated that this had nothing to do with her email.

Edward Wasserman reflected upon this conundrum in the *Miami Herald*. 'I can only imagine the current mind-set of supervising editors: If we give prominence to this story of carnage in Iraq, will we be accused of anti-administration bias? And – here it gets interesting – will we therefore owe our readers an offsetting story, perhaps an inspirational tale of Marines teaching young Iraqis how to play softball?' So by following the obsession with balance, the news reports presented a confusing and skewed picture of the reality on the ground in Iraq. And it meant that the logical hard questions that would emerge from tough-minded reporting – like what on earth accounts for this mess? – got lost in the contradictory and incoherent picture provided by 'balanced' reporting.²³ 'Balance' did mean that a number of quality reports could get through, especially in the print media. In the months before the November election, there were several first-rate examinations in the mainstream press of the failures of the US occupation. But the TV news coverage was far more pro-war, generally dismissing or ignoring facts that got in the way, with Fox News the exemplar, though far from alone in its patriotic charge.

It did not help matters that John Kerry and leading Democrats did not oppose the war per se, but only how it was being executed. Kerry was no anti-war candidate, and the war, amazingly enough, was not a defining issue in the 2004 campaign. This meant there was no 'official' anti-war source to embrace what critical reporting there was, draw voter attention to it, and encourage journalists to do more of the same. Not surprisingly, public opinion surveys indicated that in the fall of 2004 a significant percentage of Americans – and most Bush voters – still believed Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and that Saddam Hussein was shown to have been a major supporter of Al Qaeda, and hence lurked behind the 9-11 attacks. In view of how much media coverage was devoted to these issues, a more thorough repudiation of the press could barely be imagined. (What would people have thought of the US media system if in 1944 a survey had found that a majority of Americans thought China was responsible for the attack on Pearl Harbor?)

DEMOCRACY INVARIABLY ASCENDANT

Because the core articles of faith remain inviolable in US journalism and politics, US media coverage of American foreign wars inexorably slides into providing a view compatible with those atop society. Despite the thorough invalidation of every official reason provided by the Bush Administration to invade and occupy Iraq, journalists made almost no effort to locate more plausible explanations for such a major war. It would not have taken long for an inquiring reporter to find serious experts able to discuss the following factors: the imperial drive encouraged by the existence of a massive military-industrial complex; the geopolitical and economic advantages of having permanent military bases and a client regime/friendly ally in the heart of the Middle East; the domestic political advantages for a President to have the populace whipped into wartime fervour; the security needs of Israel, a close ally of the United States; and, of course, oil. Such explanations can be found in elite journals, in the business press, in intelligence reports and in academic studies. Such an approach is applied in popular analyses of the motives of any other nation throughout history, but such inquiry was and is off-limits in US politics and in US mainstream journalism. To leading American politicians and journalists, the United States is a benevolent nation, always working with the ultimate objective of promoting democracy.

When the United States finally convened an election in Iraq on January 30, it was trumpeted with a massive PR blitz by Washington, and the media obediently responded. The election was regarded as a wondrous democratic moment and viewed without criticism in the news media. Finally, the war was won! And, finally, too, the real reason why the United States had invaded and occupied Iraq could be declared: to bring democracy to the entire Middle East – and, of course, to liberate the women! This explanation was embraced across the political spectrum, as it tapped into the core presuppositions about the US role in the world. But empirical support for the democratic claim also evaporated as the situation in Iraq grew even more grim for the US forces and the elected government by mid-2005.²⁴

As the United States celebrated the triumph of freedom and democracy, elementary questions went unasked. On what grounds should the US claim to be concerned with democracy be taken seriously? Is the United States a purely philanthropic power that has no military or economic designs? Why did US occupation authorities in Iraq work so hard to delay elections? If the US favours democratic rule, why ignore the fact that most Iraqis voted for parties calling for an early or even immediate end to the US occupation? Is it legitimate to invade a nation to install democracy? If it is legitimate, is every non-democracy in need of an invasion or just some? Which ones? Is Iraq just the first nation on a list of those that should be invaded? What about

Pakistan? Or Saudi Arabia? Or Kuwait? And who makes the decision about which country to invade, and who does the invading? If the United States can do it to Iraq, can India do it to Pakistan? Can Russia invade Uzbekistan? Can Venezuela invade Colombia? These are the kinds of questions that must be answered if the invasion of Iraq is to be justified in terms of 'democracy'. Otherwise it is just the law of the jungle, with all talk about democracy so much bunkum. In the US media system, these questions almost never get asked; the subject never gets sustained attention.

The problems besetting US journalism are deep-seated and will not go away unless there is structural change in the media system, such that truthful reporting on affairs of state can be a rational expectation. This requires immediate political organizing to change the policies upon which the media system is based, and it requires making media reform part and parcel of broader movements for peace and social justice. In the end, media reform and social justice will rise or fall together. We need a press system that tells the truth.

NOTES

- 1 Letter to W.T. Barry, 4 August 1822, in Philip R. Fendall, ed., *Letters and Other Writings of James Madison*, Volume III, Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1865, p. 276.
- 2 See Saul K. Padover, editor and translator, Karl Marx, *On Freedom of the Press and Censorship*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974.
- 3 See Robert W. McChesney, *The Problem of the Media*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004, ch. 2.
- 4 Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the News Media*, New York: Pantheon, 1988.
- 5 Howard Friel and Richard A. Falk, *The Paper of Record: How the New York Times Misreports U.S. Foreign Policy*, New York: Verso, 2004.
- 6 Jonathan Mermin, 'The Media's Independence Problem', *World Policy Journal*, 21(3), Fall, 2004, p. 69.
- 7 Steve Rendall and Tara Broughel, 'Amplifying Officials, Squelching Dissent: FAIR Study Finds Democracy Poorly Served by War Coverage', *Extra!*, May/June, 2003, <http://www.fair.org/extra/0305/warstudy.html>
- 8 'Watchdogs of War', *Editor & Publisher*, 8 September 2003; Greg Mitchell, 'Why We Are in Iraq', *Editor & Publisher*, 8 September 2003.
- 9 Cited in Eric Alterman, "'Case Closed'", *The Nation*, 25 April 2005.
- 10 Glen Rangwala, 'Claims in Secretary of State Colin Powell's UN

- Presentation Concerning Iraq, 5th Feb 2003', <http://middleeastreference.org.uk/powell030205.html>.
- 11 See for example Scott Ritter, 'Is Iraq a True Threat to the US?', *Boston Globe*, 20 July 2002, <http://www.commondreams.org/views02/0721-02.htm>.
 - 12 Antonia Zerbisias, 'The Press Self-muzzled Its Coverage of Iraq War', *Toronto Star*, 16 September 2003.
 - 13 Mermin, 'The Media's Independence Problem', p. 67.
 - 14 Ibid.
 - 15 Seymour Hersh, 'The Unknown Unknowns of the Abu Ghraib Scandal', *The Guardian*, 21 May 2005.
 - 16 Michael Massing, 'Iraq, the Press and the Election', *New York Review of Books*, 16 December 2004.
 - 17 L. Roberts et al., 'Mortality Before and After the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: Cluster Sample Survey', *The Lancet*, 364(9448), pp. 1857-64. It should be noted that the figure of 100,000 deaths was a controversial one, arrived at by extrapolating from a comparison of prewar and wartime mortality rates in a sample of Iraqi neighbourhoods. For a critique see Fred Kaplan, '100,000 Dead – or 8,000. How Many Iraqi Civilians have Died as a Result of the War?', 29 October 2004, <http://slate.msn.com/id/2108887>. The effort to produce an accurate casualty estimate continues today. British and American researchers in the Iraq Body Count project maintain a database at <http://www.countthecasualties.org.uk/> of media-reported civilian deaths in Iraq resulting from the military invasion and occupation. It estimates the casualties, in the period of 1 January 2003 to 15 June 2005, to be between 22,248 and 25,229.
 - 18 Howard Kurtz, 'Paint by Numbers: How Repeated Reportage Colors Perceptions' (Media Notes), *The Washington Post*, 12 July 2004.
 - 19 Danny Schechter, 'Is Our Media Covering Its Errors or Covering Them Up?', *CommonDreams.org*, 16 August 2004, <http://www.commondreams.org/views04/0816-04.htm>.
 - 20 Mermin, 'The Media's Independence Problem', pp. 67-8.
 - 21 Statements quoted in Massing, 'Iraq, the Press and the Election'. See also Michael Massing, 'Now They Tell Us', *New York Review of Books*, 26 February 2004.
 - 22 Massing, 'Iraq, the Press and the Election'.
 - 23 Edward Wasserman, 'Cowardice in the Newsrooms', *Miami Herald*, 6 September 2004.
 - 24 Andrew Ackerman, 'War Reporters at ASNE Say Iraq Remains Frightening', *Editor & Publisher*, 15 April 2005.