

JULY 25

Wagging the puppy, unleashing the dogs

Midway through July, the Karl Rove scandal was dominating the national news – until the sudden announcement of a Supreme Court nominee interrupted the accelerating momentum of the Rove story. Since then, some anti-Bush groups and progressive pundits have complained that the White House manipulated the media agenda. But when it comes to deploying weapons of mass distraction, the worst is yet to come.

Changing the subject is a key aspect of political damage control. Media spin is often most effective when it displaces one storyline with another.

No one is in a better position to shift the country's media focus than the president. And no technique has been more successful than military action.

Just two days after a truck bomb killed 241 Americans at a Marine headquarters in Beirut, the U.S. invasion of Grenada quickly pushed the Lebanon disaster out of the media spotlight. On the day of the invasion (Oct. 25, 1983), President Reagan told reporters that the factor "of overriding importance" was the need to protect "innocent lives, including up to a thousand Americans, whose personal safety is, of course, my paramount concern."

That pretext for the invasion was bogus; the U.S. citizens in Grenada had not been in danger and they didn't want to be "rescued." Yet the invasion of Grenada was a big hit in the United States, and opinion polls showed a net gain of several points for Reagan's favorable numbers. On the front pages and TV networks, he had changed the military subject from disaster in Lebanon to triumph in Grenada.

Instead of critically examining the assumptions and effects of militarism, the news media celebrated it. Within 48 hours, the president had accomplished a remarkable public-relations feat – all the more notable because he directly transformed the public view of his role as commander in chief.

Fast forward two decades: The summer of 2002 began with Republicans on Capitol Hill in a near-panic. Congressional elections were just a few months off, and the front pages were filled with stories about economic distress. Widespread unemployment,

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fear of layoffs and spiking health-care costs had created a political atmosphere that threatened the Republican Party's control over both houses of Congress. But then war drums started beating – very loud.

It wasn't necessary for the president to "wag the dog" by starting a war before the November 2002 election. Wagging the puppy would suffice. The summer was filled with a rising chorus of alarms – sounded by the Bush administration and echoed by many reporters, pundits, think-tank allies and other spinners. By the time the first leaves fell that autumn, the economy was off the front pages, replaced by a huge focus on the possibility of invading Iraq.

The current Rove scandal could hoist the Bush administration on its own "national security" petard. Certainly, if the key political strategist for a Democrat in the White House had leaked the name of an undercover CIA operative, the Republicans would be howling. But anti-Bush media forces lack the kind of massive echo chamber that the right wing enjoys. And the Bush regime can rely on more than the usual White House prerogative to launch some kind of military attack at an opportune moment.

In political terms, 9/11 is a gift that keeps on giving to George W. Bush. It's a golden goose that the right wing is determined to keep feeding.

The previous few presidents could rely on intermittent warfare to rally their domestic forces around the flag. But today, the "war on terror" provides the president with a nonstop set of options for drawing attention away from scandalous stories that could undermine his administration.

The Bush team has made good on a promise from Donald Rumsfeld, two weeks after 9/11, that "this will be a war like none other our nation has faced." In an op-ed article that appeared in the New York Times on Sept. 27, 2001, Rumsfeld declared: "Forget about 'exit strategies'; we're looking at a sustained engagement that carries no dead-lines."

This "sustained engagement" – the supposed "war on terrorism" – has become the ultimate propaganda weapon and open-ended cashier's check for an administration that will do whatever it can to retain power. Already, vast amounts of taxpayer money have been squandered and countless lives have been destroyed. Sooner rather than later, we must void this blank check.

*This article is adapted from Norman Solomon's new book
"War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death."
For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com*