

DECEMBER 6

In plane sight: US media dodging air war in Iraq

The U.S. government is waging an air war in Iraq. "In recent months, the tempo of American bombing seems to have increased," Seymour Hersh reported in the Dec. 5 edition of *The New Yorker*. "Most of the targets appear to be in the hostile, predominantly Sunni provinces that surround Baghdad and along the Syrian border." Hersh added: "As yet, neither Congress nor the public has engaged in a significant discussion or debate about the air war."

Here's a big reason why: Major U.S. news outlets are dodging the extent of the Pentagon's bombardment from the air, an avoidance all the more egregious because any drawdown of U.S. troop levels in Iraq is very likely to be accompanied by a step-up of the air war.

So, according to the LexisNexis media database, how often has the phrase "air war" appeared in *The New York Times* this year with reference to the current U.S. military effort in Iraq?

As of early December, the answer is: Zero.

And how often has the phrase "air war" appeared in *The Washington Post* in 2005? The answer: Zero.

And how often has "air war" been printed in *Time*, the nation's largest-circulation news magazine, this year?

Zero.

This extreme media avoidance needs to change. Now. Especially because all the recent talk in Washington about withdrawing some U.S. troops from Iraq is setting the stage for the American military to do more of its killing in that country from the air.

The last few weeks have brought a dramatic shift in the national debate over Iraq war policies. On Capitol Hill and in major news outlets, the option of swiftly withdrawing U.S. troops – previously treated as unthinkable by most partisan leaders and media pundits – became part of serious mainstream media conversation.

At least implicitly, news coverage has viewed the number of boots on the ground as the measure of the U.S. war effort in Iraq. And as a consequence, public discussion

MEDIABEAT 2005 | NORMAN SOLOMON

assumes – incorrectly – that a reduction of American troop levels there will mean a drop in the Pentagon's participation in the carnage.

In fact, beneath the surface of mass-media discourse, there are strong indications that the U.S. military command will intensify its bombardment of Iraq while reducing the presence of American occupying troops before the U.S. congressional elections next fall. With the White House eager to show progress toward U.S. disengagement from Iraq, we should expect enormous media spin to accompany any pullout of troops in 2006.

"The American air war inside Iraq today is perhaps the most significant – and under-reported – aspect of the fight against the insurgency," Hersh's New Yorker article observed. The magnitude of the U.S. bombing is a mystery in American media coverage relying on what's spoon-fed by the Pentagon. "The military authorities in Baghdad and Washington do not provide the press with a daily accounting of missions that Air Force, Navy, and Marine units fly or of the tonnage they drop, as was routinely done during the Vietnam War."

Surely the media spinners in the White House are keenly aware that the air war in Iraq has been flying largely beneath the U.S. media's radar – inattention that augurs well for a scenario of reducing U.S. troop levels while stepping up the air war. Hersh's reporting suggests that's in the offing: "A key element of the drawdown plans, not mentioned in the president's public statements, is that the departing American troops will be replaced by American airpower. Quick, deadly strikes by U.S. warplanes are seen as a way to improve dramatically the combat capability of even the weakest Iraqi combat units."

Mainstream news outlets in the United States haven't yet acknowledged a possibility that is both counterintuitive and probable: The U.S. military could end up killing more Iraqi people when there are fewer Americans in Iraq. "Lowering the number of U.S. troops in conjunction with a more violent air war and creation of an Iraqi client military, as some are suggesting, will likely increase the number of Iraqis killed," says Joseph Gerson of the American Friends Service Committee. "This would in effect be 'changing the color of the corpses' in order to make the continuing war more palatable to the U.S. public."

There is a strong precedent for such a politically driven strategy. Midway through 1969, President Richard Nixon announced the start of a "Vietnamization" policy that cut the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam by nearly half a million over a three-year period. But during that time, the tonnage rate of U.S. bombs dropped on Vietnam actually increased.

MEDIABEAT 2005 | NORMAN SOLOMON

A similar sequence of events is apt to get underway next year, before the November elections determine which party will control the House and Senate through 2008. Caught between the desire to prevent a military defeat in Iraq and the need to shore up Republican prospects at home in the face of an unpopular war, President Bush is very likely to keep escalating the U.S. air war in Iraq while reducing U.S. troop levels there. And he has good reason to hope that the American news media will continue to evade the air war's horrendous consequences for Iraqi people.

*Norman Solomon is the author of the new book "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death."
For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com*