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Bogus blurring of Iraq terror and insurgency

With public support for the Iraq war at low ebb, the White House is more eager than ever to conflate Iraq's insurgency with terrorism. But last week, just after President Bush gave yet another speech repeatedly depicting the U.S. war effort in Iraq as a battle against terrorists, Rep. John Murtha debunked the claim. His refutation deserved much more news coverage than it got.

"You heard the president talk today about terrorism," Murtha told reporters at a Dec. 7 news conference. "Every other word was 'terrorism.'" Speaking as a lawmaker in close touch with the Pentagon's top military leaders, he went on to confront the core of the administration's current argument for keeping American soldiers in Iraq.

"Let's talk about terrorism versus insurgency in Iraq itself," Murtha said. "We think that foreign fighters are about 7 percent – might be a little bit more, a little bit less. Very small proportion of the people that are involved in the insurgency are terrorists or how I would interpret them as terrorists."

Murtha threw cold water on the storyline that presents U.S. troops as defenders of Iraqis. He cited a recent poll, commissioned by Britain's Ministry of Defense, indicating that four-fifths of Iraqis now want the American and British forces out of their country. "When I said we can't win a military victory, it's because the Iraqis have turned against us," Murtha said.

Contrary to what countless pundits still contend, Murtha sees the U.S. presence in Iraq as a boon, not an impediment, to terrorism. "I am convinced, and everything that I've read, the conclusion I've reached is there will be less terrorism, there will be less danger to the United States and it'll be less insurgency once we're out," he said. "I think the Iraqis themselves will turn against this very small group of Al Qaeda. They keep saying the terrorists are going to control Iraq. No way."

The relatively small number of Al Qaeda forces in Iraq will become isolated when the deeply resented occupiers leave Iraq, he predicted, and actual terrorists will no longer find a haven among most Iraqis.

During his presentation about the importance of distinguishing between terrorism

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and insurgency, Murtha was directly admonishing the White House. But what he said could also serve as a reality check for news media. All too often – without attribution to any source – reporters have asserted that the U.S. military actions in Iraq are part of a “war on terror.” And journalists have routinely failed to include any perspectives that challenge the view, avidly promoted by the Bush administration, that the fighters doing battle with American forces in Iraq are, by definition, terrorists.

In a typical news report from Baghdad, airing on “All Things Considered” early this month, NPR correspondent Anne Garrels presented the U.S. government line as the only one worth mentioning. During the Dec. 2 broadcast, she described recent American offensives and then told listeners: “The military says its actions have resulted in numerous terrorists killed or detained, as well as the discovery of a large number of weapons caches.”

The Bush administration is glad to define a “terrorist” as anyone who uses violence against occupation troops. And many U.S. news outlets parrot the claim. But that is flagrant manipulation of language.

Norman Solomon is the author of the recent book

“War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death.”

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