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22 JANUARY 2007

The Pentagon vs. press freedom

We often hear that the Pentagon exists to defend our freedoms. But the Pentagon is moving against press freedom.

Not long ago, journalist Sarah Olson received a subpoena to testify in early February in the court-martial of U.S. Army Lt. Ehren Watada, who now faces prosecution for speaking against the Iraq war and refusing to participate in it. Apparently, the commanders at the Pentagon are so eager to punish Watada that they've decided to go after reporters who have informed the public about his statements.

People who run wars are notoriously hostile to a free press. They're quick to praise it – unless the reporting goes beyond mere stenography for the war-makers and actually engages in journalism that makes the military command uncomfortable.

Evidently, that's why the Pentagon subpoenaed Olson. They want her to testify to authenticate her quotes from Watada – which is to say, they want to force her into the prosecution of him. “Army lawyers are overreaching when they try to prosecute their case by drafting reporters,” the Los Angeles Times noted in a Jan. 8 editorial.

The newspaper added: “No prosecutor should be able to conscript any reporter into being a deputy by compelling testimony about a statement made by a source – or go

fishing for information beyond what a reporter presents in a story – unless it's absolutely vital to protect U.S. citizens from crime or attack. This principle should apply whether or not the source was speaking in confidence, or whether or not the reporter works for a media organization.”

Olson is a freelancer whose reporting on Watada has appeared on the widely read Truthout.org website and has aired on the nationwide public radio program “Making Contact.” (Full disclosure: I was a founder of that program and served as an advisor.) For a number of years, she has been doing the job of a journalist. Now, in its dealings with her, the Pentagon is despicably trying to trample on the First Amendment.

As the LA Times editorialized, “there is something especially chilling about the U.S. military reaching beyond its traditional authority to compel a non-military U.S. citizen engaged in news-gathering to testify in a military court, simply to bolster a court-martial case. ... Sustaining the military subpoena would set a troubling precedent. It's time for the Army to back off.”

But the Army hasn't shown any sign of backing off – despite an outcry from a widening range of eminent journalists, mainstream media institutions and First Amendment groups.

“Trying to force a reporter to testify at a court-martial sends the wrong signal to the

THE NORMAN SOLOMON READER

media and the military,” said the president of the Military Reporters and Editors organization, James W. Crawley. He commented: “One of the hallmarks of American journalism, as documented in the Bill of Rights and defended by our armed services, is a clear separation of the press and the government. Using journalists to help the military prosecute its case seems like a serious breach of that wall.”

By sending subpoenas to Sarah Olson and to another journalist who has reported on Watada (Gregg Kakesako of the Honolulu Star-Bulletin), the Pentagon is trying to chip away at the proper role of news media.

Two officials of the PEN American Center, a venerable organization that works to protect freedom of expression, put the issue well in a recent letter to Defense Secretary Robert Gates: “If Olson and Kakesako respond to these subpoenas by testifying, they will essentially be participating in the prosecution of their source. Reporters should not serve as the investigative arm of the government.

Such a role compromises their objectivity

and can have chilling effects on the press.”

Writing for Editor & Publisher magazine, Sarah Olson summed up what is at stake: “A member of the press should never be placed in the position of aiding a government prosecution of political speech. This goes against the grain of even the most basic understanding of the First Amendment’s free press guarantees and the expectation of a democracy that relies on a free flow of information and perspectives without fear of censor or retribution.”

And Olson added: “You may ask: Do I want to be sent to prison by the U.S. Army for not cooperating with their prosecution of Lieutenant Watada? My answer: Absolutely not. You may also ask: Would I rather contribute to the prosecution of a news source for sharing newsworthy perspectives on an affair of national concern? That is the question I wholly object to having before me in the first place.”

The Pentagon’s attack on journalism is an attack on the First Amendment – and an attempt to drive a wedge between journalists and dissenters in the military. Resistance is essential for democracy.



6 FEBRUARY 2007

Making an example of Ehren Watada

The people running the Iraq war are eager to make an example of Ehren Watada. They've convened a kangaroo court-martial. But the man on trial is setting a profound example of conscience – helping to undermine the war that the Pentagon's top officials are so eager to protect.

“The judge in the case against the first U.S. officer court-martialed for refusing to ship out for Iraq barred several experts in international and constitutional law from testifying Monday [Feb. 5] about the legality of the war,” the Associated Press reported.

While the judge was hopping through the military's hoops at Fort Lewis in Washington state, an outpouring of support for Watada at the gates reflected just how broad and deep the opposition to this war has become.

The AP dispatch merely stated that “outside the base, a small group that included actor Sean Penn demonstrated in support of Watada.” But several hundred people maintained an antiwar presence at the gates, where a vigil and rally – led by Iraq war veterans and parents of those sent to kill and be killed in this horrific war – mirrored what is happening in communities across the United States.

Many of the most compelling voices against the Iraq war come from the men and women who were ordered into a conflagra-

tion that should never have begun. Opinions may be debatable, but experiences are irrefutable. And the devastating slaughter that the U.S. war effort continues to inflict on Iraqi people has a counterpoint in the suffering of Americans who are left with unspeakable grief.

In direct resistance to the depravity of the Bush administration as it escalates this war, Lieutenant Watada is taking a clear and uplifting position.

Citing international law and the U.S. Constitution, he points out that the Iraq war is “manifestly illegal.” And he adds: “As the order to take part in an illegal act is ultimately unlawful as well, I must as an officer of honor and integrity refuse that order. It is my duty not to follow unlawful orders and not to participate in things I find morally reprehensible.”

Watada says: “My participation would make me party to war crimes.”

Outside the fence at Fort Lewis – while the grim farce of Watada's court-martial proceeded with virtually all substance ruled out of order – the criminality of the war and the pain it has brought were heavy in the air.

Darrell Anderson was a U.S. soldier in Iraq. He received a Purple Heart. Later, he refused orders to return for a second tour of duty. Now, he gives firsthand accounts of the routine killing of Iraqi civilians. He

THE NORMAN SOLOMON READER

speaks as an eyewitness and a participant in a war that is one long war crime. And he makes a convincing case that “the GI resistance” is emerging and pivotal: “You can’t call yourself antiwar if you’re not supporting the resistance.”

At Fort Lewis, outside the gates, I met Carlos Arredondo. He’s traveling the country in a long black hearse-like station wagon, with big photos and letters from his son Alexander plastered on the sides of the vehicle. At age 20, more than two years ago, Alexander died in Iraq. Now, a conversation with Carlos Arredondo is likely to leave you in tears, feeling his grief and his rage against this war.

“When the Marines came to inform Arredondo of his son’s death and stayed after he asked them to leave, he set their van on fire, burning over a quarter of his body in the process,” the Boston Globe has reported. Carlos and his wife Melida Arredondo are now members of Military Families Speak Out.

Among the speakers at a nearby event

the night before Watada’s court-martial began was Helga Aguayo, whose husband Agustin Aguayo is a U.S. Army medic now charged with desertion. After deployment to Iraq in 2004, he applied for recognition as a conscientious objector, without success. During a year in the war zone, he refused to put ammunition in his weapon. Today, he is looking at the prospect of up to seven years in prison.

Many others in uniform are struggling to extricate themselves from the war machine. Information about some of them is available at: www.couragetoresist.org.

Soldiers have to choose from options forced upon them by the commander in chief and Congress. Those who resist this war deserve our gratitude and our support. And our willingness to resist as well.

Ehren Watada faces four years in prison. Half of that potential sentence has to do with the fact that he made public statements against the war. The war-makers want such honest courage to stop. But it is growing every day.



13 MARCH 2007

The pragmatism of prolonged war

The days are getting longer, but the media shadows are no shorter as they cover the war in Iraq through American eyes, squinting in Washington's pallid sun.

Debated as an issue of politics, the actual war keeps being drained of life. Abstractions thrive inside the Beltway, while the war effort continues: funded by the U.S. Treasury every day, as the original crime of invasion is replicated with occupation.

More than ever, in the aftermath of the Scooter Libby verdict, the country's major news outlets are willing to acknowledge that the political road to war in Iraq was paved with deceptions. But the same media outlets were integral to laying the flagstones along the path to war – and they're now integral to prolonging the war.

With the same logic of one, two, and three years ago, the conformist media wisdom is that a cutoff of funds for the war is not practical. Likewise, on Capitol Hill, there's a lot of huffing and puffing about how the war must wind down – but the money for it, we're told, must keep moving. Like two rails along the same track, the dispensers of conventional media and political wisdom carry us along to more and more and more war.

The antiwar movement is now coming to terms with measures being promoted by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Pelosi and Reid have a job to do. The antiwar movement has a job to do. The jobs are not the same.

This should be obvious – but, judging from public and private debates now fiercely underway among progressive activists and organizations, there's a lot of confusion in the air.

No amount of savvy Capitol-speak can change the fact that “benchmarks” are euphemisms for more war. And when activists pretend otherwise, they play into the hands of those who want the war to go on... and on... and on.

Deferring to the Democratic leadership means endorsing loopholes that leave the door wide open for continued U.S. military actions inside Iraq – whether justified as attacks on fighters designated as Al Qaeda in Iraq, or with reclassification of U.S. forces as “trainers” rather than “combat troops.” And an escalating U.S. air war could continue to bomb Iraqi neighborhoods for years.

The position being articulated by Reps. Barbara Lee, Maxine Waters, Lynn Woolsey and others in Congress is the one that the antiwar movement should unite behind – to fully fund bringing the troops home in a safe and orderly way, while ending the entire U.S. occupation and war effort, by the end of 2007.

We're urged to take solace from the fact that Washington's debate has shifted to “when” – rather than “whether” – the war

THE NORMAN SOLOMON READER

should end. But the end of the U.S. war effort could be deferred for many more years while debates over “when” flourish and fester. This happened during the Vietnam War, year after year, while death came to tens of thousands more American soldiers and perhaps a million more Vietnamese people.

Pelosi is speaker of the House, and Reid is majority leader of the Senate. But neither speaks for, much less leads, the antiwar movement that we need.

When you look at the practicalities of the situation, Pelosi and Reid could be more accurately described as speaker and leader for the war-management movement.

A historic tragedy is that the most hefty progressive organization, MoveOn, seems to have wrapped itself around the political sensibilities of Reid, Pelosi and others at the top of Capitol Hill leadership. Deference to that leadership is a big mistake. We already have a Democratic Party. Over time, a vibrant progressive group loses vibrance by forfeiting independence and becoming a virtual appendage of party leaders.

Last week, while MoveOn was sending out a mass e-mail to its 3.2 million members offering free bumper stickers urging “End This War,” the MoveOn leadership was continuing its failure to back the efforts of the Congressional Progressive Caucus for “a fully funded, and systematic, withdrawal of U.S. soldiers and military contractors from Iraq.”

There are rationales for uniting behind practical measures, and sometimes they make sense. But the MoveOn pattern has been unsettling and recurring. Power brokerage is not antiwar leadership.

The U.S. Constitution and the federal courts are clear: Only through the “power of the purse” can Congress end a war. It’s good to see MoveOn churning out bumper stickers that advocate an end to the Iraq war – but

sad to see its handful of decision-makers failing to support a measure to fund an orderly and prompt withdrawal from the war.

On Capitol Hill, most Democrats seem to have settled on a tactical approach of simultaneously ratifying and deploring the continuation of the war. The approach may or may not be savvy politics in a narrow sense of gaining temporary partisan political advantage. But it is ultimately destructive to refuse to do the one thing that the Constitution empowers Congress to do to halt a U.S. war – stop appropriating taxpayer money for it.

In retrospect, such congressional behavior during the Vietnam War – while attracting sober approval from much of the era’s punditocracy – ended up prolonging a horrific war that could have ended years sooner. Now, as then, pandering to the news media and other powerful pressures, most politicians are busy trying to pick “low-hanging fruit” that turns out to be poisonous.

“Somehow this madness must cease,” Martin Luther King Jr. said 40 years ago about the Vietnam War. “We must stop now.”

Was the situation then essentially different from today? No.

“We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for victims of our nation and for those it calls enemy,” King said. And: “We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late.”

When King denounced “the madness of militarism,” he wasn’t trying to cozy up to the majority leader of the Senate or impress the House speaker with how he could deliver support.

He was speaking truthfully, and he was opposing a war forthrightly. That was imperative in 1967. It is imperative in 2007.

2 APRIL 2007

McCain walks in the footsteps of McNamara

The media spectacle that John McCain made of himself in Baghdad on April 1 was yet another reprise of a ghastly ritual. Senator McCain expressed “very cautious optimism” and told reporters that the latest version of the U.S. war effort in Iraq is “making progress.”

Three years ago, in early April 2004, when an insurrection exploded in numerous Iraqi cities, U.S. occupation spokesman Dan Senor informed journalists: “We have isolated pockets where we are encountering problems.” Nine days later, President Bush declared: “It’s not a popular uprising. Most of Iraq is relatively stable.”

For government officials committed to a war based on lies, such claims are in the wiring.

When Defense Secretary Robert McNamara visited Vietnam for the first time, in May 1962, he came back saying that he’d seen “nothing but progress and hopeful indications of further progress in the future.”

In October 1966, when McNamara held a press conference at Andrews Air Force Base after returning from a trip to Vietnam, he spoke of the progress he’d seen there. Daniel Ellsberg recalls that McNamara made that presentation “minutes after telling me that everything was much worse than the year before.”

Despite the recent “surge” in the kind of

media hype that McCain was trying to boost in Baghdad, this spring has begun with most news coverage still indicating that the war is going badly for American forces in Iraq. Some pundits say that U.S. military fortunes there during the next few months will determine the war’s political future in Washington. And opponents of the war often focus their arguments on evidence that an American victory is not possible.

But shifts in the U.S. military role on the ground in Iraq, coupled with the Pentagon’s air war escalating largely out of media sight, could enable the war’s promoters to claim a notable reduction of “violence.” And the American death toll could fall due to reconfiguration or reduction of U.S. troop levels inside Iraq.

Such a combination of developments would appeal to the fervent nationalism of U.S. news media. But the antiwar movement shouldn’t pander to jingo-narcissism. If we argue that the war is bad mainly because of what it is doing to Americans, then what happens when the Pentagon finds ways to cut American losses – while continuing to inflict massive destruction on Iraqi people?

American news outlets will be inclined to depict the Iraq war as winding down when fewer Americans are dying in it. That happened during the last several years of the Vietnam War, while massive U.S. bombing –

THE NORMAN SOLOMON READER

and Vietnamese deaths – continued unabated.

The vast bulk of the U.S. media is in the habit of defining events around the world largely in terms of what's good for the U.S. government – through the eyes of top officials in Washington. Routinely, the real lives of people are noted only as shorthand for American agendas. The political spin of the moment keeps obscuring the human mo-

ment.

Awakening from a 40-year nap, an observer might wonder how much has changed since the last war that the United States stumbled over because it could not win. The Congressional Record is filled with insistence that the lessons of Vietnam must not be forgotten. But they cannot be truly remembered if they were never learned in the first place.



12 APRIL 2007

Truth about Hillary, Barak, John and the whitewash

The Pentagon's most likely next target is Iran. Hillary Clinton says "no option can be taken off the table."

Barack Obama says that the Iranian government is "a threat to all of us" and "we should take no option, including military action, off the table."

John Edwards says, "Under no circumstances can Iran be allowed to have nuclear weapons." And: "We need to keep all options on the table."

A year ago, writing in the *New Yorker*, journalist Seymour Hersh reported: "One of the military's initial option plans, as presented to the White House by the Pentagon this winter, calls for the use of a bunker-buster tactical nuclear weapon, such as the B61-11, against underground nuclear sites."

For a presidential candidate to proclaim that all "options" should be on the table while dealing with Iran is a horrific statement. It signals willingness to threaten – and possibly follow through with – first use of nuclear weapons. This raises no eyebrows among Washington's policymakers and media elites because it is in keeping with longstanding U.S. foreign-policy doctrine.

This year, with their virtually identical statements about "options" and "the table," the leading Democratic presidential candidates – Clinton, Obama and Edwards – have refused to rule out any kind of attack

on Iran.

If you're not shocked or outraged yet, consider this:

On Feb. 22, the national leaders of MoveOn sent an e-mail letter to more than 3 million people with the subject line "War with Iran?" After citing a need to give UN sanctions "a chance to work before provoking a regional conflict," the letter said flatly: "Senator Hillary Clinton has provided some much needed leadership on this."

The MoveOn letter quoted a passage from a speech that Clinton had given on the Senate floor eight days earlier: "It would be a mistake of historical proportion if the administration thought that the 2002 resolution authorizing force against Iraq was a blank check for the use of force against Iran without further congressional authorization. Nor should the president think that the 2001 resolution authorizing force after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, in any way, authorizes force against Iran. If the administration believes that any, any use of force against Iran is necessary, the president must come to Congress to seek that authority."

But, while quoting Hillary Clinton's speech as an example of "some much needed leadership," MoveOn made no mention of the fact that the same speech stated: "As I have long said and will continue to say, U.S. policy must be clear and unequivocal: We cannot, we should not, we

THE NORMAN SOLOMON READER

must not permit Iran to build or acquire nuclear weapons. And in dealing with this threat, as I've also said for a long time, no option can be taken off the table."

Earlier this year, David Rieff noted in the *New York Times Magazine* on March 25, "Vice President Cheney insisted that the administration had not 'taken any options off the table' as Iran continued to defy United Nations calls for it to abandon its nuclear ambitions. The response from Democrats was not long in coming. Senator Clinton helped lead the charge, reminding the president that he did not have the authority to go to war with Iran on the basis of the Senate's authorization of the use of force in Iraq in 2002.

"But what Senator Clinton did not say

was at least as interesting as what she did say. And what she did not say was that she opposed the use of force in Iran. To the contrary, Senator Clinton used virtually the same formulation as Vice President Cheney. When dealing with Iran, she insisted, 'no option can be taken off the table.'"

To praise Hillary Clinton for providing "much needed leadership" on Iran – and to mislead millions of e-mail recipients counted as MoveOn members in the process – is a notable choice to make. It speaks volumes. It winks at Clinton's stance that "no option can be taken off the table." It serves an enabling function. It is very dangerous.

The stakes are much too high to make excuses or look the other way.



19 APRIL 2007

Bowing down to our own violence

Many days after the mass killings at Virginia Tech, grisly stories about the tragedy still dominated front pages and cable television. News of carnage on a vastly larger scale – the war in Iraq – ebbs and flows. The overall coverage of lethal violence, at home and far away, reflects the chronic evasions of the American media establishment.

In the world of U.S. mainline journalism, the boilerplate legitimacy of official American violence overseas is a routine assumption.

“The first task of the occupation remains the first task of government: to establish a monopoly on violence,” George Will wrote on April 7, 2004, in the *Washington Post*. But three years later, his *Newsweek* column laments: “Vietnam produced an antiwar movement in America; Iraq has produced an antiwar America.”

Current polls and public discourse – in spite of media inclinations to tamp down authentic anger at the war – do reflect an “antiwar America” of sorts. So, why is the ghastly war effort continuing unabated? A big factor is the undue respect that’s reserved for American warriors in American society.

When a mentally unstable person goes on a shooting rampage in the United States, no one questions that such actions are in-

trinsically, fundamentally and absolutely wrong. The media condemnation is 100 percent.

However – even after four years of a U.S. war in Iraq that has been increasingly deplored by the American public – the standard violence directed from the Pentagon does not undergo much critical scrutiny from American journalists.

The president’s war policies may come under withering media fire, but the daily activities of the U.S. armed forces are subjected to scant moral condemnation. Yet, under orders from the top, they routinely continue to inflict – or serve as a catalyst for – violence far more extensive than the shooting sprees that turned a placid Virginia campus into a slaughterhouse.

News outlets in the United States combine the totally proper condemnation of killing at home with a notably different affect toward the methodical killing abroad that is funded by the U.S. Treasury.

We often read, see and hear explicit media commendations that praise as heroic the Americans in uniform who are trying to kill, and to avoid being killed, in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In recent decades, the trends of war have been clear. A majority of the dead – estimated at 75 to 90 percent – are civilians. They are no less innocent than the more than 30 people who suddenly died from

THE NORMAN SOLOMON READER

gunshots at Virginia Tech.

It would be inaccurate to say that the bulk of U.S. media's coverage accepts war launched from Washington. The media system of the USA does much more than accept – it embraces the high-tech violence under the Pentagon's aegis. Key reasons are cultural, economic and political.

We grew up with – and continue to see – countless movies and TV programs showing how certain people with a handgun, a machine gun or missiles are able to set wrongs right with sufficiently deft and destructive violence.

The annual reports of large, medium and small companies boast that the U.S. Defense Department is a lucrative customer with more and more to spend on their wares for war.

And the scope of political discourse, reinforced by major news outlets, ordinarily remains narrow enough to dodge the huge

differences between “defense spending” and “military spending.” More broadly, the big media rarely explore the terrain of basic moral challenges to the warfare state.

Everyone who isn't deranged can agree that what happened on April 16, 2007, at the campus of Virginia Tech was an abomination. It came about because of an individual's madness. We must reject it without the slightest equivocation. And we do.

But the media baseline is to glorify the U.S. military – yesterday, today and tomorrow – bringing so much bloodshed to Iraq. The social dynamics in our own midst, fueling the war effort, are spared tough scrutiny. We're constantly encouraged to go along, avidly or passively.

Yet George Will has it wrong. The first task of government should not be “to establish a monopoly on violence.” Government should work to prevent violence – including its own.



4 MAY 2007

On the media horizon: 'You invest, we decide'

Predictably, some critics have decried the current efforts by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. to buy the Dow Jones company, which publishes The Wall Street Journal. But let's imagine the dynamics that might emerge if Murdoch gains control of that newspaper.

Like viewers of his Fox News Channel, readers of The Wall Street Journal under Murdoch could look forward to jaw-dropping claims along the lines of "We invest, you decide."

The Wall Street Journal would need to make some changes in order to be in sync with Murdoch-brand journalism. The Journal's recent design make-over could provide a tidy framework for spreading the content of the editorial page to the rest of the newsprint pages.

But executives at News Corp. would swiftly face a dilemma. Investors and money managers – prime demographic targets of The Wall Street Journal – are apt to be intolerant of financial news reporting that's unduly screened through an ideological mesh.

Slanted journalism may be fine for big commercial enterprises when news consumers largely base their outlooks on prevailing media biases. But investors and others who move large amounts of money are apt to be less forgiving when political agendas behind news reports might impede the

quest to maximize profits.

Each day, investors seek accurate news as the basis for their money-related decisions. On Wall Street, they can recognize when an editorial page is spinning and grinding ideological axes. But investors will quickly stop relying on financial news pages if those pages are more dedicated to political maneuvers than well-founded portrayals of business reality.

In other words, if a newspaper is just distorting reality to the detriment of civic understanding and democratic discourse, the most powerful corporations may not mind at all. In fact, corporate elites are likely to appreciate any storyline that helps them to consolidate power over the nation's political system.

But if a business-oriented newspaper claims to be reporting the financial news and keeps skewing that news to serve ideological agendas, many investors and business leaders are likely to turn away in disgust. It's one thing to bamboozle the American public – but quite another to mislead high-end readers about how to get even richer.

Right now, the editorials of The Wall Street Journal are the rough equivalent of Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh (with an occasional dose of Ann Coulter thrown in). The grasp of right-wing ideology is notable, but the grip on reality is loose to the point of routine slippage.

THE NORMAN SOLOMON READER

At times, we all find ourselves wishing that the world were different than it is. But on the job – at least in theory – reporters can't allow themselves the luxury of turning wishful delusions into straight-faced news accounts.

However, like those who call the shots at Fox News Channel, the Dow Jones employees in charge of the editorial page at the Journal have been unstinting in their fantasies: The Iraq war remains a noble enterprise. Global warming is a liberal fraud. There is no widening gap between the rich and poor in the United States. And so on, and so on, and scooby-dooby-doo.

It's all well and good to mislead voters and cover up for an administration in Washington that is functioning more like a mas-

sive criminal enterprise than a legitimate executive branch. But if press ideologues serving as apologists for the Bush presidency try to blend their contempt for reality with purported financial news, the media result could prove less than satisfactory for the nation's upper-crust money movers.

If his current media properties are any indication, Rupert Murdoch would quickly turn The Wall Street Journal into a news operation engaged in a dizzying regimen of spin and distortion. For several decades, he has enjoyed notable success in marketing right-wing political fantasias to the general public.

Whether the nation's financial elites would be such easy marks is another matter.



24 MAY 2007

Deadly illusions, rest in peace

The cave-in on Capitol Hill – supplying a huge new jolt of funds for the horrific war effort in Iraq – is surprising only to those who haven’t grasped our current circumstances.

Public opinion polls aren’t the same as political leverage. The Vietnam War went on for years after polling showed that most Americans opposed the war and even saw it as immoral.

Slick phrases about the need to bring our troops home can easily become little more than platitudes on wallpaper in media echo chambers.

No matter how many Democrats are in Congress, they won’t end this war unless an antiwar movement develops enough grassroots strength to compel them to do so.

Unfortunately – and unnecessarily – for years now the Internet powerhouse MoveOn.org has often functioned as a virtual appendage of the national Democratic Party. That close relationship has largely squandered MoveOn’s opportunities to help build strong deep independent activism for the long haul. And, on crucial issues of the Iraq war, MoveOn has failed to back the positions of such gutsy progressive visionaries as Reps. Barbara Lee, Lynn Woolsey and Maxine Waters.

A statement issued on May 24 by the national Progressive Democrats of America

(PDA) pointed out that “the approach of the Democratic leadership has utterly failed – as they now prepare to give President Bush \$95 billion more war funding through a bill that no longer has any timelines for troop withdrawal.”

Asking a key question – “How can you oppose a troop escalation while funding it in full?” – PDA reiterated its longstanding position that Democrats in Congress should be “using the power of the purse to cut off funds to Iraq, except those needed to safely withdraw our troops (and for humanitarian/reconstruction aid to the Iraqi people).” And legislators should be “using their investigative power to probe White House deceptions and distortions that propelled the Iraq invasion and occupation, and to impeach if necessary.”

Memorial Day 2007 comes at a disastrous time. Political power brokers and media elites insist on opting for a mix-merge of tragedy and farce.

A key reality is that we won’t be able to change the militaristic direction of the country without effectively confronting the congressional Democrats who are fueling the engines of destruction.

When considering what to demand now, it’s helpful to put the current moment in historical perspective. The same basic arguments for keeping U.S. forces in Iraq have long been presented by reigning politicians

THE NORMAN SOLOMON READER

and key media outlets as self-evident wisdom.

A cover story in Time magazine laid down the prevailing line: “Foreign policy luminaries from both parties say a precipitous

U.S. withdrawal would cripple American credibility, doom reform in the Arab world and turn Iraq into a playground for terrorists and the armies of neighboring states like Iran and Syria.” That was in April – 2004.



11 JUNE 2007

The silence of the bombs

Three years have passed since most Americans came to the conclusion that the Iraq war was a “mistake.” Reporting the results of a Gallup poll in June 2004, USA Today declared: “It is the first time since Vietnam that a majority of Americans has called a major deployment of U.S. forces a mistake.” And public opinion continued to move in an antiwar direction. But such trends easily coexist with a war effort becoming even more horrific.

In Washington, over the past 25 years, top masters of war have preened themselves in the glow of victory after military triumphs in Grenada, Panama, the 1991 Gulf War, Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. During that time, with the exception of the current war in Iraq, the Pentagon’s major aggressive ventures have been cast in a light of virtue rewarded -- in sync with the implicit belief that American might makes right.

“The problem after a war is with the victor,” longtime peace activist A. J. Muste observed several decades ago. “He thinks he has just proved that war and violence pay.”

The present situation has a different twist along the same lines. The Iraq war drags on, the United States is certainly not the victor – and the U.S. president, a fervent believer in war and violence, still has a lot to prove.

Faith that American might makes right is apt to be especially devout among those

who command the world’s most powerful military – and have the option of trying to overcome wartime obstacles by unleashing even more lethal violence.

These days, there’s a lot of talk about seeking a political solution in Iraq – but the Bush administration and the military leaders who answer to the commander in chief are fundamentally engaged in a very different sort of project. Looking ahead, from the White House, the key goal is to seem to be winding down the U.S. war effort while actually reconfiguring massive violence to make it more effective.

Two sets of figures have paramount importance in mainline U.S. media and politics – the number of U.S. troops stationed in Iraq and the number of them dying there. Often taking cues from news media and many lawmakers on Capitol Hill, antiwar groups have tended to buy into the formula, emphasizing those numbers and denouncing them as intolerably high.

Meanwhile, the Iraqis killed by Americans don’t become much of an issue in the realms of U.S. media and politics. News coverage provides the latest tallies of Iraqis who die from “sectarian violence” and “terrorist attacks,” but the reportage rarely discusses how the U.S. occupation has been an ascending catalyst for that carnage. It’s even more rare for the coverage to focus on the magnitude of Iraqi deaths that are direct re-

THE NORMAN SOLOMON READER

sults of American firepower.

In the United States, many advocates of U.S. withdrawal from Iraq have focused on what the war has been doing to Americans. This approach may seem like political pragmatism and tactical wisdom, but in the long run it's likely to play into the hands of White House strategists who will try to regain domestic political ground by reducing American losses while boosting the use of high-tech weaponry against Iraqi people.

Every night, I receive an email bulletin that's called "U.S. Air Force Print News." It's one of countless ways the Pentagon does continual outreach to journalists with messages that encourage favorable coverage of what the military is doing. Those messages are filled with stories about the bravery, compassion and towering stature of – in the words of retired Gen. Colin Powell a decade ago – "those wonderful men and women who do such a great job."

But journalists receive just a trickle of limited information about the bombing runs undertaken by the U.S. military in Afghanistan and Iraq. The official sources have very little to say about what happens to people at the other end of the bombs. And, overall, U.S. media outlets don't add much information about the human consequences.

In late May, an important challenge to those media patterns appeared on the website TomDispatch.com (and, in shorter form, in the *Nation* magazine). The in-depth article – titled "Did the U.S. Lie about Cluster Bomb Use in Iraq?" – went beyond probing the Pentagon's extensive use of barbaric cluster bombs in Iraq since the spring of 2003. The piece, by journalist Nick Turse, also shined a bright light on fundamental aspects of a U.S. air war that has seldom seen any light of day in big American media

outlets.

"Unfortunately, thanks to an utter lack of coverage by the mainstream media, what we don't know about the air war in Iraq so far outweighs what we do know that anything but the most minimal picture of the nature of destruction from the air in that country simply can't be painted," Turse writes.

The article raises a key question: "Does the U.S. military keep the numbers of rockets and cannon rounds fired from its planes and helicopters secret because more Iraqi civilians have died due to their use than any other type of weaponry?"

Turse, an associate editor and research director of TomDispatch.com, has written for daily newspapers including the *Los Angeles Times* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. His article pulls no punches about the press as he assesses huge gaps in media coverage of the Iraq air war funded by U.S. taxpayers.

Sadly, he observes, "media reports on the air war are so sparse, with reporting confined largely to reprinting U.S. military handouts and announcements of air strikes, that much of the air war in Iraq remains unknown – although the very fact of an occupying power regularly conducting air strikes in and near population centers should have raised a question or two."

The available evidence is strong that the U.S. air war is escalating – with a surge of resulting casualties among Iraqi civilians. Their suffering and their deaths get very little coverage in the U.S. news media. "Since the Bush administration's invasion, the American air war has been given remarkably short shrift in the media," Turse writes. And he cites "indications that the air war has taken an especially grievous toll on Iraqi children."

The combination of deceptive officials in

THE NORMAN SOLOMON READER

the U.S. government and an evasive U.S. press has been a disaster for the flow of information to the American public. “With the military unwilling to tell the truth — or say anything at all, in most cases — and unable to provide the stability necessary for [non-governmental organizations] to operate, it falls to the mainstream media, even at this late stage of the conflict, to begin ferreting out substantive information on the air war,” Turse points out. “It seems, however, that

until reporters begin bypassing official U.S. military pronouncements and locating Iraqi sources, we will remain largely in the dark with little knowledge of what can only be described as the secret U.S. air war in Iraq.”

As the summer of 2007 gets underway, the demand to “bring the troops home” is necessary but insufficient. The numbers of Americans fighting and dying in Iraq are not a reliable measure of U.S. culpability in the continuing slaughter.



20 JUNE 2007

War at the remote

It's a popular notion: TV sets and other media devices let us in on the violence of war. "Look, nobody likes to see dead people on their television screens," President Bush told a news conference more than three years ago. "I don't. It's a tough time for the American people to see that. It's gut-wrenching."

But televised glimpses of war routinely help to keep war going. Susan Sontag was onto something when she pointed out that "the image as shock and the image as cliché are two aspects of the same presence."

While viewers may feel disturbed by media imagery of warfare, their discomfort is largely mental and limited. The only shots coming at them are ones that have been waved through by editors. Still, we hear that television brings war into our living rooms.

We're encouraged to be a nation of voyeurs – or pseudo-voyeurs – looking at war coverage and imagining that we really see, experience, comprehend. In this mode, the reporting on the Iraq war facilitates a rough division of labor. For American media consumers, the easy task is to watch from afar – secure in the tacit belief we're understanding what it means to undergo the violence that we catch via only the most superficial glances.

Television screens provide windows on the world that reinforce distances. Watching "news" at the remote, viewers are in a

zone supplied by producers with priorities far afield from authenticity or democracy. More than making sense, the mass-media enterprise is about making corporate profit in sync with governmental power.

Exceptional news reports do exist. And that's the problem; they're exceptions. A necessity of effective propaganda is repetition. And the inherent limits of television in conveying realities of war are further narrowed by deference to Washington.

Styles vary on network television, but the journalistic pursuits – whether on a prime-time CNN show or the PBS NewsHour – are chasing parallel bottom lines. When the missions of corporate-owned commercial television and corporate-funded "public broadcasting" are wrapped up in the quest to maximize profits and maintain legitimacy among elites in a warfare state, how far afield is the war coverage likely to wander?

While media outlets occasionally stick their institutional necks out, the departures are rarely fundamental. In large media institutions, underlying precepts of a de facto military-industrial-media complex are rarely disturbed in any sort of sustained way – by the visual presentations or by the words that accompany them.

"Even if journalists, editors, and producers are not superpatriots, they know that appearing unpatriotic does not play well with many readers, viewers, and sponsors,"

THE NORMAN SOLOMON READER

media analyst Michael X. Delli Carpini commented. Written with reference to the Vietnam War, his words now apply to the Iraq war era. “Fear of alienating the public and sponsors, especially in wartime, serves as a real, often unstated tether, keeping the press tied to accepted wisdom.”

Part of the accepted wisdom is the idea that media outlets are pushing envelopes and making the Iraq war look bad. But the press coverage, even from the reputedly finest outlets, is routinely making the war look far better than its reality – both in terms of the horror on the ground and the agendas of the war-makers in Washington.

Countless stories in the daily press continue to portray Bush administration officials as earnestly seeking a political settlement in Iraq while recalcitrant insurgents, bent on violence, thwart that effort. So, with typical spin, a dispatch from Baghdad published in the *New York Times* on June 17 flatly declared that comments by U.S. commander Gen. David Petraeus “reflected an acknowledgment that more has to be done beyond the city’s bounds to halt a relentless wave of insurgent attacks that have undercut attempts at political reconciliation.”

Of course, occupiers always seek “political reconciliation.” As the Prussian general Karl von Clausewitz observed long ago, “A conqueror is always a lover of peace.”

At the same time, the more that an occupying force tries to impose the prerogatives of a conqueror, the more its commander must deny that its goals are anything other than democracy, freedom and autonomy for

the people whose country is being occupied. In medialand, the lethal violence of the occupier must be invisible or righteous, while the lethal violence of the occupied must be tragic, nonsensical and/or insane. But most of all, the human consequences of a war fueled by U.S. military action are shrouded in euphemism and media cliché.

Which brings us back to violence at the remote. While a TV network may be no more guilty of obscuring the human realities of war than a newsprint broadsheet or a slick newsmagazine, we may have higher expectations that the television is bringing us real life.

Vivid footage is in sharp contrast to static words and images on a page. At least implicitly, television promises more – and massively reneges on what it promises.

We may intellectually know that television is not conveying realities of life. But what moves on the screen is apt to draw us in, nonetheless. We see images of violence that look and loom real. But our media experience of that violence is unreal. We don’t experience the actual violence at all. Media outlets lie about it by pretending to convey it. And we abet the lying to the extent that we fail to renounce it.

Artifice comes in many forms, of course. In the case of television news, it’s a form very big on pretense. We’re left to click through the world beyond our immediate experience – at a distance that cannot be measured in miles. But away from our mediated cocoon, spun by civic passivity, the death machinery keeps roaring along.



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