

AUGUST 1, 2003 / NEWSDAY

U.S. media are too soft on the White House

This summer, many journalists seem to be in hot pursuit of the Bush administration. But they have an enormous amount of ground to cover. After routinely lagging behind and detouring around key information, major American news outlets are now playing catch-up.

The default position of U.S. media coverage gave the White House the benefit of doubts. In stark contrast, the British press has been far more vigorous in exposing deceptions about Iraq. Consider the work of two publicly subsidized broadcasters: The BBC News has broken very important stories to boost public knowledge of governmental duplicities; the same can hardly be said for NPR News in the United States.

One of the main problems with American reporting has been reflexive deference toward pivotal administration players like Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice. Chronic overreliance on official sources worsened for a long time after 9/11, with journalists failing to scrutinize contradictions, false statements and leaps of illogic.

Powell's watershed speech to the United Nations Security Council in February was so effective at home because journalists swooned rather than drawing on basic debunking information that was readily available at the time. To a great extent, reporters on this side of the Atlantic provided stenography for top U.S. officials, while editorial writers and pundits lavished praise.

The most deferential coverage has been devoted to the president himself, with news outlets treating countless potential firestorms as minor sparks or one-day brush fires. Even now, George W. Bush is benefitting from presumptions of best intentions and essential honesty – a present-day "Teflonization" of the man in the Oval Office.

Midway through July – even while Time's latest cover was asking "Untruth & Consequences: How Flawed Was the Case for Going to War Against Saddam?" – the president told reporters: "We gave him a chance to allow the inspectors in, and he wouldn't let them in. And, therefore, after a reasonable request, we decided to remove

him from power." Bush's assertion about Hussein and the inspectors – that he "wouldn't let them in" – wasn't true. Some gingerly noted that the statement was false. But the media response was mild. The president openly uttering significant falsehoods was no big deal.

Meanwhile, reporting on the deaths of U.S. troops in Iraq has been understated. Editor & Publisher online pointed out that while press accounts were saying 33 American soldiers had died between the start of May and July 17, "actually the numbers are much worse – and rarely reported by the media." During that period, according to official military records, 85 U.S. soldiers died in Iraq. "This includes a staggering number of non-combat deaths ... Nearly all of these people would still be alive if they were back in the States."

In a follow-up, editor Greg Mitchell reported that his news analysis had caused "the heaviest e-mail response of any article from E&P in the nearly four years I have worked for the magazine." He added, "These weren't the usual media junkies or political activists, but an apparent cross-section of backgrounds and beliefs." Some of the letters were from relatives and friends of U.S. soldiers in Iraq. The strong reactions indicate that American deaths are apt to be politically explosive for the 2004 presidential campaign.

Contradictions have become more glaring at a time when the war's rising death toll already includes thousands of Iraqis and hundreds of Americans. Many U.S. news organizations are beginning to piece together a grim picture of deceit in Washington and lethal consequences in Iraq. The combination foreshadows a difficult media gauntlet for Bush.

Another key political vulnerability that remains underreported is the economy. Its woes persist in the context of a huge gap between the wealthy and most other Americans – a gap that is set to widen still further due to the latest round of White House tax changes and spending priorities. Ironically, this summer's resurgence of Iraq-related coverage could partly overshadow dire economic news in the coming months. It's *deja vu*, with a big difference.

Last summer, the Bush team successfully moved the media focus from economic problems to an uproar about launching a war on Iraq. That was a politically advantageous shift that endured through Election Day. Now, with concerns about Iraq and the economy again dominating front pages, it remains to be seen whether news outlets will accelerate the search for truth or slam on the brakes. ■