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The brave posturing of armchair warriors

Soon after the American death toll in Iraq passed the 1,000 mark, I thought of Saadoun Hammadi and some oratory he provided two years ago.

At the time, Hammadi was the speaker of Iraq's National Assembly. "The U.S. administration is now speaking war," Hammadi said. "We are not going to turn the other cheek. We are going to fight. Not only our armed forces will fight. Our people will fight."

The date was Sept. 14, 2002. The venue was an ornate room inside a grand government building in Baghdad. And the gaunt elderly official was determined to make an impression on the four American visitors. So, with steel in his voice, Hammadi added: "I personally will fight."

Looking across the room, I tried to imagine this frail man pointing a rifle at American troops. He sounded awfully brave. And who was to say he wouldn't be on the front lines of Iraqi resistance to the invaders? Yet it was hard to picture him wielding a weapon against the armed forces of the world's only superpower.

Overall, Hammadi's prediction that "our people will fight" has come true. A large uprising is underway in Iraq, and not only from diehard Sunni supporters of the fallen regime. The current Shiite resistance is debunking the touted expectations from the White House and the Washington press corps.

And whatever happened to Saadoun Hammadi, the silver-haired speaker of Saddam Hussein's parliament? Despite his defiant words, he didn't go down fighting. Some U.S. soldiers captured him last year on May 29 at his home in Baghdad; he spent three seasons in prison and then won release in mid-February. Before the month was over, Agence France Presse reported, Hammadi "found refuge in Jordan." A few months later, he traveled to Germany for medical treatment.

The contrast between Hammadi's pledge two years ago and his subsequent behavior may cause us to roll our eyes. But in the United States, there's no reason for leaders to feel superior.

Powerful men in Washington have long records of supporting wars for other people

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to fight. Consider the current media controversy over the disconnect between George W. Bush's brave words and self-protective deeds. An unequivocal supporter of the Vietnam War a third of a century ago, Bush benefitted when influential guardian angels pulled some strings and got him into the Air National Guard. Even then, Bush skipped out on some of his obligations, preferring to have a good time and work for a pro-war congressional candidate in Alabama.

Since then, George W. Bush never heard of an American-led war he didn't fervently support (from afar, of course). Likewise, the avidly pro-war Dick Cheney has explained that he took advantage of several draft-age deferments and stayed out of the U.S. military during the war in Vietnam because he had "other priorities."

The prevailing rhetoric insists that any alternative to current U.S. wars is unthinkable. No less than Saadoun Hammadi two years ago, the president and vice president like to use the royal "we" when discussing military action they favor. But the underlying message, decoded, can be understood as: "Let's you and them fight."

During the next weeks, to a large degree, hopes for the Bush-Cheney ticket may hinge on the willingness of the news media to ignore such realities. Historically, the USA's media establishment has been overly fond of "leadership" in Washington that sends other people off to kill and be killed – routinely, as in the case of the

Iraq war – on the basis of lies.

Government officials who glorify other people's patriotic deaths are rarely eager to partake of such glory themselves. Cases in point: Saadoun Hammadi. Dick Cheney. George W. Bush.

The White House has tried to distract the news media from dwelling on the milestone of 1,000 American deaths in Iraq. Meanwhile, the lethal toll among Iraqi civilians is a media abstraction. In the U.S. press, those victims – far more numerous and no less precious to their loved ones – go uncounted and unnamed.

Norman Solomon is co-author, with Reese Erlich, of "Target Iraq: What the News Media Didn't Tell You." The complete book is available as a free download at coldtype.net.