

NOVEMBER 18

A voluntary tic in media coverage of Iraq

When misleading buzzwords become part of the media landscape, they slant news coverage and skew public perceptions. That's the story with the phrase "Iraqi forces" — now in routine use by U.S. media outlets, including the country's most influential newspapers.

The New York Times and the Washington Post have been leading the way in news stories that apply the indigenous "Iraqi forces" label to Iraqi fighters who are pro-U.S.-occupation ... but not to Iraqi fighters who are anti-U.S.-occupation.

Some recent examples:

* "And U.S. and Iraqi forces continue to fight in Samarra..." (Washington Post, Nov. 15)

* "Pitched battles erupted between insurgents and American and Iraqi forces on Sunday in the northern city of Mosul. ... It took five hours for the American and Iraqi forces to kill or chase away the insurgents." (New York Times, Nov. 15)

* "Eight days ago, U.S. and Iraqi forces barreled through a defensive mud wall" around Fallujah. (Washington Post, Nov. 16)

* "In Baquba, 35 miles northeast of Baghdad, insurgents kept up attacks on American and Iraqi forces..." (New York Times, Nov. 17)

Day after day, American media outlets can only bring themselves to confer the term "Iraqi forces" on the Iraqi combatants allied with the United States — not on the Iraqi combatants opposing the United States.

Meanwhile, the Los Angeles Times reported on Nov. 16, there's stronger evidence than ever that the occupiers are battling "a home-grown uprising dominated by Iraqis, not foreign fighters." According to the newspaper: "Of the more than 1,000 men between the ages of 15 and 55 who were captured in intense fighting in the center of the insurgency over the last week, just 15 are confirmed foreign fighters, Gen. George W. Casey, the top U.S. ground commander in Iraq, said Monday."

The L.A. Times dispatch stated that "despite an intense focus on the network of

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Jordanian-born militant Abu Musab Zarqawi by U.S. and Iraqi officials, who have insisted that most Iraqis support the country's interim government, American commanders said their best estimates of the proportion of foreigners among their enemies is [sic] about 5 percent."

When reporting on a war that pits Iraqis against Iraqis on a daily basis, news accounts could refer to "U.S.-allied Iraqi forces" or "Iraqi government forces" — to distinguish them from the insurgent Iraqi forces that are on the other side. From the standpoint of journalism, which ought to strive for clarity and precision, that should be a no-brainer.

But the Bush administration — striving to promote the attitude that only U.S.-allied Iraqis are actual Iraqis worthy of the name — is eager to blur exactly what good reporting should clarify. And America's major media outlets are helpfully providing a journalistic fog around a central fact: The U.S. government is at war with many people it claims to be liberating. If you'd like to urge evenhanded reporting on Iraq, you might want to send some email to journalists charged with responding to readers' criticisms. At the Washington Post, letters go to ombudsman Michael Getler (ombudsman@washpost.com); at the New York Times, the public editor is Daniel Okrent (public@nytimes.com).

Unfortunately, the U.S. media's highly selective use of the phrase "Iraqi forces" is symptomatic of the way that news coverage almost reflexively defers to Washington's terminology, assumptions and frames of reference.

Attacks on U.S. troops occupying Iraq are often matter-of-factly reported to be the work of "terrorists." Along the way, American media outlets — unlike news coverage in much of the rest of the world — are apt to downplay eyewitness accounts of the civilian death toll from U.S. military assaults. In this country, such accounts are frequently ignored or discounted as "unconfirmed."

And since midway through this year, news stories have often flatly reported that Iraq has acquired "sovereignty." It's true that the U.S.-selected interim prime minister Ayad Allawi took office at the end of June, but that hardly changes the reality that he essentially serves at the pleasure of his sponsor and protector, the U.S. government. Journalists should clearly distinguish between White House pretenses and accurate reporting.

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