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Casualties of war: First truth, then conscience

The national media echo chamber is not receptive to conscience. On television, the voices are usually loud and facile. People often seem to be shouting. In contrast, the human conscience is close to a whisper. Easily unheard. Now, the biggest media outlets are in a frenzy. The networks are at war. Every cable news channel has enlisted. At the bottom of FM radio dials, NPR has been morphing into National Pentagon Radio.

With American tax dollars financing the war on Iraq, the urgent need for us to get in touch with our consciences has never been more acute. The rationales for this war have been thoroughly shredded. (To see how the sordid deceptions and outright lies from the Bush team have been demolished by my colleagues at the Institute for Public Accuracy, take a look at the www.accuracy.org website.) The propaganda edifice of the war rests on a foundation no more substantial than voluminous hot air.

"Anyone who has the power to make you believe absurdities has the power to make you commit injustices," Voltaire wrote in 1767. The quotation is sometimes rendered with different wording: "As long as people believe in absurdities they will continue to commit atrocities."

Either way, a quarter of a millennium later, Voltaire's statement is all too relevant to this moment. The Bush administration is proud to turn urban areas of Iraq into hell – defying most of the U.N. Security Council and violating the U.N. Charter – all with the righteous claim that the United States is enforcing U.N. Security Council resolutions.

As the apt cliché says, truth is the first casualty of war. But another early casualty is conscience.

Rarely explored in news media, the capacity for conscience is what makes us human. Out of all the differences between people and other animals, Darwin wrote, "the moral sense of conscience is by far the most important."

Voltaire contended that "the safest course is to do nothing against one's conscience" and added: "With this secret, we can enjoy life and have no fear of death." Franz Kafka was alluding to a similar truth when he wrote: "You can hold back from the suffering

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of the world, you have free permission to do so and it is in accordance with your nature, but perhaps this very holding back is the one suffering that you could have avoided."

Conscience is smaller than a single pixel, and much less visible. You can't see it on a TV screen. Or hear it. Or smell it. Or taste it. You can only feel it.

That's not a marketable sensation. The huge news outlets have swung behind slaughter in Iraq, and the dissent propelled by conscience is not deemed to be very newsworthy. The mass media are filled with bright lights and sizzle, with high production values and degraded human values, boosting the war effort while the U.S. government implements a massive crime against humanity.

In May 1952, the playwright Lillian Hellman wrote in a letter to the House Un-American Activities Committee: "I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions."

In 2003, this year's media fashions are increasingly adorning the conformist models of pseudo-patriotism. For many Americans, the gap between what they believe and what's on their TV sets is the distance between their truer selves and their fearful passivity.

In the domestic media siege being maintained by top-notch spinners and shrewd political advisers at the White House, conscience is in the cross hairs. They aim to intimidate, stampede and suppress the many millions of Americans who recognize the deranged and murderous character of the war makers in Washington.

Half a century ago, Albert Einstein urged: "Never do anything against conscience even if the state demands it." Today, one way or another, the mass media are going along with the Bush administration's demands that we not challenge the U.S. military actions now taking uncounted lives in Iraq.

Conscience is not on the military's radar screen, and it's not on our TV screen. But media messages do not define the limits and possibilities of conscience. We do. ■