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Media nix – Blix, Kucinich, and the Dixie Chicks

Hans Blix, Dennis Kucinich and the Dixie Chicks are in very different lines of work – but they're in the same line of fire from big media for the sin of strongly challenging the president's war agenda.

Let's start with Blix, who can get respectful coverage in American media – unless he's criticizing the U.S. government. Belatedly, in mid-April, he went public with accusations that the Bush administration faked evidence on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. And Blix declared that the United Nations – not the U.S. government – should deploy arms inspectors in Iraq now.

But presidential spokesman Ari Fleischer retorted: "I think it's unfortunate if Hans Blix would in any way criticize the United States at his juncture." The White House message was clear – and it reached the media echo chamber.

So, on the April 22 edition of CNN's "Moneyline" program, host Lou Dobbs (with an American flag pin in his lapel) summed up a news report this way: "Blix appearing for all the world to look like a petulant U.N. bureaucrat about a month to go before his retirement."

Mainstream U.S. reporters rarely apply an adjective like "petulant" to petulant administration officials like, say, Ari Fleischer. But then again, Fleischer doesn't challenge U.S. foreign policy.

Dennis Kucinich does. The four-term U.S. representative from Ohio is now running for the Democratic presidential nomination. And some media pundits find his anti-war views outrageous.

A few weeks before President Bush launched an undeclared war on Iraq, "liberal" Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen declared his own war on Kucinich. The main trigger for Cohen's wrath was that the member of Congress had dared to identify oil as "the strongest incentive" for the impending war.

Cohen claimed to be shocked shocked shocked. The first word of his column was "liar." From there, the Post columnist peppered his piece with references to Kucinich as an "indomitable demagogue" and a "fool" who was "repeating a lie." But Cohen

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would have done well to re-read a front page of his own newspaper.

Five months earlier, on Sept. 15, a page-one Post report carried the headline "In Iraqi War Scenario, Oil Is Key Issue; U.S. Drillers Eye Huge Petroleum Pool." In the article, Ahmed Chalabi, the leader of the U.S.-backed Iraqi National Congress, said that he favored the creation of a U.S.-led consortium to develop oil fields in a post-Saddam Iraq: "American companies will have a big shot at Iraqi oil."

The same Post article quoted former CIA Director James Woolsey – a Chalabi supporter who, according to a Legal Times story, has been on the payroll of Chalabi's group. Woolsey said: "France and Russia have oil companies and interests in Iraq. They should be told that if they are of assistance in moving Iraq toward decent government, we'll do the best we can to ensure that the new government and American companies work closely with them. If they throw in their lot with Saddam, it will be difficult to the point of impossible to persuade the new Iraqi government to work with them."

As many business pages have long highlighted, it's actually quite reasonable to identify oil as key to U.S. policy toward Iraq. But such talk from a presidential candidate causes some people to become incensed. That hardly makes Kucinich a "liar." On the contrary, it simply makes him a pariah in the media realms patrolled by the likes of Richard Cohen.

Similar media gendarmes are on patrol over the airwaves. The giant corporate owner of more than 1,200 radio stations, Clear Channel, syndicates talk radio host Glenn Beck to scores of stations nationwide – and Beck is enraged about Kucinich. Days before the all-out war on Iraq began, Beck discussed spontaneous combustion and then said: "Every night I get down on my knees and pray that Dennis Kucinich will burst into flames."

Beck has been a chief on-air organizer of de facto pro-war rallies promoted by Clear Channel, a monopolistic corporation with close ties to President Bush. Those rallies included vilification of the Dixie Chicks, a country music group that earned the wrath of hyper-patriots several weeks ago when lead singer Natalie Maines, a Texan, said she was ashamed to be from the same state as Bush.

While the controversy did not do much harm to sales of their music, the Dixie Chicks have suffered a sharp drop in air play. Most fans don't seem to mind the anti-war sentiment, but some radio industry executives sure do. "What's clear is that in these days of highly concentrated media ownership," says the Chicago area's Daily Herald, "there is an immense amount of pressure to not make waves."

In a new statement that voiced support for the Dixie Chicks as "terrific American

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artists expressing American values by using their American right to free speech," rocker Bruce Springsteen condemned "the pressure coming from the government and big business to enforce conformity of thought concerning the war and politics."

Being a dissenter from conventional wisdom has always involved risks – but rarely have major media powerhouses in the United States been so eager to dismiss thoughtful opinions with the wave of a patriotic wand. ■