

MAY 8, 2003

Introspective media not in the cards

A new poll tells us that – by a two-to-one margin – Americans “use clearly positive words in their descriptions of the president.” The Pew Research Center, releasing a nationwide survey on May 7, declared “there is little doubt ... that the war in Iraq has improved the president’s image” in the United States.

Such assessments stand in sharp contrast to views of George W. Bush overseas. In mid-March, the Pew center put out survey results showing that “U.S. favorability ratings have plummeted in the past six months” – not only in “countries actively opposing war” but also in “countries that are part of the ‘coalition of the willing.’”

So, why do most Americans seem at least somewhat positive about Bush, while the figures indicating a “favorable view of the U.S.” are low in one country after another – only 48 percent in Britain, 31 percent in France, 28 percent in Russia, 25 percent in Germany, 14 percent in Spain and 12 percent in Turkey? In large measure, the answer can be summed up with one word: media.

Overall, the American news media do a great job of telling us how wonderful top U.S. leaders are as they direct Uncle Sam’s stride across the planet. The contrast with evil-doers – especially on our TV sets – could hardly be more plain.

Meticulous researchers at the media watch group FAIR (where I’m an associate) recently pointed out that U.S. news outlets “have been quick to declare the U.S. war against Iraq a success, but in-depth investigative reporting about the war’s likely health and environmental consequences has been scarce.”

During the war, the London-based Guardian has reported, the Pentagon dropped 1,500 cluster bombs – horrific weaponry that fires small pieces of metal, which slice through human bodies. Unexploded cluster bombs are now detonating, sometimes in the hands of Iraqi children. And, as it did during the first Gulf War, this spring the U.S. government fortified some munitions with depleted uranium, which leaves fine-particle radioactive dust that has been linked to cancer and birth defects.

Those are important stories, known to many news watchers on several continents. But not in the United States. Searching the comprehensive Nexis media database

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through May 5, the FAIR researchers found that "there have been no in-depth reports about cluster bombs on ABC, CBS or NBC's nightly news programs since the start of the war." Those news shows provided just "a few passing mentions of cluster bombs."

The network evening news programs did even worse on DU reportage. "Since the beginning of the year," FAIR discovered, "the words 'depleted uranium' have not been uttered once on ABC 'World News Tonight,' 'CBS Evening News' or 'NBC Nightly News,' according to Nexis."

Meanwhile, the deck of cards featuring 52 Iraqi villains – with Saddam Hussein as Ace of Spades – became one of the great PR innovations of the war on Iraq. By coincidence, on the same day that FAIR completed its research, five "Army intelligence specialists" – who designed the cards – stepped forward to take a bow in Washington.

A spokesperson for Central Command said that there was "no word on the cards helping find anyone." But the Pentagon's deck has turned out to be a stroke of media genius. It tapped into the American public's appetite for fun ways to identify bad guys who'll be hunted down.

News media keep encouraging us to believe that leaders in the United States are cut from entirely different cloth than the Iraqi thugs on the most-wanted cards. But I don't think so. In some respects, the terrible choices made by those men and women are more explainable than ones that are routine in U.S. politics.

Many of the Baath Party operatives had good reason to fear for their lives – and the lives of their loved ones – if they ran afoul of Saddam. In contrast, many politicians and appointed officials in Washington have gone along with lethal policies merely because of fear that dissent might cost them prestige or power. Why denounce the use of cluster bombs or depleted uranium and risk losing a top post in Washington? Why take a moral position against a war after it starts, and risk losing the next election?

A deck of cards might be printed someday featuring the faces of certain high officials in the Republican and Democratic parties of the United States. Of course, there'd be no occupiers around to enforce any dragnet. And, in the absence of independent-minded news media, the cards would need extensive annotations on the back to explain the human costs of decisions made by those officials. ■