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Brand loyalty and the absence of remorse

Midway through this month, a Wall Street Journal headline captured the flimflam spirit that infuses so much of what passes for mass communications these days: "Despite Slump, Students Flock to Ad Schools."

Many young people can recognize a growth industry, and the business of large-scale deception is booming. But if Madison Avenue makes us think of subliminal twists and brazen lies, then Pennsylvania Avenue should bring to mind a similar process of creating and perpetuating brand loyalty.

"The Defense Department" is far from truth in labeling. But no player in Washington would suggest renaming it "the War Department," any more than execs in charge of marketing Camels, Salems and Marlboros would advocate re-branding them with names like Cancer Sticks, Coffin Nails and Killer Leaf.

As the department head, Donald Rumsfeld has gone through media ups and downs. Two years ago, he was riding high. Lately, his stock has dropped. Like every person, he's expendable. Individuals are the easiest brand names to retire. For wars, brand loyalty is crucial. By the time most people think critically, tragedies are history. And unlike a defective product (or a California governor), wars are not subject to recall.

A successful branding operation preceded the launch of war on Iraq seven months ago. Despite what we might call extensive consumer resistance in the United States, the Bush administration pulled out all the stops to persuade the U.S. public. The war sold politically because enough people failed to see through the mendacity. They bought a bogus story line as truth.

Now, long after the Bush team's pre-war lies served their purposes, the dead are dead. While no recall can retroactively cancel the war, no remorse can be heard from the perpetrators of the lies and the carnage. And vehicles for war keep gunning their engines without a single repentant glance into rearview mirrors from those in the driver seats.

It would be unduly charitable to describe U.S. foreign policy – and the prevalent American media coverage of it – as hit and run. Some events do occur by chance or

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happenstance, but the baseline of governmental policy and media spin is far from accidental. Washington's policies toward the Middle East may or may not be inept, but overall they're purposeful. American control over Iraq's massive oil reserves is one key goal; others include geopolitical leverage and military domination of the region. Meanwhile, the Bush administration's rhetoric about human rights is akin to an upbeat photo for a full-page cigarette ad.

The tasks of news media ought to include demanding moral accountability in every direction. We should want that from all journalists – American or Arab or any other –in connection with the slaughter of innocents, whether by Hamas or the Israeli government, whether by Al Qaeda or “the Defense Department.”

Appropriate scrutiny would extend to matters of cultural arrogance, which inevitably takes the form of grievous assault. On this score, the United States is terribly culpable.

Consider this report that the British daily newspaper The Independent published in mid-October: “U.S. soldiers driving bulldozers, with jazz blaring from loudspeakers, have uprooted ancient groves of date palms as well as orange and lemon trees in central Iraq as part of a new policy of collective punishment of farmers who do not give information about guerrillas attacking U.S. troops.” Now, suddenly, “the stumps of palm trees, some 70 years old, protrude from the brown earth scoured by the bulldozers beside the road at Dhuluaya, a small town 50 miles north of Baghdad.”

Even the finest and fattest U.S. papers seem to have scant room for remorse about the human toll of Washington's foreign policy. Along the way, the chronic “brand loyalty” that has endlessly reinforced support for Israel continues to blur coverage.

As a matter of routine, Israel destroys precious olive trees and homes that belong to Palestinians in the occupied territories. On Oct. 13, Amnesty International issued a statement saying that it “condemns in the strongest terms the large-scale destruction by the Israeli army of Palestinian homes in a refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah, which made homeless hundreds of people, including many children and elderly people.” There was nothing ambiguous about Amnesty International's assessment: “The repeated practice by the Israeli army of deliberate and wanton destruction of homes and civilian property is a grave violation of international human rights and humanitarian law, notably of Articles 33 and 53 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, and constitutes a war crime.”

Such war crimes are integral to Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Now, collective punishment and other war crimes are also integral to the U.S. occupation of Iraq. But in the United States – where taxpayers subsidize those methodical crimes – brand loyalties are still too strong, and remorse is still too weak. ■