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The Iraq trap: Watch out what you ask for

Media outlets are filled with bad news about Iraq. A theme is emerging: This administration doesn't know how to run an occupation. Those who oppose President Bush may welcome the recent shift in the media climate. But when war-makers get frustrated, they're inclined to heighten the violence. And some critics of the occupation's management are reinforcing assumptions that lead to more bloodshed.

The New York Times Magazine started off November with a long essay by David Rieff lamenting that "the United States is playing catch-up in Iraq." Rieff declared "the mess that is postwar Iraq is a failure of planning and implementation." His piece epitomizes what's wrong with so much of the media's criticism of the occupation.

Rieff mainly blamed "the mess" on a half-dozen factors — mostly tactical and bureaucratic — such as "getting in too deep" with Iraqi exile Ahmed Chalabi, "shutting out" the State Department, "ignoring the Shiites" and "too little planning, too late." But the razor blade in Rieff's polished apple came with the heading "The Troops: Too Few, Too Constricted."

When the efficacy of the occupation becomes the issue, the door swings open for the kind of escalation being propounded by some members of Congress — more troops. If 130,000 American soldiers won't do the trick, how about 200,000 or a quarter-million or 300,000? If an iron fist won't do, how about two?

Although they might seem to be simmering in the same pot, there's a big difference between a critique that challenges the legitimacy of the occupation and a critique that condemns how the occupation is being run.

Faulting the president for a lack of military effectiveness in Iraq sets a media tone that could be partly stilled, at least temporarily, by any number of military maneuvers. A U.S. missile attack on Iran or Syria, on the pretext that "terrorists" are entering Iraq from across the borders, could provide a new round of red-white-and-blue euphoria.

The U.S. news media usually love missile strikes. No American casualties. Lots of TV imagery displaying the Pentagon's technological prowess.

Those who goad and taunt the Bush gang for failure to subdue Iraqi resistance often seem to be accepting the legitimacy of the occupation itself. Yet some key questions must be asked and re-asked.

How could a legitimate occupation come from an illegitimate war, which U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan described as a violation of the U.N. Charter? Shouldn't the U.S. government turn on-the-ground responsibilities over to the United Nations and no longer try to manipulate the U.N.'s role in Iraq?

Unlike the "major" Democratic presidential candidates receiving high-profile media coverage, Rep. Dennis Kucinich is asking such questions — and providing forthright answers. For several weeks now, he has been promoting "a plan to bring our troops home and turn control of the transition over to the United Nations."

Kucinich points out that "sons and daughters of the U.S. are dying in increasing numbers for the benefit of war profiteers with close ties to the Bush administration. There was no basis for a war in Iraq. It was wrong to go in, and it's wrong to stay in."

Those who respond that Kucinich has no chance of winning the 2004 presidential nomination are missing the point. Truths must be spoken. Political discourse must be widened. And much of the public is open to illumination of underlying issues.

The results of a nationwide survey — conducted in the summer and fall by the Pew Research Center — indicate that "the bitter debate over war in Iraq has expanded the already wide partisan gap over national security. ... Nothing illustrates this growing divide more clearly than attitudes toward the Reagan-era concept that the best way to ensure peace is through military strength: 69 percent of Republicans agree, compared with just 44 percent of Democrats."

Released on Nov. 5, the Pew report notes: "That 25-point gap is the largest in the 16 years the Pew Center has asked this question. And independents are increasingly in sync with Democrats in their national security views."

The occupation of Iraq must be challenged not merely because the Bush administration miscalculated or because it's inept, but — much more importantly — because militarism and empire are reprehensible. Instead of ceding the media ground to those who demand a better occupation, we should widen the debate by giving voice to a very different vision. ■

Norman Solomon is co-author (with Reese Erlich) of "Target Iraq: What the News Media Didn't Tell You," published this year by Context Books.