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Linking Iraq occupation with the 'War on Terrorism'

Reuters is one of the more independent wire services. So, a recent news story from Reuters — flatly describing American military activities in Iraq as part of “the broader U.S. war on terrorism” — is a barometer of how powerfully the pressure systems of rhetoric from top U.S. officials have swayed mainstream news coverage.

Such reporting, with the matter-of-fact message that the Pentagon is fighting a “war on terrorism” in Iraq, amounts to a big journalistic gift for the Bush administration, which is determined to spin its way past the obvious downsides of the occupation.

Here are the concluding words from Bush’s point man in Iraq, Paul Bremer, during a Nov. 17 interview on NPR’s “Morning Edition” program: “The president was absolutely firm both in private and in public that he is not going to let any other issues distract us from achieving our goals here in Iraq, that we will stay here until the job is done and that the force levels will be determined by the conditions on the ground and the war on terrorism.”

Within hours, many of Bremer’s supervisors were singing from the same political hymnal:

* On a visit to Europe, Colin Powell told a French newspaper that “Afghanistan and Iraq are two theaters in the global war on terrorism.”

* In Washington, President Bush said: “We fully recognize that Iraq has become a new front on the war on terror.

* Speaking to campaign contributors in Buffalo, the vice president pushed the envelope of deception. “Iraq is now the central front in the war on terror,” Dick Cheney declared.

Whether you’re selling food from McDonald’s or cars from General Motors or a war from the U.S. government, repetition is crucial for making propaganda stick. Bush’s promoters will never tire of depicting the war on Iraq as a war on terrorism. And they certainly appreciate the ongoing assists from news media.

For the U.S. public, the mythological link between the occupation of Iraq and the

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"war on terrorism" is in play. This fall, repeated polling has found a consistent breakout of opinion. In mid-November, according to a CBS News poll, 46 percent of respondents said that the war in Iraq is a major part of the "war on terrorism," while 14 percent called it a minor part and 35 percent saw them as two separate matters.

A shift in such perceptions, one way or another, could be crucial for Bush's election hopes. In large measure — particularly at psychological levels — Bush sold the invasion of Iraq as a move against "terrorism." If he succeeds at framing the occupation as such, he'll get a big boost toward a second term.

Despite the Bush administration's countless efforts to imply or directly assert otherwise, no credible evidence has ever emerged to link 9/11 or Al Qaeda with the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Now, if "terrorism" is going to be used as an umbrella term so large that it covers attacks on military troops occupying a country, then the word becomes nothing more than an instrument of propaganda.

Often the coverage in U.S. news media sanitizes the human consequences — and yes, the terror — of routine actions by the occupiers. On Nov. 19, the U.S. military announced that it had dropped a pair of 2,000-pound bombs 30 miles northeast of Baghdad. Meanwhile, to the north, near the city of Kirkuk, the U.S. Air Force used 1,000-pound bombs — against "terrorist targets," an American officer told reporters.

Clearly, the vast majority of the people dying in these attacks are Iraqis who are no more "terrorists" than many Americans would be if foreign troops were occupying the United States. But U.S. news outlets sometimes go into raptures of praise as they describe the high-tech arsenal of the occupiers.

On Nov. 17, at the top of the front page of the New York Times, a color photo showed a gunner aiming his formidable weapon downward from a Black Hawk helicopter, airborne over Baghdad. Underneath the picture was an article lamenting the recent setbacks in Iraq for such U.S. military aircraft. "In two weeks," the article said, "the Black Hawks and Chinooks and Apaches that once zoomed overhead with such grace and panache have suddenly become vulnerable."

"Grace" and "panache." Attributed to no one, the words appeared in a prominent mash note about machinery of death from the New York Times, a newspaper that's supposed to epitomize the highest journalistic standards. But don't hold your breath for a correction to appear in the nation's paper of record. ■

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