

FEBRUARY 14, 2003

The ace up Bush's sleeve – the terrorism card

These days, it's a crucial ace up Uncle Sam's sleeve. "Terrorism" is George W. Bush's magic card. For 17 months now, the word has worked like a political charm for the Bush administration. Ever since the terrible crime against humanity known as 9/11, the White House has exploited the specter of terrorism to move the GOP's doctrinaire agenda. Boosting the military budget, cutting social programs and shredding civil liberties are well underway.

Like the overwhelming majority of politicians on Capitol Hill, most journalists in Washington are too timid to do anything other than quibble about fine-tuning and get out of the way of rampaging elephants.

The word "terror" has become a linguistic staple in news media. For keeping the fearful pot stirred, it's better than the longer word "terrorism," which refers to an occasional event. The shortened word has an ongoing ring to it. At the end of February's first week, when Attorney General John Ashcroft announced an official hike in the warning code, the cable networks lost no time plastering "Terror Alert: High" signs on TV screens.

Days later, the administration literally couldn't wait to tell the world about a new audiotape from Osama bin Laden. The eagerness of Colin Powell knew no bounds. He was spinning about the tape at a congressional appearance even before a single moment of the audio had premiered on the Arabic-language Al Jazeera network.

The next day, a White House spokesman did what he could to bolster the thin wisps of supposed links between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. "If that is not an unholy partnership, I have not heard of one," said Ari Fleischer, who trumpeted "the linking up of Iraq with Al Qaeda." It was, he said, "the nightmare that people have warned about."

Actually, it was a dream that the Bush team has been yearning for — some semblance of a public embrace involving Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein.

You wouldn't know it from the dominant media coverage, but the embrace was not only distinctly one-sided — it was also riddled with caveats and barbs. In his statement, Bin Laden made clear that he has never stopped viewing Hussein as an

infidel. And the Iraqi dictator has continued to keep his distance from longtime foe Bin Laden.

In the propaganda end game prior to an all-out attack on Iraq, the Bush crew is playing a favorite card; as a word, terrorism can easily frighten the public and keep competing politicians at bay. And now, Washington's policymakers are on the verge of implementing a military attack that will, in effect, terrorize large numbers of Iraqi people.

Pentagon war plans, dubbed "Shock and Awe," call for sending many hundreds of missiles into Baghdad during the first day. Numerous articles in the daily British press have been decrying these plans. In contrast, with few exceptions, mainstream U.S. journalists have been shamefully restrained.

The people in control of U.S. foreign policy are now determined to treat 9/11 as a license — their license — to kill. Although even the most fanciful statements from the Bush administration have not claimed that the Iraqi regime had anything to do with the events of Sept. 11, the murderous actions on that day are being cited to justify a military attack on Iraq sure to take thousands of civilian lives.

When the sludge of propaganda is afflicting the body politic of our country, news outlets have a crucial role to perform. Media can function as a circulatory system for the nation; the free flow of information and debate is the lifeblood of a democracy. But right now, the USA's media arteries are clogged.

If seeing a "Terror Alert: High" sign on your TV screen makes you feel edgy, imagine what it's like to be living in Baghdad or Basra. For people in the United States, the odds that terrorism will strike close to home are very small compared to the chances that any particular Iraqi family will be decimated before summer.

We desperately need a full national debate on whether we as a society ought to condemn terrorism — across the board — no matter who is doing the terrorizing. Clearly, politicians will be the last to initiate such a nationwide discussion. And, sad to say, few journalists show much inclination to ruffle the feathers of the hawkish gang that rules the roost in Washington. So, let's stop waiting for others to rise to the occasion. If we want to get an authentic debate going, we'll need to do it ourselves. ■