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Conventional media wisdom: obedience

As the possibility of a U.S. invasion turns into the reality of massive carnage, the war on Iraq cannot avoid confronting Americans with a tacit expectation that rarely gets media scrutiny. In a word: obedience. When a country — particularly "a democracy" — goes to war, the passive consent of the governed lubricates the machinery of slaughter. Silence is a key form of cooperation, but the war-making system does not insist on quietude or agreement. Mere passivity or self-restraint will suffice to keep the missiles flying, the bombs exploding and the faraway people dying.

On the home front, beliefs are of scant importance. Antiwar sentiment is necessary but insufficient to halt a war. Much more is needed than expressions of dissent that stay within the customary bounds.

Daily media speculation about the starting date for all-out war on Iraq has contributed to widespread passivity — a kind of spectator relationship to military actions being implemented in our names.

We can't just blame the media conglomerates and Washington spinners for the prevailing stupor. After decades of desensitizing propaganda, we routinely crave the insulation that news outlets offer. We tell ourselves that our personal lives are difficult enough without getting too upset about world events.

The conventional wisdom of American political life has made it predictable that editorial writers and politicians cannot resist accommodating themselves to expediency by the time the first missiles reach Baghdad. Conformist behavior — in sharp contrast to authentic conscience — is notably plastic.

A pathetic case in point is Sen. John Kerry, the Massachusetts Democrat who voted for the congressional war resolution last October while trying to pass himself off as a critic of President Bush's enthusiasm for war. While campaigning in Iowa recently for his party's presidential nomination, Kerry told a New York Times reporter: "When the war begins, if the war begins, I support the troops and I support the United States of America winning as rapidly as possible. When the troops are in the field and fighting — if they're in the field and fighting — remembering what it's like to be those troops,

I think they need a unified America that is prepared to win.”

Prepared to win. Such a phrase rolls off an oily tongue with ease. As a consequence, of course, many blameless people must die.

Howard Dean, a former governor of Vermont, is supposedly an antiwar candidate for the Democratic presidential slot. On the campaign trail in Iowa, he “stopped short when asked what he would say if there was a war,” according to the Times.

“You know, I don’t know the answer to that yet,” Dean said. “Certainly I’m going to support American kids that are sent over there. Obviously, I’m going to wish everybody well. You know, you root for your country.”

You root for your country. No matter how horrific its actions.

Billions of buds on countless flowers and trees will wondrously open across the United States during the next weeks. Meanwhile, the Pentagon’s firepower will destroy uncounted human beings in Iraq during what will be, to put it mildly, a war of aggression.

Judgments at Nuremberg and precepts of international law forbid launching aggressive war — an apt description of what the U.S. government has in store for Iraqi people this spring.

“We must make clear to the Germans that the wrong for which their fallen leaders are on trial is not that they lost the war, but that they started it,” said Supreme Court Justice Robert L. Jackson, a U.S. representative to the International Conference on Military Trials at the close of World War II. He added that “no grievances or policies will justify resort to aggressive war. It is utterly renounced and condemned as an instrument of policy.”

Last November, more than 300 law professors in the United States signed a statement pointing out that “the international rule of law is not a soft luxury to be discarded whenever leaders find it convenient or popular to resort to savage violence.”

The deadening lockstep of obedience is easier to fault in other societies. Close to home, as the adrenaline of unfathomable violence pulses through the televisions of America, the siren of deference to authority may seem irresistible. But it isn’t. ■