

MARCH 27, 2003

Obsessed with tactics and technology

Two months ago, when I wandered through a large market near the center of Baghdad, the day seemed like any other and no other. A vibrant pulse of humanity throbbed in the shops and on the streets. Meanwhile, a fuse was burning; lit in Washington, it would explode here. Now, with American troops near Baghdad, the media fixations are largely tactical. "A week of airstrikes, including the most concentrated precision hits in U.S. military history, has left tons of rubble and deep craters at hundreds of government buildings and military facilities around Iraq but has yielded little sign of a weakening in the regime's will to resist," the Washington Post reported on March 26.

Shrewd tactics and superlative technology were supposed to do the grisly trick. But military difficulties have set off warning bells inside the U.S. media echo chamber. In contrast, humanitarian calamities are often rendered as PR problems, whether the subject is the cut-off of water in Basra or the missiles that kill non-combatants in Baghdad: The main concern is apt to be that extensive suffering and death among civilians would make the "coalition of the willing" look bad.

But, despite the public-relations efforts on behalf of this invasion, the military forces of Washington and London remain a coalition for the killing of Iraqi people who get in the way of the righteous juggernaut. Despite the prevalent media fixations, the great moral questions about this war have not been settled – on the contrary, they intensify with each passing day – no matter what gets onto TV screens and front pages.

When U.S. missiles exploded at Iraqi government broadcast facilities six days after the war began, it was a move to silence a regime that had been gaining ground in the propaganda struggle. Throughout the months of faux "diplomacy" and the first days of invading Iraq, the governments led by George W. Bush and Tony Blair had managed to do the nearly impossible – make themselves look even more mendacious than the bloody dictator Saddam Hussein.

On the home front, most U.S. news outlets are worshiping the nation's high-tech arsenal. It was routine the other day when the Washington Post printed a large color

MEDIABEAT '03 | NORMAN SOLOMON

diagram under the headline "A Rugged Bird." Unrelated to ornithology, the diagram annotated key features of the AH-64 Apache – not a bird but a helicopter that excels as a killing machine.

We're supposed to adore the Pentagon's prowess; the deadlier the better. Transfixed with tactical maneuvers and overall strategies inside Iraq, media outlets rarely mention that this entire war by the U.S. government and its British accomplice is a flagrant violation of international law. Only days before the United States launched the attack, U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan said that the invasion – lacking a new Security Council resolution to authorize it – would violate the U.N. Charter.

In the capital city of the world's only superpower, the Post is cheering the slaughter. "Ultimately the monument that matters will be victory and a sustained commitment to a rebuilt Iraq," the newspaper concluded. Its assessment came in an editorial that mentioned the pain – but not the anger – of family members grieving the loss of Kendall D. Waters-Bey, a Marine from Baltimore who died soon after the war began.

The Post's editorial quoted the bereaved father as saying that "the word Sorrow, cannot fill my pain." But the editorial did not include a word of the response from the dead man's oldest sister, Michelle Waters, who faulted the U.S. government for starting the war and said: "It's all for nothing. That war could have been prevented. Now, we're out of a brother. Bush is not out of a brother. We are."

The Baltimore Sun reported that Michelle Waters spoke those words "in the living room of the family home, tears running down her cheeks."

A week into this war, CNN's White House correspondent John King was in sync with many other journalists as he noted criticisms of the administration's "war strategy." The media anxiety level has been rising, but the voiced concerns are overwhelmingly about tactics. A military triumph may not be so easy after all.

Today, I took another look at quotations that I'd jotted at meetings with Iraqi officials during visits to Baghdad last fall and winter. (The quotes are included in "Target Iraq: What the News Media Didn't Tell You," a book I co-authored with foreign correspondent Reese Erlich.)

In mid-September, the elderly speaker of Iraq's national assembly, Saadoun Hammadi, told our delegation of Americans: "The U.S. administration is now speaking war. We are not going to turn the other cheek. We are going to fight. Not only our armed forces will fight. Our people will fight."

Three months later, at a Dec. 14 meeting, Iraq's deputy prime minister Tariq Aziz said: "Hundreds of thousands of people are going to die, including Americans – because if they want to take over oil in Iraq, they have to fight for it, not by missiles and by

MEDIABEAT '03 | NORMAN SOLOMON

airplanes ... they have to bring troops and fight the Iraqi people and the Iraqi army.

And that will be costly.”

The fuse lit in Washington is now burning in Baghdad. Our tax dollars are incinerating Iraqi troops and civilians.

No matter how long this war takes, it is profoundly wrong. ■