
Casus Belli

U.S. Media and the Justification of the Iraq War



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In departing from the traditional principles of a “just war” theory, which demands that military action be taken only in self-defense, the U.S. government’s policy in its war against Iraq was preemptive, the logic being that the perceived risk of Iraqi aggression toward the United States ought to be avoided by attacking first. Perhaps this decision does not define imperialism, but it certainly has raised the specter in the eyes of much of the rest of the world. Of course, the obvious question became what evidence was there of imminent danger that should justify an attack? From the start, the principal challenge never was a matter of whether the U.S. military had the capacity to topple Saddam Hussein’s regime. Rather, the challenge has been all along a matter of how to sell the war and U.S. military occupation to the community of nations, the United Nations Security Council, the American people, and the Iraqi people.

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In August 2003, the Pentagon took a peculiar interest in film history when officials at the U.S. Department of Defense held a screening of Gillo Pontecorvo’s gritty 1965 film about revolution, *The Battle of Algiers*. The film depicts the Algerian fight against French colonial domination in the period of 1954–1957. It is a harsh, documentary-style portrayal of violent confrontation between the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) and the French colonial settlers and occupying government. Pontecorvo’s film is mostly sympathetic toward the Algerians, who were the demoralized victims of imperialist racism and exploitation. Although the French succeeded in winning the battle, the Algerians’ fierce resistance led to their eventually winning the war and gaining independence in 1962, a fact that many also

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attribute to the lack of public support by the French population for continued colonial rule. The film shows the ugliness of colonial barbarism, which was recently denounced as immoral by the French General Jacques Massu, who is fictionally portrayed in Pontecorvo's film as General Phillippe Matthieu, the head of a "para" (French paratrooper) division that perpetrates torture and murder to extract information sought to defeat the FLN.

Why would U.S. military strategists take an interest in such a film, which was shown to an audience of about 40 officers and civilians? The invitation to those in attendance raised the difficult issue of what becomes of an occupying power that is the target of insurrection and that "succeeds tactically, but fails strategically" (Kaufman 2003). The film offers lessons about the sort of "low-intensity" conflict, including regular car bombings, that occupying forces currently are experiencing in Iraq. A well-known challenge posed by such forms of resistance, even to soldiers who possess far superior firepower, is demoralization and fear, and with it the temptation to torture prisoners to gain more information about the plans and whereabouts of other combatants. The tactical success of the French in the Battle of Algiers was the result of the use of overwhelming force and brutal violence, but their strategic failure was due to a chronic inability to hear the reasons why the Algerians desired their independence. Whether or not the cineastes at the Pentagon view the Battle of Algiers as "Neo-Colonialism for Dummies," as one writer suggests might be the case, it seems that the screening was motivated by the perception of the very real dangers of winning at direct confrontation but being worn down by the unrelenting will of people who refuse to be ruled by an outside power or its puppets (Atkinson 2004).

But is the comparison between the French in Algeria and United States in Iraq an accurate one? Is the United States a colonial power? Is the United States an empire? (Rothkopf 1997; King 2003; Walzer 2003; Ferguson 2004). The growing debates surrounding this subject are many, and they include not only whether America is an empire but also, if so, whether it is in decline and/or whether and how it should be maintained. As one critic of the idea that America is an empire has argued, colonization—including the setting up of a permanent political administration—would not be supported indefinitely. However, dismissals of the idea that there is or could be an American empire tend to rest on a formalized, nineteenth-century concept of imperialism, a vision of empire that is of course no longer politically sustainable in democratically elected countries. This leads to questioning whether the concept of *empire* must be revisited, if not revised, from time to time in light of new conditions (Foster 2001, 2003).

The claim that America is an empire will remain arguable, but a premise of this essay is that the Bush administration's foreign policy has been guided by imperialist aims. The U.S. government continues to wield tremendous influence, not only through global military expansion but also by

exercising economic and political power in all aspects of its foreign policy. The thrust of the Bush administration's vision of the new American century is evident in its consistent high-profile refusals to participate in multilateral agreements, including the Kyoto Global Warming Accord, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, the Mine Ban Treaty, and the International Criminal Court. Whether or not we wish to call this the behavior of an imperial power, it is a reflection of imperial ambition. This essay examines how that ambition has been manifested in the case for war that was made by the Bush administration and how that case was made public to the American people and the world. Based on evidence presented below, this article argues that the major media of the United States played a key role in uncritically projecting American imperialism, both domestically and abroad.

How and When the War Was Sold

In departing from traditional principles of "just war" theory, which demand that military action only be in self-defense, the U.S. government's policy in its war against Iraq was preemptive, the logic being that the perceived imminent possibility of Iraqi aggression toward the United States ought to be avoided by attacking first. Of course, the obvious question became what evidence was there of imminent danger that should justify an attack? From the start, the principal challenge never was a matter of whether the United States military had the capacity to topple Saddam Hussein's regime, but rather it was a question of how to sell the war to the United Nations (UN) Security Council, the American people, and ultimately to the Iraqis. The Bush administration correctly recognized the vital importance of the media, both domestically and internationally, as tools for justifying its war policy in Iraq.

The principal arguments offered for why the United States and Great Britain should invade Iraq were twofold, one being that the regime of Saddam Hussein had continued to store, produce, and find ways to further develop the capacity to produce biological, chemical, and nuclear "weapons of mass destruction" (WMDs) and the other being that there were covert links between the Iraqi government and members of the al Qaeda network, perhaps even implicating Iraq in the terrorist attacks on U.S. targets on September 11, 2001. On February 5, 2003, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell appeared before the UN Security Council and presented what he characterized as compelling evidence of the existence of WMDs in Iraq and of links between al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein's government. Powell's speech relied heavily on a report issued by the government of British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Blair's report was represented as the product of an analysis by MI6, the British spy agency, although in fact MI6 did not

produce the report, and the agency even leaked its own report on the same date as Powell's speech, denying that there had been any evidence linking Iraq and al Qaeda (Rampton and Stauber 2004, 96–99). Nevertheless, as Sheldon Rampton and James Stauber (2003) convincingly argue in their analysis of the Bush administration's use of propaganda and deception to promote its military strategies and actions, titled *Weapons of Mass Deception*, the Iraq–al Qaeda connection did not have to be real. All that mattered was that the Bush team, including Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Vice President Dick Cheney, and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, continue to insist that there was a connection. By the sheer force of relentless repetition, the public came to accept that it was true, or at least became worn down to the point of no longer caring that it was untrue, that Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein not only shared a common mission to destroy the United States but that they had joined forces to do so. "We know that Iraq and the al Qaeda terrorist network share a common enemy," President Bush stated in a speech in October 2002, concluding that Saddam Hussein was "a man who, in my judgment, would like to use al Qaeda as a forward army" (Rampton and Stauber 2004, 95).

In Colin Powell's address to the UN Security Council on February 5, 2003, he stated that Saddam Hussein had the ability to deliver "lethal poisons and diseases in ways that can cause massive death and destruction" (Powell 2003). One day later, in his address to the nation on the occasion of his announcement of plans to invade Iraq, President Bush stated that the Iraqi regime had "acquired and tested the means to deliver weapons of mass destruction," including spray devices on "unmanned aerial vehicles" which, if launched from a ship off the American coast, "could reach hundreds of miles inland." Moreover, Bush claimed on that occasion, there was compelling evidence that Saddam Hussein had "longstanding, direct and continuing ties to terrorist networks. . . . The danger Saddam Hussein poses reaches across the world" (Bush 2003). During this period, such claims were disputed, and the evidence used to support them was discredited before, during, and since the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

On January 8, 2004, after the war was declared over, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) released a detailed report analyzing the prewar evidence that was available to the U.S. and international intelligence communities about Iraq's weapons programs and comparing that data to the claims that were made by the Bush administration. The report was the result of a distillation of "pre-war intelligence, the official presentation of that intelligence, and what is now known about Iraq's programs." The findings provide a startling contrast to the claims that were made by Secretary Powell and President Bush prior to the invasion. Notably, the CEIP concluded that there had been no immediate threat of WMDs from Iraq. Its nuclear program had been "suspended for many years," the

nerve agents it possessed “had lost most of their lethality as early as 1991,” and “Operations Desert Storm and Desert Fox, and UN inspections and sanctions effectively destroyed Iraq’s large-scale chemical weapon production capabilities.” The CEIP concluded that *the intelligence community* had “overestimated the chemical and biological weapons in Iraq,” that it “appears to have been unduly influenced by policymakers’ views,” and that officials had misrepresented intelligence findings about the threat posed by Iraq’s ballistic missile program to deliver WMDs (Cirincione, Mathews, and Perkovich 2004). According to the report, the Bush administration’s distortion of intelligence reports included “the wholesale dropping of caveats, probabilities, and expressions of uncertainty present in intelligence assessments.” It notes that “numerous statements” were made by “the president, vice president, and the secretaries of state and defense to the effect that ‘we know’ this or that when the accurate formulation was ‘we suspect’ or ‘we cannot exclude’” (Cirincione, Mathews, and Perkovich 2004, 52). The CEIP also discredits claims made by the Bush administration that there was valid evidence of an Iraq-al Qaeda connection, having found “no solid evidence of a cooperative relationship between Saddam’s government and al Qaeda” and “no evidence that Iraq would have transferred WMDs to terrorists—and much to counter it” (Cirincione, Mathews, and Perkovich 2004, 52). As the report notes, “Bin Laden and Saddam were known to detest and fear each other, the one for his radical religious beliefs and the other for his aggressively secular rule and persecution of Islamists. Bin Laden labeled the Iraqi ruler an infidel and an apostate, had offered to go to battle against him after the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and had frequently called for his overthrow” (Cirincione, Mathews, and Perkovich 2004, 48). In an interview with National Public Radio (NPR) correspondent Vicky O’Hara, CEIP president for studies and coauthor of the report, Jessica T. Matthews, cited the “routine omission of any reference to uncertainty in intelligence on Iraq” and faulted the Bush administration for “the turning of judgments, assessments and possibilities into facts” (O’Hara 2004). The report’s conclusion, reiterated in the interview, is that “war was not the best or only option” and that the United States should revise its National Security Strategy “to eliminate a U.S. policy of unilateral preventive war, i.e., preemptive war in absence of imminent threat,” and change the post of CIA director “from a political appointment to a career appointment” to remove the potential for political pressure to be exerted on intelligence work (Cirincione, Mathews, and Perkovich 2004).

Regarding Colin Powell’s address to the UN Security Council, coauthor of the CEIP report, Joseph Cirincione, concluded that “it’s very difficult to support any of Powell’s main conclusions.” In a public statement responding to the report, Powell has acknowledged that there was no “smoking gun, concrete evidence” between Saddam and al Qaeda, although, in

keeping with administration practices, he proceeded with contradicting what the evidence has shown by insisting that the unsubstantiated suspicions were warranted and therefore that the invasion was justified (Marquis 2004). Despite the fact that he was reportedly opposed to the Bush administration's Iraq policy, Powell set his disagreements aside and publicly supported it (Blumenthal 2004). As is now well known, the Bush administration's plans to invade Iraq had been formulated well before the 9/11 attacks, making pressure to step up the UN weapons inspection and the speech given by Powell little more than obligatory rhetorical steps on the way to a *fait accompli*. Quoting national security advisor Condoleezza Rice, former director of state department policy planning Richard Haas noted that in June 2003 Rice said to Powell, "Save your breath, the president has already decided what he's going to do on this" (quoted in Blumenthal 2004).

In fact, the agenda for war in Iraq had been set before the president was elected, by a group of Republican strategists, now often referred to as the "neoconservatives." The "neocons" have become identified with a think-tank called the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), many of whose members would go on to become high-ranking members of the Bush administration and whose stated goal is "to promote American global leadership," achieved through "military strength and moral clarity." According to the PNAC's 1997 "Statement of Principles,"

We seem to have forgotten the essential elements of the Reagan Administration's success: a military that is strong and ready to meet both present and future challenges; a foreign policy that boldly and purposefully promotes American principles abroad; and national leadership that accepts the United States' global responsibilities. (PNAC 1997)¹

From its inception, PNAC considered the invasion of Iraq necessary and inevitable. In January of 1998, eighteen PNAC members sent an open letter to President Clinton urging him "to enunciate a new strategy that would secure the interests of the U.S. and our friends and allies around the world. That strategy should aim, above all, at the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime from power" (PNAC 1998).² One month later, PNAC successfully lobbied for Congress to pass the "Iraqi Liberation Act" and authorize a \$97 million aid package for Iraqi opposition groups, including the Iraqi National Congress, which was the creation of a public relations firm, the Rendon Group, with \$12 million in covert CIA funding during the period between 1992 and 1996 (Rampton and Stauber 2004, 42-49). On September 20, 2001, nine days after the 9/11 attacks, PNAC sent an open letter to President Bush, again with multiple signatories by prominent "neocons," urging for the destruction of the al Qaeda network and again calling for war in

Iraq. PNAC claimed that Saddam may have provided assistance to al Qaeda, "But even if evidence does not link Iraq directly to the attack, any strategy aiming at the eradication of terrorism and its sponsors must include a determined effort to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq" (PNAC 2001). To summarize, the policy for war in Iraq was one that President Bush inherited rather than created.

In one of the few in-depth news stories about PNAC and its origins, Jay Bookman wrote in the daily newspaper *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, "Rarely did the press or, especially, television address the possibility that larger strategies might also have driven the decision to invade Iraq." Bookman's article concludes with a statement that aptly summarizes PNAC's principles: "the U.S. stands ready to invade any country deemed a possible threat to our economic interests" (Bookman 2002). In September 2000, just prior to Bush's election victory, PNAC published one of its most important reports, *Rebuilding America's Defenses*, stating the necessity for the United States to gain military control in various parts of the world, including in Iraq. The desired process of transformation would bring "revolutionary change," but it might take long to happen, unless "some catastrophic and catalyzing event—like a new Pearl Harbor," were to occur (Donnelly, Kagan, and Schmitt 2000). The attacks on 9/11 constituted just such an event. The authors cannot be accused of a conspiracy for such thinking, for they were open and unequivocal from the start about their goals for a new American empire (Donnelly 2002).

Vox Americana

One of the most memorable promises voiced by President George Bush Sr. during the period immediately preceding the Gulf War of 1990–91 was that that war would not be "another Vietnam." That vow was certainly open to interpretation. In the most general sense, it meant that the United States would win decisively and that all of the world would witness the prowess of the U.S. military. But equally important, it meant that there would be no lingering doubt among the American public about the justness of the cause—in other words, no lack of support. Although it is doubtful that the U.S. failure in Vietnam was due to a domestic failure in opinion control and consequent lack of public support, the government imposed far greater restrictions on journalistic access to battlefronts in subsequent military conflicts (Rampton and Stauber 2004, 182–83). The theory was that there would be less chance for the media to steer public opinion away from supporting the war if access to information were more carefully controlled. The Gulf War of 1990–91 and the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq offered a clear contrast to the Vietnam War in many ways, not least of which was the decisiveness and effectiveness with which the administrations in

power engaged in domestic efforts at “perception management” (Rampton and Stauber 2004, 5–6).

In addition to these contrasts with the Vietnam War coverage, we can even see significant transformations since the Gulf War. One of the contrasts that has been widely noted was the shift from government control in the form of press pools during the Gulf War to the use of “embedded journalism” in the recent Iraq War. Briefly, “embedding” is the process of allowing individual or small groups of journalists to travel to the battlefronts with troops. It is estimated that more than seven hundred U.S. and foreign reporters were permitted to participate in training and to travel with American military units. According to Terence Smith, media correspondent and senior producer for the PBS television program *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, embedding “made possible a kind of intimate, immediate, absorbing, almost addictive coverage, the likes of which we have not seen before.” Smith also called embedding “the most innovative aspect of the coverage of the second gulf war” (Smith 2003).

Perhaps a more significant change since the first Gulf War has been the increase in the number of 24-hour television news channels now providing “real-time” coverage worldwide. During the Gulf War of 1990–91, the most globally influential television news source was CNN. It is often noted that many in the Arab world, including Saddam Hussein, watched CNN to learn about what was happening on the battlefield. During the war, CNN caught the other television networks off-guard and gained a tremendous competitive advantage, both in terms of television ratings and credibility, and it remained the U.S. international news ratings leader, for better and for worse, until fairly recently. But things have changed. There were multiple television networks providing 24-hour global live coverage of the Iraq War. They included Fox News, which is now the ratings leader among cable news channels in the United States, ahead of CNN, MSNBC, and CNN Headline News. But more significant is the fact that, unlike in 1990–91, the Arab-speaking world no longer depends on American television to see coverage of conflict in the Middle East. Today, there are four 24-hour Arab satellite channels, including Al Jazeera, Al Manar, Abu Dhabi, and LBC (Sharabi 2003). As we have seen since the time of the attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, Arab satellite television has had a profound impact, not only in the Middle East, but globally. While the Gulf War brought CNN into global prominence, the war in Afghanistan did the same for Al Jazeera, and in fact Al Jazeera has been referred to as “the CNN of the Arab world” (Ibish and Abunimah, 2001). As the responses by the U.S. government and U.S. news networks have indicated, Al Jazeera’s impact was keenly felt in the United States. These developments, and American responses to them, are discussed below.

Staying on Message: Government Efforts at "Perception Management"

Once the war began, the U.S. government naturally sought to limit access to military operations in Iraq and indeed to promote favorable perceptions of its campaign both within the United States and internationally. Despite the uniqueness of U.S. military power, with respect to the nature of its efforts at "perception management," the United States behaved in a predictable manner. Nevertheless, what was even unique in that instance was the scale of investment in propaganda, which few governments can match. Such efforts have ranged from multimillion dollar public relations campaigns to the financing of a radio and television station in Iraq and covert expenditures that included the propping of an inauthentic U.S. taxpayer-funded "Iraqi National Congress" that was made to look like a group of exiled freedom-loving patriots.

Among the most controversial informational tactics by the United States are those that were in connection with the Al Jazeera network. Al Jazeera began broadcasting in November 1996 with \$137 million in financing by the emir of Qatar, but the network did not become widely known in the West until after the September 11, 2001, attack on the United States. In October of that year, the United States invaded Afghanistan to remove the Taliban from power and attack bases of operation used by the al Qaeda network. Immediately following the start of the war, the Taliban forced all foreign news organizations to leave the country except Al Jazeera, which was estimated to be able to reach 35 million viewers in the Arab world, including 150,000 in the United States. According to journalist Rick Zednick, "When the U.S. launched strikes on Afghanistan on October 7, the world wanted what only Al Jazeera had: war video, including live footage of bombs falling on Kabul." Not long after the start of the war, a videotape of Osama bin Laden denouncing the United States was delivered to the Kabul bureau, which Al Jazeera broadcasted and which was subsequently aired in its entirety on several American television networks (Zednik 2002). The speech by bin Laden not only blessed the 9/11 attacks, it also stated once more his position that he and his supporters are fighting a religious holy war against the American infidels. It was a call to arms and a defiant criticism of American foreign policy. Following the American broadcast of the video, President Bush's National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice, asked American networks not to carry such statements by bin Laden or his collaborators in the future. One reason she gave was that these tapes might contain coded (hidden) messages, possibly instructions to other al Qaeda network members to commit further acts of terrorism (Kurtz 2001, Carter and Barringer, 2001). "What we do not need is to have a kind of a free rein [for bin Laden] to sit and use the airwaves to incite attacks on innocent

people," Rice stated in an interview she later gave to Al Jazeera (Rice 2001). The bin Laden recording was certainly newsworthy as far as prevailing media industry standards are concerned, but coded messages or not, Rice was not unreasonable in projecting concern about how the tape would be received by the American public so soon after 9/11. According to the president of NBC news, "Her biggest point was that here was a charismatic speaker who could arouse anti-American sentiment getting 20 minutes of air time to spew hatred and urge his followers to kill Americans" (Carter and Barringer 2001). The request made by Rice to the networks did attract criticism, the implication being that the government was trying to censor U.S. television news coverage of the war. However, following her request, the networks agreed to edit future tapes of bin Laden. In response to Al Jazeera's airing of the bin Laden video, Secretary of State Colin Powell publicly criticized the network, as did *The New York Times* and several radio and television broadcasters. Powell also later asked the emir of Qatar to reduce Al Jazeera's level of inflammatory reporting on the war, and the State Department tried to prevent the Voice of America from broadcasting an interview with Taliban leader Mulla Omar Muhammad.

Most significant of all U.S. government actions against Al Jazeera have been two bombings of the network's offices, one in Kabul during the war in Afghanistan, and one in Baghdad during the Iraq War. According to the *Washington Post*, the Kabul incident occurred in November 2001, when U.S. aircraft dropped two 500-pound bombs on Al Jazeera's offices "based on 'compelling' evidence that the facility was being used by the al Qaeda terrorist organization." None of the Al Jazeera staff members were injured (Loeb 2001). A few weeks later, Al Jazeera's managing director, Mohamed Jaseem Al Ali, received a letter from assistant secretary of defense, Victoria Clarke, claiming that the United States did not know the building was used by Al Jazeera. Although the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists asked the Department of Defense for further explanation, it is unlikely that the lingering doubts will be removed about whether the bombing was a deliberate attempt to end Al Jazeera's presence in Kabul (Zednik 2002). With fears of a similar event occurring in Iraq, prior to the start of the war, Al Jazeera repeatedly informed the U.S. military of the exact coordinates of its office in Baghdad, but in April 2003, a U.S. missile hit the office and killed Tareq Ayub, a 34-year old Jordanian journalist (Solomon 2003).

Al Jazeera has also been targeted by U.S. media, including *The New York Times*, which criticized Al Jazeera for being anti-Israel and anti-American, and by CBS television anchor Dan Rather, who speculated that Al Jazeera was funded by bin Laden (Straus 2001). But not all of the mainstream U.S. media have been so critical or hyperbolic. CNN and Al Jazeera have even been partners in sharing news footage about the Middle East (Sullivan

2001). During the war in Afghanistan, MSNBC's Michael Moran praised Al Jazeera's journalists for their hard work and for the risks they were taking to cover the story (Moran 2001). The fact is that Arab satellite television has posed a serious challenge to the U.S. government's control of information about conflict in the Middle East and to the hegemony of U.S. news media. Al Jazeera has been a familiar topic in the repertoires of American late-night talk show comedians, and it has been the subject of serious discussions about how to further curtail its global influence (Schiesel 2001; Ibish and Abunimah 2001). But regardless of wishful thinking by some to reduce or end the network's influence, it is now abundantly clear that U.S. media do not have a global monopoly in satellite news reporting. Global civil society has new and very influential voices that are likely to continue gaining attention and respect around the world, regardless of whether American audiences are watching.

Under circumstances of declining support for U.S. foreign policy, it is not surprising that the U.S. government has invested considerable funds in "public diplomacy," or public relations, or simply propaganda, to rebuild confidence in "Brand America." The efforts have included hiring Charlotte Beers, a top Madison Avenue advertising executive, to serve as undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, and the employment of public relations firms, to give a facelift to the U.S. image abroad (Rampton and Stauber 2004, 30). Following 9/11 and the war in Afghanistan, the Bush administration spent many millions of dollars to remedy the fact that it has been "losing the propaganda war abroad," as *The New York Times* terms it (Stanley 2001). In fact, soon after 9/11, a group was formed at the Pentagon called the Office of Strategic Influence (OSI), which was "developing plans to provide news items, possibly even false ones, to foreign media organizations." The OSI had opponents in the military, the media, and Congress, not least of which was because it blurred the boundaries between covert intelligence operations and public relations. One fear became that U.S. media would pick up disinformation from the foreign media and publish and broadcast it to U.S. audiences. Soon after the OSI became a matter of public knowledge, the White House closed it down (from the *New York Times*, cited by Rampton and Stauber 2004, 66–68).

In an attempted countermove to draw Arab-speaking audiences away from Arab news channels, the Pentagon established Al Iraqiya, a radio and television station run by the California-based Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC). SAIC is on the "Fortune 500" list of the largest U.S. corporations and generated \$6.1 billion in revenue in 2002, mainly from providing surveillance services for U.S. spy agencies. Although SAIC had no prior experience operating either a radio or a television station, it is one of the top contractors with both the National Security Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency. During its short period of existence (the

concept was proposed two months before the start of the Iraq War), Al Iraqiya has suffered from instability due to staff turnover and lack of audience interest by Iraqis, and it appears that SAIC may lose its contract with the Pentagon. The U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees all nonmilitary propaganda, including Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, Radio Free Asia, and Radio and TV Marti, is now investing \$100 million to establish a new Middle East Network, which will broadcast throughout the Middle East by satellite and will be available terrestrially in Iraq. The network, which is intended to resemble CNN, MSNBC, and the Discovery Channel, will serve 22 countries and will initially broadcast twelve to fifteen hours a day (Chatterjee 2004).

Profits and Patriotism: U.S. Media Coverage of the War

Despite the obvious newsworthiness of the Bush administration's pre-9/11 strategy for foreign policy, which included plans for Iraq, the mainstream U.S. media chose not to draw this important story onto the center stage of American public discourse. The major television networks reported little of the detail pertaining to neoconservative strategies and their influence on U.S. foreign policy. As noted above, a significant number of PNAC associates became influential members of the Bush administration. In fact, ten out of the eighteen people who signed the PNAC letter to President Clinton in 1998, urging him to remove Saddam Hussein from power, became members of the Bush administration. This fact was observed on one of the major television networks (ABC), although it is one of the few such stories that were found in a search of television coverage of the subject. It is also important to note that the "Nightline" story presents a largely skeptical tone toward criticism of PNAC ("The plan," 2004).³

Nor was there sustained media coverage that questioned the evidence used by the administration regarding WMDs or the connection between the Iraqi government and al Qaeda. The media's failure to provide informative and accurate coverage of the government's arguments for war contributed to the majority of Americans giving blind support to the administration. Based on a series of seven surveys of Americans on the subject of media and the Iraq War, the University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) analyzed the relationship between American misperceptions about the government's claims and levels of support for the war (Kull et al. 2003). The report begins by examining the weak or complete absence of evidence to support the Bush administration's repeated assertions of an Iraq-al Qaeda connection and of Iraq's possession of WMDs. Besides the lack of evidence about Iraq's link to al Qaeda or its WMD threat, PIPA also highlighted the lack of world support for a U.S.-led war that was not sanctioned by the United Nations. The primary focus of the surveys,

however, was how that misinformation was received by the American public, including an exploration of the connection between misperceptions and the likelihood of support for the war.

In January 2003, "68 percent expressed the belief that Iraq played an important role in September 11, with 13 percent even expressing the clearly mistaken belief that 'conclusive evidence' of such a link had been found" (Kull et al. 2003, 2). The end of major bombing in Iraq, or what is generally referred to as the war's end, was declared on May 1, 2003. Following that time, in June-September 2003, PIPA found a slight decline in perception of an Iraq-al Qaeda connection, but the figure remained at a remarkably high 57 percent. Another striking finding was that even immediately after the war had ended, with no WMDs found nor evidence produced of an ongoing WMD program, 34 percent of Americans said they believed that the U.S. forces had "found Iraqi weapons of mass destruction" (Kull et al. 2003, 4).⁴

The PIPA surveys also assessed the degree to which Americans misperceived world opinion about the U.S. decision to invade Iraq. In the period leading up to and during the Iraq war, world opinion polls were taken in many countries by Gallup International and by the Pew Research Center to assess the level of support/lack of support for the United States launching a war without UN approval. The findings strongly indicate the very high level of world opposition to U.S. unilateral action against Iraq (Kull et al. 2003, 8). A question that Americans heard repeatedly after 9/11 was "Why do they hate us?" (Zakaria 2001). For its Global Attitudes Project, the Pew Research Center for People and the Press conducted surveys of 16,000 people in 20 countries and the Palestinian Authority in May 2003 and 38,000 people in 44 nations in 2002. Not surprising, the Pew study found that "the bottom has fallen out of support for America in most of the Muslim world" and that "even in Kuwait, where people have a generally favorable view of the United States, 53% voice at least some concern that the U.S. could someday pose a threat" (Pew Research Center 2003).

Reporting on Americans' perceptions of world opinion about foreign support for the war, PIPA researchers found in March 2003 that only 35 percent of Americans correctly perceived that the majority of the people in the world opposed the U.S. decision to go to war. Even after the war ended, findings in June, July, and August 2003 revealed that only 38 percent to 42 percent correctly perceived that the majority of the people opposed the U.S. war against Iraq (Kull et al. 2003, 6). Although no single misperception was held by a majority of respondents, the PIPA report notes that "a large majority has at least one misperception" (p. 2). In a composite analysis of three major misperceptions—Iraq-al Qaeda links, the presence of WMDs in Iraq, and world opinion that favored the U.S. invasion—PIPA found a cumulative effect: 53 percent of those with one misperception supported the war,

78 percent of those with two misperceptions did so, and 86 percent of those who held all three misperceptions favored war (p. 11).

Apart from the administration's role in generating these misperceptions, how do we explain the role of the media? The answer to this question is complex, although the PIPA study and another yield data allowing important insights that seem to contradict any assumptions that the effects of the media were neutral. One notable finding was the degree to which misperceptions varied according to news source. A striking comparison is the difference between those who got most of their news from the Fox News Network and those who relied mostly on the U.S. Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and NPR. According to data collected in June, July, and August of 2003, 80 percent of Fox TV viewers had one or more misperceptions, whereas only 23 percent of the audience for NPR or PBS had one or more misperceptions. Of course, this finding does not enable us to draw conclusions about causality—that is, whether a given news source determines the likelihood of misperception—and the interactions between preferences for particular news sources and the effects are not reported. However, the study did control for demographic variables, and it was found that demographic differences within an audience for a particular news source are consistent with findings of misperceptions held by the aggregate audience for that source (Kull et al. 2003, 15). For example, more educated Fox viewers were as likely to hold misperceptions as less educated Fox viewers.

The heavy reliance on official sources by the major U.S. television news networks during the war was documented in a study conducted by the media watchdog organization, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR). The study covered news programs about Iraq during a three-week period following the first day of bombing in Iraq (March 20, 2003) on six television networks and news channels: *ABC World News Tonight*, *CBS Evening News*, *NBC Nightly News*, *CNN's Wolf Blitzer Reports*, *Fox's Special Report with Brit Hume*, and *PBS's NewsHour with Jim Leher*. The following are among the notable findings of the study:

- A total of 1,617 on-camera sources (interviewees) appeared in the stories.
- 63 percent of all sources were current and former government employees, either civilian or military, more than half of whom were current or former U.S. officials.
- U.S. sources comprised 76 percent of the total.
- 64 percent of all sources, and 71 percent of U.S. sources, supported the war.
- 10 percent of all sources were opposed to the war, but only 3 percent of U.S. sources did so. The latter finding contrasts with polls that found 27 percent of U.S. citizens opposed the war.

The study also found that only one antiwar group leader appeared as a source. The FAIR report states that antiwar sources “were almost univer-

sally allowed one-sentence soundbites taken from interviews conducted on the street. Not a single show in the study conducted a sit-down interview with a person identified as being against the war" (Rendall and Broughel 2003). Peace groups also attempted to purchase time to broadcast advertisements for peace, but they were refused by all of the major television networks. The reason given for the refusal by the president of CBS was that "informed discussion comes from our programming" (Rampton and Stauber 2004, 172). Of course, the range of "informed discussion" was limited significantly by the bias in favor of prowar sources. But then, like the other networks, CBS makes no apology for its prowar bias. In an interview on CNN's *Larry King Live* interview show, *CBS Evening News* anchor Dan Rather stated, "Look, I'm an American. I never tried to kid anybody that I'm some internationalist or something. And when my country is at war, I want my country to win, whatever the definition of 'win' may be. Now, I can't and don't argue that this is coverage without a prejudice. About that I am prejudiced" (quoted in Rendall and Broughel 2003).

The prowar bias documented in FAIR study's findings was a function of the networks' selection of interview sources. But in covering the actual battlefield, "embedded" journalists also were naturally not inclined to question the war and whether it was just. Their job was not to question whether and why the war should take place but rather to illuminate how the war would unfold. The subject of "embedding" has been a focus of considerable discussion and criticism by journalists and critics analyzing how well the media did in covering the war. By focusing on one small group of soldiers and their efforts, did journalists compromise the overall understanding of what was happening? Also, did the fact that journalists were embedded with soldiers, on whom they relied for food, water and safety, make it less likely that they would take critical positions about how the war was being conducted? Or as Terence Smith of the *Columbia Journalism Review* asks, "Did media jingoism compromise objectivity?" Smith notes "the on-screen flags and lapel pins, the breathless embedded television correspondent describing how 'we' went on patrol." He also notes "the cheerleading, can-do tone that infected too much of the reporting as U.S. forces advanced against an overpowered, overwhelmed army" (Smith 2003). Embedded television coverage from the field was a chance for the networks to test new technologies used for "real-time" reporting, including lightweight cameras, satellite uplinks, and videophones. Paul Friedman notes that early embedded reports "had a gee-whiz quality that overwhelmed the fact that very little information was being conveyed" and he further observes that, because the networks fetishized the use of live transmissions, embedded journalists spent much of their time with the technology, which was "time that could not be spent on gathering pictures and information for more complete stories" (Friedman 2003).

In the fierce competition for the audience for Iraq War television coverage, the networks also aimed to distinguish themselves by “branding” their news reports. CBS titled its reports “America at War,” while CNN used the heading “Strike on Iraq.” Fox used the same title for its newscasts as the Pentagon’s official name for the invasion—“Operation Iraqi Freedom”—which was subsequently also adopted by NBC and MSNBC. In addition to titles for their newscasts the networks wrapped their stories in red, white and blue, including by use of computer-generated images of the American flag waving at the bottom of the screen during reports. Overall, the networks went to great lengths to seamlessly blend their patriotism, technological prowess, and professionalism, which in the long run has the potential to yield market advantages. Although the extraordinary expense of war reporting cannot be sustained indefinitely, the investment during such a period can enable a network to build “brand loyalty.”

Unlike in the Gulf War, when CNN was the unchallenged cable news source, Fox held that distinction in the Iraq War. In the first twenty-one days of the Iraq War, Fox had an average share of 42 percent of the cable news audience, whereas CNN had 34 percent, MSNBC had 18 percent, and CNN Headline News had 6 percent (Greppi 2003a). What explains the strength of Fox News? One clear distinction is that Fox appears to tap into the large and receptive American audience for militantly conservative political viewpoints. As one writer claims, “Fox has two things going for it. It has a political agenda that many people find attractive, and it has an entertainment value that many people find attractive. And the other networks have neither” (Joe Angotti, quoted in Greppi 2003b). Fox News, which is owned by media baron Rupert Murdoch, surpasses its competitors by its overt displays of nationalism. The head of Fox News is Roger Ailes, a Republican who worked on the presidential campaigns of Nixon, Reagan, and the senior George Bush. Ailes reportedly takes a vengeful attitude toward what he considers the predominantly liberal media establishment in the United States. According to a former Fox News Channel producer, Charlie Reina, Fox News staff consider the channel to be “‘Roger’s Revenge’—against what he considers a liberal, pro-Democrat media establishment that has shunned him for decades.” Reina also notes that the Fox News Channel newsroom is “under the constant control and vigilance of management.” Every day, an “executive memo” reportedly is circulated, “addressing what stories will be covered and, often, suggesting how they should be covered.” According to Reina, “The Memo is the bible. If, on any given day, you notice that the Fox anchors seem to be trying to drive a particular point home, you can bet The Memo is behind it. . . . The Memo was born with the Bush administration, early in 2001, and, intentionally or not, has ensured that the administration’s point of view consistently comes across on FNC [Fox News Channel]” (Reina 2003).⁵

Murdoch's Fox News set the standard for patriotic television with an editorial policy that echoed the Bush administration's official stance, making any challenge to the White House's plans for war seem tantamount to treason. As the ratings leader during the war, Fox became the model for the other U.S. commercial networks. While chasing after Fox in the ratings wars, the other networks also shifted more closely toward Fox's ideological terrain. For example, when Bill Maher, host of the provocative ABC talk show "Politically Incorrect," questioned the use of the term "coward" to describe the suicide bombers, he became a target of strong criticism, eventually resulting in the withdrawal of major advertising sponsorship from the show by Sears and FedEx. The network eventually cancelled the show rather than risk the further financial and image losses that could result from keeping the show on the air (*The Guardian*, October 5, 2001; Rothenberg 2001). Likewise, just before the Iraq war began, MSNBC cancelled its highest rated show, hosted by Left liberal Phil Donahue, citing low ratings for the show as its reason. According to a leaked internal NBC report, the Donahue show was recommended for cancellation because it gave a "difficult public face for NBC in a time of war. . . . He seems to delight in presenting guests who are antiwar, anti-[George H. W. Bush] and skeptical of the administration's motives" (AllYourTV.com, quoted in Rampton and Stauber 2003).

In a study of British and American newspaper and magazine coverage of WMDs that has obvious relevance for evaluating television coverage, media researcher Susan Moeller found that most journalists failed to differentiate among various types of weapons—chemical, biological, nuclear, and radiological—and consequently were unable to raise vital questions regarding Iraq's capabilities or the risks posed by the use of the various types of weapons. Moeller also observed that the media generally accepted the Bush administration's framing of the "war on terror" in terms of unsupported claims about Iraq's WMD threat. The failure to question the terrorism-Iraq-WMD connections was symptomatic of the expedient approach reporters took to covering the story, relying heavily on off-the-record, anonymous sources and unverified "findings" about WMDs made by the Bush administration. Journalists tended to report the same stories, giving the same emphasis and primacy to the administration's lead in terms of the selection and framing of stories. Moeller concludes that the reporting on WMDs was "classic scandal coverage," emphasizing "breaking news" and "partisan contests" rather than "technological or scientific debates or the policy ramifications—especially the international ramifications" (2004, 20).

One of the lessons Moeller draws from her analysis is that weak reporting results from reliance on "off the record anonymous sources" (Moeller 2004, 20). The problem of relying on such sources became evident recently in revelations about how *New York Times* reporters had been responsible for

misleading and sustained front-page coverage of WMDs that was based on “anonymity-cloaked assertions of people with vested interests” (Okrent 2004; see also Mayer 2004; Scheer 2004; Shafer 2004). Chief among U.S.-based Iraqi “informants” was Ahmad Chalabi, one of the founders of the “Iraqi National Congress” and a favorite of PNAC members.⁶ But the news media cannot be held entirely to blame. In the interest of patriotism, especially in times of crisis, journalists sometimes accept the words of their leaders, making it tempting for leaders to justify national security decisions with arguments that are, in the words of one writer, “clearer than the truth”:

In justifying war against Iraq, the Administration suggested ties between a mortal adversary (al Qaeda) and what was at worst a worrisome future adversary (Saddam)—ties whose existence nearly every knowledgeable observer has called into question. Furthermore, the Administration conflated the dangers posed by terrorists with those posed by tyrants, and said that the same sort of pre-emptive measures must be applied to both. This is a dubious argument, and one that must be rigorously examined rather than continually asserted. (Schwarz 2004; see also Englehardt 2004; Dreyfuss and Vest 2004).

Many journalists covering the lead up to the Iraq War relied heavily on unsubstantiated and unverified administration “findings” and on Iraqi informants who were more intent on removing Saddam Hussein from power than on telling the truth. News organizations and journalists should not be excused for suspending their ethical responsibilities because of patriotic zeal. Even worse, however, is the deliberate deception by government leaders intent on manipulating patriotism in pursuit of empire. Now that greater knowledge of the manipulation and deception of the U.S. government by Ahmad Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress has become public, Defense Department officials have tried to distance themselves. But all appearances indicate that “the U.S. wanted to be scammed” (Mayer 2004, 59).

Conclusion: Pax Americana?

Like the French in Algeria, the Bush administration has put U.S. soldiers in grave danger by maintaining an occupying force in Iraq, with more American casualties being sustained since the declared end of the war than during it. The Bush administration used the media to tap into public fear and sentiment among Americans following 9/11 to create a public discourse that would support an imperialist war. In pursuit of that aim, open and healthy political debate has suffered. During times of war, the failures of the media to adequately represent the political differences contribute to a stifling atmosphere for political dissent, which was abundantly clear before, during, and since the Iraq War. In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville noted

that the tyranny that has the most oppressive effect on democracy in America is not that of political leaders. Rather, it is what he called “the tyranny of the majority.” In our televisual age, that tyrant has the unique characteristic of being the child of the unholy marriage of political power and market power. Today’s tyrant makes it a dangerous risk for a media corporation to step out of line from the prevailing viewpoint, especially during wartime. Now that the American president has declared that we are in a permanent state of war—a “war against terrorism”—the pressure projected by the commercial media to not appear “unpatriotic” has been intense, indefinite, and forbidding. Although the pressure comes from two directions, the government and the market, it is the latter that is far more forbidding. The American television industry enjoys broad protection under the First Amendment, but it must answer to commercial sponsors. And the commercial television networks must always fear that by taking controversial political positions that deviate from the majority, they will be at risk of losing advertisers who do not wish to be associated with those views. Commercial advertisers generally do not wish to be associated with a program that presents, much less advocates, a minority political viewpoint on a matter as controversial as war, let alone a view that runs counter to moneyed interests. The consequence of this condition is that those who dissent find it difficult to make their voices heard. But the censorship they face is not that of the government, at least not directly. Rather, it is market censorship. American commercial television provides a near-perfect form of repression because it does so by touting the seemingly wholesome principle that it responds to what the audience wants.

By uncritically following Bush to war, the networks tailored their respective brand identities to complement the White House strategy for “brand America.” In the process, they predictably avoided presenting any sustained challenges to the Bush administration’s failure to produce credible evidence of WMDs or links between the government of Iraq and al Qaeda. Moreover, the mainstream U.S. media neglected to give American citizens an adequate picture of the scale of the antiwar movement at home or abroad. Whether or not the United States fits a technical description of an imperial power, the mainstream media consistently obscure from the view of the American people the reasons that increasingly much of the rest of the world sees America as a less than benevolent empire.

Notes

1. See also *Christian Science Monitor* (2004).
2. Signatories include Elliott Abrams, William Bennett, Francis Fukuyama, William Kristol, Richard Perle, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and James Woolsey.

3. The program featured an interview with Project for a New American Century's founder and chairman William Kristol, who was chief of staff to Bush Sr.'s vice president, Dan Quayle, and is the editor of the conservative political magazine, *The Weekly Standard*, which is underwritten by Rupert Murdoch. See also Rampton and Stauber (2004, 46).

4. Program on International Policy Attitudes did not begin asking about perceptions regarding weapons of mass destruction until May 2003.

5. It should be noted that, although Fox may be extreme in how it regulates editorial viewpoints expressed on its channel, it is not the only channel to do so. For example, during the war in Afghanistan, the head of CNN ordered that images of civilian casualties must be balanced by reminders that the Taliban harbored and supported terrorists. This story became news when some CNN reporters complained publicly that they were being forced to have a "pro-America" stamp on their reports" (Kurtz 2001).

6. Recent revelations have shown that Chalabi was instrumental in providing now-discredited intelligence that was used by the Bush administration to justify its case for war and in providing misleading information to the media, particularly regarding weapons of mass destruction. Chalabi succeeded in getting the U.S. government to overthrow Saddam Hussein, and he has accumulated considerable political and economic power in Iraq, to the point where he has become less reliant on the United States and is no longer a darling of the Department of Defense, but rather, he has come to be viewed as a potential threat to U.S. national security (Mayer 2004; Scheer 2004).

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