
Chapter 10
Mass Media: Aiding and Abetting Militarism

Propaganda Machinery

"The greatest triumphs of propaganda have been accomplished, not by doing something, but by refraining from doing," Aldous Huxley observed long ago. "Great is truth, but still greater, from a practical point of view, is silence about truth." Despite the media din about "9/11," a silence—rigorously selective—has largely pervaded mainstream news coverage. For policymakers in Washington, the practical utility of that silence is huge. In response to the mass murder committed by hijackers, the righteousness of U.S. military action remains clear—as long as double standards go unmentioned.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, while rescue crews braved intense smoke and grisly rubble, ABC News analyst Vincent Cannistraro helped to put it all in perspective for millions of TV viewers. Cannistraro is a former high-ranking official of the Central Intelligence Agency who was in charge of the CIA's work with the Contras in Nicaragua during the early 1980s. After moving to the National Security Council in 1984, he became a supervisor of covert aid to Afghan guerrillas. In other words, Cannistraro has a long history of assisting terrorists—first, Contra soldiers who routinely killed Nicaraguan civilians; then, mujahideen rebels in Afghanistan—like Osama bin Laden.

How can a longtime associate of terrorists now be credibly denouncing "terrorism"? Easy: all that is required is for media coverage to remain in a kind of history-free zone that has no use for any facets of reality that are not presently convenient to acknowledge. In his book 1984, George Orwell described the mental dynamics: "The process has to be conscious, or it would not be carried out with sufficient precision, but it also has to be unconscious, or it would bring with it a feeling of falsity and hence of guilt.... To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just so long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies—all this is indispensably necessary."

Secretary of State Colin Powell denounced "people who feel that with the destruction of buildings, with the murder of people, they can somehow achieve a political purpose." He was describing the terrorists who had struck his country hours earlier, but Powell was also aptly describing a long line of top officials in Washington. Surely U.S. policymakers believed they could "achieve a political purpose"—with "the destruction of buildings, with the murder of people"—when launching missiles at Baghdad or Belgrade. But media scrutiny of atrocities committed by the U.S. government is rare. Only some cruelties merit the spotlight. Only some victims deserve empathy. Only certain crimes against humanity are worth American tears.

"This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil," President Bush proclaimed. The media reactions to such rhetoric were overwhelmingy favorable. Yet the heart-wrenching voices heard on the nation's airwaves were, in human terms, no less or more important than those voices we have never heard. The victims of terrorism in America have been deserving of our deep compassion. So have the faraway victims of American foreign and military policies—human beings whose humanity has gone unrecognized within the U.S. media.
With the overwhelming bulk of news organizations accustomed to serving as amplification systems for Washington's warriors in times of crisis, the White House found itself in a strong position to retool and lubricate the machinery of domestic propaganda after September 11, 2001. When confronted with claims about "coded messages" that Osama bin Laden and his henchmen might be sending via taped statements (as though other means like the Internet did not exist), TV network executives fell right into line.

Tapes of Al Qaeda leaders provided a useful wedge for the administration to hammer away at the wisdom of (government-assisted) self-censorship. Network execs from ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, and CNN were deferential in an October 10 conference call with Condoleezza Rice. The conversation was "very collegial," Ari Fleischer told the White House press corps. The result was an agreement, the New York Times reported, to "abridge any future videotaped statements from Osama bin Laden or his followers to remove language the government considers inflammatory." It was, the Times added, "the first time in memory that the networks had agreed to a joint arrangement to limit their prospective news coverage." News corporation magnate Rupert Murdoch, speaking for Fox, promised: "We'll do whatever is our patriotic duty." CNN, owned by the world's largest media conglomerate, AOL Time-Warner, was eager to present itself as a team player: "In deciding what to air, CNN will consider guidance from appropriate authorities." "Guidance" from the "appropriate authorities" was exactly what the president's strategists had in mind—brandishing a club without quite needing to swing it. As longtime White House reporter Helen Thomas noted in a column, "To most people, a 'request' to the television networks from the White House in wartime carries with it the weight of a government command. The major networks obviously saw it that way... ." The country's TV news behemoths snapped to attention and saluted. "I think they gave away a precedent, in effect," said James Naughton, president of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies. "And now it's going to be hard for them not to do whatever else the government asks." Some ominous steps were underway. "The U.S. State Department contacted the Voice of America, a broadcast organization funded by the federal government, and expressed concern about the radio broadcast of an exclusive interview with Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar," according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, based in New York. As a follow-up, VOA head Robert Reilly "distributed a memo barring interviews with officials from 'nations that sponsor terrorism.'" In early October, while the U.S. government prepared for extensive bombing of Afghanistan, efforts increased to pressure media outlets—both domestically and globally. Colin Powell urged the Emir of Qatar to lean on the Qatar-based Al Jazeera satellite TV network. A correspondent for the San Francisco Chronicle, reporting from Cairo, remarked on "the sight of the United States, the defender of freedom and occasional critic of Arab state repression, lobbying one of the most moderate Arab leaders to rein in one of the region's few sources of independent news."

What was the global impact of such measures? The Committee to Protect Journalists included this assessment in its "Attacks on the Press" annual report: "The actions taken by the Bush administration seemed to embolden repressive governments around the world to crack down on their own domestic media. In Russia, a presidential adviser said President Vladimir Putin planned to study U.S. limitations on reporting about terrorists in order to develop rules for Russian media."

While the bombing of Afghanistan continued, the U.S. proved to be quite a role model for how avowedly democratic nations can serve rather explosive notice on specific news outlets. The Pentagon implemented a devastating November 13 missile attack on the Al Jazeera bureau in Kabul. Months later, the Committee to Protect Journalists expressed skepticism about the official explanations: "The U.S. military described the building as a 'known' al-Qaeda facility without providing any evidence. Despite the fact that the facility had housed the Al Jazeera office for nearly two years and had several satellite dishes mounted on its roof, the U.S. military claimed it had no indications the building was used as Al Jazeera's Kabul bureau."

That is one of many ways for governments to "dispatch" news.
Terrorism and New Media

During the first two days of October 2001, CNN's web site displayed an odd little announcement: "There have been false reports that CNN has not used the word 'terrorist' to refer to those who attacked the World Trade Center and Pentagon," the notice said. "In fact, CNN has consistently and repeatedly referred to the attackers and hijackers as terrorists, and it will continue to do so." The CNN disclaimer was accurate—and, by conventional media standards, reassuring. But it bypassed a basic question that festers beneath American media coverage: Exactly what qualifies as "terrorism"?

For this country's mainstream journalists, that turns out to be a non-question about a no-brainer. More than ever, the proper function of the "terrorist" label seems obvious. "A group of people commandeered airliners and used them as guided missiles against thousands of people," said NEC News executive Bill Wheatley. "If that doesn't fit the definition of terrorism, what does?" True enough. At the same time, it is noteworthy that American news outlets routinely define terrorism the same way that U.S. government officials define it. Editors usually assume that reporters have no need for any formal directive because the appropriate usage is simply understood. The Wall Street Journal does provide some guidelines, telling its staff that the word terrorist "should be used carefully, and specifically, to describe those people and nongovernmental organizations that plan and execute acts of violence against civilian or non-combatant targets." In newsrooms across the U.S., media professionals would agree.

But, in sharp contrast, Reuters has adhered to a distinctive approach for decades. "As part of a policy to avoid the use of emotive words," the global news service says, "we do not use terms like 'terrorist' and 'freedom fighter' unless they are in a direct quote or are otherwise attributable to a third party. We do not characterize the subjects of news stories but instead report their actions, identity and background so that readers can make their own decisions based on the facts." During autumn 2001, the Reuters management took considerable heat for maintaining this policy—and for reiterating it in an internal memo, which included the observation that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." In a clarifying statement, released on October 2, 2001, the top execs at Reuters explained: "Our policy is to avoid the use of emotional terms and not make value judgments concerning the facts we attempt to report accurately and fairly."

Reuters reports from 160 countries, and the "terrorist" label is highly contentious in quite a few of them. Behind the scenes, many governments have pressured Reuters to flatly describe their enemies as terrorists in news dispatches. From the vantage point of government leaders in Ankara or Jerusalem or Moscow, for example, journalists should never hesitate to describe their violent foes as terrorists. But why should reporters oblige by pinning that tag on Kurdish combatants in Turkey, or Palestinian militants in the occupied territories, or rebels in Chechnya? Unless we buy into the absurd pretense that governments never engage in "terrorism," the circumscribed use of the term by U.S. media makes absolutely no sense. Turkish military forces have certainly terrorized and killed many civilians, while the same is true of Israeli forces and Russian troops. As a result, a large number of Kurds, Palestinians, and Chechens are grieving.

American reporters could plausibly expand their working definition of terrorism to include all organized acts of terror and murder committed against civilians, but of course such consistency would meet with fierce opposition in high Washington places. During the 1980s, with a non-evasive standard for terrorism, news accounts would have routinely referred to the Nicaraguan Contra guerrillas—in addition to the Salvadoran and Guatemalan governments—as U.S.-backed "terrorist" organizations. Today, for instance, such a standard would require news coverage of terrorism in the Middle East to include Israeli assaults with bullets and missiles that take the lives of Palestinian children and other civilians.

It's entirely appropriate for news outlets to describe the September 11 hijackers as "terrorists"—if those outlets are willing to utilize the "terrorist" label with integrity across the board. Evenhanded use of the "terrorist" label would mean sometimes affixing it directly on the U.S. government. During the past decade, from Iraq to Sudan to Yugoslavia, and Afghanistan, Pentagon missiles have destroyed the lives of civilians just as innocent as those who perished on September 11,
2001. If journalists dare not call that "terrorism," then maybe the word should be retired from the media lexicon.

In the spring of 2002, Thomas Friedman won a Pulitzer Prize for commentary. The award came after many months when the syndicated New York Times columnist appeared on television more than ever, sharing his outlooks with viewers of Meet the Press, Face the Nation, Washington Week in Review, and other programs. "In the post-9/11 environment, the talk shows cannot get enough of Friedman," a Washington Post profile noted. Another media triumph came for Friedman in early 2002 with the debut of "Tom's Journal" on the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer. A news release from the influential PBS program described it as a "one-on-one debriefing of Friedman by Lehrer or one of the program's senior correspondents." Friedman was scheduled to appear perhaps a dozen times per year, after returning from major trips abroad. If he were as fervent about stopping wars as starting them, it is hard to imagine that a regular feature like "Tom's Journal" would be airing on the NewsHour.

Friedman has been a zealous advocate of "bombing Iraq, over and over and over again" (in the words of a January 1998 column). When he offered a pithy list of prescriptions for Washington's policymakers in 1999, it included: "Blow up a different power station in Iraq every week, so no one knows when the lights will go off or who's in charge." But in an introduction to the book Iraq Under Siege, editor Anthony Amove points out: "Every power station that is targeted means more food and medicine that will not be refrigerated, hospitals that will lack electricity, water that will be contaminated, and people who will die." Yet Friedman-style bravado goes over big with editors and network producers who share his complete disinterest in taking into account such human costs. Many journalists seem eager to fawn over their stratospheric colleague. "Nobody understands the world the way he does," NEC's Tim Russert claims.

At various times Friedman has become fixated on four words in particular. "My motto is very simple: Give war a chance," he told Diane Sawyer in late 2001 on Good Morning America. It was the same motto he had used two and a half years earlier in a Fox News interview. Different war; different enemy; different network; same solution. In the spring of 1999, as bombardment of Yugoslavia went on, Friedman recycled "Give war a chance" from one column to another. "Twelve days of surgical bombing was never going to turn Serbia around," he wrote in early April. "Let's see what 12 weeks of less than surgical bombing does. Give war a chance." Another column included this gleeful approach for threatening civilians in Yugoslavia with protracted terror: "Every week you ravage Kosovo is another decade we will set your country back by pulverizing you. You want 1950? We can do 1950. You want 1389? We can do 1389 too." In November 2001, his column returned to a similar groove. "Let's all take a deep breath and repeat after me: Give war a chance. This is Afghanistan we're talking about."

Friedman seems to be crazy about wisps of craziness in high Washington places. He has a penchant for touting insanity as a helpful ingredient of U.S. foreign policy—some kind of passion for indications of derangement among those who call the military shots. During an October 13, 2001, appearance on CNBC, he said: "I was a critic of Rumsfeld before, but there's one thing... that I do like about Rumsfeld. He's just a little bit crazy, OK? He's just a little bit crazy, and in this kind of war, they always count on being able to out-crazy us, and I'm glad we got some guy on our bench that's our quarterback—who's just a little bit crazy, not totally, but you never know what that guy's going to do, and I say that's my guy." And Friedman does not simply talk that way. He also writes that way. "There is a lot about the Bush team's foreign policy I don't like," a Friedman column declared in mid-February 2002, "but their willingness to restore our deterrence, and to be as crazy as some of our enemies, is one thing they have right." Is Thomas Friedman clever? Perhaps. But not nearly as profound as a few words from W.H. Auden: "Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return."
In the fall of 2001, Pentagon reporters sought—and received—more frequent news conferences. "Let's hear it for the essential daily briefing, however hollow and empty it might be," Secretary Rumsfeld said in the middle of October. "We'll do it." After that, Rumsfeld regularly helped with the propaganda chores. Airing live on such cable networks as MSNBC, CNN, and Fox, his performances won profuse media accolades. A news report by CNN called him "a virtual rock star." A Wall Street Journal essay by TV critic Claudia Rosett, a member of the newspaper's editorial board, described Rumsfeld as "a gent who in our country's hour of need has turned out to be one [of] the classiest acts on camera." Published on the last day of 2001, Rosett's article was a fitting climax to a media season of slathering over the well-heeled boots of the man in charge of the Pentagon. During the closing weeks of the year, she noted approvingly, "in print and on the air, we've been hearing about Don Rumsfeld, sex symbol, the new hunk of home-front airtime."

Deep into the mass-media groove, the Wall Street Journal article declared: "The basic source of Mr. Rumsfeld's charm is that he talks straight. He doesn't expend his energy on spin...." Now there is an outstanding example of some prodigious spinning. Actually, Rumsfeld—who excels at sticking to the lines of the day—is a fine practitioner of spin in the minimalist style, with deception accomplished mostly by what's left unsaid. Yet for some, Rumsfeld's dissembling style has been a source of continual delight. "These briefings, beamed out live, have become, to my mind, the best new show on television," Rosett gushed. "It's a rare one that doesn't contain, at some point, some variation on his wry trademark reply when asked to discuss matters he'd rather not go into: 'I could, but I won't.'"

One of the subjects that Rumsfeld would "rather not go into" was civilian deaths in Afghanistan. Just before 2001 ended, University of New Hampshire professor Marc Herold released a report calculating that 3,767 Afghan civilians had been killed by the bombing from October 7 to December 10. (That figure was later revised to between 2,650 and 2,970 civilians.) Ignored by major U.S. media, the report got considerably more attention in Britain. "The price in blood that has already been paid for America's war against terror is only now starting to become clear," an editor at the Guardian in London wrote on December 20. Seumas Milne explained that Herold's research was "based on corroborated reports from aid agencies, the UN, eyewitnesses, TV stations, newspapers and news agencies around the world." Milne added: "Of course, Herold's total is only an estimate. But what is impressive about his work is not only the meticulous cross-checking, but the conservative assumptions he applies to each reported incident. The figure does not include those who died later of bomb injuries; nor those killed in the past 10 days (December 10-20); nor those who have died from cold and hunger because of the interruption of aid supplies or because they were forced to become refugees by the bombardment."

But the civilian deaths resulting from American military action held little interest among the people in charge of major U.S.-based media outlets. After the first weeks of bombing, CNN chair Walter Isaacson sent a memo to the network's international correspondents telling them that it "seems perverse to focus too much on the casualties or hardship in Afghanistan." Interviewed by a Washington Post reporter on October 30, Isaacson explained: "I want to make sure we're not used as a propaganda platform." He added: "We're entering a period in which there's a lot more reporting and video from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. You want to make sure people understand that when they see civilian suffering there, it's in the context of a terrorist attack that caused enormous suffering in the United States."

Meanwhile, a separate memo went out to CNN anchors from the network's head of standards and practices, Rick Davis, who supplied helpful examples of appropriate language to use on the air: "'We must keep in mind, after seeing reports like this from Taliban-controlled areas, that these U.S. military actions are in response to a terrorist attack that killed close to 5,000 innocent people in the U.S.' or, 'We must keep in mind, after seeing reports like this, that the Taliban regime in Afghanistan continues to harbor terrorists who have praised the September 11 attacks that killed close to 5,000 innocent people in the U.S.,' or 'The Pentagon has repeatedly stressed that it is trying to minimize civilian casualties in Afghanistan, even as the Taliban regime continues to harbor terrorists who are connected to the September 11 attacks that claimed thousands of
innocent lives in the U.S."

The memo was clear about the mandatory nature of the instructions: "Even though it may start sounding rote, it is important that we make this point each time."

**Agenda-Setting for War against Iraq**

To fend off the threat of peace, determination is necessary. Elected officials and high-level appointees must work effectively with reporters and pundits. The summer of 2002 was no time for the U.S. government to risk taking "yes" for an answer from Iraq. Guarding against the danger of peace, the Bush administration moved the goal posts, quickly pounding them into the ground. In early August, a State Department undersecretary swung a heavy mallet. "Let there be no mistake," said John Bolton. "While we also insist on the reintroduction of the weapons inspectors, our policy at the same time insists on regime change in Baghdad—and that policy will not be altered, whether inspectors go in or not."

A sinister cloud appeared over the sunny skies for war when the U.S. Congress got a public invitation. A letter from a top Iraqi official "said Congressional visitors and weapons experts of their choice could visit any site in Iraq alleged to be used for development of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons," USA Today reported. Summing up this diplomatic overture, the front page of the New York Times informed readers that the letter "was apparently trying to pit legislators against the Bush administration" (a pithy phrase helping to quash a dastardly peace initiative). Later on, the article noted that "the letter said members of Congress could bring all the arms experts they wanted and should plan to stay three weeks."

There may have been a moment of panic in Washington. On the face of it, the August 5 invitation was unequivocally stating that members of the Senate and House—along with some of the best and most experienced weapons inspectors in the world—could go to Iraq and engage in a thorough inspection process. The news had ominous potential: it could derail the war train then gaining so much momentum. But U.S. media coverage matched the bipartisan refusal by leaders in Congress to do anything but scorn the offer. Even before describing the invitation from the Iraqi government, the first words of the USA Today news story on August 6 called it "the latest Iraqi bid to complicate U.S. invasion plans." With our most powerful politicians hell-bent on starting a war, complete with human misery and death of unfathomable proportions, the last thing they wanted was complications before the bloodshed got underway. Why should anyone in Washington try to defuse the crisis when there was such a clear opportunity to light an enormous fuse in the Middle East?

On the domestic scene, there are always some people eager to unleash the dogs of peace. Not content to pray, they actually believe in a fanciful ideal: Blessed be the peacemakers. They refuse to acquiesce to the machinery of war that grinds human beings as if they were mere sausage. They refuse to make peace with how determined the Executive Branch must be—and how sheepish and even cowardly the members of Congress must be—so that the bombs can fall in all their glory.

One of the people trying to impede the war drive was Scott Ritter, a former chief weapons inspector for the UN in Iraq. "The Bush administration," he said, "has been unable—or unwilling—to back up its rhetoric concerning the Iraqi threat with any substantive facts." Meanwhile, in Britain, the press failed to welcome the oncoming war. On August 4, 2002, in the Observer, foreign affairs editor Peter Beaumont wrote: "The question now appears to be not whether there will be a war, but when. The answer is that in war, as other matters, timing is all. For President George W. Bush that timing will be dictated by the demands of a domestic political agenda."

A news story in the July 30 edition of the Financial Times began this way: "Rolf Ekeus, head of United Nations weapons inspections in Iraq from 1991-97, has accused the U.S. and other Security Council members of manipulating the UN inspections teams for their own political ends. The revelation by one of the most respected Swedish diplomats is certain to strengthen Iraq's argument against allowing UN inspectors back into the country." Such reporting, if widely pursued on this side of the Atlantic, could have seriously undermined the war planners. But they had little
cause for worry: the threat of peace was up against good ol' professional news judgment in the USA.

Some people were suspicious that President Bush would go for a "wag the dog" strategy—boosting Republican prospects with a military assault on Iraq shortly before Election Day. But a modified approach was underway, something that might be called "wag the puppy."

After a number of GOP luminaries blasted his administration's war scenarios, Bush claimed to appreciate "a healthy debate." The president offered assurances that he would consult with Congress rather than take sudden action. But his handlers were simply adapting to circumstances that made it impractical for the Pentagon to kill large numbers of Iraqis prior to Election Day. Before initiating vast new carnage abroad, the White House wanted its propaganda siege to take hold domestically. Countless hours of airtime and huge vats of ink were needed to make this work. Like safecrackers trying first one combination and then another, the Bush team continued to twirl the media dials until their warmaking rationales somehow clicked.

The most widely publicized critics of attacking Iraq were hardly inclined to withstand the hot rhetorical winds that would accompany the first U.S. missile strikes. Objections from the likes of Dick Armey and Brent Scowcroft were apt to swiftly morph into pseudo-patriotic deference once Bush gained momentum for the initial terrorizing launch of missiles against Iraqi cities. And history gave the president ample reasons to believe that most hand-wringing punditry would turn into applause once the Pentagon began its mass slaughter.

Delaying war is of course very different than preventing it. In fact, many of the arguments marshaled in the mainstream media against a precipitous attack on Iraq appeared to be accepting the need for the U.S. government to afflict that country with massive violence, only at a later time. Whether on Capitol Hill or in media venues, most of this criticism seemed largely concerned with style, timing, and tactics. Enormous amounts of flak also came from pro-war commentators who wanted Bush to get his militaristic act together. The bloodthirsty editor of The Atlantic magazine, Michael Kelly, used his August 21 column on the Washington Post's op-ed page to lament "the president's refusal to wage a coherent campaign to win public—and, let's force the issue, Congressional—approval for the war."

While President Bush huddled with hawks at the top of the pecking order at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, war enthusiasts were on the offensive across the nation's media landscape. Their efforts added to a sustained volume of valuable news coverage. The mid-summer media obsession with Iraq offered tangible benefits for Shrub's party—including real progress in changing the subject. The more that Iraq dominated front pages, magazine covers, news broadcasts, and cable channels, the less space there was for such matters as the intensifying retirement worries of many Americans, the Wall Street scandals, and specific stories about entanglements that linked Bush or Dick Cheney with malodorous corporate firms like Enron, Harken, and Halliburton.

During late summer and into the fall, the "healthy debate" over Iraq displaced a range of negative economic stories from the top of the news. Of course Bush's advisers hardly minded the strong prospect that a similar pattern would hold through early November. For months the president had plenty of domestic political incentives to keep "wagging the puppy" while floating a variety of unsubstantiated claims—like references to wispy dots that implausibly claimed to connect the Iraqi dictatorship with Al Qaeda. Meanwhile, sending more ships and aircraft to the Persian Gulf region could be calculated to evoke plenty of televised support-our-troops spectacles. With Old Glory in the background as tearful good-byes were exchanged at U.S. military ports and bases, how many politicians or journalists would challenge the manipulative tactics of the commander-in-chief?

Even without unleashing the Pentagon on Iraqi people before the November elections, White House efforts to boost pre-war fever promised to have an enormous media impact with big dividends at the polls. The American public observed something short of a "wag the dog" extravaganza provided by leading officials of the Bush administration. But the full-grown dogs of war were not far behind.
For a news watcher, coverage of the United Nations is liable to be confusing at times. Is the UN a vital institution or a dysfunctional relic? Are its Security Council resolutions profoundly important for international relations—or beside the point because global leadership now winds up coming from the world's only superpower?

Americans kept hearing that the United States would need to launch a full-scale attack on Iraq because Saddam Hussein had violated UN Security Council resolutions—at the same time that we were told the U.S. government must reserve the right to take military action unilaterally if the Security Council failed to make appropriate decisions about Iraq. To clarify the situation, here are three basic guidelines for understanding how to respond in sync with America's leading politicians and pundits:

- The UN resolutions approved by the five permanent members of the Security Council are hugely important, and worthy of enforcement with massive military force—if the White House says so. Otherwise, the resolutions have little or no significance, and they certainly can never be allowed to interfere with the flow of American economic, military, and diplomatic support to any of Washington's allies.

- Several countries have continued to ignore large numbers of resolutions approved by the UN Security Council since the early 1990s. Morocco remains in violation of more than a dozen such resolutions. So does Israel. And Turkey continues to violate quite a few. But top officials in Rabat, Jerusalem, and Ankara are not really expecting ultimatums from Washington anytime soon.

- Some UN resolutions are sacred. Others are superfluous. To cut through the media blather about Security Council resolutions that have been approved in past years, just keep this in mind: In the world according to American news media, the president of the United States has Midas-like powers in relation to those UN resolutions. When he confers his holy touch upon one, it turns into a golden rule that must be enforced. When he chooses not to bless other UN resolutions, they lose all value.

- The United Nations can be extremely "relevant" or "irrelevant," depending on the circumstances. When the UN serves as a useful instrument of U.S. foreign policy, it is a vital world body taking responsibility for the future and reaffirming its transcendent institutional vision. When the UN balks at serving as a useful instrument of U.S. foreign policy, its irrelevance is so obvious that it risks collapsing into the dustbin of history while the USA proceeds to stride the globe like the superpower colossus that it truly is.

"There's a lot of lofty rhetoric here in Washington about the UN," said Erik Leaver of the Institute for Policy Studies. Pretty words function as window-dressing for warmaking. While the president claimed the right to violently enforce UN Security Council resolutions, Leaver added, "there are almost 100 current Security Council resolutions that are being ignored, in addition to the 12 or so resolutions that Iraq is ignoring. What the U.S. is saying here is that it has the right to determine which Security Council resolutions are relevant and which are not."

Leaver was outside the usual media box when he brought up a key question: "If the U.S. takes military action using the cover of the United Nations, what is to prevent other countries from launching their own military attacks in the name of enforcement of UN resolutions—against Turkey in Cyprus, or Morocco in Western Sahara, or Israel in Palestine? This is precisely the reason why the doctrine of preemptive force is a dangerous policy for the United States to pursue." When Leaver maintained that "We can't uphold the U.N. at one moment and then discard it the next," he was up against powerful media spin that hails such hypocrisy as a mark of great American leadership on the world stage. From the vantage point of Washington's reigning politicians and most of the journalists who cover them, it is quite proper to treat the United Nations as a tool for U.S. diplomacy—war by another means, useful until the time comes for the bloody real thing.
Spinning Public Opinion toward War

Before decisions get made in Washington—and even before most politicians open their mouths about key issues—there are polls. Lots of them. Whether splashed across front pages or commissioned by candidates for private analysis, the statistical sampling of public opinion is a constant in political life. We may believe that polls tell us what Americans are thinking, but polls also gauge the effectiveness of media spin—and surely contribute to it. Opinion polls do not simply measure; they also manipulate, helping to shape thoughts and tilt our perceptions of how most people think. Polls routinely invite the respondents to choose from choices that have already been prepared for them. Results hinge on the exact phrasing of questions and the array of multiple-choice answers, as candid players in the polling biz readily acknowledge.

"Slight differences in question wording, or in the placement of the questions in the interview, can have profound consequences," Gallup executive David Moore wrote in his book The Superpollsters. He observed that poll outcomes "are very much influenced by the polling process itself." And in turn, whatever their quality, polling numbers "influence perceptions, attitudes and decisions at every level of our society."

In the process, opinions are narrowed into a few prefabricated slots: the result is likely to be mental constriction in the guise of illumination. "Opinion-polling as practiced in the United States...presents itself as a means of registering opinions and expressing choices," media critic Herbert Schiller noted in the early 1970s. His assessment of polling remains cogent today: "It is a choice-restricting mechanism. Because ordinary polls reduce, and sometimes eliminate entirely, the...true spectrum of possible options, the possibilities and preferences they express are better viewed as 'guided' choices."

Mainstream polls are so much a part of the media wallpaper that we are apt to miss how arbitrarily they limit people’s sense of wider possibilities. And we may simply forget that those who pay the pollsters commonly influence the scope of ideas and attitudes deemed worthy of consideration. In his book The Mind Managers, Herbert Schiller pointed out: "Those who dominate governmental decision-making and private economic activity are the main supports of the pollsters. The vital needs of these groups determine, intentionally or not, the parameters within which polls are formulated."

When the U.S. government takes military action, instant polls help to propel the rapid-fire cycles of spin. After top officials in Washington have engaged in a well-coordinated media blitz during the crucial first hours of warfare, the TV networks tell us that most Americans approve—and the quick poll results may seem to legitimize and justify the decision to begin the bloodshed. During late 2002, in the case of the Bush administration’s planned launch of an all-out attack on Iraq, the U.S. military build-up in the Persian Gulf region was running parallel to a sustained propaganda campaign for domestic consumption. Even so, the extent of public support was foggy.

At the end of September 2002, a murky picture emerged from an article in the Washington Post by the director of the big-bucks Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. "Almost all national surveys this year," Andrew Kohut wrote, "have found a broad base of potential support for using military force to rid the world of Saddam Hussein." Yet such generalities could be deceiving. Kohut reported that a Pew Center poll "found that 64 percent generally favor military action against Iraq, but that withers to 33 percent if our allies do not join us." Meanwhile, according to a CBS News poll, 51 percent of Americans said that Hussein was involved in the 9/11 attacks. But there was no evidence for that assertion. So, as in countless other cases, the failures of news media to clearly convey pivotal matters of fact—and the unwillingness of journalists to challenge deceptive claims from the White House—boosted the poll numbers for beliefs lacking a factual basis.

Polls may seem to provide clarity in a confusing world. But all too often they amount to snapshots taken from slanted angles.

Marketing a war is serious business, and no product requires better brand names than one that squanders vast quantities of resources while intentionally killing large numbers of people.

Euphemistic fog for such enterprises began several decades ago. It is now very old news that the federal government no longer has a department or a budget named "war." At present it is called
"defense," a word with a strong aura of inherent justification. The sly effectiveness of the labeling switch can be gauged by the fact that many opponents of reckless military spending nevertheless constantly refer to it as "defense" spending.

The intersection of two avenues, Pennsylvania and Madison, has given rise to media cross-promotion that increasingly sanitizes organized mass destruction known as warfare. Along the way, the first Bush administration enhanced the public relations techniques for U.S. military actions by "choosing operation names that were calculated to shape political perceptions," linguist Geoff Nunberg recalled. The invasion of Panama in December 1989 went forward under the name Operation Just Cause—an immediate media hit. "A number of news anchors picked up on the phrase Just Cause, which encouraged the Bush and Clinton administrations to keep using those tendentious names."

As Nunberg pointed out, "it's all a matter of branding. And it's no accident that the new-style names like Just Cause were introduced at around the same time the cable news shows started to label their coverage of major stories with catchy names and logos." The Pentagon became adept at supplying video-game-like pictures of U.S. missile strikes at the same time that it began to provide the big-type captions on TV screens.

Ever since the Gulf War in early 1991, people across the political spectrum have commonly referred to that paroxysm of carnage as Operation Desert Storm—or, more often, just Desert Storm. To the casual ear, this sounds kind of like an act of nature or, perhaps, an act of God. Either way, according to the vague spirit evoked by the label Desert Storm, men like Dick Cheney, Norman Schwarzkopf, and Colin Powell may well have been assisting in the implementation of divine natural occurrences, with high winds and 2,000-pound laser-guided bombs raining down from the heavens. Soon after the Gulf War a.k.a. Desert Storm ended, the Army's chief of public affairs, Major General Charles McClain, commented: "The perception of an operation can be as important to success as the execution of that operation." For guiding the public's perception of a war—while it is happening and after it has become history—there is nothing quite like a salutary label that sticks.

In October 2001, while launching missiles at Afghanistan, the Bush team came up with Operation Infinite Justice, only to swiftly scuttle the name after learning it was offensive to Muslims because of their belief that only Allah can provide infinite justice. The replacement, Enduring Freedom, was well received in U.S. mass media, an irony-free zone where only the untowardly impertinent might suggest that some people had no choice other than enduring the Pentagon's freedom to bomb.

It was a candid slip of the tongue in late summer 2002 when the White House chief of staff, Andrew Card, told the New York Times: "From a marketing point of view, you don't introduce new products in August." Not coincidentally, the main rollout of new-and-improved rationales for an upcoming war on Iraq did not take place until September. Meanwhile, some media spinners at the White House were undoubtedly devoting considerable energy to sifting through potential brand names for the expected U.S. war on Iraq.

**The War Road Ahead**

Overall, the systems of mass media in the United States are well suited to boosting the war agendas of the White House. Contradictions and nuances are always present in news coverage, but the large-scale repetition of key themes and phrases—the essence of propaganda—has huge ongoing effects on public perceptions. The media walls of U.S. society have numerous cracks, and sometimes those fissures are politically significant; yet the media industry’s structural constraints mitigate against wide-ranging public discourse. Those constraints tighten during times of U.S. military action.

The United States was moving into a new era of militarism during the autumn of 2001, with 9/11 serving as a catalyst. By late 2002, the concept of a "pre-emptive war"—in effect, the proclaimed right to launch a war of aggression against Iraq—had gained sufficient momentum to win support from most members of Congress and most of the U.S. news media. In such a context,
the well-established dynamics of news manipulation for war were undergoing great acceleration. The media road ahead looked to be filled with war and rationalizations for more war.

Shaped by the political economy of the United States, this media terrain could only be disheartening for people convinced that social justice and peace are essential for the future of the nation and the world. Out of necessity, efforts to meet the daunting challenges ahead must include vigorous analysis of present-day propaganda—and willingness to confront the manipulations of news media in all their deadly expressions.

ENDNOTES

7. Quotes from the Committee to Protect Journalists (New York) are in its annual report "Attacks on the Press in 2001."