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The American Media in Wartime

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The following is adapted from a speech delivered at a Hillsdale College seminar in Dearborn, Michigan, on April 28, 2003.

I'm going to begin by reading some samples from the American media coverage of the Iraq conflict. I admit to finding them delightful. Before the war began, my colleague and friend, the ever-voluble Chris Matthews of NBC, said that if we go to war in Iraq, "It will join the Bay of Pigs, Vietnam, Desert I, Beirut and Somalia in the history of military catastrophes." NBC analyst General Barry McCaffrey predicted that if there were a battle for Baghdad, the U.S. could take "a couple to three thousand casualties."

R. W. "Johnny" Apple, the legendary *New York Times* war correspondent, political correspondent and food and wine writer, wrote on March 29: "With every passing day, it is more evident that the allies made two gross misjudgments in concluding that coalition forces could safely bypass Basra and Nasiriyah, and that Shiite Muslims in southern Iraq would rise up against Saddam Hussein." This, you will recall, was during the time when there was a slowdown in the conflict, and it was being widely referred to as a "quagmire" by those who couldn't tell the difference between a quagmire and a sandstorm.

Seymour Hersh, who really did make a name for himself in Vietnam — he broke the My Lai massacre story — and who still is read and believed in some quarters, wrote this in the *New Yorker* in the April 7 issue (published on March 31): "According to a dozen or so military men I spoke to, Rumsfeld simply failed to anticipate the consequences of protracted warfare. He put army and marine units in the field with few reserves and an insufficient number of tanks and other armored vehicles. 'It's a stalemate now,' a former intelligence official told me."

Even the normally sensible Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* wrote on April 9, relatively late in the U.S. advance on Baghdad, that America had "gone from expecting applause [by the Iraqi people] to being relieved that there is no overt hostility."



My favorite quote – and this is one you might have missed – was written by Merissa Marr of Reuters. (Reuters, you recall, can't bring itself to use the words “terrorists” or “terrorism” – even to describe the atrocities of September 11. To do so, it says, would break the sacred principle of neutrality.) On April 1, she wrote about the Saddam Hussein spokesman who would come to be known widely as “Comical Ali”: “Despite poorly lit surroundings and a sea of microphones often crowding the view, Iraqi Information Minister Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf has become something of a global television star. As the dream of a quick, clean war and cheering Iraqis evaporated last week, America and its allies have been furiously tweaking their media strategy. But how can they hope to gain the upper hand?”

I suppose that reading these quotes now is a little unfair, like shooting fish in a barrel. But I do so to illustrate the point that the majority of the American media who were in a position to comment upon the progress of the war in the early going, and even after that, got it wrong. They didn't get it just a little wrong. They got it completely wrong. And many of these same people had gotten it wrong in much the same way a year-and-a-half earlier, portraying U.S. forces in Afghanistan as facing the most inhospitable kind of terrain imaginable, not to mention the most dug-in and difficult-to-find enemy ever confronted.

I remember joking on *Fox News Sunday* during the Afghanistan conflict that pretty soon someone in the media would report that our bombing of the enemy was actually helping the enemy. And sure enough, about a week later, there was a story in the *Washington Post* – based on interviews conducted in a refugee camp on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border – the thrust of which was that U.S. bombing was making the Taliban more popular! The underlying point of such a story is that bombing never works. We often hear that. But of course, bombing did work in Afghanistan, just as it did in Kosovo and in the Gulf War. But the idea in the media that bombing never works lives on. This level of imperviousness to reality is remarkable. It is consistent and it continues over time.

I think about this phenomenon a lot. I worry and wonder about the fact that so many people can get things so wrong, so badly, so often, so consistently and so repeatedly. And I think that there are ideas lurking under the surface that help to explain why this happens. In brief, when it comes to the exercise of American power in the world, particularly military power, there seems to be a suspicion among those in the media – indeed, a suspicion bordering on a

presumption – of illegitimacy, incompetence and ineffectiveness.

The Media's Response to 9/11

Think about the cycle we've just been through. The U.S., attacked on September 11, 2001, by a terrorist gang, was immediately assailed by speculative ruminations in the media about “why they hate us.” You see, the idea that those who attacked America were themselves illegitimate – indeed, even evil – is not the kind of thing that springs to the minds of the people responsible for *Newsweek* cover stories. What springs to their minds is that *we've* done something wrong.

After that initial period of hand-wringing, we suffered through quite a bit of media discussion about how 9/11 was really about the Israelis and the Palestinians, and about how the president really has to solve that problem in order to win the war on terrorism. This is a little like saying that before he can push a domestic agenda, he's got to find a cure for cancer.

The next thing we heard was all the bad news about how, if we tried to overthrow the Taliban in Afghanistan by force of arms, the “Arab street” would rise up. Has anything in contemporary history ever been more overrated than the Arab street? I remember Peter Jennings telling me at the beginning of the Gulf War that a likely outcome of that war would be the overthrow of President Mubarak in Egypt, because there would be an uprising in the Arab street. Well, there was no such uprising and Mubarak is still in place. Nor was there an uprising in the Arab street during the war in Afghanistan. Nor was there such an uprising during the war in Iraq – in spite of some of the most over-hyped coverage of civilian casualties and of American military miscalculations that you can imagine, especially on the Arab network al-Jazeera.

The attitude of the media in times of war is all the more puzzling when considered in the context of what America has done in the world over the last century – and in particular, what the American military has done. It entered World War I toward the end, tipped the balance, and saved our friends and allies. In World War II, it led the free world to victory against genuinely monstrous evils. After that war, it gave aid and comfort to defeated enemies on a scale never before seen. Considering its actions in Japan alone, the U.S. should go down in history as one of the most benevolent victorious powers in history. Japan owes its economy and democracy to Douglas McArthur, and to the leaders of the American government who put him there to do

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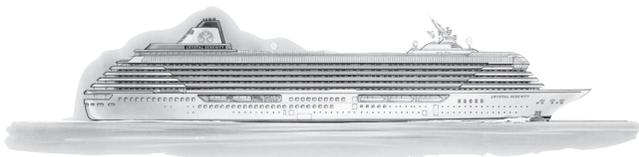


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what he did. But it didn't stop with Japan. There was the Marshall Plan. During the entire 45-year Cold War, America projected military power over western Europe and in many far-flung outposts elsewhere, such as South Korea. It protected the people who had been our allies, and many who had been our enemies, from the next great evil, Soviet communism — an evil, I might add, which many in our media refused to recognize as such. Then, upon the victorious end of the Cold War, one of the first things the U.S. did was

work feverishly to make sure that the reunification of Germany went forward in a way that would work and be effective.

Skepticism or Cynicism?

This is the record. It is available and known to the world. It's not particularly controversial. Yet even within this context, ideas have somehow ger-

minated among those in the media such that when America embarks on something like the Iraq war, there are all kinds of tremulous suspicions and fears about what we might *really* be doing. How many times have we heard it suggested that we're in Iraq for the oil? Does this make any sense at all? If we are there for the oil, why didn't we keep Kuwait's oil after the Gulf War? The best and simplest explanation is that we're just not that kind of country. Indeed, it turns out that it's very difficult in today's world to get a democracy behind the invasion and annexation of another country — even for oil! Democratic people simply aren't very enthusiastic about that kind of undertaking.

This is an important political distinction, often lost on the media. Democratic countries operate within the restraints imposed by the will of their people. The truly dangerous countries on this earth are all dictatorships, which, needless to say, are common in the Middle East. Dictatorships, for example, are behind terrorism. Sometimes they export it, sometimes they support it, and sometimes — as in the case of Saudi Arabia — they do both. That's what we're dealing with in the war on terror. And yet, when the fat's in the fire and conflict arises with some dictatorship in that part of the world — or with another member of the Axis of Evil — the doubts and suspicions in the American media (and in the Western media generally) all seem to attach to the U.S.

Ted Koppel, one of the finest journalists of our generation, said something the other day that quite astonished me. Ted was an embedded reporter in Iraq, and after he came home he had this fascinating conversation — at Harvard, I believe — with Marvin Kalb. He spoke with real generosity about the American officers and enlisted men that he dealt with, and how able they were and how good they were and how effective they were. But he went out of his way to make a point of distinguishing between them and the policy makers in Washington. About the latter he said, "I'm very cynical, and I remain very cynical, about the reasons for getting into this war."

Cynical? We journalists pride ourselves, and properly so, on being *skeptical*. That's our job. But I have always thought a cynic is a bad thing to be. A cynic, as I understand the term, means someone who interprets others' actions as coming from the worst motives. It's a knee-jerk way of thinking. A cynic, it is said, understands the price of everything and the value of nothing. So I don't understand why Ted Koppel would say with such pride and ferocity — he said it more than once — that he is a cynic. But I think he speaks for many in the media, and I think it's a very deep problem.

The Media and Iraq

One of the problems we in the news business face, of course, is that sometimes there's not much news. And there's an old saying in newsrooms: "No news is bad news, good news is dull news, and bad news makes marvelous copy." And that's essentially true. Some good news, like Jessica Lynch's rescue, is spectacular stuff. But generally speaking, news is what's exceptional, and bad stuff tends to be exceptional in our world. Reporters have a natural instinct, therefore, to look for the negative. But I sense something more at work in the media today.

Look at the assumption behind most of the reporting on the debate over the United Nations and the legitimacy of American unilateralism, which immediately preceded the war. The assumption was that the United States, with its marvelous record of beneficial military action around the world over the past century, needed to go before a tribunal at the United Nations — where the Human Rights Commission is presided over these days by Libya, and which has a long list of failures before it, e.g., Rwanda and Kosovo — before taking action against Saddam Hussein. This idea — the idea that we have to go pleading before such a body and receive its stamp of approval in order for our conduct to be legitimate — strikes me as more than a little nutty.

There is a reasonable argument that says that international support of our foreign policy is desirable because we don't want to have to bear the whole burden of it ourselves. Certainly we should always welcome every bit of support we can get. For one thing, this argument has nothing to do with legitimacy. For another, at the end of the day, it is the U.S. military that's going to get the job done. Our country has made the necessary investments in its military, although many argue that we need to invest more, or that we need to rethink the way we do a lot of things militarily. But those are arguments for another day. We certainly haven't taken a holiday from history like much of Europe has, where military establishments in countries like France are truly pathetic and not much help.

Media coverage at the beginning of the Iraq conflict reminded me of the story about the boy who asked for a pony for Christmas. On Christmas morning, he opened the door to the room where the present was, found the room filled to the roof with dung, and immediately and enthusiastically began shoveling away. Someone asked him what he was doing, and he said that he was optimistic that he would find a pony in the room somewhere. American reporters are like that when it comes to looking for negative news in wartime: They think they are sure to find it if they look hard enough.

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Only this could explain their belief that the Fedayeen – by shooting at our troops' flanks and attacking our supply convoys – posed a serious threat. I remember when that story came out, and I thought to myself that it just didn't seem sensible that the Fedayeen were militarily significant. They were riding around in pickup trucks with machine guns, for heaven's sake! And it turned out, contrary to all the stories, that they weren't a serious threat, and that they succeeded only in getting themselves killed by the hundreds.

There is a balance to be struck in journalism. I know that some people would argue that FOX News was cheerleading on the war, and in some instances, perhaps, those criticisms are justified. What we didn't do was to announce early on and repeatedly that all was lost, that nothing could be done, and that the whole thing was an illegitimate enterprise bound for failure. Others did, and the beat goes on.

The latest causes of worried criticism of American efforts in Iraq are the newly liberated Shiites. They are controlled by Iran, we are told, and all hope of democratic reform is going to be stymied because they're going to set up an Iranian-style theocracy. Never mind that there is a tremendous history of Iraqi resistance to this very thing, or the fact that the Iraqis recently fought a long and terrible war with Iran. Never mind that an Iraqi

state on the Iranian model is going to be hard to establish, not least because the Iranian state is in all kinds of trouble itself. In fact, the Iranian government is enormously unpopular with the Iranian people, who love – guess what? – America. You'd think that some perspective on this Shiite story would be warranted. But journalists are still looking for the pony.

If you go back and look at American military operations beginning with the Grenada invasion and including Panama, the Gulf War, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq, and you study what U.S. military spokesmen said about how those conflicts were going at each stage, you'll see that they were right, and that they told the truth, by and large. No doubt they made some mistakes, but there was nothing like the large deceptions and misrepresentations that made so many journalistic careers in Vietnam. The military learned its lesson in Vietnam, and it has not behaved that way since. You'd think journalists would have noticed. They haven't, but it's not too late: When retired General Jay Garner says that things are going well in Iraq as far as he's concerned, it might be wise for American journalists and their counterparts in western Europe – who in some cases are even more strident in their cynicism – to give him the benefit of the doubt.



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