

JANUARY 27

Of death, be not proud

The story today is going to be very discouraging to the American people," President Bush said at a news conference Wednesday, hours after 37 American troops died in Iraq. "I understand that. We value life. And we weep and mourn when soldiers lose their life."

How long will the U.S. news media continue to indulge that sort of pious talk from the White House without challenge? The evidence is overwhelming that the president and his policy team are quite willing to devalue – in fact, destroy – life when it gets in their way. And if they "weep and mourn when soldiers lose their life," the grief is rigorously selective.

The day Bush can "weep and mourn" when anti-occupation fighters "lose their life" in Iraq will be the day he transcends his oily fundamentalism.

But no such day is on the presidential calendar. Current U.S. foreign policy – a virulent blend of nationalism, corporate zeal and religiosity – views the latest military technology as a sacrament in Uncle Sam's hands. So, the American commanders have opted to emphatically convey their faith in firepower and their contempt for human connection. As author Dilip Hiro points out, "The Pentagon's routine use of fighter-bombers and attack helicopters to strike against the insurgents in urban areas soon enough defeated its own campaign to win Iraqis' 'hearts and minds.'"

Death is nothing to be proud of. But you wouldn't know that from Washington's media spin. With a Jimmy Stewart kind of welling in his eyes, President Bush loves to talk about ultimate sacrifice when America's uniformed killers are killed.

Enemies have many human similarities, and the perverse logic of war demands that veils of mirrors face outward. Gaining some independent perspective – and perhaps sanity – requires stepping outside the laser-like crossfire of projection.

In wartime, the First Amendment offers profoundly simple remedies.

If they refuse to be enmeshed in what Martin Luther King Jr. called "the madness of militarism," journalists can help to provide antidotes to the social adrenaline of mass killing.

MEDIABEAT 2005 | NORMAN SOLOMON

"War is an instrument of policy; it must necessarily bear the character of policy; it must measure with policy's measure." So wrote the Prussian general Karl von Clausewitz (near the end of his tedious book "On War"). When the character of policy is death, it should be measured that way. And – despite the multitudes of media stories that distract, confuse and entertain – death is the gist of war.

And death, whether directly from weapons or from neglect due to squandered resources, is the central meaning of the additional \$80 billion now being sought by President Bush for the Iraq war. When he said that the election on Sunday would be "a grand moment in Iraqi history," Bush was whistling past a graveyard to be filled with people he never met.

Now the media buzz about the election in Iraq has turned into a siren. The sincerity and courage of many millions of Iraqi people is beyond dispute; no one should doubt their willingness to take risks for democracy. But under the occupation circumstances, the electoral process is highly dubious at best. Whether in peacetime Florida or wartime Iraq, it's not too difficult to steal an election.

One of the uncertainties about this election is the political future of Iyad Allawi, the U.S.-installed prime minister. Late last spring – when the White House suddenly identified him as a great Iraqi leader – the mainstream U.S. press did not emphasize the longtime strings connecting the man to puppeteers in Washington.

The New York Times noted that Allawi "lived abroad for 30 years and is not well known in Iraq." Yet there were few media murmurs of dissent while the Bush administration extolled Allawi as the best leader for an Iraqi government. In the halls of U.S. power, he was seen as eminently qualified. A high-profile story in USA Today made a gingerly reference to Allawi's long entanglement with the Central Intelligence Agency, describing him as "a Shiite close to the CIA."

Days ago, Newsday reporter Mohamad Bazzi raised a key question from Baghdad: "Will former exiles like Allawi, who have Washington lobbyists and public relations firms to push their case to U.S. politicians, continue to dominate Iraq's government?"

Before long, we may know the answer. But no matter what leaders emerge for the new government in Baghdad, they'll need to come to terms with a president in Washington who seems to view Iraqi deaths as abstractions.

Norman Solomon's next book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," will be published in early summer by Wiley. His columns and other writings can be found at www.normansolomon.com.