

MAY 26

The silent media curse of Memorial Day

Memorial Day weekend brings media rituals. Old Glory flutters on television and newsprint. Grave ceremonies and oratory pay homage to the fallen. Many officials and pundits speak of remembering the dead. But for all the talk of war and remembrance, no time is more infused with insidious forgetting than the last days of May.

This is a holiday that features solemn evasion. Speech-makers and commentators praise the "ultimate sacrifice" of American soldiers – but say nothing about the duplicity of those who sacrificed them. War efforts are equated with indubitable patriotism. Journalists claim to be writing the latest draft of history, but actual history is no more present than the dead.

In the truncated media universe of Memorial Day, the act of remembering bypasses any history that indicates an American war was not inevitable and unavoidable. The populace is made to understand that God and nature must be death dealers. We are encouraged to extol those who bravely gave their lives and took the lives of others – but not confront those, high in the U.S. government's executive and legislative branches, who cravenly gave their fervent blessings to gratuitous carnage.

It has become popular to describe the U.S. invasion of Iraq as some kind of anomaly, a departure from Washington's previous record of seeking peaceful alternatives to war and refusing to engage in aggression. Such depictions amount to a kind of pseudo-historical baby food, chopped up and strained so it can be stomached.

But during the last half century – when, for days or months or many years, U.S. troops and planes assaulted the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Grenada, Panama, Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq again – the rationales from the White House were always based on major falsehoods, avidly promoted by the U.S. mass media. In the light of real history, the U.S. soldiers who are honored each Memorial Day were pawns of methodical deception. Media spin and the edicts of authorities induced them to kill "enemy" combatants and civilians, for whom Pentagon buglers have never played a single mournful note.

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The Orwellian process of rigorous forgetting is not only about past wars. It's also about the next war.

Aldous Huxley observed about "triumphs of propaganda" long ago: "Great is truth, but still greater, from a practical point of view, is silence about truth." I thought of that comment the other night while watching a TV network. No, it wasn't Fox or MSNBC or CNN. It was PBS – the "Frontline" show, airing a report about Iran's nuclear program. Every word of the May 24 broadcast may have been true – yet, due to the show's omissions, the practical effect was to participate in laying media groundwork for a military attack on Iran.

"Frontline," let's remember, is supposed to be a quality show on a quality network. But predictably, the reporting bypassed key elements of nuclear proliferation dangers in the Middle East: No mention of the Israeli nuclear arsenal, now estimated at more than 200 warheads. No mention of Mordechai Vanunu, imprisoned for 18 years by the Israeli government for exposing Israel's stockpile of nuclear bombs, now facing the prospect of a return to prison for daring to speak to journalists. No mention of the U.S. government's plunge forward with development of new nuclear weapons, in violation of the same Non-Proliferation Treaty that Iran is now condemned for skirting.

High-tone media outlets claim to excel at providing context. But context is exactly what "Frontline" did not offer the viewers of its report on Iran's nuclear development. Such "silence about truth" is a prerequisite for the kind of self-righteous hypocrisy that's likely to propel a military assault on Iran.

Memory with integrity should inform our understanding, on Memorial Day and every day. If we remember the Americans who were killed but forget the people they killed – if we remain silent while media scripts exclude crucial aspects of history that demolish Washington's claims of high moral ground – the propaganda system for war can remain intact. When journalists defer to that silence, they're part of the deadly problem.

Norman Solomon's latest book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," comes off the press in mid-June. His columns and other writings can be found at: www.normansolomon.com