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War made easy: From Vietnam to Iraq

On February 27, 1968, I sat in a small room on Capitol Hill. Around a long table, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was in session, taking testimony from an administration official. Most of all, I remember a man with a push-broom moustache and a voice like sandpaper, raspy and urgent.

Wayne Morse did not resort to euphemism. He spoke of "tyranny that American boys are being killed in South Vietnam to maintain in power." Moments before the hearing adjourned, the senior senator from Oregon said that he did not "intend to put the blood of this war on my hands." And Morse offered clarity that was prophetic: "We're going to become guilty, in my judgment, of being the greatest threat to the peace of the world. It's an ugly reality, and we Americans don't like to face up to it."

Near the end of the 1960s, drawing on a careful reading of secret documents and a reappraisal of firsthand observations, Daniel Ellsberg came to a breakthrough realization: "On the basis of the record ever since 1946, 'telling truth to presidents' privately, confidentially – what I and my colleagues regarded as the highest calling and greatest opportunity we could imagine to serve our country – looked entirely unpromising as a way to end our war in and on Vietnam. That conclusion challenged the premises that had guided my entire professional career."

Ellsberg went on: "To read the continuous record of intelligence assessments and forecasts for Vietnam from 1946 on was finally to lose the delusion that informing the Executive Branch better was the key to ending the war – or to fulfilling one's responsibilities as a citizen. It appeared that only if power were brought to bear upon the Executive Branch from outside it, with the important secondary effect of sharing responsibility for later events more broadly, might the presidential preference for endless, escalating stalemate rather than 'failure' in Vietnam be overruled."

It was not very tough to invade and quickly dominate a small country like Grenada or Panama, where resistance could be flattened with military might and subsequent goodies in exchange for elite collaboration. Except for some unlucky combatants and their loved ones, the American people tended to view such wars as easy. In the mid-1980s,

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media scholar Daniel Hallin commented that "the fear of repeating the Vietnam experience showed signs of giving way to a desire to relive it in an idealized form."

Whatever the circumstances, in the shadow of Vietnam, every subsequent U.S. war seemed to offer the opportunity to do it right, with less muss, less fuss, and more ease. Early in the 1990s, the Gulf War was, for the U.S. forces and the folks back home, mostly a war of air power. And near the end of the decade, the protracted bombing of Yugoslavia was the high-tech archetype of a very good American war waged overwhelmingly from the skies.

Yet the horrific and continuous air-war component of the Vietnam War had not sufficed to spare American troops the tactical need to fight on the ground, nor did it bring victory. And Americans expect to win – which is a key reason why President George W. Bush had difficulty with Iraq as a campaign issue in 2004. The stream of revelations about pre-war lies, turning into a flood with significant political impacts after the invasion phase of the war, would have counted for relatively little if not for (to use Paul Krugman's phrase) "how badly things have gone."

Failure to "win the peace" is failure to really triumph. For the White House and its domestic allies in the realms of government, media, think tanks and the like, the political problem of war undergoes a shift after the Pentagon goes into action in earnest. Beforehand, it's about making the war seem necessary and practical; if the war does not come to a quick satisfactory resolution, the challenge becomes more managerial so that continuation of the war will seem easier or at least wiser than cutting the blood-soaked Gordian knot.

Advocates for humanitarian causes might see the United States as a place where "madmen lead the blind." But that's a harsh way to describe the situation. Our lack of vision is in the context of a media system that mostly keeps us in the dark.

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"We took space back quickly, expensively, with total panic and close to maximum brutality," war correspondent Michael Herr recalled about the U.S. military in Vietnam. "Our machine was devastating. And versatile. It could do everything but stop."

War coverage becomes routine. Missiles fly, bombs fall. Live briefings – with talkative officers, colorful charts and gray videos – appear on cable television, sometimes like clockwork, sometimes with sudden drama. The war is right in front of the American public and very far away.

When a country – particularly a democracy – goes to war, the consent of the governed

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lubricates the machinery of killing. Silence is a key form of co-operation, but the war-making system does not insist on quietude or agreement. Mere self-restraint will suffice.

Post-9/11 fears that respond more affirmatively to calls for military attacks are understandable. Yet fear is not a viable long-term foundation for building democratic structures or finding alternatives to future wars. Despite news media refusals to be sufficiently independent, many options remain to invigorate the First Amendment while challenging falsehoods, demagoguery and manipulations. While going to war may seem easy, any sense of ease is a result of distance, privilege, and illusion. The United States has the potential to set aside the habitual patterns that have made war a frequent endeavor in American life.

There remains a kind of spectator relationship to military actions being implemented in our names. We're apt to crave the insulation that news outlets offer. We tell ourselves that our personal lives are difficult enough without getting too upset about world events. And the conventional war wisdom of American political life has made it predictable that most journalists and politicians cannot resist accommodating themselves to expediency by the time the first missiles are fired. Conformist behavior – in sharp contrast to authentic conscience – is notably plastic.

"Anyone who has the power to make you believe absurdities has the power to make you commit injustices," Voltaire wrote. The quotation is sometimes rendered with different wording: "As long as people believe in absurdities they will continue to commit atrocities."

Either way, a quarter of a millennium later, Voltaire's statement is all too relevant to this moment. As an astute cliché says, truth is the first casualty of war. But another early casualty is conscience.

When the huge news outlets swing behind warfare, the dissent propelled by conscience is not deemed to be very newsworthy. The mass media are filled with bright lights and sizzle, with high production values and lower human values, boosting the war effort. And for many Americans, the gap between what they believe and what's on their TV sets is the distance between their truer selves and their fearful passivity.

Conscience is not on the military's radar screen, and it's not on our television screen. But government officials and media messages do not define the limits and possibilities of conscience. We do.

This article is an excerpt from Norman Solomon's new book

"War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death."

For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com