

**SEPTEMBER 26**

# The news media and the anti-war movement

It's reasonable to estimate that more than a quarter of a million people demonstrated against the Iraq war on Saturday in Washington, Los Angeles, San Francisco and other U.S. cities. The next day, the Washington Post front-paged a decent story that described "the largest show of antiwar sentiment in the nation's capital since the conflict in Iraq began." But more perfunctory back-page articles were typical in daily papers across the country. And over the weekend, many TV news watchers saw little or nothing about the protests.

Hurricane Rita was clearly a factor. But even without dramatic natural disasters, the news media are ready, willing and able to downplay news about war – and the anti-war movement – for any number of reasons. Conventional wisdom on Capitol Hill or in newsrooms can tamp down media coverage of a surging movement. What's crucial is that the movement not allow its momentum to be interrupted by media treatment.

If "journalism is the first draft of history," the journalism of corporate media is usually the quickie top-down view of history that's told from vantage points far removed from progressive movements. Media technologies and styles aside, what we're experiencing now from major U.S. news outlets is not very different from the coverage of the Vietnam War.

A persistent myth is that mainstream American news outlets were tough on the war in Vietnam while boosting the antiwar movement. And these days – after a summer of plunging poll numbers for President Bush along with the profoundly important media presence of Cindy Sheehan – many people seem to think that the news media have turned against the war makers in Washington.

But overall the media realities are something else. Actual history should make us wary of any assumption that the press is apt to be a counterweight to militarism.

Vietnam "was the first war in which reporters were routinely accredited to accompany military forces yet not subject to censorship," media scholar Daniel Hallin wrote in his excellent book "The 'Uncensored War': The Media and Vietnam." The authorities in Washington figured they could expect correspondents not to wander too far in terms

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of content; "the integration of the media into the political establishment was assumed to be secure enough that the last major vestige of direct government control – military censorship in wartime – could be lifted."

Some reporters exercised a significant degree of independence. And, Hallin concluded, "this did matter: in 1963, when American policy in Vietnam began to fall apart, the media began to send back an image that conflicted sharply with the picture of progress officials were trying to paint. It would happen again many times before the war was over. But those reporters also went to Southeast Asia schooled in a set of journalistic practices which, among other things, ensured that the news would reflect, if not always the views of those at the very top of the American political hierarchy, at least the perspectives of American officialdom generally."

Despite all the changes in news media since then, a systemic filtration process remains crucial. Strong economic pressures are especially significant – and combine with powerful forces for conformity at times of war. "Even if journalists, editors, and producers are not superpatriots, they know that appearing unpatriotic does not play well with many readers, viewers, and sponsors," media analyst Michael X. Delli Carpini has commented. "Fear of alienating the public and sponsors, especially in wartime, serves as a real, often unstated tether, keeping the press tied to accepted wisdom." Journalists in American newsrooms don't have to worry about being taken out and shot; the constraining fears are apt to revolve around peer approval, financial security and professional advancement.

Interviewed in early November 2003, with the Iraq occupation in the midst of turning into a large-scale war against a growing insurgency, Hallin compared media treatment of the two wars and saw similar patterns. "As you begin to get a breakdown of consensus, especially among political elites in Washington, then the media begin asking more questions," he said. In the case of the Iraq occupation, "the Democrats were mostly silent for a long time on this war, and when things began to bog down, they started asking questions. There were divisions within the Bush administration, and then the media starts playing a more independent role."

To a notable degree, reporters seem to await signals from politicians and high-level appointees to widen the range of discourse. "They need confirmation that this issue is part of the mainstream political discussion in the U.S.," Hallin commented. "Journalists are very keyed into what their sources are talking about. Political reporters define news worthiness in part by what's going to affect American politics in the sense of who gets elected the next time around. But it isn't absolutely only elites. I think it also makes a difference that polls show the public divided, and that there are problems of

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morale among soldiers in Iraq. But the first thing that the journalists look to is: 'What are the elites debating in Washington?' That's what really sets the news agenda."

So, with the autumn of 2005 under way, what are the elites debating in Washington? With rare exceptions, they're debating how to continue the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

High-profile Democrats and even some Republicans like to bemoan "mistakes" and bad planning and the absence of an "exit strategy." The prevailing version of Washington's debate over Iraq still amounts to disputes over how to proceed with the U.S. war effort in Iraq. Top officials and politicians in Washington won't change that. The journalists echoing them won't change that. The antiwar movement must.

*Norman Solomon is the author of the new book*

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

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