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Media tall tales for the next war

T he Sept. 25 edition of Time magazine illustrates how the U.S. news media are gearing up for a military attack on Iran. The headline over the cover-story interview with Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is "A Date With a Dangerous Mind." The big-type subhead calls him "the man whose swagger is stirring fears of war with the U.S.," and the second paragraph concludes: "Though pictures of the Iranian president often show him flashing a peace sign, his actions could well be leading the world closer to war."

When the USA's biggest newsweekly devotes five pages to scoping out a U.S. air war against Iran, as Time did in the same issue, it's yet another sign that the wheels of our nation's war-spin machine are turning faster toward yet another unprovoked attack on another country.

Ahmadinejad has risen to the top of Washington's – and American media's – enemies list. Within the last 20 years, that list has included Manuel Noriega, Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic, with each subjected to extensive vilification before the Pentagon launched a large-scale military attack.

Whenever the president of the United States decides to initiate or intensify a media blitz against a foreign leader, mainstream U.S. news outlets have dependably stepped up the decibels and hysteria. But the administration can also call off the dogs of war by going silent about the evils of some foreign tyrant.

Take Libya's dictator, for instance. For more than a third of a century, Col. Muammar al-Qaddafi has been a despot whose overall record of repression makes Noriega or Milosevic seem relatively tolerant of domestic political foes. But ever since Qaddafi made a deal with the Bush administration in December 2003, the silence out of Washington about Qaddafi's evilness has been notable.

When Qaddafi publicly celebrated the 37th anniversary of his dictatorship a few weeks ago, he declared in a speech on state television: "Our enemies have been crushed inside Libya, and you have to be ready to kill them if they emerge anew." The New York Times noted that Qaddafi's regime "criminalizes the creation of opposition parties."

MEDIABEAT 2006 | NORMAN SOLOMON

Today, while the human rights situation in Iran is reprehensible, the ongoing circumstances are far worse under many governments favored by Washington. Here at home, media outlets should be untangling double standards instead of contributing to them. But so many reporters and pundits have internalized Washington's geopolitical agendas that the mainline institutions of journalism continue to rot from within. That the rot goes largely unnoticed is testimony to how Orwellian "doublethink" has been normalized.

These are not issues of professionalism any more than concerns about public health are issues of medicine. The news media should be early warning systems that inform us before current events become unchangeable history.

But when the media system undermines the free flow of information and prevents wide-ranging debate, what happens is a parody of democracy. That's what occurred four years ago during the media buildup for the invasion of Iraq.

Now, warning signs are profuse: The Bush administration has Iran in the Pentagon's sights. And the drive toward war, fueled by double standards about nuclear development and human rights, is getting a big boost from U.S. media coverage that portrays the president as reluctant to launch an attack on Iran.

Time magazine reports that "from the State Department to the White House to the highest reaches of the military command, there is a growing sense that a showdown with Iran … may be impossible to avoid."

The same kind of media spin – assuming a sincere Bush desire to avoid war – was profuse in the months before the invasion of Iraq. The more that news outlets tell such fairy tales, the more they become part of the war machinery.

The paperback edition of Norman Solomon's latest book, War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*, was published this summer. For information, go to: www.warmadeeasy.com*