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New media offensive for the Iraq war

The American media establishment has launched a major offensive against the option of withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq.

In the latest media assault, right-wing outfits like Fox News and the Wall Street Journal editorial page are secondary. The heaviest firepower is now coming from the most valuable square inches of media real estate in the USA – the front page of the New York Times.

The present situation is grimly instructive for anyone who might wonder how the Vietnam War could continue for years while opinion polls showed that most Americans were against it. Now, in the wake of midterm elections widely seen as a rebuke to the Iraq war, powerful media institutions are feverishly spinning against a pullout of U.S. troops.

Under the headline "Get Out of Iraq Now? Not So Fast, Experts Say," the Nov. 15 front page of the New York Times prominently featured a "Military Analysis" by Michael Gordon. The piece reported that – while some congressional Democrats are saying withdrawal of U.S. troops "should begin within four to six months" – "this argument is being challenged by a number of military officers, experts and former generals, including some who have been among the most vehement critics of the Bush administration's Iraq policies."

Reporter Gordon appeared hours later on Anderson Cooper's CNN show, fully morphing into an unabashed pundit as he declared that withdrawal is "simply not realistic." Sounding much like a Pentagon spokesman, Gordon went on to state in no uncertain terms that he opposes a pullout.

If a New York Times military-affairs reporter went on television to advocate for withdrawal of U.S. troops as unequivocally as Gordon advocated against any such withdrawal during his Nov. 15 appearance on CNN, he or she would be quickly reprimanded – and probably would be taken off the beat – by the Times hierarchy. But the paper's news department eagerly fosters reporting that internalizes and promotes the basic worldviews of the country's national security state.

That's how and why the Times front page was so hospitable to the work of Judith Miller during the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq. That's how and why the Times is now so hos-

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pitiable to the work of Michael Gordon.

At this point, categories like "vehement critics of the Bush administration's Iraq policies" are virtually meaningless. The bulk of the media's favorite "vehement critics" are opposed to reduction of U.S. involvement in the Iraq carnage, and some of them are now openly urging an increase in U.S. troop levels for the occupation.

These days, media coverage of U.S. policy in Iraq often seems to be little more than a remake of how mainstream news outlets portrayed Washington's options during the war in Vietnam. Routine deference to inside-the-Beltway conventional wisdom has turned many prominent journalists into co-producers of a "Groundhog Day" sequel that insists the U.S. war effort must go on.

During the years since the fall of Saddam, countless news stories and commentaries have compared the ongoing disaster in Iraq to the Vietnam War. But those comparisons have rarely illuminated the most troubling parallels between the U.S. media coverage of both wars.

Whether in 1968 or 2006, most of the Washington press corps has been at pains to portray withdrawal of U.S. troops as impractical and unrealistic.

Contrary to myths about media coverage of the Vietnam War, the American press lagged way behind grassroots antiwar sentiment in seriously contemplating a U.S. pullout from Vietnam. The lag time amounted to several years – and meant the additional deaths of tens of thousands of Americans and perhaps 1 million more Vietnamese people.

A survey by the Boston Globe, conducted in February 1968, found that out of 39 major daily newspapers in the United States, not one had editorialized for withdrawing American troops from Vietnam. Today – despite the antiwar tilt of national opinion polls and the recent election – advocacy of a U.S. pullout from Iraq seems almost as scarce among modern-day media elites.

The standard media evasions amount to kicking the bloody can down the road. Careful statements about benchmarks and getting tough with the Baghdad government (as with the Saigon government) are markers for a national media discourse that dodges instead of enlivens debate.

Many journalists are retreading the notion that the pullout option is not a real option at all. And the Democrats who'll soon be running Congress, we're told, wouldn't – and shouldn't – dare to go that far if they know what's good for them.

Implicit in such media coverage is the idea that the real legitimacy for U.S. war policy-making rests with the president, not the Congress. When I ponder that assumption, I think about 42-year-old footage of the CBS program Face the Nation.

The show's host on that 1964 telecast was the widely esteemed journalist Peter Lisagor,

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who told his guest: "Senator, the Constitution gives to the president of the United States the sole responsibility for the conduct of foreign policy."

"Couldn't be more wrong," Sen. Wayne Morse broke in with his sandpapery voice. "You couldn't make a more unsound legal statement than the one you have just made. This is the promulgation of an old fallacy that foreign policy belongs to the president of the United States. That's nonsense."

Lisagor was almost taunting as he asked, "To whom does it belong then, Senator?"

Morse did not miss a beat. "It belongs to the American people," he shot back – and "I am pleading that the American people be given the facts about foreign policy."

The journalist persisted: "You know, Senator, that the American people cannot formulate and execute foreign policy."

Morse's response was indignant: "Why do you say that? ... I have complete faith in the ability of the American people to follow the facts if you'll give them. And my charge against my government is, we're not giving the American people the facts."

Morse, the senior senator from Oregon, was passionate about the U.S. Constitution as well as international law. And, while rejecting the widely held notion that foreign policy belongs to the president, he spoke in unflinching terms about the Vietnam War. At a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, on Feb. 27, 1968, Morse said that he did not "intend to put the blood of this war on my hands."

And, prophetically, Morse added: "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."