APRIL 3, 2003

The thick fog of war on American television

Minutes after the dawn spread daylight across the Iraqi desert, "embedded" CNN correspondent Walter Rodgers was on the air with a live report. Another employee at the network, former U.S. Gen. Wesley Clark — on the job in a TV studio back home — asked his colleague a question. When Rodgers responded, he addressed Clark as "general" and "sir." The only thing missing was a salute.

That deferential tone pretty much sums up the overall relationship between American journalists and the U.S. military on major TV networks. Correspondents in the field have bonded with troops to the point that their language and enunciated outlooks are often indistinguishable.

Meanwhile, no matter what tensions exist, reporters remain basically comfortable with Pentagon sources. And what passes for debate is rarely anything more than the second-guessing of military decisions. It's OK to question how — but not why — the war is being fought.

Sure, some journalists have raised uncomfortable questions for top war makers in Washington. At this point, within the bounds of mass media, the loudest voices of pseudo-dissent have demanded to know whether the U.S. government miscalculated by failing to deploy enough troops from the outset.

When the media debate centers on whether the United States has attacked Iraq with adequate troop strength and sufficient lethal violence, the fulcrum of supposed media balance is far into the realm of fervent militarism.

Exceptional reports on American television, conspicuous for their rarity, have asked deeper questions. On the ABC program "Nightline," correspondent John Donvan shed light on what "embeds" have routinely missed. Rather than traveling under the Pentagon's wing, Donvan and other intrepid "unilaterals" venture out on their own. In his case, the results included an illuminating dispatch from the Iraqi town of Safwan.

"Just because the Iraqis don't like Saddam, doesn't mean they like us for trying to take him out," Donvan explained. "To the contrary. Although people started out talking

to us in a friendly way, after a while it became a little tense. These people were mad at America, very mad. And they wanted us to know why. It was because, they said, people in town had been shot at by the United States."

Declining to travel in tandem with U.S. troops, Donvan was able and willing to report on views not apt to be expressed by Iraqis looking down the barrels of the invaders' guns: "Why are you taking over Iraq? That's how the people in this crowd saw it — takeover, not liberation."

In contrast to the multitudes of "embedded" American reporters, the "unilateral" Donvan was oriented toward realities deeper than fleeting images. Instead of zooming along on the media fast track, he could linger: "In short, if embeds are always moving with the troops, unilaterals get to see what happens after they've passed through."

The visible anger of Iraqi people has roots in events that usually get described in antiseptic and euphemistic terms by U.S. media outlets. "What else did we see by going in as unilaterals? The close-up view of collateral damage. The U.S. says it's trying to limit injuries to civilians. It is, however, hard not to take it personally when that collateral damage is you." Donvan reported on a wounded Iraqi man, evidently a bus driver, who had lost his wife over the weekend: "She was collateral damage. So were his two brothers. So were his two children."

Journalism that may seem notably daring in the U.S. media would not raise an eyebrow elsewhere. For instance, the contrast is stark between National Public Radio and BBC Radio, or the PBS "NewsHour With Jim Lehrer" and BBC Television. In comparison, most public broadcasting in the United States seems to be cravenly licking the boots of Uncle Sam.

With a straight face, and with scant willingness to raise fundamental questions, American networks uncritically relay a nonstop barrage of statements from U.S. officials that portray deadly Iraqi actions as heinous and deadly American actions as positive. They have "death squads," and we have noble troops. Their bullets and bombs are odious; ours are remedies for tyranny.

"It looks and feels like terrorism," a Pentagon official said on national television after several American soldiers died at the hands of an Iraqi suicide bomber. But if attacks on U.S. troops inside Iraq are "terrorism," what should we call the continuously massive bombing of Baghdad? Surely, to people in that city, the current assault looks and feels like terrorism. ■