

The US "free" press and the Pentagon war machine

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In the rash of articles that spread across the front pages of virtually every major newspaper earlier this week detailing US plans for the invasion of Iraq, information was attributed to unnamed "military sources," "senior administration officials" or "Pentagon analysts."

An article appearing in the November 10 *Washington Post*, however, went further, providing its readers with a fleeting insight into the real relations that exist between the supposedly independent media and Washington's war machine.

"This article was discussed extensively in recent days with several senior civilian and military Defense Department officials," the *Post* reported. "At their request, several aspects of the plan are being withheld from publication. Those aspects include the timing of certain military actions, the trigger points for other moves, some of the tactics being contemplated and the units that would execute some of the tactics."

The article went on to reveal that the officials saw a "strategic benefit" to the publication of the information contained in the article. It was meant to suggest to world opinion that the Pentagon was determined to avoid large-scale civilian casualties, while it amassed an overwhelming armed force capable of crushing any Iraqi resistance.

In short, military censors vet the article, and the newspaper unabashedly accepts its role as a conduit for war propaganda.

The only thing that set the *Washington Post* article apart from those appearing in the *New York Times*, *USA Today* and other publications was the frank acknowledgment of the Pentagon's role in crafting the piece. This admission recalled the warning labels affixed to cigarette packages and liquor bottles—"Caution: the article you are reading contains

government disinformation that may be hazardous to the truth."

The buildup to war in Iraq has once again exposed the media as a propaganda arm of the Bush administration and the Pentagon. The television networks, daily newspapers and other means of mass communication have all obediently lent themselves to what White House aides themselves have described as a campaign to "sell" the war to the American people.

TV commentators and print journalists alike have, with rare exceptions, fallen into lockstep behind the administration's campaign of lies. Virtually all of them present Iraq, a war-devastated country unable to feed its own people, as a grave threat to the US and the world. White House allegations that the Arab country is engaged in a massive effort to produce "weapons of mass destruction" are presented as fact, with no attempt to independently verify whether such weapons even exist. US imperialism's long-standing strategic objective of dominating the oilfields of the Persian Gulf—widely recognized abroad as the driving force for war—is passed over with barely a mention.

Meanwhile, major news corporations manufacture opinion polls to meet government specifications, promoting an image of broad support for war, with the aim of making resistance to the plans of the administration, the Pentagon and the oil monopolies appear futile.

All of this is merely rehearsal for when the slaughter in Iraq begins. There were reports earlier this month that those who will cover the war are being put through a military "boot camp" in preparation for shipping out with US invasion forces. This marks the first time that the military and the media have participated in such a joint program, whose aim is to accustom journalists to military discipline. Those participating will be counted

on to abide by the orders of the military censor, while not even hinting to the public that they are suppressing information that casts the US war in an unfavorable light.

The methods perfected in the last Persian Gulf war will no doubt be even more refined this time around. Pentagon authorities will enforce a “pool system” of reporting in which a few journalists out of the thousands present will be selected by military handlers each day and escorted to scenes that are deemed fit for the public. Their coverage will then be “pooled” with their colleagues held in the rear, so that the same controlled story will be reported by every major news outlet.

This system was devised based on lessons the military drew from the Vietnam War, when television coverage of atrocities against civilians and photographs of US soldiers being loaded into body bags contributed to the sharp turn by the American public against the war.

Now, the military can count on the networks’ millionaire anchormen and its well-heeled war correspondents to black out reports on the slaughter of Iraqi civilians, limiting their coverage to handouts from Pentagon press briefings and stories that blame any carnage on the Iraqis themselves. Should independent media sources, such as the Arab network *Al Jazeera*, fail to observe this self-censorship, their facilities may themselves be targeted with US precision-guided munitions.



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