

Pentagon, media agree on Iraq war censorship

Reporters to be “embedded” in military

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During the 1991 Gulf War, the White House and the Pentagon imposed unprecedented censorship on media coverage. With the willing agreement of the corporate-owned media, American military activities in the region were mostly off-limits to journalists. Defense Department censors cleared photos, video footage and battlefield dispatches. Reporters were allowed to travel only in “pools,” accompanied by US military escorts.

With the help of this cozy relationship, the war crimes committed by the United States and allied forces were systematically covered up, while the Iraqi forces were demonized. Every mainstream media outlet reported ad nauseam that US “smart bombs” had inflicted devastating damage on Iraqi military targets, yet spared civilian lives. Only later was it revealed that the vast majority of the bombs were unguided missiles and that thousands of innocent Iraqi men, women and children were killed.

The same media organizations reported that 300 premature babies in Kuwait died when Iraqi soldiers removed them from incubators, which were sent to Iraq as loot. These Pentagon-inspired fabrications were afforded front-page treatment, but the retractions, which came months later, were buried on inside pages.

After the lies emerged, discrediting the media in the eyes of many people, the proprietors sought to blame US authorities. In a May, 1991 letter to then-secretary of defense Dick Cheney, the Washington editors of 15 big media outlets criticized the Pentagon for exerting “virtually total control” over coverage.

In reality, then as now, the media executives marched in lockstep with the US administration. (See the accompanying report on CNN’s internal censorship system, “CNN imposes new ‘script control.’”) Reporters were instructed to follow “guidelines” to avoid coverage damaging to the war effort. With rare exceptions, journalists engaged in self-censorship.

Last week, confronted by deepening public opposition to the planned invasion of Iraq, the war planners and media

chiefs unveiled a new, more sweeping system of media control, under the guise of providing greater access to frontline war reporters.

In the Pentagon’s own terminology, about 500 journalists from selected Western media agencies will be “embedded” into the US military. Despite the White House pretence that it hopes to avoid war, reporters, photographers and camera crews have already been assigned to designated frontline units.

Attaching reporters to combat contingents is not entirely new—official war correspondents were employed in both world wars—but the embedding scheme is on a larger and more organized scale than has ever been contemplated previously. Handpicked reporters have already undertaken training to become accustomed to military discipline and conditioned to identify fully with their units.

Media commentators initially praised the Pentagon for its apparent agreement not to censor articles or broadcast footage. Yet a closer examination of the Pentagon’s rules reveals numerous clauses designed to ensure that a false or sanitized picture of events is presented to the world.

One section of the Pentagon document says there is “no general review process for media products.” But a latter section says: “If media are inadvertently exposed to sensitive information they should be briefed after exposure on what information they should avoid covering.”

It adds that where a military commander believes it would be beneficial to the interests of the Department of Defense to allow journalists to see sensitive information that would normally be restricted, reporters must agree to a security review of their coverage. In other words, journalists will be denied most newsworthy material unless they agree to be vetted.

Another clause states that all interviews with military personnel should be on the record—an attempt to prevent the leaks that occurred during the Vietnam War, when servicemen anonymously divulged damaging information or

expressed disgust about the conduct of the war. In the Iraq war, military staff will face disciplinary action for saying too much.

The Pentagon's rules also prevent journalists from using their own transport, so that most of the press will get to see only what the military high command wants them to see. There will be no safety guarantees for correspondents who take a chance on going it alone. On the contrary, they are being specifically warned that using their satellite phones could make them targets for unfriendly missile fire. On the Iraqi side, moreover, the opening days of blitzkrieg will make reporting highly dangerous.

In a February 18 interview on the US Public Broadcasting Service, Bryan Whitman, deputy assistant secretary of defense for media operations, disclosed some of the motivation behind the new system. He spoke of the "beauty of embedding" from the Pentagon's point of view.

"We want to be able to protect that information that is going to determine the success of an operation, and we don't want any reporting that's going to unnecessarily jeopardize those individuals that are executing that mission.... I also have never met a journalist, particularly one that's traveling with that unit, that would have any interest in compromising the mission of the unit."

Whitman confirmed that unit commanders will have final control over dispatches. "Well, clearly there is a need to protect any operational security out there. Reporters will be pre-briefed. They'll be debriefed if they come in contact with sensitive information on what it is that is inappropriate to either report on or inappropriate to report on at this time because it will affect the outcome of the operation or endanger the personnel that are engaged in that operation."

If any disputes arise, Whitman expressed confidence that the military and media "chains of command" will ensure that no adverse material is published. "I don't think that reasonable people will disagree. I think the disagreements on that type of information will be rare. And if necessary, they'll be adjudicated not only through the news organizations' chain of command but also through the military chain of command."

British and Australian correspondents may be similarly attached to their military, whereas journalists from other countries will be excluded, making most frontline coverage dependent on the major agencies from countries actively engaged in the assault.

Some veteran war correspondents have spoken out against the Pentagon rules. Former CNN correspondent Bernard Shaw, one of a handful of journalists to report from Baghdad during the 1991 war, said in a CNN television interview:

"The idea of journalists allowing themselves to be taken under the wing of the United States military to me is very

dangerous. I think journalists who agree to go with combat units effectively become hostages of the military, which can control the movements of the journalists and, more importantly, control their ability when they file their stories."

In general, the media has buried these criticisms. A greater concern, registered in a number of comments, is that a too transparent identification with the Pentagon will further tarnish the credibility of the media, especially since millions of people now have access to alternative sources of news, information and analysis via the Internet.

One comment in the British *Guardian* noted: "When Allied forces were last on their way to the Gulf in 1991, the Internet was little more than a gaggle of bearded academics swapping information on their latest computer programs. The last Gulf war heralded the coming of age of rolling news television. CNN, with reporters on the ground and in the studio, made its name by comprehensively outperforming its traditional rivals.

"But now 24-hour news is commonplace; it is the web that is opening up a world of different perspectives and viewpoints. As we've seen over the past two years, from September 11 to the subsequent war on terror and the current countdown to war, after the initial rush towards recognised news sources such as the BBC and CNN, web users started to cast their net far wider as they searched for explanation and context."

These reservations are revealing. Once the US-led bombardment of the people of Iraq commences, the Pentagon and the corporate media will be doing everything in their power to strictly control and massage the coverage of the ensuing carnage. Yet, their efforts are likely to only widen the gulf between the official political and media establishment and the international public, which has already expressed its growing hostility to US militarism.



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