

# The US media: propagandists for a criminal war

Bill Vann

25 March 2003

The New York City Police Department announced recently that as part of its “Operation Atlas” plan for a security crackdown to accompany the Iraq war it has deployed special patrols to guard television news outlets in midtown Manhattan. City and police officials claim they are concerned about terrorists seizing control of a network news studio to broadcast anti-American messages.

The chance of Al Qaeda operatives storming the set of “Good Morning America” to read a screed from Osama bin Laden seems rather slim. A far more likely fear—and almost certainly the one that motivated the beefed-up security—is that Americans opposed to the assault on Iraq will direct their anger against a media that has systematically excluded their views and functioned as a privatized propaganda ministry for the Bush administration’s war drive.

In Los Angeles, thousands joined an unauthorized march on Saturday down Sunset Blvd. to CNN’s headquarters to denounce the cable news network’s coverage.

For outraged citizens to descend on CNN, ABC, CBS and NBC—not to mention that citadel of backwardness and reaction, Fox News—would be entirely understandable. It is difficult to overestimate the criminal role played by the mass media in the current war of aggression.

Whatever information does not further US military objectives does not qualify as news. While millions of people poured into the streets around the world at the onset of the US invasion, marching on US embassies and clashing with riot police on every continent, those relying solely on television news for their view of the world would hardly know it.

Widespread antiwar protests in the US itself forced their way briefly onto the television screens only after more than 1,000 people were arrested in San Francisco. And even then, the message accompanying images of these events was that such protests are both wrong-headed and futile.

By banishing any critical voices during the US buildup to war against Iraq, the media played a significant role in preparing military aggression. Bush’s obvious lies—riddled with internal contradictions and clumsily picked up, shelved and revived from one week to the next—went unchallenged. Instead they were presented as good coin by the media’s “hard news” reporters. Meanwhile, commentators indulged in a frenzy of French-bashing and witch-hunting of Martin Sheen and other celebrities who dared speak out against military action.

The media and the Pentagon have managed to achieve a level of

sympiosis never before imagined. On the one hand, there are some 500 American war correspondents “embedded” in US military units, functioning, in effect, as part of the armed offensive and clearing their stories with unit commanders. On the other, there are seemingly countless retired US military officers who are “embedded” within the network and cable news channels, drawing down handsome supplements to their retirement benefits as paid “military consultants.”

No journalist dares hint that any of these “experts” has his own political, not to mention institutional, biases and agendas. The likes of ex-CIA director James Woolsey are regularly presented as impartial experts on Iraqi matters. No one reminds viewers that he has advocated a US war against the country for over a decade and has promoted patently false war propaganda—including claims of Iraqi responsibility for September 11—to further this goal.

These “experts” and “consultants” are there to lend added weight to the endless chatter of television anchors as they stride across floor maps of Iraq, barely suppressing their glee over the devastation of this defenseless country by the US war machine.

The embedding of journalists was a stratagem worked out by the Pentagon with the clear intent of assuring its control over coverage and forcing journalists to identify totally with the US war effort. At the same time that they sent their correspondents to ride aboard invading tanks, the networks pulled their correspondents out of Baghdad on the grounds that it was unsafe. They did so at the behest of the Pentagon, which warned journalists that they might be targeted by US missiles or bombs if they dared to remain in Baghdad without the permission of the American military and outside of its control. No one will be “embedded” with any Iraqi family cowering in a basement or trying to comfort a wounded child.

While images of dead Iraqi troops and wounded Iraqi civilians, including children burned and bloodied from bomb attacks, are kept to the barest minimum, the same scene of a handful of Iraqis greeting US troops in the south and tearing down a poster of dictator Saddam Hussein are re-broadcast over and over again. One is reminded of German World War II-era newsreels of Nazi troops rolling into captured cities as supposedly grateful citizens lined the streets and threw flowers. With this difference: the Nazis were able to assemble significant crowds for such staged events—something the American and British invaders have been unable to accomplish in Iraq.

Reports of Iraqi resistance are downplayed, while claims from

the Bush administration that the Iraqi leadership is collapsing and that significant sections of its military command are in discussions on surrender—both dismissed by knowledgeable sources as war propaganda—are parroted without question.

Among the “embeds” employed by Fox News is none other than Oliver North, the retired Marine lieutenant colonel who was convicted in the Iran-Contra affair for his leading role in the illegal network that used arms sales and drug money to finance the “contra” mercenaries’ terrorist war in Nicaragua. North, an ultra-rightist radio “shock jock,” poses as a reporter while providing jingoist commentary about how the US military machine will crush the Iraqis.

There is no danger that the war will be reported in anything approaching an objective fashion. Such reporting during the Vietnam War—from the exposure of the My Lai massacre to televised footage of American soldiers burning down Vietnamese villages—played a significant role in turning public opinion against the US government. The Pentagon’s handling of the media—and the media’s docile acquiescence—is undoubtedly its greatest achievement in the attempt to shake off the “Vietnam syndrome.”

To justify its role as a cheerleader for war, the media trumpets opinion polls—such as the one released this week claiming that 75 percent of the American people back military action—which are based on the supposed answers given by a few hundred people. In presenting war as a form of macabre entertainment—the ultimate “reality” show—network producers cynically claim they are only giving the public what it wants. But these polls, like the media itself, are an instrument of war propaganda.

Presented as scientific and sensitive gauges of mass public opinion—with a “five-point margin of error”—they are, in fact, subject to blatant political manipulation. The type of questions that are asked as well as the way they are asked can be crafted to produce the desired results.

Even if one were to accept these figures as legitimate, they would only demonstrate the way in which the American public has been subjected to an endless barrage of lies. One recent poll showing that 44 percent of the population falsely believes that Iraqis were among the hijackers of September 11 provided some barometer of the impact of the disinformation campaign mounted by the government and the mass media.

Despite the media lies and systematic suppression of critical thought, even by the skewed standards of the polls, the opposition to the current war is at its outset far broader than that which existed during the first several years of the war in Vietnam.

The abysmal state of the American media today is the culmination of a protracted process in which the government, right-wing political forces and powerful corporate interests have worked together to create a tightly controlled conduit for a political line that serves the interests of the country’s financial elite.

In the end, Pentagon controls on news are of less significance than the profit interests of those who own the media. Vast conglomerates own the entire television dial and the print media as well. Viacom Inc.’s CBS, Walt Disney Co.’s ABC, AOL Time Warner’s CNN, General Electric Co.’s NBC and Fox, the property of Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp., are all subordinated to the interests of corporate boards and controlling shareholders

whose investments are spread across the spectrum of oil, arms and other industries.

The owners of the media, like the most decisive sections of big business, support the Bush administration’s reactionary and deranged perspective of using America’s military might to establish hegemony over global resources and markets.

The character of those selected to defend this perspective through the crafting and presentation of what passes for news has itself been transformed over the past several decades. While the reporter of an earlier era earned an income comparable to that of a better-paid factory worker, those at the top of the journalistic heap today draw down multimillion-dollar salaries. They are picked, for the most part, not for their knowledge or intelligence, but for their looks, loyalty and willingness to lie with an air of conviction.

The corruption of what once was known as the “Fourth Estate” is both a symptom and contributing factor in the decay of American democracy. Not only has the corporate control of the media deprived the American people of a critical view of the world, it has contributed to the disorientation within the ruling circles themselves by failing to provide any check on their excesses. To the extent that those who run the government, business and finance believe their own press, they are emboldened to embark on ever more reckless policies, including more wars of aggression.

The prostitution of the “freedom of the press,” enshrined in the US Constitution, finds its consummate expression in the ability of that disreputable malefactor of wealth, the Australian-British-American media baron Rupert Murdoch, to buy up huge sections of the world’s air waves for the purpose of spewing right-wing ideological filth on an unsuspecting public.

The monopolization of the mass media by a handful of powerful corporations and its utilization against the interests of the broad masses of people underscore the vital importance of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the need to expand its coverage and readership.

At the same time, it poses the necessity for a political struggle to wrest this vital resource—television, radio and the corporate print media—from the hands of the super-rich and place it under public ownership and the democratic control of the working people.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**