

Right-wing US television group refuses to air names of war dead

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In a sign of the extreme sensitivity within the American media and political establishment to the impact of the Iraq war on public opinion, a major television group is refusing to air a segment of ABC's "Nightline" program April 30 devoted to reading the names of the US war dead.

The Sinclair Broadcast Group, known for its right-wing management and editorial outlook, refused to carry the program on its eight ABC affiliate stations, claiming "Nightline" was "motivated by a political agenda designed to undermine the efforts of the United States in Iraq."

"Nightline," hosted by veteran newsman Ted Koppel, planned to use photographs and information drawn from the Army Times Publishing Company's online "Faces of Valor" database. The program's producers intended to show a photograph of each serviceman and woman with his or her name, military branch, rank and age.

The executive producer of the program, Leroy Sievers, told the media that the program is their "way of reminding our viewers—whether they agree with the war or not—that beyond the casualty numbers, these men and women are serving Iraq in our names, and that those who have been killed have names and faces." The "Nightline" program was expanded from its normal 30 minutes to 40 to make possible the reading of all the names.

The decision by "Nightline" itself reflects the growing nervousness within the media establishment about the Bush administration's policy in Iraq. Koppel, who considers former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger his mentor, is no political progressive. Jeff Cohen, of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), has described the "Nightline" anchor aptly as an "individual who has, for his whole career, been virtually a mouthpiece for the US State Department."

Backing up the characterization, Cohen points out that Koppel began his career as the Hong Kong bureau chief for ABC News, where he helped cover up the US role in Vietnam and, in particular, CIA operations in Laos. Norman Solomon, another critic, has documented Koppel's role in concealing illegal bombing runs carried out by the Laotian air force and directed by CIA and US military personnel from 1969 to 1971.

If Koppel is expressing concern about the Iraq war, it reflects the anxiety of high-level people in the US state apparatus. The sharp increase in casualties in April apparently prompted

Koppel and "Nightline" to organize the name-reading.

Originally they intended only to read the names of the military personnel killed in combat. But the father of a soldier who was killed coming back from the front lines when his truck flipped over asked why his son was not worthy of being mentioned. After a conversation with him, the program's producers extended the show to include all the deaths related to the Iraq conflict, combat and non-combat. Koppel told a reporter, "It hit us so hard when he said that he went to the network and said, 'Can you give us an extra 10 minutes?'"

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Koppel commented, "I have always felt, and I said it when I was in Iraq last year, that the most important thing a journalist can do is remind people of the cost of war." He continued, "If the motivation to go to war is good, is justifiable, then the cost, whether it is 500, or 5,000, or 50,000, is something people will accept. Should the motivation not be good, then five is too many."

The "Nightline" program takes place in the context of a general blackout by the US media of images and stories concerning the American war dead and wounded, let alone the tens of thousands of Iraqis killed and maimed. It comes only a week after the furor created by the publication of photographs of flag-draped coffins returning from Iraq. The Bush administration and the Pentagon have exercised a strict censorship over such images, in the hope that they could somehow hide the grim reality of the war from the American people.

With polls showing plunging support for the war, the decision by "Nightline" to name the war dead was perceived as a virtually treasonous act by the extreme right-wing management of the Sinclair Broadcast Group.

In their statement, Sinclair declared "Mr. Koppel and 'Nightline' are hiding behind this so-called tribute in an effort to highlight only one aspect of the war effort and in doing so to influence public opinion against the military action in Iraq.... As a result, we have decided to preempt the broadcast of 'Nightline' this Friday on each of our stations which air ABC programming."

They go on: "We understand that our decision in this matter may be questioned by some. Before you judge our decision,

however, we would ask that you first question Mr. Koppel as to why he chose to read the names of 523 troops killed in combat in Iraq, rather than the names of the thousands of private citizens killed in terrorist attacks since and including the events of September 11, 2001. In his answer, we believe you will find the real motivation behind his action scheduled for this Friday.” The implication is that Koppel and “Nightline” are ‘soft’ on terrorism.

Sinclair is one of the largest television broadcasting companies in the US. According to its web site, the company owns, operates or provides sales services to 62 television stations in 39 markets. Sinclair’s television group reaches approximately 24 percent of US television households. Sinclair provides its own news coverage from Iraq to its 62 stations. It proclaims that its purpose is to counter the stories reported by the “liberal media.”

Mark Hyman, Sinclair’s vice president of corporate relations, told *New York Newsday* in a telephone interview, that “Nightline” was “trying to stir up negative emotions in our involvement in the war [and that] Ted Koppel was among those back in March 2003 who was embedded with the Third [Infantry Division] and reported how the war effort had bogged down.”

Barry Faber, Sinclair vice president and general counsel, suggested that reading the names of the war dead “without any discussion of why we’re there and why these lives are being sacrificed ... will unduly influence people.”

Giving some indication of the coverage Sinclair provides, Faber noted the company’s own journalists in Iraq “found ... that the overwhelming majority [of Iraqis] are thrilled the US is there after suffering years of oppression, and they are worried about what some radicals would do if we left.” He said the company found the name-reading “contrary to the public interest.”

The ABC affiliates owned by Sinclair and affected by the boycott include stations in Columbus, Ohio; St. Louis; Charleston, West Virginia; Pensacola, Florida; Springfield, Massachusetts; Asheville, North Carolina; Tallahassee, Florida; and Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Sinclair employees contributed more than \$174,000 to political campaigns in 2000, 98 percent of which went to Republicans.

Apparently some of the Sinclair stations have received many calls and emails decrying the company’s position. An assignment desk editor at WSYX in Columbus told CNN, “I have not gotten one positive response.” WEAR in Pensacola has also been inundated by calls and emails, mostly from people wanting to know why the decision was made.

In a further indication of the sensitivity of the issue, Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona and a firm supporter of the Iraq war, weighed in on the controversy, writing Sinclair to complain of its decision to censor the program. McCain told Sinclair president and CEO David Smith, “Your decision to

deny your viewers an opportunity to be reminded of war’s terrible costs, in all their heartbreaking detail, is a gross disservice to the public, and to the men and women of the United States Armed Forces. It is, in short, sir, unpatriotic. I hope it meets with the public opprobrium it most certainly deserves.”

Sinclair’s Smith felt obliged to respond on the company’s web site. He wrote McCain, “[O]ur decision was based on a desire to stop the misuse of their [the dead soldiers’] sacrifice to support an anti-war position with which most, if not all, of these soldiers would not have agreed.

Smith continued: “‘Nightline’ is not reporting news; it is doing nothing more than making a political statement. In simply reading the names of our fallen heroes, this program has adopted a strategy employed by numerous anti-war demonstrators who wish to focus attention solely on the cost of war. In fact, lest there be any doubt about ‘Nightline’s’ motivation, both Mr. Koppel and ‘Nightline’s’ executive producer have acknowledged that tonight’s episode was influenced by the Life Magazine article listing the names of dead soldiers in Vietnam, which article was widely credited with furthering the opposition to the Vietnam war and with creating a backlash of public opinion against the members of the US military who had proudly served in that conflict.”

This is a revealing comment. The Bush administration, with the full support of media outlets such as Sinclair, lied to the American public about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and the Hussein regime’s connection to terrorism for months to neutralize opposition and make possible a colonial-style invasion and war. The administration’s claims about its motives for the war, as well as its insistence that the Iraqi people would welcome US occupation, have been exposed as entirely false over the past several months.

Smith and Sinclair, anxious and outraged by the turn of events in Iraq, are essentially complaining that without the appropriate “context” provided by the Pentagon and White House—which hardly anyone believes anymore—the pictures and names of the US war dead will only encourage antiwar sentiment. In this, they are probably correct.



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