

The Media's Role in U.S. Foreign Policy

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WATCHDOG AND ADVERSARY MODELS OF THE MEDIA

Spokespersons for the media regularly portray them as the country's watchdogs, who "root about in our national life, exposing what they deem right for exposure," without fear or favor.¹ Such self-congratulatory statements are traditionally supported by reference to the Watergate exposures, which "helped force a President from office,"² and the media's news coverage of the Vietnam War — allegedly so open and critical that it helped firm up popular opposition and forced the war's negotiated settlement.

Nonetheless, many factors — discussed below — contribute to make the mainstream media supportive of government policy and vulnerable to "news management" by the government. This is most evident in foreign affairs reporting, in which strong domestic constituencies contesting government propaganda campaigns are rare, and in which the government can employ ideological weapons like anti-communism, a demonized enemy or alleged national security threats to keep the media compliant. Thus in the 1980s the Reagan administration was able to demonize the Soviet Union as an Evil Empire, Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi as premier terrorist, Grenada and Nicaragua as U.S. national security threats and Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega as a villainous drug dealer, with a high degree of mainstream media cooperation.³

1. See Anthony Lewis, "Freedom of the Press—Anthony Lewis Distinguishes Between Britain and America," *London Review of Books*, 26 November 1987.

2. *ibid.*

3. These processes in the cases noted are spelled out in Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989) and Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy* (London: Verso, 1991).

The media's generous self-appraisal is supported in a curious and indirect way by neo-conservative and business attacks, which have frequently charged that the media are dominated by a liberal elite, hostile to business and government.⁴ The same Watergate-Nixon evidence and Vietnam War coverage, cited by defenders of the media as demonstrating their constructive role, is used by conservative critics to demonstrate media excess. *Big Story*, for example, purported to show that the media's coverage of the 1968 Tet offensive was inaccurate, adversarial and unpatriotic.⁵ Cited often and without criticism, *Big Story* contributed to the now-conventional belief not only that the media was hostile to the war, but also that "the outcome of the war was determined not in the battlefield, but on the printed page, and above all, on the television screen."⁶ John Corry of the *New York Times* conceded that the media bias argued by Braestrup existed, but contended that it was thoughtlessness, not deliberate subversive intent, that brought about this result.⁷

These attacks, and half-hearted and compromised defenses have served the media well. They suggest that those in power feel pressed by the media and are not insulated from their "rooting about." The media's liberal defenders have also helped legitimize the media by the uncritical nature of their rebuttals to neo-conservative criticism. Thus, Herbert Gans, attacking neo-conservative charges that the media are dominated by a liberal elite, answered these critics in part by lauding the media's professionalism and objectivity:

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4. For an exposition of the neo-conservative view, see Michael Ledeen, *Grave New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman, "Media and Business Elites," *Public Opinion* 4, no. 5 (October-November 1981) pp. 42-4; Michael Novak, "The New Elite in an Adversary Culture," *Business and the Media*, Conference Report, Yankelovich, Skelly & White, 19 November 1981, pp. 8-11.
 5. Peter Braestrup, *Big Story* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1977).
 6. Robert Elegant, as cited in an Accuracy in Media (AIM) rebuttal to the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) series "Vietnam: A Television History," AIM episode entitled "Inside Story Special Edition: Vietnam Op Ed," 1985. For a critical examination of Braestrup's book, see Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988) chapter 5 and appendix 3.
 7. John Corry, "Is TV Unpatriotic or Simply Unmindful," *New York Times*, 12 May 1985, section 2, page 1.

The beliefs that actually make it into the news are *professional* values that are intrinsic to national journalism and that journalists learn on the job....The rules of news judgment call for ignoring story implications....with some notable exceptions, including libel and national security.⁸

A similarly constrained scope of debate is evident in *Reporters Under Fire*, a book on media bias in foreign affairs. In it, the media are accused by neo-conservative and right-wing critics — Morton Kondracke, Ben Wattenberg, Daniel James, Shirley Christian and Allen Weinstein — of an adversarial position to the U.S. government in their coverage of Central America in the 1980s, and to Israel at the time of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. On the defensive, the liberals argued either that the media were even-handed — reporters Alan Riding and Karen De Young and academics William Leo Grande and Roger Morris — or that their bias against Israel was a result of a double standard, according to which better things were expected of Israel — Milton Viorst.⁹ In each case, the agenda and limits of the debate were set by the neo-conservatives and spokespersons for the U.S. and Israeli governments, with the opposition at best denying the alleged adversarial bias.

Critical Analyses of the Media

In fact, the media do *not* root about and expose abuses freely and without discrimination — an important possibility excluded from the debates just described. Rather, they serve mainly as a supportive arm of the state and dominant elites, focusing heavily on themes serviceable to them, and debating and exposing within accepted frames of reference.

The dominant media are themselves members of the corporate-elite establishment. Furthermore, media scholarship has regularly stressed the tendency of the media to rely excessively on the government as a news source and to defer to its positions. A

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8. Herbert Gans, "Are U.S. Journalists Dangerously Liberal?," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November-December 1985, pp. 32-3; and Herbert Gans, *Deciding What's News* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) pp. 185-6.
 9. Landrum Bolling, ed., *Reporters Under Fire: U.S. Media Coverage of Conflicts in Lebanon and Central America* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1985). For a full analysis of the confined scope of the debate in this work, see Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions*, pp. 161-77.

classic and often-cited study by Leon Sigal showed that nearly three-quarters of the front page stories in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* depended on official sources.¹⁰ Bennett, Chomsky, Cooper, Solely and Spence have also quantified the media's extraordinary deference to official views during the Central American wars of the 1980s.¹¹

Media analysts have long noted that the economics of the media push journalists into the hands of "primary definers," who offer a daily supply of supposedly credible stories.¹² Offbeat news and sources, in contrast, require careful verification for accuracy and, thus, resources. State Department and White House hand-outs are provided daily at the same place and do not require an accuracy check; they are news by virtue of their source. A symbiotic relationship tends to develop between primary definers and their regular beat reporters, who are rewarded for being cooperative and penalized for unfriendly reporting. These "old-boy networks" are reinforced by linkages between officials and senior managers and editors in the mainstream media.¹³

Structural aspects of the media also make them sensitive to the demands of the government. Contrary to neo-conservative analyses, the controlling media elites are the owners, not the reporters and anchors. The owners are extremely wealthy individuals or large corporations, such as Westinghouse and General Electric Company, with a major stake in the status quo and extensive social and business connections to other business and government leaders. They also depend on the government for television licenses, contracts to provide goods and services and support in

10. Leon V. Sigal, *Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1973) p. 48.

11. For a discussion, with citations to these and other authors, see Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions*, 1989, pp. 76-9; also, Lawrence Solely, *The News Shapers* (New York: Praeger, 1992) *passim*.

12. Primary definers are major news sources who, by virtue of their importance as sources are able to define what is newsworthy. The term is used and explained in Stuart Hall, Charles Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978), pp. 53-76. See also, Herman and Chomsky, pp. 18-20, and sources cited there.

13. Herman and Chomsky, pp. 8-16; Solely, chapters 2, 3 and 10.

overseas activities.¹⁴ Furthermore, the media must sell their programs to advertisers, who are not likely to look favorably on "adversarial" messages.¹⁵

Given this kind of media, what is the explanation for business and neo-conservative complaints of adversarial and unpatriotic media? The business community and elite are not a monolith, and the mainstream media are not closely controlled by the "capitalist class," or even by the owners of the media, although they broadly reflect dominant class interests. Frequent disagreements crop up among these interests, and the media often criticize established institutions, their abuses and policies, although virtually never at the level of institutional arrangements themselves. The accusations and debates mentioned earlier are intra-establishment conflicts, in which the complaining parties — while not necessarily badly treated — are dissatisfied and have the resources to press for closer conformity to their views. The business community — angry at the media's treatment of the Nixon-era bribery disclosures and the oil-price increases of the 1970s — made its dissatisfaction known, directly by vociferous complaints and a barrage of publicity, and indirectly by the funding of critical analysts and institutions like The Media Institute and Accuracy in Media to press its case.¹⁶ Similarly, neo-conservative critiques of the media on foreign policy issues have essentially objected to deviations from the official party line. This was evident during the U.S.-led 1991 Persian Gulf War, when Reed Irvine of Accuracy in Media complained that the media were reporting facts that were not

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14. During the Gulf War, apart from the need for licenses, the television networks were in the midst of an effort to get the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) to allow them to participate in syndication profits, from which they were barred by FCC rule. Opposing government policy during the Gulf War would have been very risky from a profit-maximizing perspective. See Danny Schechter, "Gulf War Coverage," *Z Magazine* (December 1991) pp. 22-5.
 15. On the constraining power of advertising, see Erik Barnouw, *The Sponsor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
 16. See Leonard Silk and David Vogel, *Ethics and Profits: The Crisis of Confidence in American Business* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976); A. Kent MacDougall, *Ninety Seconds To Tell All: Big Business and the News Media* (Homewood, IL: Dow Jones-Irwin, 1981). MacDougall tells the story of a *Los Angeles Times* reporter calling an oil company president to clarify a news release, to be told: "Just run it the way I sent it in, sonny," p. 36. On the corporate system's funding of oppositional forces, see John Saloma, *Ominous Politics: The New Conservative Labyrinth* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1984); and Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, pp. 26-8.

helpful to the war effort; Irvine's view was that the media should serve as public relations agents of the state and adjust the news accordingly. Braestrup's *Big Story* had offered a similar complaint about the Vietnam War: The media were too pessimistic during and after the Tet offensive.¹⁷ Braestrup's documentation, however, showed that the U.S. military leaders were even more pessimistic than the media, but his premise was that a free press should act as a marketing agent for official policy when reporting on any national venture. The proper role of the mass media in the neo-conservative view was also implicit in Michael Ledeen's neo-conservative plaint about the media: "Most journalists these days consider it beneath their dignity to simply report the words of government officials—and let it go at that."¹⁸

It is noteworthy that in early 1988 the Soviet press was assailed by Defense Minister Dimitri Yazov for disclosing negative facts about the Soviet war in Afghanistan, which he claimed "played into the hands of the West."¹⁹ The Ledeen-Irvine-Braestrup equivalents in the former Soviet Union would surely have supported Yazov's claim that the Soviet press was too liberal and "adversarial," as his criticisms of the Soviet press precisely fit their own for the U.S. media. In fact, the "adversary press" in the Soviet Union followed the party line in all essentials in 1988. Similarly, the mass media in the United States accepted that the United States fought to protect South Vietnam, sought democracy in Nicaragua in the 1980s and intervened in the war in the Gulf in 1991 to fight for the principle of non-aggression. The Bush administration wanted to censor the media during the Gulf War, not because they were adversaries, but for the reason implicit in Yazov's critique of the Soviet media — to avoid of *any* inconvenient or negative reports.

Criteria for Evaluating the Media's Role in Foreign Policy

There is a strong elitist tradition in the United States concerning the proper roles of the government and ordinary citizens in the conduct of foreign policy. In this tradition, the most notable

17. Braestrup, vol. 1, pp. 158ff and *passim*.

18. Ledeen, p. 111.

19. Bill Keller, "Soviet Official Says Press Harms Army," *New York Times*, 21 January 1988, p. A3.

exemplar of which was the journalist Walter Lippmann, the public is seen as stupid, volatile and best kept in the dark, with policy left in the hands of a superior elite who can better judge the national interest.²⁰ Government officials regularly look upon themselves as the best judges of the national interest and the public and media as obstacles to be overcome or managed.²¹ This view fits with the contemporary neo-conservative opinion that the media are properly an arm of the government. The difference is that the liberal-elite tradition recognizes and allows debate and disputes among the elite. In the neo-conservative view, even dissenting elites are a subversive and unpatriotic threat. Both, however, share the view that the public has no legitimate role in determining foreign policy.

These views are blatantly undemocratic. The mainstream media themselves, in principle, espouse the view that they are responsible for informing the public, thereby enabling it to properly assess policy and potentially influence decision making. As instruments of a democratic order, they should be condemned — and in theory would condemn themselves — if they served as tools of the government, deprived the public of essential information and, in effect, sold government policy.

Assuming that the media should serve a democratic polity, then they ought to inform the public on the major issues of the day with sufficient context, depth and honesty, for the public to be able to make thoughtful judgments and influence the course of policy making. As all governments lie and manipulate evidence, a democratically oriented media would not take government claims at face value and allow themselves to become another propaganda arm of the government. They would try to establish the substantive reasons for actions and not accept nominal claims as valid. They would be alert to double standards and selective use of criteria and evidence to justify policy. They would carefully evaluate claims of the probable effects of proposed policies. Finally, they would follow up on foreign policy actions to see

20. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1932, reprinting of 1921 edition) pp. 31-2, 248.

21. Bernard C. Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963) chapter 5.

whether the claimed objectives were met; they would not allow the government to mobilize support for a policy action, carry it out and then drop the subject.

**PAIRED CASE STUDIES IN MEDIA FOREIGN POLICY PERFORMANCE:
HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS, PLANE SHOOT-DOWNS AND
THIRD WORLD ELECTIONS**

In the several short cases analyzed here, it will be shown that the media followed a double standard in accord with a state agenda, even though this often required that they contradict themselves and ignore relevant information that was incompatible with the agenda. The more extended case study of media coverage of the Persian Gulf War that follows examines the issues to which the media *should* have paid attention — in the interest of giving the public essential information — in comparison with what the media *did* report.

During the 1980s, the Reagan administration strove to mobilize the U.S. public in support of a massive increase in arms expenditures and a more aggressive policy toward the Soviet Union. It also sought to help regimes under siege by orchestrating insurgencies in El Salvador and South Africa — among others — and to aid “freedom fighters” attacking governments it opposed, as in Angola and Nicaragua. These policies required media support, as the need for additional arms was dubious, some of the regimes under siege were massive human rights violators and the freedom fighters were sometimes difficult to distinguish from plain terrorists.

The U.S. media have frequently allowed themselves to be mobilized to serve the government’s agenda and foreign policy goals.²² Thus, for example, the Polish government’s crackdown on Poland’s Solidarity movement from 1980 to 1982 was assailed furiously by administration officials and the mainstream media. The Turkish military government’s equally or more brutal crackdown on

22. Other examples falling into this category that regretfully cannot be discussed here for lack of space would include: Libyan terrorism, contrasted with the treatment of South African terrorism; the Soviet “terror network”; the alleged Soviet-Bulgarian involvement in the assassination attempt against the Pope in May 1981; the Soviet military threat; and the Soviet arms buildup.

Turkey's union movement about the same time was ignored by the U.S. government and was barely noticed by the mainstream media.²³

Perhaps even more revealing was the treatment by U.S. government and media of the Polish police's killing of the activist priest Jerzy Popielusko in October 1984, in comparison with coverage of the murders of religious leaders and activists in Latin America. Popielusko's murder was given spectacular attention and treated with furious indignation, sufficient to put the Polish government on the defensive and compel the trial and imprisonment of the officers involved. The mainstream media were much less attentive to human-rights violations in U.S.-client states and often ignored them altogether, with the result that such murders interfered minimally with U.S. policy support of the regimes perpetrating the violence.²⁴

An examination of the coverage of Popielusko's murder in comparison with the murders of Archbishop Oscar Romero and four U.S. religious women in El Salvador in 1980 and 95 other priests murdered by state agents in U.S.-client states in Latin America was particularly revealing. The hypothesis that Popielusko's murder would receive more attention and indignation was not only confirmed for the individual victims, but the leading U.S. media also gave more coverage to Popielusko's murder than to all 100 victims in the U.S.-client states taken together, even though eight of the 100 were U.S. citizens.²⁵

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23. See Edward S. Herman, *The Real Terror Network* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1982) pp. 208-9.
24. At the time of this writing, the U.S. mainstream media were reporting on the U.N. investigation of Salvadoran state murders, expressing dismay that the Reagan administration lied and covered up the violence. But the mainstream media awoke too late, and they have failed to point out their own crucial role in not doing for the Salvadoran victims what they did for Popielusko. See, for example, Clifford Krauss, "How U.S. Actions Helped Hide Salvador Human Rights Abuses," *New York Times*, 21 March 1993, pp. 1, 10.
25. Herman and Chomsky, chapter 2, table 2-1, especially pp. 42-6. This chapter shows, for example, that Popielusko got 1183 column inches in the *New York Times*, versus 201 for the four murdered U.S. religious women and 605 for the 100 client-state victims taken together. It also shows that the quality of treatment was different; that is, the client state victims were treated more antiseptically and their injuries treated with minimal drama, so that they did not get humanized as Popielusko did. An earlier study by this writer of media attention to human rights victims in the former Soviet sphere and in U.S.-client states also showed that Soviet victims were given vastly greater attention than victims in the U.S. sphere of influence. See Herman, *Real Terror Network*, table 4-1, p. 197.

Media treatment of civilian-airliner shoot-downs affords another interesting comparison of media performance. The Soviet shoot-down of Korean Airliner flight 007 on 1 September 1983 occurred during a period when the Reagan administration was eagerly attempting to demonize the Soviet Union. The administration seized this opportunity to tar the Soviets as brutal and ruthless, and it organized a worldwide publicity campaign and boycott. The mainstream media joined the campaign with enthusiasm and passion, expressing great indignation and employing invidious language, such as "barbarian," "savage" and "cold-blooded murder," insistently pursuing the question of responsibility of high Soviet officials, and rejecting Soviet claims that the plane was on a spy mission, and that they were unaware that it was a civilian aircraft.²⁶ A *New York Times* editorial at the time asserted that "There is no conceivable excuse for any nation shooting down a harmless airliner."²⁷

When the Israeli air force shot down a Libyan civilian airliner in February 1973, however, the U.S. mass media never used dramatic language. It was termed only a "tragic accident," and the *New York Times* editorial on that occasion stated that "No useful purpose is served by an acrimonious debate over the assignment of blame for the downing of a Libyan airliner in the Sinai Peninsula last week."²⁸ The government and media together in this case kept publicity and indignation at a minimum.

Similarly, when the USS *Vincennes* shot down Iranian Airliner 655 on 3 July 1988, there was no invidious language employed or indignation expressed by the mainstream media, and it turned out that there *were* conceivable excuses for at least one nation "shooting down a harmless airliner." The victim could have been asking for it, or it could have been a "tragic error." The *New York*

26. For a discussion and illustrations of the dichotomous levels of publicity and word usage in connection with this and other plane shoot-downs, see Edward S. Herman, "Gatekeeper Versus Propaganda Models: A Critical American Perspective," in Peter Golding, Graham Murdock and Philip Schlesinger, eds., *Communicating Politics: Mass Communication and the Political Process* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986) pp. 181-95; Martin Lee and Norman Solomon, *Unreliable Sources* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1990) pp. 278-83.

27. *New York Times*, editorial, 2 September 1983, p. A18.

28. *New York Times*, editorial, 1 March 1973, p. 40.

Times editorial in this case concluded that "The onus for avoiding such accidents in the future rests on civilian aircraft: avoid combat zones; fly high; acknowledge warnings."²⁹ The mainstream media's focus in this case was on the "anguish" of the naval personnel ordering the shoot-down. The coverage was such that, according to opinion polls at the time, a majority of the public believed the downing of the civilian airliner was justified.³⁰

The service of the media to the state agenda in these cases extended beyond the differential levels of publicity and double standards to the abandonment of any concern for truth. Thus, in the case of the Soviet shoot-down of flight 007, the Reagan administration lied in claiming that the Soviets knew they were shooting down a civilian plane. This was finally acknowledged by the media in 1988, when Congressman Lee Hamilton disclosed the relevant information based on a Freedom of Information Act inquiry, which the media itself had never made.³¹

In the case of the Iranian Airbus, the press, having accepted the government line of "tragic error," but with some onus on the Iranians for having flown an airliner in a provocative way and having failed to answer signals, even failed to follow up on the facts when they were thrust upon them. Thus, in an article in the September 1989 issue of the *Proceedings of the U.S. Naval Institute*, David R. Carlson, Commander of the USS *Sides*, an escort frigate in the vicinity of the *Vincennes* at the time, wrote that he was disgusted with the apologies for the act, the attempts to blame the shoot-down on the Iranians and the idea that the *Vincennes* was "defending herself against an attack," which he said was based on a series of lies. According to Carlson,

When the decision was made to shoot down the Airbus, the airliner was climbing, not diving; it was showing the proper identification friend or foe — IFF (Mode III); and it was in the correct flight corridor from Bandar Abbas to Dubai. The *Vincennes* was never under attack by Iranian aircraft. There was no targeting being done by the Iranian P-3....The conduct of Iranian military forces in the

29. "In Captain Roger's Shoes," *New York Times*, editorial, 5 July 1988, p. A16.

30. Lee and Solomon, p. 281.

31. "The Lie That Wasn't Shot Down," *New York Times*, editorial reporting the Hamilton findings, 18 January 1988, p. A18.

month preceding the incident was pointedly nonthreatening....[Well before the shoot-down, the *Vincennes'* actions] appeared to be consistently aggressive, and had become a topic of wardroom conversation....'Robo Cruiser' was the unamusing nickname that someone jokingly came up with for her, and it stuck.³²

The story was sensationally newsworthy: An on-the-scene naval officer suggested that the shoot-down was not a "tragic error" but was based on the trigger-happy characteristics of a Rambo-like commander, and that the talk about Iranian errors and provocations was untrue. At the time, the *Washington Post* did publish a back-page article on the Carlson report, in which George Wilson suggested that Carlson's statements were "certain to refuel the controversy generated by the shooting."³³ But Wilson was wrong: The *New York Times*, which had accepted the official version of the incident, placing blame on the Iranians and focusing on "tragic error," did not touch the story, and no controversy ensued. Not until a July 1992 investigation by *Newsweek* and ABC News' "Nightline" did the full story become known in the mainstream media.³⁴

Another topic on which comparative data sheds light on the subservience of the media to the government's foreign policy aims is the handling of Third World elections in places of conflict. Some such elections are looked upon favorably by U.S. officials, and sometimes — as in the Dominican Republic in 1966 and El Salvador in 1982 and 1984 — the elections were even organized by U.S. officials, as a means of legitimizing the governments in place. In other cases, as in Nicaragua in 1984, the U.S. government sought to discredit an election that threatened to legitimate the Sandinista government, which U.S. officials were trying to overthrow.

El Salvador in 1982 and 1984, and Nicaragua in 1984, thus provide a virtually controlled experiment in media integrity or

32. David Carlson, "The *Vincennes* Incident," *Proceedings of the U.S. Naval Institute*, September 1989, pp. 87-92.

33. George Wilson, "Fellow Officer Faults USS *Vincennes* Skipper," *Washington Post*, 1 September 1989, p. A4.

34. "Sea of Lies," *Newsweek*, 13 July 1992, p. 29.

submissiveness. The U.S. government promoted the Salvadoran elections as marvels of democratic advance under adverse conditions, while trying to undermine and discredit the Nicaraguan election as a sham, even though facts did not support claims of superiority of the former election. In the case of El Salvador, the U.S. government agenda stressed the importance and excellence of the election. They focused on the long lines of smiling voters, the size of the turnout, rebel opposition and alleged efforts at disruption. Additionally, they downplayed the absence of fundamental conditions of a free election, such as the freedoms of press and assembly; the ability of all groups to run candidates; and freedom from state terror and coercive threats.

During the Nicaraguan election, the U.S. government agenda was exactly reversed. It called for a focus on the fundamental conditions and disregarded long lines, turnout and so on. This example is more telling because the basic conditions for a free election were more favorable in Nicaragua than in El Salvador. In El Salvador, the dissident media had been literally destroyed in 1980 and 1981, and more than a score of journalists had been murdered between 1980 and 1984.³⁵ In contrast, no journalists had been killed in Nicaragua under the Sandinistas and the opposition newspaper *La Prensa*, while harassed and censored, continued to publish.³⁶ Furthermore, in El Salvador, state terror reached dramatic levels, with hundreds of unarmed civilians killed each month during the two years prior to the March 1982 election and scores killed just before the one in March 1984.³⁷ No comparable state killings occurred in Nicaragua before its 1984 election. In Nicaragua, right-wing candidates ran without fear of murder, while all the left-wing candidates in El Salvador were on army death lists and could not safely run — nor was it intended that they run. Finally, voting was required by law in El Salvador, but not in Nicaragua. This made the voter turnout less meaningful in El Salvador than in Nicaragua, especially in light of the atmosphere of fear and state terror in the former.

35. Herman and Chomsky, pp. 97-8.

36. For a good discussion of these comparative conditions and media treatment of them, see Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions*, pp. 41-3.

37. Herman and Chomsky, pp. 105-7.

It is highly significant, therefore, that the mainstream media followed the U.S. government's agenda in the two sets of elections, without notable deviation. They gave intense coverage to the Salvadoran elections, played up the long lines and turnout — but without mentioning the voting requirement — and stressed alleged rebel attempts to disrupt the elections. Yet these media completely bypassed the absence of the basic conditions needed for a free election. For the Nicaraguan election, the mainstream media ignored the turnout and efforts of the Contras — and the United States — to disrupt the election. They focussed incessantly on the trials and tribulations of *La Prensa* and the complaints and eventual withdrawal from candidacy of Arturo Cruz, who — it was later disclosed — was on the CIA payroll.³⁸

In its 28 articles on the 1984 Salvadoran election, for example, the *New York Times* never mentioned freedom of the press or the ability of candidates to run without fear of murder; whereas in its 21 news articles on the Nicaraguan election in that year, eight (38 percent) discussed free speech and assembly; six (29 percent) discussed freedom of the press; and 11 (52 percent) discussed the freedom of candidates to run in the election.³⁹

What makes this tabulation so telling is that the media, in following the government agenda, not only failed to look at whether the basic conditions of free elections were present in the favored countries, but they also asked different questions in the two sets of elections. The mainstream media then followed the government in finding that the Salvadoran elections had legitimized the government, which was democratic and “elected,” whereas the Nicaraguan government was found by the media to be illegitimate and “unelected,” despite the technical and substantive superiority of the Nicaraguan election. The gearing of media newsmaking to the propaganda demands of government policy could hardly have been closer.

38. First disclosed in the *Wall Street Journal*, 23 April 1985, this CIA funding was admitted by Cruz himself in Stephen Kinzer, “Ex-Contra Looks Back, Finding Much to Regret,” *New York Times*, 8 January 1988, p. 3.

39. For a full tabulation and discussion, see Herman and Chomsky, pp. 132-7.

TELEVISION WAR IN THE PERSIAN GULF

The Grenada and Panama invasions during the 1980s and the Gulf War in 1991 were military successes, but disastrous media failures. In part, the failures were a result of military restrictions on access, but the media did not react to these official constraints by more aggressive investigative and reporting efforts in areas open to them, nor did they struggle very energetically to get the restraints removed. In the cases of Grenada and Panama, once the great military triumphs over two of the tiniest countries in the world were completed, and officials turned their attention elsewhere — the mainstream media dutifully did the same.

The Gulf War was a larger scale effort, with greater international dimensions, and its preparation and the war itself were of longer duration, even though the imbalance of forces between the West and Iraq was overwhelming. This meant that there was more room for debate and public discussion before the outbreak of hostilities. The main attention in what follows will be on this early period before the Gulf War, when the media could have fostered a democratic debate on issues of war and peace.

Phase I: 2 August 1990 to 15 January 1991

Following the occupation of Kuwait by Iraq on 2 August 1990, the Bush administration very quickly decided to use this invasion for President George Bush's political advantage, by compelling Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein to leave Kuwait "with his tail between his legs," in Defense Secretary Richard Cheney's memorable phrase.⁴⁰ This required fending off all attempts at a negotiated settlement that would have allowed Saddam a dignified exit, and readying the public for war.

The media's role was crucial in this public relations and propaganda exercise. The Reagan-Bush administration had actively supported Iraq's aggression against Iran from 1980 to 1988; and the Bush administration continued to aid and appease Saddam Hussein through 31 July 1990. On 25 July 1990, a week before the invasion, April Glaspie, U.S. ambassador to Iraq, had assured

40. Richard Cheney, "Remarks of Defense Secretary Richard Cheney on American Defense Preparedness," Federal News Service, 10 December 1990.

Saddam that the United States had no opinion on his conflict with Kuwait. And on 31 July, John Kelly, assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs — the highest-ranking Bush official directly concerned with Middle Eastern affairs — told a congressional committee that the United States had no obligation to defend Kuwait.⁴¹ Numerous CIA alerts that Iraq was amassing troops on the Kuwaiti border and that an invasion was imminent did not cause the Bush administration to issue a warning. It was important for Bush's freedom of action that both his virtual go-ahead to the August invasion and the prior appeasement policy be buried. The media obliged, by giving these issues negligible attention.⁴²

As Bush was allegedly taking a high moral stance against "naked aggression," it was also important that the background of Reagan-Bush support of Iraq's aggression against Iran be ignored. Furthermore, less than a year before Iraq's invasion, the Bush administration had invaded Panama, in violation of the U.N. and Organization of American States (OAS) Charters and in the face of a U.N. oppositional majority, vetoed by the United States. South Africa had been ordered to leave Namibia by U.N. resolution and World Court judgment from 1968 — and regularly invaded Angola from Namibia from 1975 into the 1980s. But Reagan-Bush policy in that case was "quiet diplomacy" and "constructive engagement," with the United States supporting a "linkage" between South Africa's gradual withdrawal from Namibia and the departure of Cuban troops from Angola. Israel was also in long-standing violation of Security Council orders to leave the occupied territories, which had not led to cutbacks in massive U.S. aid, let alone sanctions or bombing. Attention to these double standards would have called into question the purity of Bush's insistence that aggression could never be allowed to stand. The

41. On the pre-war appeasement of Saddam Hussein, see Murray Wass, "Who Lost Kuwait?," *Village Voice*, 16-22 January 1991, pp. 60ff.

42. Basic sources cited here are: Douglas Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992); Hamid Mowlana, George Gerbner and Herbert I. Schiller, eds., *Triumph of the Image: The Media's War in the Persian Gulf — A Global Perspective* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992); and John McArthur, *Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).

media obliged by rarely, if ever, allowing these matters to surface.⁴³

Similarly, the media avoided a number of other issues that would have inconvenienced the administration. The United States had long failed to meet its legal obligations to U.N. financing, had withdrawn from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and was far and away the dominant user of the veto against U.N. attempts to oppose violations of international law. It simply ignored a 1986 World Court decision that its attacks on Nicaragua constituted an "unlawful use of force." In the case of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, however, with the Soviet veto and military capability no longer an obstruction, the United States was able to mobilize the United Nations to attack this particular violator of international law. The administration's double standard here and the turnabout in treatment of U.N. authority were dramatic, but were essentially ignored in the mainstream U.S. media, which reproduced the U.S. official view that the United Nations was finally resuming its proper role in maintaining the peace.⁴⁴

In addition to the decontextualization of issues just described, the Bush administration depended heavily on U.S. mass-media cooperation in its various strategies for mobilizing consent, all of which involved the use of traditional propaganda techniques. One such technique was the demonization of Saddam Hussein, who, like Qadhafi and Noriega in earlier years, was made into the embodiment of evil and "another Hitler." Effective propaganda required that the mass media repeat these claims and disclose the evidence of the new villain's evil acts, but avoid mention not only of any positive features of his rule, but also that the villain was nurtured for a long time by the U.S. government and treated with parallel apologetics by the mainstream media — as a "pragmatist,"

43. Kellner, pp. 89-97 and *passim*.

44. See Chomsky, "The Media and the War: What War?" in Mowlana, Gerbner and Schiller, pp. 60-61.

with the evils now featured, then glossed over.⁴⁵ Demonization was accompanied by new atrocity stories, often inflated and sometimes wholly fabricated. A classic was the alleged Iraqi removal of several hundred babies from incubators in Kuwaiti hospitals following the occupation. This story, created by a Kuwait-financed propaganda operation, was accepted and transmitted without verification by the mainstream media, and was still repeated by CNN and others long after it had been shown to be a complete fabrication.⁴⁶

An important part of the Bush administration's Gulf War program was to place a large U.S. force in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Middle East. This allowed the media to focus on military maneuvers, and to bond them and the public with U.S. soldiers facing a ruthless enemy. This was accomplished, first, by claiming that Iraq was planning to invade Saudi Arabia. This claim was almost certainly a propaganda lie, as Iraq consistently asserted that it had no such intention, had insufficient troops and supplies for such an operation, and such action would have been a suicidal declaration of war against the United States. The U.S. mainstream media nevertheless accepted the official version without question and quickly urged vigorous military action against Iraq.⁴⁷

Having put a large U.S. force in place, the Bush administration enlarged it substantially, immediately after the November 1990 elections. With U.S. soldiers in the region, the media cooperatively spent a large portion of their organizational resources in exploring military deployments, possible scenarios of war and the conditions and opinions of U.S. soldiers. This not only diverted attention from real issues, but also readied the public for war.

45. On earlier media apologetics for Noriega, see Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 150-58; and Lee and Solomon, pp. 316-17; on the earlier whitewash on Saddam Hussein, Scott Armstrong refers to him as "the man who charmed the pants off many American leaders and journalists in the 1970s," providing citations from Evans and Novak, the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, in "Sixty-Four Questions in Search of an Answer," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November-December 1990, pp. 23-4.

46. Kellner, pp. 67-71.

47. *ibid.*, pp. 13-29; and Pierre Salinger and Eric Laurent, *Secret Dossier: The Hidden Agenda Behind the Gulf War*, pp. 110-47.

The most important official lie and greatest media service to the war policy was on the question of diplomacy. Crucial to the Bush strategy was averting a diplomatic solution, as noted by Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*: The diplomatic track needed to be blocked, lest negotiations “defuse the crisis” while allowing Iraq “a few token gains.”⁴⁸ The administration therefore carefully subverted an early Arab effort at resolution of the crisis.⁴⁹ Iraq itself, taken aback by the Bush administration’s furious reaction, made at least five diplomatic approaches and proposals, all summarily rejected by the United States.⁵⁰ The French and Russians also tried to open diplomatic lines, to no avail.⁵¹ In this process, the mainstream media served administration policy by giving minimal attention to these diplomatic efforts and their immediate rejection by the United States. In the end, when the Bush administration kept repeating that the United States had tried and exhausted the diplomatic option, the media also accepted this as true.⁵²

The significance of this lie and its media support is highlighted by a national public opinion poll reported in the *Washington Post* in January 1991.⁵³ It indicated that two-thirds of the U.S. public favored a conference on the Arab-Israeli conflict, if that would lead to an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait — though the poll was biased against a positive response, as it indicated that the Bush administration was opposed to the proposal. About one week earlier a diplomatic proposal had been floated by the Iraqi govern-

48. Thomas Friedman, “Confrontation in the Gulf: Behind Bush’s Hard Line,” *New York Times*, 22 August 1990, p. 1.

49. See Kellner, pp. 30-1; and Salinger and Laurent, pp. 110-14.

50. Kellner, pp. 31-7.

51. *ibid.*, pp. 37, 318-35.

52. *ibid.*; and Thomas Friedman, “Pax Americana: What the United States Has Taken on in the Gulf, Besides a War,” *New York Times*, 20 January 1991, sec. 4, p. 1. Friedman reported the urgency for the administration of avoiding diplomacy, as noted in the text above, then later repeated without qualification, in the 20 January article, the administration claim that it had exhausted all diplomatic options — “Now that diplomacy has failed and it has come to war...” — a wonderful illustration of a reporter’s doublethink capability.

53. Charles Krauthammer, “War and Public Opinion,” *Washington Post*, 11 January 1991, p. A21. This poll is discussed in Chomsky’s chapter in Mowlana, Gerbner and Schiller, eds., pp. 58-9.

ment, supported by the exiled Iraqi democratic opposition,⁵⁴ which embodied the elements of the resolution supported by at least two-thirds of the U.S. public. The Iraqi proposal was flatly rejected by the Bush administration, and went virtually unreported by the U.S. mass media. That is to say, the media suppressed and failed to allow or encourage a debate on a political solution favored by the public. Instead, it allowed the administration to pull the country into war, based on a media-sustained lie that all the diplomatic routes had been exhausted.

Phase II — The War: 16 January to 27 February 1991

During the war proper, access to military personnel was closely controlled by a system in which journalists were selected, organized into pools and accompanied by military personnel, making for exceptional reliance on government handouts. The aim was to get the media to focus on the new U.S. weaponry, to convey the image of a clean war, to minimize images of human suffering and to give the impression of war-makers in full control of the situation.

The result was one of the great successes in the history of war propaganda. The media were incorporated into a system of serious censorship with only mild protests,⁵⁵ focused throughout on precisely what the censors wanted, and helped produce a genuine war hysteria. The control of information by government "couldn't be done any better," stated Michael Deaver, the number two image-making official in the Reagan administration.⁵⁶ Douglas Kellner, in his extensive examination of media coverage, concluded that the mainstream media

presented incredible PR for the military, inundating the country with images of war and the new high-tech military for months, while the brutality of war was normalized and even glamorized in the uncritical media coverage. Throughout the Persian Gulf TV

54. *ibid.*, pp. 55-6. This opposition vigorously opposed the Bush administration's war policy. The Bush administration, however, was not interested in and did not encourage or even talk about this opposition; and the media followed in line.

55. The process of integration is well discussed in McArthur, especially chapters 1 and 5.

56. Alex S. Jones, "War in the Gulf," *New York Times*, 15 February 1991, p. A9.

war, the culture of militarism became the mainstream culture after a period when war and the military were in disfavor.⁵⁷

During the war, the media passed on innumerable rumors and official and unofficial fabrications concerning the size of Iraq's forces in Kuwait and chemical and other arms capabilities, alleged exclusive Iraqi responsibility for oil spills, the number of Iraqi hostages taken from Kuwait in the final Iraqi exodus and the legitimacy of U.S. targeting.⁵⁸ Although it was clear from official statements during the war that the United States was deliberately destroying the infrastructure of Iraq beyond military necessity, the media rarely, if ever, examined this or discussed its compatibility with the U.N. mandate or international law and morality. When U.S. officials adamantly claimed that an infant-formula factory destroyed in Baghdad actually made biological weapons, the U.S. media accepted this as true, despite the fact that CNN reporter Peter Arnett's and Iraqi officials' denials of these claims were confirmed by numerous independent sources.⁵⁹

When the U.S. military engaged in its final orgy of massacre on the so-called Highway of Death, destroying thousands of fleeing Iraqi soldiers and, almost surely, thousands of Kuwaiti hostages and other refugees, the U.S. media provided an apologetic cover: They averted their eyes to a maximum degree, failed to discuss the use of napalm-fragmentation bombs and fuel air bombs, stressed that the fleeing Iraqis were "looters," ignored the large numbers of hostages and refugees — although they had given close attention to the earlier claims of Iraqi hostages taken from Kuwait — and repeated the official explanation that it was important to destroy Iraq's military capability. At the same time, they failed to note the limited U.N. mandate and international

57. Kellner, p. 421.

58. *ibid.*, chaps. 3-5.

59. *ibid.*, pp. 203-6.

law condemning the slaughter of fleeing soldiers, and the burial of large numbers of them in unmarked graves.⁶⁰

Phase III — The Aftermath: 28 February 1991 to the present

The euphoria following the pulverization of an overmatched Third World country continued for some months but eventually faded as neglected domestic problems came to the fore, and as the results of the war came under closer scrutiny. Belated attention was given to the earlier appeasement policy and the Bush administration's role in building up Saddam Hussein's military establishment, although almost nothing was said of the administration's virtual invitation to Iraq to invade Kuwait and its subsequent complete refusal to allow a diplomatic resolution of the conflict. The fact that the "allied" military effort stopped short of removing "another Hitler" but left him with just enough arms to crush dissident and oppressed Kurds, Shi'ite Iraqis and any democratic opposition was noted, but its full implications were not discussed. There was some publicity given to the fact that the Bush administration and the CIA had encouraged the Kurds to fight, but virtually none was given to the administration's refusal to provide arms to them in their fight against Saddam Hussein.

Although the United States was again selling arms to the Middle East on a massive scale, this was barely noted in the media and was not contrasted with earlier pious claims about bringing a new era of peace to that area of the world. The media touched very lightly on the fact that the fight for democratic principles did not include bringing democracy to Kuwait or Saudi Arabia. Little attention was paid to the retaliatory killings in Kuwait, which may have exceeded the inflated and indignantly publicized Iraqi executions of Kuwaitis.⁶¹

60. *ibid.*, chap. 9. After the war was over, it was also disclosed that the U.S. military had buried alive hundreds or even thousands of Iraqi soldiers by bulldozing in their trenches with sand cover — in another episode of doubtful legality as well as morality. The U.S. mainstream media, which had failed to pick up this process as war news, gave it minimal attention and an apologetic twist when disclosure finally came in September 1991. See Nancy Watt Rosenfeld, "Buried Alive," *Lies of Our Times*, October 1991, pp. 12-13.

61. Kellner, pp. 399-404, 429-30.

Most notable in the aftermath coverage was the continued attention to Iraq's obstructions and refusals to allow inspections, overflights and destruction of its military resources. This was the basis for the continued limitations on Iraqi trade and oil sales and made more difficult its recovery from the "near apocalyptic conditions" reported by a U.N. team in June 1991.⁶² In perfect accord with the U.S. foreign-policy agenda, the media paid almost no attention to Iraqi civilian hunger, sickness and death, but focused unrelentingly on Iraq's alleged foot-dragging on weapons control.

In sum, in the three phases of the Gulf War, U.S. mass media coverage was to an extraordinary degree a servant of official policy. In the crucial months before the war, they allowed themselves to be managed in the service of war mobilization and failed to provide the factual and opinion basis for public evaluation. Then and later the mainstream media served ongoing government policy, not the democratic polity.

CONCLUDING NOTE

Both structural analysis and empirical evidence of media performance support the view that the mainstream media tend to follow a state agenda in reporting on foreign policy, and that their alleged adversarial posture reflects tactical differences among the elite, along with factional demands that the media function as a public relations arm of the government. The *real* problem, however, is the already high level of subservience to government agendas and the media's consistent failure to provide context, and to encourage or even to allow debates extending to fundamental criticism. These failings are incompatible with the media's acknowledged obligation to serve the informational needs of a democracy.



62. See Patrick E. Tyler, "U.S. Officials Believe Iraq Will Take Years to Rebuild," *New York Times*, 3 June 1991, p. A1.