

Unchecked sources: The media and a culture of fear

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [May 15, 2007](#) issue

Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser in the Carter administration, believes that the Bush administration's use of the term "war on terror" has created a culture of fear that's had "a pernicious impact on American democracy, on America's psyche and on U.S. standing in the world" (*Washington Post*, March 25).

A compliant U.S. media, eager for slogans to toss to the public, has been a partner in promoting the "war on terror." The *Washington Post*, to cite just one example, carried at least 140 front-page stories making the case for the attack on Iraq, and editorialized in favor of the war at least 27 times. The press contributed, says Brzezinski, to turning the term "war on terror" into "a national mantra":

[The term has] undermined our ability to effectively confront the real challenges we face from fanatics who may use terrorism against us. . . . The damage these three words have done—a classic self-inflicted wound—is infinitely greater than any wild dreams entertained by the fanatical perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks when they were plotting against us in distant Afghan caves.

Yet the term is meaningless, adds Brzezinski. There is no such thing as a war on terror because the term defines "neither a geographic context nor our presumed enemies. Terrorism is not an enemy but a technique of warfare—political intimidation through the killing of unarmed noncombatants."

The horrific events of 9/11 were acts of terror, not acts of war. On the day of the attack, ABC anchor Peter Jennings was virtually alone in referring to the Twin Towers in New York City as a "crime scene."

The "enemy" that day was not an identifiable aggressor but an unknown opponent that could strike anywhere and anytime. Anger at the attacks blocked out rational thinking and made it relatively easy to create and perpetuate a climate of fear. But

the fear could not have been so well fed without the endorsement and help of media messengers. In his PBS documentary *Buying the War*, Bill Moyers presents a devastating indictment of journalists who spoke out during the war buildup with facts that were either misleading or just plain wrong.

In the documentary, some of those journalists acknowledge that they were wrong. Others, including Thomas Friedman, Bill Kristol, Roger Ailes, Charles Krauthammer and Judith Miller, refused to speak to Moyers. William Safire, who also declined to appear, had predicted a quick war that would end with Iraqis cheering their liberators; he wrote 27 opinion pieces “fanning the sparks of war” (*Editor and Publisher*, April 19).

The media support was essential to gaining congressional support for war. Says Brzezinski: “The war of choice in Iraq could never have gained the congressional support it got without the psychological linkage between the shock of 9/11 and the postulated existence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.”

Five years later, “war on terror” is still an acceptable term in the American media, but not elsewhere. The London *Observer* reported that the Foreign Office told British cabinet ministers to drop the phrase, and that “neither British Prime Minister Tony Blair nor Margaret Beckett, Britain’s Foreign Secretary, has used the term ‘war on terror’ in a formal speech since June, 2006” (December 10, 2006).

In America we continue to hear about the “war on terror,” and there are signals that another war may lie ahead. According to Brzezinski, this next war is backed by “a false historical narrative” that compares the war on terror to struggles against Nazism and Stalinism. The Bush administration, he says, “could be preparing the case for war with Iran.”

Once again, journalists like Michael R. Gordon (*New York Times*) are helping to make the case. Gordon and Judith Miller served as *Times* conduits for the administration in promoting the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and Gordon still talks to administration insiders. Gordon reports that the most lethal weapon used against American soldiers in Iraq comes from Iran, and says that this claim reflects “broad agreement among American intelligence agencies” (February 10).

Moyers pressed Walter Isaacson, chair and CEO of CNN News Group, about his network’s coverage of events leading up to the war. Isaacson admitted that “we didn’t question our sources enough,” but explained that there was a sort of

“patriotism police” after 9/11. When the network showed civilian casualties, he said, it would get phone calls from advertisers and the administration. “Big people in corporations were calling up and saying, ‘You’re being anti-American here.’”

What was the source of all the information making the case for war? Greg Mitchell of *Editor and Publisher* (April 21) quotes Moyers as saying, “Of the 414 Iraq stories broadcast on NBC, ABC and CBS nightly news in the six months before the war, almost all could be traced back to sources solely in the White House, Pentagon or State Department.”