

Media casualties: Embedded with the military

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The 24/7 news coverage of the Iraq war is often riveting television, but it is not necessarily good journalism. The journalists embedded with coalition forces can't do what journalists usually do: make sure they get the story correct before they go with it, and set the facts in a larger context. When embedded reporters comment on the action unfolding before their eyes, their reporting seems highly realistic, but it is in fact highly distorted—it shows only a very narrow slice of the war, told from a very particular angle.

Furthermore, the reporters are dependent upon the military not just for getting the story but for their own safety. “Journalists now eat, sleep and live with the military in order to bond with them and report their triumphs,” said Marc Peyser of *Newsweek*. “It has been a smashing success for the government—and an utter disaster for the state of American journalism.”

If the journalists on the battlefield are embedded with the soldiers, it seems that their bosses in New York and Washington are in bed with the Bush administration, cheering on the war rather than reporting it or asking tough questions about the conduct of the war. In a rare moment of self-disclosure, CBS news anchor Dan Rather admitted in an interview that the American news media are engaged in self-censorship. No news journalist wants to be viewed as unpatriotic, including himself, Rather confessed. “It is fear that keeps journalists from asking the toughest of the tough questions,” he said. Curious, isn't it, that Rather made this confession to a non-American news source (the BBC)?

One measure of the current state of journalism is the career of Bob Woodward. In the 1970s he was one of the investigative reporters who got to the bottom of the Watergate scandal, which eventually brought down the Nixon administration. Now, as a seasoned writer and editor, he's written a book, *Bush at War*, that Eric Alterman (in *What Liberal Media?*) calls a lengthy epic poem lauding Bush's leadership. “The

impression this report created was not unlike that of an official Soviet-era account of the Great Patriotic War.”

Tough questions need to be asked. For example, how accurate are the precision bombs and missiles? (In the 1991 gulf war, large claims were made about the precision of missile attacks, claims which later proved to be false.) The media should also persist in asking about the outcomes of the war. What are U.S. plans for a post-Saddam Iraq? Why is the U.S. reluctant to involve the United Nations in those plans? If weapons of mass destruction are never found, does that invalidate the war effort? Are preemptive strikes being planned against other states? And what is the U.S. doing to work toward a just and workable solution to the Palestinian problem?

Bush has indicated that he aims to bring not just regime change but democracy to Iraq. Democracy at home is precious too, and it requires media that are not cowed either by government power or by a public that prefers waving the flag to hearing hard and complex truths.