

# A muzzled media: Manipulated into war

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [October 18, 2003](#) issue

The chief international correspondent of CNN, Christiane Amanpour, was asked her opinion of the U.S. media's coverage of the Iraq war. She responded: "I think the press was muzzled and I think the press self-muzzled. Television . . . was intimidated by the [Bush] administration and its foot soldiers at Fox News." For her honesty, Amanpour was immediately branded by one of those Fox foot soldiers as a "spokeswoman for al-Qaeda."

Columnist Eric Margolis, writing in the *Toronto Sun*, reports that he has experienced similar attacks for criticizing the war reporting. "I felt for Amanpour, having myself been slandered by the U.S. neoconservative media as a 'friend of Saddam' for disputing White House claims about Iraq." Margolis charges that "reporters who failed to toe the line were barred or had their access to military and government officials limited, virtually ending some careers."

Why was the public so easily persuaded to accept what Amanpour politely describes as "high-level disinformation" from war advocates? Margolis has a suggestion: "Night after night, networks featured 'experts' who droned on about Iraq's fearsome weapons of mass destruction that posed an imminent threat to the U.S."

We now know that Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction. And the link to al-Qaeda? No less an authority than President Bush himself declared, his face assuming that innocent look beloved by many, that no one in his administration ever claimed a connection between Iraq and al-Qaeda.

Well, perhaps. But before and during the invasion of Iraq, in the context of the national paranoia created by events of 9/11, a compliant media, led by the Fox network, had no trouble recruiting expert commentators eager to go on television and make the connection. Purveyors and distributors of "high-level disinformation" convinced 70 percent of the American public that there was a link between Iraq and 9/11, just as they persuaded the public that the U.S. was in immediate danger of

attacks by Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

A self-muzzled press and a public traumatized by 9/11 were manipulated by politicians. When President Bush asked the United Nations on September 12, 2002, to join the U.S. in an invasion of Iraq, he made his case by citing Amnesty International reports on human rights abuses there. British journalist Glen Rangwala reports that Amnesty resented being used by the White House to justify “a war of aggression.”

Nor was Amnesty willing to let the president forget that during Ronald Reagan’s presidency (when George Bush’s father was vice president), human rights abuses were ignored when it suited U.S. foreign policy.

“The U.S. and other Western governments turned a blind eye to Amnesty International reports of widespread human rights violations in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war, and ignored Amnesty’s campaign on behalf of the thousands of unarmed Kurdish civilians killed in the 1988 attacks on Halabja.”

Halabja, a Kurdish town in the north of Iraq, was the site of the horrific attack that occurred in March 1988 during the Iraq-Iran war. This atrocity was the source of the administration’s mantra—we had to get rid of Saddam Hussein because “he gassed his own people.” It was no coincidence that as public support of the occupation of Iraq was starting to erode, Secretary of State Colin Powell traveled there recently with a media entourage and visited family members of the 5,000 who died in Halabja. Powell and his advisers must have been hoping that the media reports would not discuss U.S.-Iraqi relations at the time of the Halabja attack, when the U.S. was supporting Hussein.

To his credit, the *Chicago Tribune*’s Mike Dorning added this historic note: “At the time of the [1988] attacks, Iraq was at war with Iran and the United States provided military assistance to the Hussein regime. Iraq also used chemical weapons against Iran going back to the early 1980s.”

In 1988, when Powell was serving on the National Security Council, a reporter asked him if the U.S. had been “indifferent to the attacks on Halabja at the time.” Powell’s answer: “It was roundly condemned.”

But Andrew and Patrick Cockburn, in their book *Out of The Ashes: The Resurrection of Saddam Hussein*, write that “when Iraqi warplanes showered sarin, tabun and

mustard gas on the inhabitants of Halabja in March 1988, the world's governments stayed mute. No one . . . wished to discommodate Saddam Hussein, the hammer of the ayatollahs." The U.S. remained silent about the attack for several months and continued to support Iraq in its war against Iran.

During his September visit to Halabja, Powell told reporters that "if you ever needed greater evidence of the crimes of Saddam Hussein or any more reaffirmation that what we did was the correct course of action, you could see it in the faces of the people who were in the crowd."

Some in the crowd held up printed signs, including one that read, "My family was lost to Saddam's WMD." The sign was in English, which suggests it was not for local consumption but for an American public that already linked Saddam with WMD.