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# THE BLACK HOLE OF TV WAR REPORTING

Frank Rich

Should we never have watched at all? So Barbara Bush had instructed us in an interview the day before the Iraq war began. The president's mother said she would watch "none" of TV's war coverage because "90 percent" of it would be speculative. She continued: "Why should we hear about body bags and deaths and how many, what day it's gonna happen? ... It's not relevant. So why should I waste my beautiful mind on something like that?"

A beautiful mind is indeed a terrible thing to waste, but not having one, I took Mrs. Bush's words as the see-no-evil musing of a mom spinning for her son. But now I realize she was prescient. A survey by the *Los Angeles Times* last weekend found that 69 percent of Americans turned to the three cable news networks first for war coverage—with newspapers, local TV news, regular network news and the Internet trailing far behind. But to what end? If cable has taught us anything during "War in Iraq," it is this: Battalions of anchors and high-tech correspondents can cover a war 24 hours a day and still tell us less about what is going on than the mere 27 predigital news hounds who accompanied the American troops landing in Normandy on D-Day.

Speculation, while rampant, has in some ways been the least of the coverage's ills. By this point we instinctively know that whenever a rent-a-general walks over to a map, it's time to take a latrine break. What has most defined this TV war on cable is the networks' insistence on letting their own scorched-earth campaigns for brand supremacy run roughshod over the real action. The conveying of actual news often seems subsidiary to their mission to out-flag-wave one another and to make their own personnel the leading players in the drama.

For anchors like Brian Williams and Wolf Blitzer, Kuwait City is a backdrop that lends a certain amount of gravitas (though not as much as it would have in the last Gulf War), but couldn't they anchor just as well from New York? It's not as if they're vying to interview the locals. While a study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism found that reports from "embedded" journalists were 94 percent accurate, it also determined that in only 20 percent of those reports did the correspondents share the screen with anyone else.

There's almost nothing in the war, it seems, that cannot be exploited as a network promo. Fox's anchors trumpeted an idle remark by General Richard Myers that "reporters just have to be fair and balanced, that's all" as an official endorsement of the network's "fair and balanced" advertising slogan. At CNN, a noble effort by Sanjay Gupta, an embedded medical reporter, to rescue an injured 2-year-old Iraqi boy performing on-the-scene brain surgery was

milmed for live reports. Gupta himself declared that "it was a heroic attempt to try to save the child's life after the child had died.

As for MSNBC—last in war, last in peace, last in the Nielsens with or without "Donahue"—the battles for Basra and Baghdad were more bagatelles compared with its take-no-prisoners battle with Fox to emerge as the most patriotic news channel in the land. Who was the most "treasonous" villain in the war? MSNBC says it was Fox's Geraldo Rivera, who revealed U.S. troop movements on camera. Fox says it was MSNBC's Peter Arnett, who gave an interview to Iraqi TV. As the two networks stoked the flames of this bonfire of the vanities, neither took time out from their proxy war to devote much (if any) coverage to an actual treason. That would be Sergeant Asan Akbar of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne, who was arrested (then charged with murder) in the fragging incidents that led to the deaths of two soldiers and the wounding of at least 14 others. How fleeting was his infamy.

But it's not only that story that has vanished from view. Whatever happened to Afghanistan, Al Qaeda, the Israelis and the Palestinians? TV viewers in America are now on more intimate terms with Aaron Brown and Shep Smith's perceptions of the war than with the collective thoughts of all those soon-to-be liberated "Iraqi people" they keep apotheosising.

Iraqis are the better-seen-than-heard dress extras in this drama, alternately pictured as sobbing, snarling or cheering. Even Saddam Hussein remains a villain from stock, since the specific history of his reign of terror gets far less airtime than the tacky décor of his palaces and the circular information-free debates about whether he's dead or alive. When Victoria Clarke at the Pentagon says Saddam is responsible for "decades and decades of torture and oppression the likes of which I think the world has not ever seen before," no one on Fox or MSNBC is going to gainsay her by bringing up Hitler and Stalin. To so much as suggest that the world may have seen thugs even more evil than Saddam is to engage in moral relativism—which, in the prevailing Foxspeak of the moment, is itself tantamount to treason.

The most violent images have been kept off American television. "It's a news judgment where we would of course be mindful of the sensibilities of our viewers," a CNN spokeswoman told *The Wall Street Journal*, explaining her network's decision to minimize the savagery and blood of warfare.

All the American networks and much of print journalism have made a similar decision—even though some on-air correspondents, notably ABC's Ted Koppel, have questioned it. Of course, no reader

or viewer should be inundated with gore. But when movies like "Saving Private Ryan" and "Black Hawk Down" arrived, they were widely applauded for the innovative realism of their battle scenes. Wouldn't it make sense that media depictions of an actual war at least occasionally adhere to the same standard? Is the decision to sanitize "War in Iraq" really a matter of "news judgment" or is it driven by business? Certainly, horrific images would make it tough, if not impossible, to sell commercials—which returned with accelerating frequency to the cable networks after the altruistic first few days of the war.

As a result, the pre-war joke, that this war would be the ultimate reality show, has come true. Its life-and-death perils are airbrushed whenever possible in the same soothing style as the artificial perils of "Survivor."

BBC, which is commercial-free, refused to turn away when blood splashed on its camera lens late last Sunday night during its first-hand report on the friendly fire incident that killed 19 Kurds. Then again, the unsparing first-hand written accounts of battle in the major newspapers—Dexter Filkins of *The New York Times*

described literal eye-for-eye combat near Baghdad last weekend—are not replicated by the verbal story—telling of many TV correspondents either.

Appearing recently on Jon Stewart's "Daily Show," Anthony Swofford, the former marine who wrote the best-selling *Jarhead* about his experience in the 1991 Gulf War, said he had shut off his TV after three or four days and "stayed with the print." For all the TV pictures, he noted, "the actual experience of combat doesn't make it to the other side of the screen."

He and Mrs. Bush are not alone in tuning out. By late March, cable-news ratings had fallen roughly 20 percent from their early highs. A war presented with minimal battlefield realism, canned jingoism and scant debate is going to pall as television no less than it does as journalism. At this rate, it may be only days before SARS sends Iraq into the same memory hole now occupied by the rest of the Middle East, assuming a resurgence of child abductions doesn't come along to trump them both. ■

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## IRAQ: A LETTER OF RESIGNATION

*The following is the text of John Brady Kiesling's letter of resignation to Secretary of State Colin L. Powell. Mr. Kiesling is a career diplomat who has served in United States embassies from Tel Aviv to Casablanca to Yerevan.*

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I am writing you to submit my resignation from the Foreign Service of the United States and from my position as Political Counselor in U.S. Embassy Athens, effective March 7. I do so with a heavy heart. The baggage of my upbringing included a felt obligation to give something back to my country. Service as a U.S. diplomat was a dream job. I was paid to understand foreign languages and cultures, to seek out diplomats, politicians, scholars and journalists, and to persuade them that U.S. interests and theirs fundamentally coincided. My faith in my country and its values was the most powerful weapon in my diplomatic arsenal.

It is inevitable that during twenty years with the State Department I would become more sophisticated and cynical about the narrow and selfish bureaucratic motives that sometimes shaped our policies. Human nature is what it is, and I was rewarded and promoted for understanding human nature. But until this Administration it had been possible to believe that by upholding the policies of my

president I was also upholding the interests of the American people and the world. I believe it no longer.

The policies we are now asked to advance are incompatible not only with American values but also with American interests. Our fervent pursuit of war with Iraq is driving us to squander the international legitimacy that has been America's most potent weapon of both offense and defense since the days of Woodrow Wilson. We have begun to dismantle the largest and most effective web of international relationships the world has ever known. Our current course will bring instability and danger, not security.

The sacrifice of global interests to domestic politics and to bureaucratic self-interest is nothing new, and it is certainly not a uniquely American problem. Still, we have not seen such systematic distortion of intelligence, such systematic manipulation of American opinion, since the war in Vietnam. The September 11 tragedy left us stronger than before, rallying around us a vast international coalition to cooperate for the first time in a systematic way against the threat of terrorism. But rather than take credit for those successes and build on them, this Administration has chosen to make terrorism a domestic political tool, enlisting a scattered and largely defeated Al Qaeda as its bureaucratic ally. We spread disproportionate terror and confusion in the public mind, arbitrarily