

Mission Unaccomplished

Meet the press—and see why it failed at several crucial points during the Iraq War.

Long after the Iraq War went south, when its failures could no longer be minimized, the elite newspapers and weeklies finally got around to offering sound analyses and asking the Bush Administration tough questions. It took them long enough—not until after December 2003, by which time the war was underway and its damage irreversible.

And yet the elite print press still hasn't managed a serious evaluation of its own reporting in the early years of the war. There have been discrete examinations, focused on a specific newspaper or subject, such as Howard Kurtz's review of *The Washington Post's* pre-war reporting and *The New York Times's* evaluation of its WMD coverage. But there has been no comprehensive effort to look at all the pre-war print reporting and draw conclusions about its suc-

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cesses, as well as its failures.

This article presents just such an appraisal, in the hope that journalism centers, and especially the elite press itself, will deepen their inquiries. The stakes could not be higher: Our public debate and our democracy hinge in good measure on how well our most prestigious print outlets cover matters of war and peace.

The “elite press” here includes three daily newspapers (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*) and two weeklies (*Time* and *Newsweek*). As of 2008, they collectively reach around ten million people in print and millions more online, including the most influential government, business, media, and community leaders. Major articles in the elite press can trigger further attention on television news and in Congress. The five publications chosen here are, to a large extent, the ultimate centurions of our democracy.

We evaluate their performance in the early years of the Iraq conflict at several key moments. We looked at 576 news and opinion stories in all—104 articles written during the 2002 Congressional vote on the prospective use of force, 193 written during Secretary of State Colin Powell’s presentation of Iraqi transgressions at the United Nations, 113 written during President George W. Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” speech, and 166 written immediately after Saddam Hussein’s capture. It is certainly fair to choose other early moments or to extend the timeline to the famous “surge” period. But the inquiry here is arbitrarily restricted to the early years.

Our findings may surprise both the media’s critics and defenders: In covering the early years of the war, the elite print press did not embarrass itself to the degree widely assumed—nor did it distinguish itself. Only episodically did our best news outlets provide the necessary alternative information to Administration claims, ask the needed questions about Administration policy, or present insightful analysis about Iraq itself. For the most part, the elite print press conveyed Administration pronouncements and rationale without much critical commentary.

We have objectified our judgments of stories with the following system:

- 0: A story is entirely slanted, suppresses skepticism, and is completely supportive of the Administration line
- 1: A story is somewhat slanted to the Administration’s side, with skeptical and questioning sentences over-weighted by supportive ones
- 2: A story dutifully reports both sides by balancing experts or political leaders
- 3: A story raises questions about official statements and events and generally projects skepticism
- 4: A story casts fundamental doubt on Administration explanations, policies, and claims

5: A story casts fundamental doubt and then reports the Administration's reaction to such doubt

On matters of war and peace, an article with a score of 3.0 represents an acceptable level of skepticism. He said/she said reporting, while perhaps adequate when the stakes are lower, does not suffice when so much is on the line. Journalists ought not to be stenographers. In our evaluation process, we have penalized those stories that merely relayed the assertions of official Washington and its critics; conversely, we looked favorably upon those that held all assertions up to the light of scrutiny and fell on the side of the critics. For the critics were right.

Unfortunately, I was not one of them. On subjects as sensitive and important as war and peace, people in glass houses should be careful how they throw stones. I was a strong supporter of the Iraq War. I was sure Saddam Hussein had chemical weapons because he had used them against Iran and Iraqi Kurds. He had also attacked Iran and Kuwait. And I believed that he either had or was close to achieving nuclear weapons capability, and I favored getting rid of him before that day. I would have waited for more help from our friends and allies, as President George H.W. Bush did in the first Gulf war. And I would have limited the attack to the southern Shiite portion of Iraq, while we held onto the already protected Kurdish region in the North. This would have cut Hussein off from his oil supplies and, I believe, led to his ouster by the Iraqi military.

But for all the ands, ifs, buts, and maybes, the fact was I didn't look hard enough at the country, its history and culture, the WMD facts, and above all, whether the Administration had thought through what to do with Iraq after defeating Hussein's army. What's more, I knew at the time that I wasn't taking a hard enough look at these matters. To remedy this, I started two Council on Foreign Relations task forces on our policy toward Iraq, just before and after the outbreak of war.

I started seriously questioning the war within months of the fall of Baghdad, when it became obvious the Bush Administration had no idea what to do after its swift victory. My questioning soon hardened into opposition when it was clear that Hussein did not have WMD. But that was too little, too late. The same can be said for the print press.

The Story of the Press and the Iraq War

WAR AUTHORIZATION VOTE

In early October 2002, Congress debated granting Bush authority to wage war against Iraq, based on his expansive claims about Baghdad's nuclear ambitions and purported terrorist connections. Rather than critically evaluating the Admin-

istration's claims about Iraqi threats, the press mainly repeated those claims and gave little voice to skeptics. Too few stories questioned the evidence regarding Iraq's purported WMD or links to terrorism. Even fewer examined plans for handling post-Hussein Iraq, or how a U.S. invasion might affect the balance of power in the Middle East. The elite media's posture of neutrality amounted to little more than deference to the Administration's position.

Many stories gave excessive attention to Bush's personality in the battle to persuade Congress, rather than to the substance of his arguments. In part, this is to be expected, given the constitutional power of the President and Bush's popularity after 9/11. Yet the result was to give him virtual *carte blanche*. The media gushed over Bush's televised address on October 7, where he brought his case for war to the American people. The *Post* ran an article the following day, "Bush Cites Urgent Iraqi Threat," by Karen DeYoung, which effectively amounted to an amplification of the President's claim that, because Hussein possessed chemical and biological weapons and was pursuing nuclear ones, he was "a grave threat to peace."

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The article credited Bush for delivering a "sober and thoughtful address," and did not engage with critics until near the end. In a later review that the *Post* conducted of its war coverage, written by Howard Kurtz and published in the summer of 2004, DeYoung acknowledged the problem with this approach:

If there's something I would do differently—and it's always easy in hindsight—the top of the story would say, 'We're going to war, we're going to war against evil.' But later down it would say, 'But some people are questioning it.' The caution and the questioning was buried underneath the drumbeat.

Other outlets gave the president a similar benefit of the doubt. *The New York Times* played into Bush's cult of personality by giving intense and favorable coverage to what the headlines blared as "The President's Speech." Written by David Sanger and published October 8, 2002, it included just one brief mention of skepticism, and it waited until the end to note that most Americans were, according to polls, against near-term unilateral military action. Another article, "Stern Tones, Direct Appeal," by the *Times's* Todd Purdum, which appeared the same day as the Sanger piece, began by approving the surface aspects of the speech, while waiting until near the halfway point to note that the President "did not so much offer up new evidence against Iraq as weave together known

facts.” Similarly, *The Wall Street Journal* published a piece on October 9, “CIA Says Iraq on Brink of War Would Use Terror,” while barely considering the possibility that perhaps war was less, not more, advisable based on the finding contained in the headline. The resolution passed the House three days after Bush’s speech, and the Senate shortly followed.

News stories should have been talking about the difficulties of post-war occupation, of nation-building and its attendant costs. Instead, potential difficulties were glossed over. In one of the *Times*’ key articles on the military planning of Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, “Rumsfeld Orders War Plans Redone for Faster Action,” the secretary’s plans—for fewer troops above all else—were described at length. Yet despite an acknowledgment in the first paragraph that the troop levels Rumsfeld wanted would be lower “than thought possible—or even wise—before the Sept. 11 attacks,” criticism of Rumsfeld’s plans did not appear until the end. And even then, the concerns were summarized and generalized.

One notable exception was Peter Slevin’s piece for *The Washington Post*, “Undefined U.S. Plans for Post-Hussein Iraq Stir Questions,” which included this prescient quote, from “a senior Arab diplomat in Washington”:

If you win militarily, we will have to live with the consequences of instability or chaos, either because Iraq is divided or you have a series of coups d’état or an imbalance between Iraq and Iran.

The opinion columnists, meanwhile, more or less uniformly favored the Administration’s claims. *Post* columnist Richard Cohen’s “Ready for War,” published the day of the vote, did just that while invoking the memory of World War II:

In listing his reasons for (probably) going to war against Iraq soon—the threat of weapons of mass destruction, the nature of Saddam Hussein’s regime and its flouting of international law—President Bush the other night failed to mention the most important one: Now’s the time.

Just as the attack on Pearl Harbor enabled President Roosevelt to go to war against Germany as well as Japan, so did the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 give Bush the opportunity to do what three administrations—his, his father’s and Bill Clinton’s—had wanted to do for some time. The attacks galvanized the nation and altered the political climate. Hussein hadn’t changed any. America had.

Cohen was echoed by his *Post* colleague Jim Hoagland, who on October 13 wrote about several survivors of totalitarian regimes whose stories helped convince him to support the war. As for those who were skeptical about the Administration’s post-war plans, Hoagland countered: “There is covert racism submerged today in much of the argument over ‘the day after’ in Iraq and the Persian Gulf.”

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During this critical period, as Bush made his case for war to the nation, the elite media quietly transmitted the Administration line. We have assigned a score of exactly 2.0 for their overall coverage—the perfect picture of “either/or” journalism. That’s not good enough when the stakes are so high.

POWELL AT THE UNITED NATIONS

As the march to war grew more intense, Secretary of State Colin Powell made his historic pitch for invading Iraq to the UN on February 5, 2003. On the line was the credibility of both the United States and the UN. More than ever, the media had an obligation to ask probing questions about evidence, and in particular, the lack of a smoking gun. What did Washington really know about Iraq’s biological weapons program to support Powell’s histrionic presentation of an Iraqi “anthrax” vial to those assembled? For this period, we scored coverage at 1.77, the lowest score for the events studied. The media not only failed to marshal the kind of skepticism the moment required; it was outright deferential.

Powell’s powerful personality and peerless reputation surely colored the reporting. Michael Gordon concluded in the *Times* the day after the presentation:

Even the skeptics had to concede that Mr. Powell’s presentation had been an important milestone in the debate... Critics may try to challenge the strength of the administration’s case and they will no doubt argue that inspectors be given more time... But it will difficult for the skeptics to argue that Washington’s case against Iraq is based on groundless suspicions and not intelligence information.

Likewise, *Newsweek*’s Richard Wolffe and Daniel Klaidman enthused, “Battle-tested by countless military briefings, Powell was the embodiment of overwhelming force. In contrast to President George W. Bush’s vague if forceful sermons on good and evil, Powell fired a 76-minute salvo of detailed evidence with photos, tapes, sources, and place names.”

Reporters failed to challenge the twisted logic Powell employed to drive his evidence: He effectively asked Hussein to demonstrate a negative, famously imploring him to disprove the existence of WMD in Iraq. Few pressed him for a smoking gun. One notable exception was a February 6 *Wall Street Journal* piece noting that “[t]he series of intriguing intelligence nuggets [in Powell’s presentation] included no smoking gun proving Iraq’s possession of such weapons.”

On numerous occasions and in numerous articles, the Iraqi leadership, not to mention Iraqis themselves, issued strident denials of the accusations. But the press essentially dismissed them. Reports that went against the grain were tucked away on the inside pages. On the day after Powell’s speech, C.J. Chivers of the *Times* reported from Northern Iraq, where Powell alleged there was a

terrorist training camp. The native Kurds were “pleased to hear an American effort to discredit their Islamist enemies, and to sense momentum toward war to unseat Saddam Hussein. But some also wondered if the intelligence Mr. Powell presented to the United Nations Security Council was imprecise.” The article, “Kurds Puzzled by Report of Terror Camp,” only made page 22. On February 8, the *Times*’ Ian Fisher reported from one of the Iraqi locations that Powell asserted was involved in the production of WMD. Fisher quotes the manager of the plant responding to Powell: “It’s all lies.” The resulting article, “Reporters on Ground Get Iraqi Rebuttal to Satellite Photos,” made page 8. Rajiv Chandrasekaran of the *Post* filed a similar report, “Iraq Shows Facilities Cited by Powell; Missiles Within U.N.’s Limits, Officials Assert,” on the same day, featuring Iraqi officials denying Powell’s allegations on site. The article appeared on page 14.

The elite press has to be given the very same scrutiny we expect it to give major government policies and pronouncements.

Of all the major daily newspapers during this time period, only one article of significance focused on the specific faults of Powell’s presentation. “Alleged Al-Qaeda Ties Questioned,” by Walter Pincus, appeared on February 7

in the back pages of the *Post*’s front section. It highlighted rigorous critics of the putative link between Al-Qaeda and Hussein:

Foreign government officials, experts in terrorism and a few members of Congress raised questions yesterday about the Bush administration’s description of the connections between the Iraqi leadership and the al Qaeda terrorist network

The article was a rarity, and its insights weren’t repeated.

Among opinion columnists, Bill Keller’s “The ‘I-Can’t-Believe-I’m-A-Hawk’ Club,” published in the *Times* three days after Powell’s speech, may be the most notable, not only because its author went on to become executive editor of the newspaper, but for the way in which it encapsulated liberal support for the war:

We reluctant hawks may disagree among ourselves about the most compelling logic for war—protecting America, relieving oppressed Iraqis or reforming the Middle East—but we generally agree that the logic for standing pat does not hold. Much as we might wish the administration had orchestrated events so the inspectors had a year instead of three months, much as we deplore the arrogance and binary moralism, much as we worry about all the things that could go wrong, we are hard pressed to see an alternative that is not built on wishful thinking.

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It is not as if the public was clamoring for skepticism from the press. According to *The Media and the War on Terrorism*, a fine book from 2003 edited by Stephen Hess and Marvin Kalb, Mark Jurkowitz, associate director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, reported that when the Pew Research Center asked respondents who should control news about the war on terror, “By almost a two-to-one margin at the beginning of the war the answer was, ‘We want the Pentagon to control the flow of information.’” With that troubling data point in mind, it’s hard to believe that pro-war public opinion was not affecting coverage.

The Powell moment was perhaps the last opportunity for the press to put forward the then-plentiful information that ran counter to the secretary’s assertions, the last chance to raise basic questions about war policy and alternatives. It did nothing of the kind.

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On May 1, 2003, Bush declared victory from the deck of the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, under a banner proclaiming “Mission Accomplished.” This banner, of course, didn’t square with realities on the ground: Insurgents were already regrouping and carrying out attacks. But while the elite press can be commended for publishing several pieces on the rising ethnic violence and instability in the days surrounding this moment, it failed to weave that background into its coverage of Bush’s speech. Few pieces about that speech cast any doubt on his proclamation of victory. Our scoring for the “Mission Accomplished” moment is 2.12, better than previous periods but still wanting.

The difficulties on the ground were mostly absent from the coverage. On April 29, *Post* journalist Vernon Loeb reported from Iraq on a trip by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in which he “assail[ed]” war critics and adamantly defended the war. Nowhere in the piece were critics given a chance to defend themselves, nor was the spike in violence noted.

Skepticism was admittedly on the rise in the overall coverage of Iraq from Iraq—but not from Washington. Indeed, multiple news outlets noted the uptick in violence. On April 30, the *Times* described plans for 4,000 U.S. troops to enter Baghdad and help restore order. The same day, it was reported across the papers that U.S. soldiers had shot and killed more than a dozen Iraqis at an anti-American rally. In the following days, the *Times*’ Ian Fisher and the *Post*’s Scott Wilson similarly reported that U.S. soldiers killed additional Iraqis protesting the initial deaths. But, again, none of these pieces connected the dots between the signs of a growing insurgency and Bush’s speech.

Writing for the *Times* on May 2, Michael Gordon was one of the few to pit

the Administration's triumphalism against the situation in Iraq. In "Between War and Peace," he writes:

Apache helicopter gunships zoomed toward a band of paramilitary fighters who were stealing crates of ammunition from an arms cache near Saddam Hussein's hometown, Tikrit. As the Iraqis tried to make their getaway, the Apaches opened fire, turning the Iraqis' truck into a hunk of twisted metal and killing 14.

This is not an old episode from the war. It took place Wednesday night, just a day before President Bush flew to the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln to announce the end of major combat operations in Iraq, and it illustrates the complicated mission American forces now face as they try to bring stability to Iraq.

But even this piece was far from the skepticism warranted—and shown, in pieces like Michael Hirsh's "Our New Civil War," published by *Newsweek* on May 12:

Two alternative versions of postwar Iraq bumped into each other in the news last week... One was expressed in the beaming face of President Bush... The other was the hair-trigger reality on the ground in places like Al Fallujah and Tikrit where little is yet accomplished... Here the administration remains at war with itself.

The columnists were mildly more skeptical than news reporters, but not sufficiently so. Though he had his doubts, *Post* columnist Richard Cohen "still believe[d] we did the right thing." *Times* columnist Tom Friedman remained a supporter too, only beginning to question the post-war planning. And columnist David Ignatius of the *Post* struck a similar note with his April 29 piece, "Omens of Trouble in Iraq," which argued that American forces had suffered a series of setbacks to their long-term goals. But neither he nor Friedman tied this "trouble" to the Administration's claims of victory.

The "Mission Accomplished" banner will remain one of the enduring images of the Bush presidency. While the overall quality of coverage grew somewhat more skeptical than in past moments, reporters did far too poor a job of pitting evidence of the developing violence in Iraq against the theatricality of Bush's speech. The columnists did only marginally better—scoring a 2.36, in comparison to the overall score of 2.15. The readers of the mainstream press must have been caught largely unawares when the insurgency exploded shortly thereafter.

CAPTURE OF SADDAM HUSSEIN

It would have been all too easy for the press to paint Saddam Hussein's capture in a spider hole near Tikrit on December 13, 2003 as the Administration's ultimate victory. Instead, the press went to great lengths not to depict this as

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another “Mission Accomplished.” Its coverage focused on the expanding insurgency in Iraq and the pains of cobbling together a country as diverse and devoid of infrastructure as Iraq. Our score is 2.24—the highest, and thus most skeptical, of all the moments examined, though even this rating falls significantly short of our desired standard of 3.0.

Take these December 15 *Post* headlines: “Belief that Insurgency Will Fade May be Misplaced” and “Complex Tasks Remaining on Several Fronts.” The *Times* can also claim some critical pieces of its own, including “A Baghdad Neighborhood, Once Hopeful, Now Reels as Iraq’s Turmoil Persists,” from December 14. Notably, in his December 17 piece “As Iraqis Become the Targets of Terrorists, Some Now Blame the American Mission,” Ian Fisher examined the turn of Iraqi opinion against the United States occurring in tandem with the escalation of violence.

The weeklies were the most piercing in their criticism of the Administration’s performance. On December 22, Nancy Gibbs of *Time* wrote:

We can measure the meaning of [Hussein’s] capture by the measures we have taken—old alliances and long traditions discarded to go to war to take him out and, in the name of democracy, a war that was opposed by vast majorities in most democracies on earth. Hundreds of soldiers killed, hundreds more wounded, \$4 billion a month spent and billions more to come, a country broken in pieces that we will be helping rebuild for years to come.

In a December 15 *Newsweek* piece entitled “Mission Distraction,” Mark Hosenball insightfully noted:

[T]oo few U.S. intelligence resources in Iraq are being devoted to the hunt for insurgents, while the 1,400-odd intelligence personnel assigned to the CIA/CENTCOM Iraqi Survey Group are continuing their hunt for Saddam’s alleged stockpiles of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons.

While few pieces outright attacked the Administration, many at least attempted to ask serious questions about whether victory had, in fact, been truly “accomplished.” The growing shift to in-country reporting likely contributed to this improved critical eye. Indeed, for the first of the four periods under study here, Baghdad-based reporting outweighed pieces originating from Washington.

That said, key issues still remained absent from reporting: the accuracy of the intelligence used to make the case for war, civilian casualties resulting from U.S. attacks, and most important, Al Qaeda’s growing presence in Iraq. One laudable exception on this last point was a prescient December 15 *Newsweek* piece, “Bin Laden’s Iraq Plans:”

Until now, the attacks... have come mainly from local Saddam loyalists rather than an influx of foreign jihadists. But if the Taliban sources are correct, bin Laden may be aiming to help turn Iraq into 'the central front' in the war on terror.

The press should be commended for not joining the Administration's victory parade, as it had done six months earlier. But the quality of its coverage still left much to be desired.

What Happened?

The elite print press must be judged by the highest standards. They are our last best hope for serious examination of the most important public policy issues—war and peace, economic policy, health care, and education. If the general public can't get good information and analysis from them, they aren't likely to get it anywhere else. (Blogs, while helpful, have not yet achieved the necessary level of fact-checking.)

The alternative—taking the Administration's word—is a non-starter. It is too much to expect the president's own team both to make policy and scrutinize its own judgments. One keeps hoping against hope for such serious and open self-scrutiny within government, where it matters most. But the reality is that advocacy and politics drive out skepticism from within. Nor should we expect sustained scrutiny—let alone informed skepticism—from Congress. The political pressures to back the president, our troops on the ground, and the country simply overwhelm opposition and even serious questioning.

As for the shadow government—the think tanks and universities—it has overwhelmingly become party to, rather than an arbitrator of, major policy disputes, let alone an independent voice. Most senior fellows and professors now take up the cudgels for their causes, ideologies, and political parties, and many rotate in and out of government. Too many think tanks and universities reinforce this trend by recruiting along ideological lines.

This leaves the elite press. They are better situated to bear this heavy role than the other major players for several reasons: More than other institutions, their tradition is one of relative political independence. Indeed, reporters tend to be rewarded for living up to traditions of independence and accuracy. And for the most part, the owners of these precious enterprises, though necessarily more concerned with their business interests than before, still hesitate to compromise journalistic standards. These circumstances are far from perfect, but they are good enough to give elite print outlets the room to provide the public with reliable information for an informed democratic debate.

Why didn't that happen in their early coverage of the Iraq War? What were the factors that weakened the press's professionalism? The biggest problems

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were, and still are, structural—that is, they inhere in the way the print media goes about its work. In the first place, good news outlets are effectively trapped by being good news outlets; their first obligation is to report what's new. And generally, what's big news is what the Administration says is important. By good and proper journalistic standards, the foremost obligation of the news is to accurately present the pronouncements of government. That's where power and responsibility reside, and so the news must follow. This is a good procedure. It is also a strait-jacket. Editors shouldn't change what they do there, but they should recognize the strait-jacket effect and add other stories that question presidential policy. Otherwise, they give presidents a powerful, unfair advantage.

Giving the president his due, however, makes reporters' jobs harder to perform correctly. They can, should, and often do pair the straight news stories with news analysis or reported pieces with contrary points of view. And these should be featured prominently when editors believe the alternate views are well put together, and not just simple affirmations or condemnations of the policy being reported. In the run-up to the Iraq War, however, these analytical articles lacked the heft of alternative ideas. For the most part, these critically important pieces were mostly listings of he said/she said quotes.

Another structural problem was that most stories emphasized politics over policy. When reporters got around to analytical points, they tended to lean far more heavily on political factors than policy considerations. True, politics indisputably plays a major role in both the Administration's policies and criticisms of it. Though most government officials deny the role of politics, good reporters would be derelict not to expose these power calculations. But fixating on politics is worrisome. It sometimes suggests that the writer doesn't know much about policy or the genuine ideological positions of policymakers. It's also evidence that the writer has not mastered the substance of their subject. I have found over the years that if people don't know substance, they talk pure politics. Everyone is a political expert; it is the great leveler.

Lack of substantive knowledge is a serious problem, because most journalists don't think there is a problem. Many believe that either they know plenty or that they don't need to know plenty. Fixing this isn't easy. It means leaving reporters on beats longer and encouraging them to go to policy conferences for sources and information. The knowledge gap could also be closed by rotating overseas correspondents who have learned a lot about a region back into Washington beat jobs.

More than halfway through the Iraq War, and beyond the scope of this article, the elite print press caught on to some of their problems, corrected them—and then over-corrected. On the plus side, they stopped giving front-page attention

to Bush's claims and regularly started asking tough questions. The trouble was that they covered Bush *too little* by the end of 2006, when he finally agreed to a plausible new strategy. Consequently, the press both under-reported the new successes, and when they did report on them, generally misattributed them to the "surge"—that is, to the increase of 30,000 U.S. troops alone. In fact, the success of "the surge" also had to do with a change in military strategy (getting U.S. troops out of their bases and onto the streets), the unexpected withdrawal of Muqtada Al-Sadr's militia in Baghdad, the new openness to financial and military ties with former Sunni and Shiite adversaries, and Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki's surprising emergence as a strong leader. Rarely were all these factors cited.

Curing or, better, simply managing this under-reaction/over-reaction phenomenon requires more vigilance at both ends of the policy story. At the outset,

What were the factors that weakened the press's professionalism? The biggest problems were, and still are, structural.

the press need not keep reporting the same old presidential claims in the face of contrary facts or assertions. By the same token, it has to remain alert to real and effective policy changes that may alter realities in the field.

In general—and this point is essential—there was better reporting from the field than Washington. Among the

pieces considered in our study, articles reported from the Middle East scored, on average, 2.33, while articles reported from within the United States scored a 1.96. The reporting of correspondents on the scene held up far better than the reporting from Washington. The wonder is that editors and reporters in the nation's capital allowed these conflicting realities to live happily side by side for so long.

Sometimes, the realities in the field were clearly not sinking in back home. Washington-based reporters and editors bought into Administration arguments that field reporters had been sold a bill of goods by one or two biased sources and weren't seeing the "big picture," or that the situation was changing and those holed up in the famously isolated Green Zone of Baghdad didn't realize it.

For most of the early Iraq War years, Washington reporters tended to do what comes naturally: They went to their Administration sources, wrote what these sources told them, and thereby took up the cudgels against their fellow reporters in the field. A few Washington reporters did the right thing and took those telling stories from Iraq and played them into solid questions and strong analytical pieces of their own. Take for instance, Ian Fisher's February 2003 piece for the *Times*, "Reporters on Ground Get Iraqi Rebuttal to Satellite Photos," Ariana Eunjung Cha's December 2003 piece for the *Post*,

“Recruits Abandon Iraqi Army,” or Alex Berenson’s *Times* piece, “A Baghdad Neighborhood, Once Hopeful, Now Reels as Iraq’s Turmoil Persists,” likewise from December 2003.

As a general rule, when the word of the United States is pitted against the word of another country, the burden of proof in the public’s mind rests on the foreigner. That was certainly the case on the issues of whether Hussein possessed WMD and whether U.N. inspectors had been allowed to do their job. Most foreign policy experts in America sided with the Bush Administration, and that’s fine, but quality news outlets should not jump into line, as they did.

One final point is needed to round out the picture of elite press coverage of the early war years, and it’s not strictly about news coverage. It’s about the columnists. It is fair to say that most of the leading columnists were strong supporters, even cheerleaders, for the war. Interestingly, the earliest dissenting columns were in the weeklies, particularly in *Newsweek*. The weeklies were more inclined to step back far enough to read more broadly about the history of Iraq and to explore the traps and landmines ahead. To a certain extent, the *Times*’ correspondents, like John Burns, did that as well in the Week in Review. Perhaps there’s something liberating about distance from the daily news pages.

Recommendations

The elite press has to be given the same scrutiny we expect it to give major government policies and actions. If independent magazines and journalism schools believe what they teach and preach, they should have no more important target for their investigations than the elite press. Independent centers and schools should grasp the ring and conduct more studies. Of course, the elite press won’t like it. But if they want to do the job in our society for which they are uniquely qualified, they will join in. They correctly never stop calling for more information about the government. The same standard applies to them, the keepers of the democratic flame. And who better to conduct the review than the many journalism centers lodged in universities across our nation?

Here are some modest recommendations that ought to help spark a long-overdue conversation, based both on the research for this article and my own career in journalism. First, to do its job right, the elite press has to adopt an aggressive but fair attitude to all stories about war and peace. Editors have to stress this, so reporters won’t fear they’ll get punished for being too critical. And to help them be aggressive in an informed manner, editors should encourage them to read history and keep up with other stories and op-eds. Reporters have to know enough to ask intelligent follow-up questions.

Second, do more and better news analysis pieces. Over the last decade or so, these critically important articles have slipped into a pattern of he says/she says, not much superior to cable news. They should be about what we know and don't know, and they should point out how difficult it is to establish key facts in certain situations. These pieces need to explore policy ideas in depth. For example, the success of policies depends on likely foreign reactions. Is the American pressure being brought to bear likely to push foreign leaders in the right direction? Is persuasion likely to work or not?

Third, make more use of overseas correspondents covering the key stories by bringing them back to Washington to cover the same region or issues. Usually, foreign correspondents don't like to be roped into Washington assignments; it's too confining. But their knowledge is needed on major stories.

Fourth, journalism schools and centers should stay on top of how the media cover major stories. What could those professors and visiting fellows do better than hold the media to account in the same way we expect the media to hold government to account? They should do long studies and shorter reports, and these should be based on careful readings of stories, as well as tough, respectful interviews with reporters and editors.

My initial support for the war was symptomatic of unfortunate tendencies within the foreign policy community, namely the disposition and incentives to support wars to retain political and professional credibility. We "experts" have a lot to fix about ourselves, even as we "perfect" the media. We must redouble our commitment to independent thought, and embrace, rather than cast aside, opinions and facts that blow the common—often wrong—wisdom apart. Our democracy requires nothing less. ■