

Not My War

EW readers express their sentiments

Tax resistance. Rallies. Marches. Voting. Sign-making. Calling Congress. Writing a letter to the editor. All forms of protest deserve attention. Here, we give a soapbox to some of our readers who've taken the time to write in. We also include some notes on war tax resistance and take a look at war media coverage.



News

Fog of War

Truth is victim of collateral damage.

By Alan Pittman

If the first victim of war is truth, the Iraq war, featuring the latest modern weapons of mass communication, has become a journalistic slaughterhouse.

The contrasts between Arab and U.S. media coverage of the war are stark. In the U.S., Fox Cable News leads the pack with flag-waving coverage of valiant American soldiers fighting a just war. In the Arab world, the leading Al Jazeera Cable Network shows pictures of children decapitated or gutted by the same troops U.S. reporters laud as "heroes."

The widening gulf of Gulf War II coverage may leave Americans scratching their heads for decades with the 9/11 question: Why do they hate us?

"This war has united the Islamic world from border to border against the United States," Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, an alleged leader of Hizbullah, told *Newsweek*.

"Instead of having one bin Laden, we will have 100 bin Ladens," Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak warns.

Newsweek and *Time*, the leading U.S. newsweeklies, both reported this week on the divergent Arab and U.S. coverage of the war.

"In this war, the mighty but merciful allies target bombs carefully and tend to the enemy's wounded. In that war, the allies blow up women and babies," reported *Time*, describing the contrast between U.S. coverage of "Operation Iraqi Freedom" and Al Jazeera's coverage of "the invasion." The article continued, "If the war on American TV has been a splendid fireworks display and tank parade punctuated by press conferences, on Al Jazeera et al., war is hell."

Al Jazeera's coverage, including images of dead and captured U.S. and Iraqi troops, has sparked intense criticism from U.S. officials. But the attacks have come from both sides. Iraqi officials recently expelled Al Jazeera's Baghdad correspondent. That makes the Arab network the only news network to have its reporters expelled both by Saddam Hussein and the New York Stock Exchange for its war coverage.

picturesque," *Time* reports.

Al Jazeera has an English language web site, but it was brought down by unknown hackers (Al Jazeera officials suspect the Pentagon). The Arabic version (www.aljazeera.net) is still loaded with pictures you've never seen on U.S. television.

Despite the U.S. criticism, Al Jazeera has often had more accurate information about the war than U.S. networks, *Time* reports. Early U.S. TV reports of a Shiite revolt in Basra and the capture of Umm Qasr were shown to be inaccurate by Al Jazeera reporting at the scene.

The London *Guardian* newspaper and an *Editor and Publisher* columnist compiled a long lists of factual errors by U.S. and British media after the first week of the war. The false reports included: a chemical weapons depot in northern Iraq; a captured Iraqi general; an attack by 120 Iraqi tanks; Scud missiles shot at Kuwait; an uprising in Basra; a mass surrender of 8,000 Iraqis and identifying a grenade attacker as a terrorist rather than a U.S. soldier.

U.S. coverage of the war has relied heavily on reports by about 600 journalists "embedded" with U.S. troops.

Supporters of embedding journalists say the coverage has brought more exciting reports of frontline action. But critics worry about whether reporters can remain objective while in bed with the military.

Before the war, top U.S. officials predicted that the fighting would be over quickly because Iraqi citizens would welcome U.S. forces and rise up to overthrow Saddam Hussein. That prediction was proved false. ABC reporter John Donovan says it's been difficult for the media to report on the views of Iraqi citizens while embedded with U.S. soldiers.

"To show up with a Humvee with machine guns on top, and guys in flak jackets and helmets, completely changes the dynamic when you try to talk to people," Donovan told the *Washington*

Post. "The whole hearts-and-minds thing cannot be done from inside an embed."

Another big problem with embeds is that it's difficult to criticize the soldiers around you who are protecting, feeding, driving and sheltering you. "I could see how it'd be hard to write critically if they made a mistake," Donovan said. "I don't think I could do it. They're my protectors."

Sydney Schanberg, a former *New York Times* correspondent who covered Vietnam, told the *Guardian* that Pentagon rules requiring only on-the-record interviews of troops by embedded reporters are designed to ensure "good PR." In Vietnam, soldiers feared punishment, he says. "Most things guys really wanted to tell you were not on the record."

Some reporters have tried to cover the war as un-embedded independents. But the International Federation of Journalists has complained the U.S. military has forcibly removed such reporters from Iraq.

Critics say the U.S. networks often appear to have little interest in objectivity. "The networks are at war. Every cable news channel has enlisted," says columnist Norman Solomon. Solomon faults coverage for reporting the "humanitarian calamities" as only "PR problems" for the Pentagon. Instead of civilian suffering, he says, the networks are filled with coverage of military tactics and "worshipping" reports of the marvels of new high-tech weapons.

Fox leads in using patriotism to pump ratings. "Fox is so blatantly one-sided, it is appalling. Every time I turn it on, someone is saying something evil about the protesters or being pro-Bush," says *Los Angeles Times* television critic Howard Rosenberg.

But other networks aren't far behind in flag waving. "It is unfair to single out Fox News Channel for pro-American tilt or jingoism in the early days of a war in which much of the broadcast media has reflexively rallied around the flag," says a *Boston Globe* columnist. On many networks, reporters refer to U.S. troops and generals as "we."

But we deserve better. Schanberg, the veteran reporter who covered the "killing fields" of Cambodia, wrote in the *Village Voice* that the gruesome images of war shown on Arab TV shouldn't be censored for American viewers. "If ours is truly a democracy, the people should be told and shown — even if they wish to turn their eyes away — exactly what is being waged in their name."

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