

## The Spoils of War Coverage

By Frank Rich

Should we never have watched at all?

So Barbara Bush had instructed us in a "Good Morning America" interview showcased the day before the war began. The president's mother told Diane Sawyer she would watch "none" of TV's war coverage because "90 percent" of it would be speculative. Mrs. Bush 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 musings of a mom spinning for her son. Now that the fog of war begins to lift, however, I realize she was prescient. A *Los Angeles Times* poll 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 24/7 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 in Iraq. The conveying of actual news often seems subsidiary to their mission to out-flag-wave one another and to make their own personnel, rather than the war's antagonists, 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 during the last Persian Gulf war), but couldn't they anchor just as well from New York City? 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 discovered 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 news-briefing remark by Gen. Richard B. 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 Dr. Sanjay Gupta, an embedded medical reporter, to rescue an injured 2-year-old Iraqi boy by performing on-the-scene brain surgery was milked for live reports. Lest anyone not grasp the most important moral of this incident, Dr. 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 mere bagatelles compared to 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? According to MSNBC, it was Fox's Geraldo Rivera, who revealed American troop movements on camera. According to Fox, 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 American serviceman who might have committed actual treason. That would be Sgt. Asan Akbar of the 101st Airborne, who was arrested (and subsequently charged with murder) in the fragging incident that led to the deaths of two soldiers and the wounding of at least 14 others at Camp Pennsylvania. How fleeting was his infamy.

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

In retrospect we can see that patriotism as a TV news marketing ploy was inevitable after Dan Rather took flak for interviewing Saddam in February. There was nothing either exceptional or un-American about Mr. Rather's interview; it showed us a calculating dictator spewing unalloyed propaganda, none of which earned him the sympathy of any American viewers. But the uproar that ensued, stoked by the White House, sent the clear message that news not upholding the administration's message was verboten during wartime (unless the critique is delivered by paid network military consultants).

The resulting mood has at times made American television seem to march in lockstep as much as state-controlled TV in Iraq. The tale of Pfc. Jessica Lynch is a powerful story of a brave soldier and an equally brave rescue mission. But as packaged on TV, and not just by the cable news networks, it was sometimes corrupted into a propagandistic epic at war with the facts. If journalism is the first draft of history, this mutant strain is at best the first draft of the made-for-TV movie. Private Lynch's father himself had to correct the record after reports of his daughter's gunshot and stab wounds repeatedly outpaced her doctors' findings — as if her genuine, serious injuries were not grave enough to justify the TV weight given to her ordeal. "Somebody in the Army is trying to turn her into Audie Murphy," a senior Defense Department official told *The Daily News* as the mediathon spiraled out of control. Meanwhile, *The Los Angeles Times* reported that Randy Kiehl of Comfort, Tex., the father of a soldier who was taken prisoner in the same ambush, had to surf the Web to find Al Jazeera images that might reveal what would turn out to be the tragic fate of his own son.

Such images were 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* 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 prewar 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." It may not be coincidence that 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-an-eye combat near Baghdad last weekend — are not replicated by the verbal storytelling 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 '91 gulf war, said that he had shut off his TV this time 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 Barbara Bush are not alone in tuning out. By late March, cable-news ratings had fallen roughly 20 percent from their early highs. Eventually 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 cable memory hole currently 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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