DAVID DADGE

THE WAR IN IRAQ AND WHY THE MEDIA FAILED US

FOREWORD BY DANNY SCHECHTER

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For Al

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FOREWORD

This book tells an important story, an ongoing story, maybe even the story of our times. It's the story of a war aided and abetted by a nominally ''free'' media. It's the story of a war that was every bit a media war as a military undertaking.

David Dadge does us all a service by paying attention to the details of how the Bush Administration defanged critics in the media and managed the coverage of the run-up to the war and then the war itself.

It's all here—the bullying of reporters, the maneuvers to isolate and limit critical reporting, and the overall manipulation of the media environment. This book reconstructs how it was done, step-by-step, incident after incident, and crisis after crisis. The administration was skillful because it understood how the media business operates, how divided and competitive it is, and how news cycles work. Its media operatives understood ''message disclipline'' and how to engineer public perceptions and undermine any emerging counter-narrative that could effectively challenge the administration's storyline.

This was not just the work of the White House; it was dispersed through all the departments of government, including the Office of Global Communications and the specialists at the well-funded Intelligence and Information Warfare Directorate in the Pentagon.

They were all pushing a story line, shaped in part by an understanding that Americans like stories more than facts. That's why Hollywood narrative technique has been so successful, especially in an era of the

decline of journalism as a serious force in American life. Moviemakers fictionalize reality with a well-plotted story structure, character conflicts, and happy endings. What the Bush people set out to do was to displace a fact-based system of information with a faith-based one. They did it by demonizing enemies, domestic and foreign, and then setting themselves up as a paragon of patriotically correct trust. The horror of 9/11 was skillfully used to achieve this goal.

How did the watchdog become a lap dog? Most of the press didn't bark in part because it no longer sees that as its role. This administration worked hard—and with the connivance and complicity of many in the media, it must be noted—to transform the historic concept of the ''Fourth Estate'' into what war commander Tommy Franks called a ''fourth front'' in his war plan.

Classical democratic theory posits a system of checks and balances, where the branches of government work like clockwork to confront each other when needed and insure that the public interest is protected. We all learned about that in school: the Executive proposes, the Congress disposes, and the Supreme Court assures that the Constitution is in command.

The Founders of the Republic understood that these checks would not always balance or restrain the power of the other. So they conveyed a constitutional right to a free press in hopes that a vigilant media would add an extra layer of protection.

One by one, these institutions that pretended at democracy began to fail us.

Imperial presidencies emerged with larger-than-life leaders arrogating to themselves powers and postures that were profoundly un-democratic. Throughout our history, many fell on their own swords or through self-inflicted scandals. They lied, made war, and overstepped their roles. And today even the processes of our elections seem flawed and untrustworthy.

The Congress was not far behind, whether controlled by Dixiecrats, Democrats or Republicans. Special-interest lobbies ran policy from the shadows in the cloak-rooms. Compromises and deals often doomed democratic hopes. Seniority turned some members into dictators and power grubbers. Today, the lobbyists on K Street seem to have more power than most elected representatives.

The Supreme Court has shown its capacity for partisanship and decisions that enshrine the power of the wealthy and conservative classes. Just think about the *Bush* v. *Gore* decision of 2000, which set the stage for what was to follow and made a highly questionable ''selection'' on flawed

grounds by invoking an amendment passed to protect the slaves of an earlier era.

And of course, often in the background and the foreground is the real power center of America that was not foreseen in its current form when the Constitution was handed down by a group of white men of property: the powerful corporations behind the military-industrial complex that President Eisenhower warned us against fifty years ago and the military-industrial-MEDIA complex that David Dadge warns of today. Corporate power is often the least scrutinized and understood.

In a globalized economy, state actors and governments are no longer the key decision makers. Private interests are. Is it any wonder that public life is becoming privatized too? Or government propaganda? How else can we understand the role played by Fox News Channel and all the right-wing talk shows that function as an echo chamber for GOP claims? In the absence of a countervailing media outlet, they push all of the media to the right. Many tried to ''outfox'' Fox. Others self-censored themselves for fear of being attacked as apologists for terrorism.

And what of the press in this mix? Edward R. Murrow's famous saying, ''Good night, and good luck,'' should be taken literally, as a metaphor for our media's role, not just as a farewell.

As media was corporatized and its ownership concentrated, journalism, the stuff of watchdogging (to turn a noun into a verb) became more a memory than a reality.

In their book *Our Unfree Press*, Robert W. McChesney and Ben Scott take a march down that memory lane with a collection of media criticism dating back to 1906 showing that the decay of the journalistic imperative to be the kind of watchdog David Dadge and so many of us yearn for has a long and inglorious history. The days of the Watergate investigation are long gone, and in 2005, one of its brightest stars, Bob Woodward, himself became embroiled in a media scandal. (He too was among the editors of the *Washington Post* who admitted that his paper had not done all it could have to challenge the Bush administration's march to war.)

So where does this leave us?

Study the chapters in this book and weep, but also understand the practices he describes so skillfully didn't stop with the war and haven't to this day.

If war is politics by other means, then politics is also war. That's what we are seeing today in the extreme partisanship that plays out on all the talk shows where heat is preferred to light and confrontation displaces conversation.

The war coverage had a template guiding it. Make a claim. Reinforce it with experts, usually the same ones over and over again. Marginalize all dissent. Narrow the range of debate. Use emotive language inciting fears. Make the only option ''us'' versus ''them.''

What was once considered Pavlovian and then Orwellian is today Bushian. The same media techniques that exaggerated the threat posed by Saddam Hussein later exaggerated the threat of a Kerry presidency. The same sales techniques that sold the invasion of Iraq with repeated catchy phrases, well-designed backdrop, and hype dominated the discourse.

David Dadge's study lays out the problem, with perhaps more of an emphasis on the role of government than my own work on the subject. But all media critics are left with an issue that journalists and scholars of all stripes are uncomfortable with.

What can and must be done by citizens to challenge these practices? Hoping that ''the media'' will rediscover their historic mission may be naïve.

In my view, we need to make media an issue, not just a complaint. We need to use books like this in campaigns to challenge media outlets and government propagandists alike. This means exposing these practices and challenging their practitioners.

As I write, the war on Iraq continues, and its coverage leaves a lot to be desired. As the editor of a media watch website Mediachannel.org, I am calling for a campaign to tell the truth about the war.

Here's part of our call to action:

As public opinion shifts, the media will shift too. It is already starting to, although not quickly enough. Many media outlets remain out of step with the public because they are in lockstep with the war.

Readers and viewers are rebelling against what they've been seeing and reading. Viewing levels on TV news shows are down and newspaper circulation is down as well. There is a reason that some ''fake-news'' programs outdraw ''real-news'' programs.

One by one, the newspapers and journalists that backed the war are backing down. The pro-war media consensus has cracked, and not just because Judith Miller of the *New York Times* now admits she was wrong, wrong, wrong. Miller was not alone in pumping the rationale for war, and even as her muddled story comes out, there are bigger fish to fry in the higher ranks of media corporations where ''group-think'' rules.

There is now an opening to press the press and move the media to change the political climate by challenging politicians to abandon a war that has already been lost.

The media has the power to do it and we have the power to move them to do it.

There are many proposals for more intensive monitoring and direct action, from protests to letter (and e-mail) campaigns.

If this book angers you—as it should—then you have a responsibility to join this fight.

David Dadge has told us what's wrong. It's our job as citizens to make it right.

Danny Schechter

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It is also worth noting that the views expressed in this book are purely my own and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of IPI.

INTRODUCTION

> ''Is there any point to which you would draw my attention?''
> ''To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.''
> ''The dog did nothing in the night-time.''
> ''That was the curious incident,'' remarked Sherlock Holmes.
> —''Silver Blaze'' by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle[1]

THE WATCHDOG THAT FAILED TO BARK

In the short story ''Silver Blaze'' by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes solved the mystery of a stolen racehorse after appreciating the importance of a dog's failure to bark! For Holmes, the inaction of the dog was the first link in a chain that led to a solution of the case; as he comments to Watson, ''I had grasped the significance of the silence of the dog, for one true inference invariably suggests others.''[2] In many ways, the American media's behavior, both prior to, and during the war in Iraq is not dissimilar to that of the dog in ''Silver Blaze.''

Given a watchdog role within American society—a role supported by the First Amendment and a raft of Supreme Court cases—the American media failed to ask the tough questions of an Administration that seemed determined to go to war. Instead of questioning the assertions about Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), especially Iraq's alleged nuclear weapons program, and Saddam Hussein's links with al Qaeda and the September 11 attacks, the media, as a whole, appeared silent on these

issues. They often failed to remind their audiences that statements made by senior officials of the Bush administration were hotly contested, or a matter of conjecture. Even those media organizations that did question these views, often reported them in such a way that they gave credence to the Bush administration's views, while downplaying the views of those who disagreed. The consequence of this failure was a confusion in the American public's understanding of the Iraq war.

The distortions in the public's understanding may be seen in a number of polls taken by various organizations starting in 2002. Conducted before President Bush's October 7, 2002 speech in which he laid out the justifications for war, the poll by the Pew Research Center and the Council on Foreign Relations showed that 66 percent of people said they believed, ''Saddam Hussein helped the terrorists in the September 11 attacks.'' Moreover, 65 percent of those interviewed said they believed Iraq was close to having a nuclear weapon, while 14 percent said they believed Iraq already possessed these weapons.[3] Another poll taken, nearly one year later, in September 2003 by *Time*/CNN reinforces the impression of Iraq's complicity in the September 11 attacks. The poll showed that almost seven out of 10 people believed in Iraq's involvement.[4]

This confusion continued after the war in Iraq was over. A poll carried out by the University of Maryland in March 2004 found that 57 percent of Americans believed that Iraq provided substantial support to al Qaeda before the war. Perhaps even more worryingly, 60 percent of Americans believed that pre-war Iraq had WMD. The belief in Iraq's weapons capacity existed despite statements to the contrary made by David Kay, who led the allied hunt for such weapons in Iraq, and Hans Blix who headed the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) before the war.[5]

Nearly two years after the start of the war, a Harris Poll in February 2005 found that 36 percent of Americans continued to believe that Iraq had WMD before the war started, and 44 percent still believed Iraqi nationals were involved in the hijacking of planes on September 11, 2001.[6] The public's stubborn belief in Iraq's participation in the September 11 attacks remains firm despite the explicit rejection of this claim by the 9/11 commission, which covered every possible aspect of the attacks.

If the polls point to misconceptions, they also highlight the media's failure to provide the truth to the public. While the Bush administration gained considerably from the belief that Iraq had WMD and was involved in the September 11 attacks, it is the media that helped communicate this impression to the public. After all, it is mostly through the medium of

television, Internet, and newspapers that the policies of government are delivered. So the question arises: how did the faulty messages about Iraq get through without the Bush administration's assertions being tested? Where was the balance and context in the media's reporting that should have helped shape the debate in late 2002 and early 2003? Why did the watchdog fail to bark as the United States prepared to go to war?