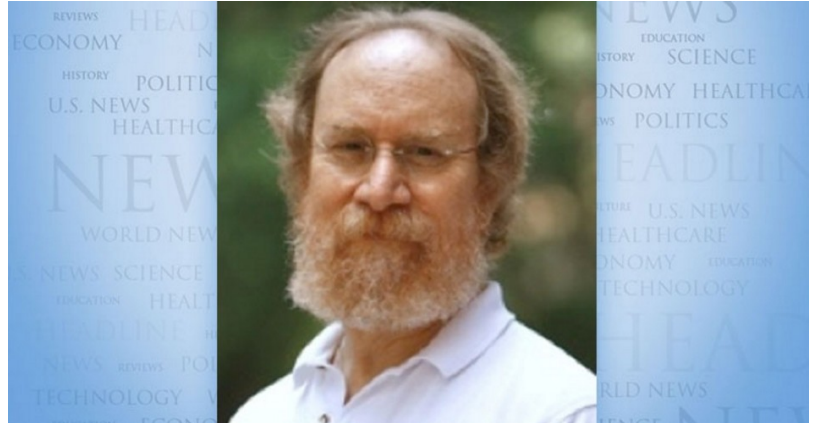




Written by [Sheldon Richman](#) on March 26, 2013

How the News Media Betrayed Us on Iraq

The tenth anniversary of the start of America's illegal and aggressive war against Iraq should not pass without recalling that the mainstream news media eagerly participated in the Bush administration's dishonest campaign for public support. It is no exaggeration to say that most news operations were little more than extensions of the White House Office of Communications. Abandoning even the pretense of an adversarial relationship with the government, the media became shameful conduits for unsubstantiated and outright false information about Saddam Hussein's alleged threat to the American people. Included among the falsehoods were reports that Saddam had a hand in the 9/11 attacks, had trained al-Qaeda fighters, and had attempted to obtain uranium ore and aluminum tubes for nuclear bombs.



Put bluntly, the disastrous invasion of Iraq, which was sold on the basis of lies told by President George W. Bush, Vice-President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, national-security adviser Condoleezza Rice, and others might not have happened without the enthusiastic help of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, ABC, NBC, MSNBC, CBS, CNN, Fox News, and others. The blood of more than a hundred thousand — perhaps more than a million — Iraqis and 4,500 Americans is on their hands too.

Today, like the Bush administration alumni attempting to duck responsibility, the media blame “bad intelligence” for their conduct. But that will not wash. The dissenting reports of Knight Ridder's Warren Strobel and Jonathan Landay, along with a very few others, show definitively that in 2002-03



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solid intelligence information undermining every propagandistic administration claim was readily available to anyone willing to use traditional reporting techniques. Strobel and Landay were mostly ignored. On the rare occasions when the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* reported on the doubts intelligence personnel had about the Bush narrative, the stories were buried deep in the paper. (See Bill Moyers's special "[Buying the War](#)" and Greg Mitchell's book [Wrong for So Long](#).)

The media did not merely pass along baseless assertions; the television channels also attempted to shape public opinion with a biased selection of guests. Pro-war voices abounded, while informed war skeptics were scarce. Even when an opponent of war was featured, he or she had to share the time with a pro-war advocate, yet the pro-war side was often featured unchallenged. As the war became regarded as inevitable, the cable news channels shifted almost exclusively to military analysis, as though the question was no longer whether the nation ought to go to war, but rather how it would be fought. Many of the retired generals who were presented as objective experts had seats on the boards of defense contractors and were getting Pentagon briefings.

What motivated those who covered the run-up to the Iraq invasion this way? Several factors were surely at work. Groupthink and the fear of going out on a limb must have played a large role. The vaunted courage of journalists is more pose than fact. (This makes the work of Strobel and Landay, Phil Donahue of MSNBC until he was cancelled, and Bob Simon of CBS's *Sixty Minutes* all the more admirable.) "Pack journalism" is reinforced by a fear that reports suggesting skepticism about a military action will be



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interpreted as unpatriotic. The smear factories run by militarist right-wing media watchdogs ensure this will be the case. Moreover, being branded un-American for doubting a president's case for war may lead to viewer or reader boycotts, which in turn may lead to pressure from advertisers. Thus, the corporate bottom line played a role.

Another factor is the simple truth that war makes better news than peace. No one wins a Pulitzer Prize for being a peace correspondent. We must not underestimate this as a motive for favoring war.

Finally, we can't overlook that many in the media were simply motivated by nationalism and deference to the state with its dazzling war technology.

This story of media malfeasance would be bad enough if it were just history. Unfortunately, even as media figures now issue mea culpas about their shameful Iraq "coverage," they are engaged in precisely the same shoddy business with respect to Iran and its alleged but unproven nuclear-weapons program.

Sheldon Richman is vice president and editor at [The Future of Freedom Foundation](#) in Fairfax, Va.



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