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## Down in the Trenches, Up in the Public's Opinion

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It's been the best of times and the worst of times for journalists.

The best because so many of them braved enemy fire and showed the world that they could cover a war honestly and aggressively from the front lines.

The worst because some of them died in the process.

The best because most of them managed to humanize America's fighting men and women without becoming military cheerleaders.

The worst because they nearly got submerged in a sea of second-guessing just days into the fighting.

The best because news organizations ripped up their budgets to swarm over a serious global story without a hint of sex or scandal.

The worst because grandstanding by Peter Arnett and Geraldo Rivera reminded some folks what they can't stand about the news business.

Unlike the first Gulf War, which most reporters covered through official briefings, the war in Iraq was a grand experiment in which 600 media people were allowed in the trenches and tanks and helicopters.

No less a media critic than Vice President Cheney told newspaper editors that there has been "some outstanding reporting. I suspect the arrangement has also led to greater respect all around. For their part, the troops have come to know reporters who are willing to accept the hardships and dangers of war in order to get the story right."

The public got an unvarnished view of the battle for Iraq. Earlier fears that the embeds would serve as military publicists were largely dispelled by a series of raw, sometimes unflattering reports when things went wrong and civilians got killed. To be sure, some stories had a rah-rah tone, and the blur of televised dispatches sometimes created the hour-by-hour impression that the war was going badly. That left journalists and viewers alike struggling to put together a coherent picture.

One reason the coverage drew high marks -- 74 percent approval in a Pew Research Center poll -- is that folks could see the disheveled correspondents slogging through the sandstorms along with the grunts, no hair spray in sight. And the deaths of Michael Kelly and David Bloom underscored the grave risks involved.

No anchor-gab was needed when it came to the powerful images produced by this short war. The American POWs cruelly displayed by the Iraqis; the dazed face of the wounded Jessica Lynch during the rescue that freed her; the sheer joy of Baghdad residents hacking away at that Saddam statue. The footage sent the world a message more compelling than a thousand op-ed pieces or a million propaganda leaflets dropped from U.S. planes.

Were parts of the media too downbeat about the war's early setbacks? Sure. Trying to assess a war after a week or two is a high-wire act, as journalists learned after the infamous "quagmire" pieces about Afghanistan.

But it's no accident that a majority of people who opposed the war found the coverage too favorable to the military, as the Pew survey found. And conservative critics who say the press was deliberately pessimistic out of opposition to the war missed the fact that most of the stories in question were quoting other

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naysayers. Unnamed critics, it turns out, are never in short supply.

- The Washington Post, March 27: "Despite the rapid advance of Army and Marine forces across Iraq over the past week, some senior U.S. military officers are now convinced that the war is likely to last months and will require considerably more combat power than is now on hand there and in Kuwait, senior defense officials said yesterday."
- Los Angeles Times, March 28: "The stiff resistance shown by Iraqi forces in the last week has forced administration officials to consider the prospect of a longer, costlier war."
- The New York Times, April 1: "Long-simmering tensions between Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and Army commanders have erupted in a series of complaints from officers on the Iraqi battlefield that the Pentagon has not sent enough troops to wage the war as they want to fight it."

On the other hand, Newsweek's "Conventional Wisdom Watch" gave Cheney a down arrow: "Tells 'Meet the Press' just before war, 'We will be greeted as liberators.' An arrogant blunder for the ages." Or not.

Now comes the difficult part of the story -- forming a government, rebuilding a shattered country, fending off suicide attacks -- that lacks the obvious drama of toppling a brutal dictator. (Anyone seen a television report from Kabul lately?) Once the embedded reporters are liberated, it's all too easy to imagine the media drifting off to other obsessions while the future of Iraq is hammered out.

### **Sitting on the News**

Eason Jordan, CNN's chief news executive, acknowledged Friday that he suppressed stories of Iraqi brutality for years -- out of concern, he says, for people's safety, especially Iraqis working for the network.

In a New York Times op-ed piece, Jordan wrote that the regime beat and used electroshock torture on an Iraqi CNN cameraman in the mid-1990s for refusing to say that Jordan worked for the CIA. Several Iraqi officials "confided" to Jordan that Saddam Hussein "was a maniac who had to be removed." Hussein's son Uday told him in 1995 that he intended to assassinate two brothers-in-law who had defected and the man giving them asylum, Jordan's King Hussein. The CNN executive warned the king, who dismissed the threat, but the brothers-in-law were lured back to Baghdad and killed.

Did all this put CNN in the position of colluding with murderers? Jordan says Iraq expelled the network a half-dozen times "because the regime was unhappy with our reporting. If there was any question that we were somehow currying favor, that would dispel it right there. . . . We are not going to report anything that jeopardizes people's lives, full stop. We've had a contentious relationship with the Iraqi regime over the years. My meetings in Baghdad usually included shouting."

In his meeting with Uday Hussein -- an off-the-record attempt to obtain an interview with his father -- Uday "just sort of went berserk," Jordan says, but the assassination threats were "not something I felt I could report."

He says executives from the Associated Press, Reuters, Britain's ITN and other news outlets begged him not to interview or air reports by their correspondents after the Iraqis warned that anyone cooperating with CNN would be expelled or imprisoned for spying.

Boston Phoenix columnist Dan Kennedy writes that Jordan was "an ambassador of the most odious kind, keeping silent about terrible human-rights abuses. . . . At what moment does Jordan's concerns about access and safety morph into a slimy collaboration with Saddam's evil regime?"

A "shocked and disgusted" James Glassman, a former CNN commentator, writes on TechCentralStation.com that "by reporting the [suppressed] stories, CNN might finally have aroused the outrage of the world."

But Jordan calls such criticism "ridiculous," saying: "No one in his right mind thinks anything other than Saddam Hussein's regime was a brutal regime that ruled by terror. . . . On the whole, we told some very important stories from Iraq."

### **War Story**

The Oneonta (N.Y.) Daily Star ran a front-page story last week on a Hartwick College sophomore named Rob Williams, who spoke of leaving school to train soldiers for urban warfare in Iraq.

It was a hoax -- an elaborate one at that. "We got burned," Editor Sam Pollak told readers.

Williams, 27, told the paper that he had worked at Fort Drum under Staff Sgt. Mark Wildman. Reporter Mark Boshnack couldn't find such a person, but a bogus "Wildman" later called him and confirmed Williams's account in clipped, military-like tones.

"That should have gotten our radar up," Pollak says in an interview. "I wanted to make sure this guy wasn't some kind of nut." The college has now suspended Williams and local police have charged him with illegal possession of an assault rifle photographed by the Star.

### **Internet Theft**

Cyberspace has been hit with its first plagiarism scandal.

Sean-Paul Kelley, who writes a Web log called the Agonist, has apologized for using material without attribution from the military intelligence site Stratfor. In classic blogging fashion, Kelley was exposed by another site, Strategic Armchair Command, and the incident was picked up by Wired News.

"What I did was inexcusable," Kelley says by phone. "It was a dumb thing to do, it really was. . . . I'll take my lumps. If I've discredited myself permanently, I have to accept that."

Kelley, 32, who works at a San Antonio financial services firm, says he made clear to his readers that he was cutting and pasting from other Web outlets but got "lazy" in failing to credit Stratfor when the war heated up. "The vast majority of my readers have been very supportive," he says.

*Howard Kurtz hosts CNN's weekly media program.*

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