

The non-debate on the war

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By Terry Michael

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"Teach your interns the role of journalists is to question power, not propagate it." That advice arrived recently from retired New York Times columnist Tom Wicker. While Mr. Wicker's words are important for my journalism students, they're a timely reminder for the Baby Boom leaders of America's newsrooms — who should have learned more than they did in the '60s, when the best and the brightest gave us Vietnam.

The most influential interpreters of our public affairs are accepting, rather than expanding, a noose-tight frame the Washington political culture is enforcing to limit permissible discourse on the war in Iraq.

"The worst, the most corrupting of lies, are problems poorly stated," Georges Bernanos wrote decades ago — an elegant way of saying, those who twist the terms of a debate skew its outcome.

Look at almost any major daily op-ed page, watch the Sunday shows or listen to nightly cable-babble. See how seldom you encounter voices against the war permitted to argue we should just end it, not try to mend it.

Sure, there is coverage of protests, like the mother outside President Bush's ranch. There have been many pieces about unfound weapons of mass destruction. Columns were filled with findings of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, including the discovery of no operational link between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. But those reports are the raw material of discourse, not the debate itself. In fact, the Crawford protest is the opposite of reasoned debate; it's a sideshow of verbal combatants yelling past each other. For average citizens to be presented with meaningful alternatives to the current war policy, we must have legitimate, fully engaged discourse, with intelligent voices coming to competing conclusions.

We're not getting that honest debate. Instead, those who control access to mainstream media are telling a quiet, corrupting lie when they allow the Bush administration and "opposition" congressional Democrats to engage in Amish-style shunning of those who advocate immediately ending the war. War proponents attack them with the ultimate Beltway rhetorical weapon: "not serious." In his wonderful new book, "Radical Evolution," Joel Garreau writes about the "tribal town" of Washington's definition of "serious," as in, "He is a serious person," or "That is a serious idea." "Serious does not necessarily have anything to do with whether the person or idea is correct, important or valuable," Mr. Garreau explains. "It implies that the idea or person is deemed ready for admittance to the sacraments of authority — such as congressional hearings... It basically means housebroken." The housebroken big dogs of the press corps won't admit end-it-now opponents of the war to the fraternity of The Serious.

Arguably, in the run-up to the war, the press could be given a pass for not allowing the case against attacking Iraq to be vigorously presented. Timid congressional Democrats held their fingers to the wind and engaged no real debate. It's hard to cover a conversation not taking place.

But how can mainstream journalism now be excused for quarantining stop-it-now voices from outside official Washington, after justification for the war has shifted from: 1) eliminating weapons of mass destruction, which didn't exist; 2) getting rid of a brutal dictator, who was a secularist thug, not an associate of Osama bin Laden; 3) spreading democracy, in a Hatfield-McCoy style tribal culture, heavily influenced by politicized religious fanatics whose world view never made it past the 8th century, let alone the Enlightenment, and who want theocracy, not liberty; 4) fighting Islamic terrorists, who need the United States in Iraq, not out, as their bete noir for recruiting more terrorists.

Yes, all the arguments in the previous sentence have been heard through opinion channels of mainstream media — but almost never from anyone who suggests they add up to a case for bringing our troops home now. Instead, some senior senatorial windbag like Sen. Joe Biden of Delaware alludes to them on “This Week” or “Meet the Press,” but ends his disingenuous criticism of administration policy with the caveat: of course, we can't just leave.

Mr. Biden and Sen. John Kerry are the quintessential have-everything-every-way empty suits in my party, who essentially allow the Republican party to have no congressional opposition.

To use the over-used Yogi Berra observation, it's deja vu all over again. We can't cut-and-run, the world won't respect us, Vietnam would be in chaos, the “serious” voices told us in the '60s. So we stayed for years, spread more of the chaos we created, and thousands more of my generation were sacrificed, so “serious” men wouldn't have to admit they were wrong.

Until major newspapers and networks permit proponents of ending the war now to be taken seriously, Americans will hear no meaningful debate about whether it is in our national interest. The current non-debate is about tactics for muddling on through, rather than purposeful discourse to decide whether to stay or go.

My bet is that most editors and producers will prefer to remain properly housebroken. It's less messy to propagate power than to question it.

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