



The Media Slant

If you've read any of my past columns, you're probably aware that I sometimes poke the American news media in the eye for its treatment of the U.S. armed forces and the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. In my judgment, where the military is concerned, our journalists tend to be a bit too stingy with the proverbial carrot, and a little too ready with the stick. So I sometimes take it upon myself to thump the fourth estate when I think someone has crossed the line.

As a consequence of some of the things I've said in print, I get a lot of emails from people who think I'm accusing the American media of political bias. Some of these emails are messages of solidarity from readers who want to thank me for speaking out against what they perceive as a growing liberal conspiracy in the media. Other messages come from readers who are horrified that I would ascribe anything but the purest of motives to any person who carries a press credential.

It may well come as a shock to readers on both sides, but I don't believe in a left wing (or right wing) conspiracy of the media. Although I often encounter people who accept wholeheartedly the existence of the *VLWM* (Vast Left Wing Media), I don't share their beliefs. Yes there are liberals in the fourth estate, but there are also conservatives. The press has taken to attacking the Bush administration with vitriolic glee, and I have no doubt whatsoever that much of the mainstream news media in America is actively engaged in stirring up public dissent over our military presence in Iraq, but I don't think it's liberal bias at work.

Don't get me wrong; there are times when I almost *want* to believe in a political conspiracy of the media. I've deployed to the Middle East many times in peace and in war. I have friends and loved ones over there now, men and women I've served with and trained. The photographs, videos, and memories that they bring home from Iraq bear almost no resemblance to the media's version of the situation over there. My own experiences in the region were so utterly at odds with the picture painted by the American press that I almost *want* to believe that some secret political machinations are in play.

About Jeff Edwards:



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As frustrated as I am with the recent conduct of the press, I don't buy the conspiracy angle for a second. I *do* think that a great deal the news coverage we see is deliberately slanted. But I don't think the root cause is political bias. In my opinion, the answer lies somewhere else entirely.

In 1988, Gary Hart was considered a frontrunner for the democratic presidential nomination. After eight years of Reagan administration politics, many saw Hart as his party's best chance for breaking the republican deadlock on the presidency. But that didn't stop reporters from the *Miami Herald* from staking out Hart's townhouse in Washington DC to catch the 50-year-old former democratic senator in an affair with a 29-year-old model named Donna Rice. Nor did the knowledge that they were about to chloroform the political career of a major democratic hopeful stop the Herald's reporters from tracking down photos of Hart aboard the yacht *Monkey Business*, with that same young model curled up in his lap. By exposing Hart's marital infidelities, they practically guaranteed a republican presidential victory. If there had been a liberal conspiracy at work, the American media would have glossed over the Hart story instead of running it into the ground.

Remember a certain white house intern and the infamous blue dress? Can anyone look back over the national coverage of the Monica Lewinski scandal and seriously claim that President Clinton got off easy? The press beat him up coming *and* going. If American journalism had been governed by left-leaning politics, I don't think the top man in the Democratic Party would have gotten so thoroughly mauled by his own (supposedly) secret allies. As I recall, he didn't get much slack over Whitewater, Gennifer Flowers, Paula Jones, the Lincoln Bedroom, or Travelgate either.

An examination of the historical evidence is more than enough to convince me that our press is *not* the puppet of left wing politics. But having said that, I must also point out that the news media is not an altruistic public service organization. Journalism is a profit-driven industry. It survives by selling newspapers, magazines, and pumping up Nielsen viewer ratings to attract advertising sponsors. It's a basic fact of life that sensational stories sell newspapers, and draw television viewers. Crime, corruption, sex, and death are the top moneymakers in the news industry. Consequently, decision-makers in the media are predisposed to select story angles that maximize controversy. It's not conspiracy. It's not even bias. It's basic economics.

A lot of Americans treat the news media as though it's a benevolent public trust, and that's simply not true. They assume that the stories they see are an even-handed representation of the current world situation. In fact, the lead stories in a typical news lineup are carefully selected to trigger polarized emotional responses in the news-consuming public. "*If it bleeds, it leads*" is a long-standing axiom in broadcast journalism. Malfeasance, failure and scandal can glue 200 million viewers to their television screens. Competence, success and fair play can't attract a fraction of that audience.

Put simply, the media gives us what we pay for, and we pay to see controversy. That may be an excellent business model for sweeping the ratings, but we'd be foolish to pretend that it encourages balance or accuracy in journalism.



In case you're thinking that this is a recent phenomenon, let me assure you that it isn't. In 1897, when *New York Journal* Correspondent Frederick Remington cabled William Randolph Hearst that there were no signs of insurrection in Cuba, Hearst cabled back, "You provide the pictures, and I'll provide the war." His newspaper launched a series of scathing attacks against the Spanish government, and an ongoing campaign of critical editorials about the U.S. government's failure to act against Spain. He succeeded in inflaming public opinion. Many — if not *most* — historians agree that Hearst's *New York Journal* was at least as instrumental in touching off the Spanish American War as the sinking of the USS *Maine*.

Hearst took tremendous pride in the fact that his newspaper was powerful enough to goad nations into war. That's not *reporting* the news. That's *creating* the news. It's not a dispassionate presentation of the facts. It's fear mongering for profit. Not even for political gain, but simply to escalate public interest and enhance news industry revenues.

If you pay attention, you'll see the same thing happening right now. The fourth estate's coverage of Iraq is carefully crafted to maximize controversy. We get the news, but only those portions that are likely to galvanize us with anger or fear. Enraged and frightened citizens buy a *lot* of newspapers and spend a *lot* of time glued to their television screens. So the coverage we get is slanted toward our insecurities and our weaknesses. The American media isn't following some liberal political agenda. It's just ramping up its customer base in the only way it can.

Ask the average American citizen whose idea was it to remove Saddam Hussein from power, and they'll probably point the finger toward President Bush. Our vaunted friends of the fourth estate *know* this, and they do nothing to disabuse us of the notion. Of course, most journalists *also* know that President Clinton signed *Public Law 105-338* on October 31, 1998. That law, better known as *The Iraq Liberation Act of 1998*, formally stated the intentions of the United States to overthrow Hussein. Here's a direct quote from Section 3 of the text:

'It should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and to promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace that regime.'

That same law outlines some of the reasons behind the decision to bring down Hussein. Among them are war crimes, the documented use of chemical weapons, genocide, a failed Iraqi plot to assassinate an American president, and the fact that *'Iraq has persisted in a pattern of deception and concealment regarding the history of its weapons of mass destruction programs.'* That's another direct quote from the law. Look it up at your local library. It's interesting reading.

In October of '98, when The Iraq Liberation Act was signed, George W. Bush was campaigning for reelection as governor of Texas. His name wasn't even in the hat for the presidency when his predecessor and the 105th Congress committed America to replacing Saddam Hussein with a democratic government. You won't see *that* on the front page of the national newspapers.

Ask the average American citizen about U.S. casualties in Iraq, and you're likely to get an earful about our unprecedented losses. The media encourages the belief that we're taking a



beating over there, because it frightens us and it angers us. What they *won't* tell you is that the casualty rate in Iraq is lower than in any other armed conflict we've ever engaged in. They won't tell you that our total losses in thirty-eight months of fighting are less than a third of our average *monthly* losses in World War II. They won't tell you that more Americans choke to death in restaurants every year than we lose in Iraq. They won't mention the fact that, even adjusted for the scale of the conflict, our casualty rates in Iraq are so low that they are statistically anomalous. There is no historical precedent for protracted operations with such a low death rate, but you won't see *that* on cable news.

A few months ago, I watched a news report about the body armor in use by U.S. troops in Iraq. A grim-faced correspondent announced sadly that the current generation of armor leaves our Soldiers vulnerable to injury. The subtext of the report strongly insinuated that indifferent military leaders are callously sending our troops into harm's way with substandard protective equipment. What I *didn't* see in the report was any mention of the fact that *all* body armor leaves the wearer vulnerable to injury. I saw no attempt to point out to viewers that there is *no* design or level of quality that can protect against all injury; that there never *has* been, and that there never *will* be. Nor did I see any mention of the Pentagon's extensive research into the compromises between armor coverage and physical agility. There is a point at which the weight of additional armor and the accompanying loss of mobility combine to make a Soldier *more* vulnerable to injury rather than less. Working in the desert, a Soldier with too much armor can actually *die* from heatstroke without the enemy firing a shot. But there was no mention of *that* in the news report. A large percentage of the military personnel serving in Iraq believe that wearing less armor would make them faster, more maneuverable, and ultimately safer. None of that came out in the report, because a dispassionate consideration of the facts takes the drama and tension right out of the story. Not a lot of people are likely to get spun up over a reasoned decision based on the limitations of existing technology and the tradeoffs between protection and mobility. But *apathy* and *incompetence* on the part of heartless military leaders? *That's* a story! It fairly *screams* controversy. So the news correspondent skipped over the research and decision-making process used by the military, and went straight for the angle that would send the average viewer into emotional overload.

There's a joke email circulating around the internet under the label "Men's Rules," or "The Man Code." It purports to be a sort of macho manifesto: a list of rules that women must understand and accept in order to live peacefully alongside male members of the species. Most items on the list are silly and a few are patently offensive, but there's one that always brings me a smile: "*If something we said can be interpreted two ways, and one of the ways makes you sad or angry, we meant the other one.*"

With a few revisions, I think that so-called rule could become a fair summary of the journalism-for-profit manifesto. "*If something we said can be interpreted two ways, and one of the ways makes you frightened or angry, that's the one we meant.*"

It's not about conspiracy; it's about controversy. It's about circulation figures and rating shares. It's not politics; it's profit.



I almost hesitate to submit this column, because I can already see the flurry of angry emails it's going to bring me. Before you break out the poison pens, you should know that I'm staunchly against any attempt to rein in the American media. The Bill of Rights makes Freedom of the Press sacrosanct, and I think it *should* be. Although I'm frequently disappointed by the media's tendency to elevate sensationalism over truth, I wouldn't want to live in a country where the media doesn't have the *right* to disappoint me. An unregulated press is one of the core components of a free society. I've spent most of my adult life working to defend that right, and I will gladly do it again. But the same First Amendment that protects the press also gives me the right to voice my disapproval when the press falls short of its promise.

I must also note that there are a lot of journalists out there who *do* try to get it right. There are people in the news industry who do their very best to shoot straight, and to treat conflicting views with equal weight. Unfortunately, big-ticket reporters often marginalize straight shooters. Un-slanted news invites contemplation, research, and thoughtful discussion. It doesn't create the storms of emotional discord that drive up ratings and circulation. So the balanced and reasonable stories don't make the headlines. They end up below the fold on page 6, if they make the news at all. And most of us miss the balanced stories entirely because we've learned to settle for headlines, fifteen-second sound bytes, and the ticker at the bottom of the cable news screen.

If you want to know what's going on in the world, you have to dig. You have to investigate, inquire, and — where possible — talk to people who have a personal connection to the events that interest you. If you want to know what's going on in Iraq, turn off your television and talk to a few Soldiers who've been there. If you want to know how the Iraqi people feel about the U.S. military presence in Iraq, find some Iraqi citizens and *ask* them. Turn to page 6 or page 11 and read the stories *below* the fold. And when a story on the news pushes your blood pressure through the roof, remember that it was almost certainly engineered to do precisely that.

The media gives you about 5% of the information that you need to reach an intelligent conclusion on most world events. Go read some of the other 95%. More often than not, the rest of the story is easily available through records that are open to the public. The media is counting on the fact that you'll never bother to check up on their version of things. Fool them. Find out for yourself. And remember: it's not bias; it's business.

For more columns by Jeff Edwards, visit NavyThriller.Com.