n early 2005 the Bush administration formally announced that no evidence of a program to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) during the last years of Saddam Hussein’s regime had been found. Since no “smoking gun” will ever be found as proof of a real Iraqi effort to develop WMD, the public is entitled to wonder whether the media blew smoke in its face about the causes of the war. Indeed, even more than the Spanish American War—which for over a century has served as a paradigm of jingoistic “yellow journalism” leading to armed military action—Operation Iraqi Freedom demonstrates the problem of media power in war policy formation.

The bug in the system is not that journalists made mistakes about WMD in Iraq but that the public seems so unprepared to impose a coherent set of watchdog standards about media accountability. In the judicial system, one needs evidence beyond any reasonable doubt to convict a man. How is it that the media can point the public toward war, and help put thousands of troops in harm’s way, without having any definite evidence to support its descriptions of a foreign reality? Are there standards of malpractice that can, and ought, to be imposed on newsroom editors and news studio producers?

The New York Times’ admission of May 26, 2004, that its coverage of the WMD controversy in prewar Iraq was flawed is a cultural earthquake whose tremors will be felt and studied for years. With this admission, the closest thing to a newspaper of record in America said that it dropped the ball about the causa belli in Iraq.

As was pointed out widely by Internet bloggers and independent research groups, the same two or three journalists filed many of the articles cited in the Times’ admission. Long before the WMD crisis and 9/11, these journalists were criticized for harboring anti-Arab prejudices. The fact that their names were cited by The New York Times in its mea culpa piece about its coverage of the buildup to Operation Iraqi Freedom appears to reinforce a troubling question.

Do political agendas tip the balance in media discussion of issues like the WMD controversy, in which editors and producers have to make judgment calls on the basis of inconclusive evidence? What do The New York Times’ May 2004 admission, and the prominent role played in these faulty reports by journalists who in the 1990s were accused of anti-Arab bias, mean? Do they validate sweeping judgments made by critics of American media coverage of the Middle East?

Media bias could be one piece of the puzzle, but I’m guessing most readers will agree it can’t be the only reason why reasonable, intelligent editors made the wrong call about WMD in Iraq. For those who would want to prosecute a hypothetical “media malpractice” suit in light of unfolding realities in Iraq, what, besides prejudice, could serve as counts in the indictment? Two broad problems could be identified by the prosecution in this case. Problems of shortsightedness and self-involvement, the indictment counts in this hypothetical media malpractice suit, might be called “media amnesia” and “me-first media.”

by Matthew Silver
First, media outlets have an attention span that is invariably shorter than the national interest. And in the Middle East, media amnesia is liable to be extremely costly.

For instance, media outlets seem to have forgotten about the dire concerns they conjured in the mid-1970s about an energy crisis. Because of this memory loss, the upside-down relationship between oil dependency and democratization is never seen for what it is.

Where are the journalists who have sufficient memory and vision to show the American public that its idealistic goals in the Middle East are ill served by its dependence upon oil—oil that is supplied by oppressive, undemocratic regimes in the region? In the 1970s mainstream media outlets called on American consumers to make small but significant sacrifices in their energy habits. Thirty years later, the media largely endorses policies that require American soldiers to sacrifice their lives in the struggle to bring political freedom to the Middle East. Until one sort of sacrifice is incorporated with the other in public discussion, illiberal regimes in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere will be able to exploit America’s oil dependence while ignoring its calls for democratization.

Second, me-first media outlets tend to be obsessed with domestic political processes, even when they are ostensibly reporting on foreign political dynamics and controversies of urgent, acute importance.

One reason why America’s most talented journalists failed to unravel the truth about WMD—and about related did-he-or-didn’t-he-type mysteries that are the lifeblood of investigative reporting—is that they are primarily interested in local, American riddles. They want to know how power operates in Washington. However natural it is for American media to center on American politics, it is undeniable that this domestic focus has left highly intriguing political processes in Iraq—culminating in national elections that are being staged as I write these lines—in a dizzy blur.

America’s premier investigative journalists have been in the game for decades, and their reporting on the Iraqi crisis has produced notably vivid portraits. But by penetrating deeply into corridors of power in Washington while neglecting the struggles of the man on the street in Basra or Najaf to create a new political reality after Saddam Hussein, their work has reinforced a me-first world outlook.

Two recent books on Iraq, Bob Woodward’s Plan of Attack and Seymour Hersh’s Chain of Command, compellingly illustrate this point. Woodward portrays Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and other war architects as thorough planners whose positions are challenged by dissenters and skeptics in a viable policy process. Hersh, on the other hand, argues that Rumsfeld and a few aides created at the Pentagon special policy formation structures that bypassed regular intelligence and military channels, provided wholly inaccurate information about WMD, and supported possibly unconstitutional interrogation practices at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib.

Nobody would say that such a divergence of views is illegitimate, but it is worth wondering whether the public interest was best served after the 9/11 attacks by a stuck-in-the-1960s veteran media establishment whose orientation is so deeply rooted in the domestic political process.

The media, in other words, might be guilty of malpractice because it wrongly asked a self-involved question at an inopportune moment. After the 9/11 attacks, the public gave the Bush administration considerable policy-making latitude, and it consistently affirmed its confidence in its leadership. It was not the time for American journalists to be wondering if their own political system could be trusted.

With their focus on domestic politics, the media ignored the complex, foreign issue of staging elections in developing countries, which is quickly becoming the crux of global politics in the 21st century.

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U.S. Army soldier reads Time magazine cover story on American forces. Photo by Alexander Demianchuk, Reuters/Corbis.