

How Media Deceive You About Iraq

By J. MICHAEL WALLER

A bipartisan congressional delegation visiting Iraq is unanimous in its opinion that the media's emphasis on isolated acts of violence distort the progress made.

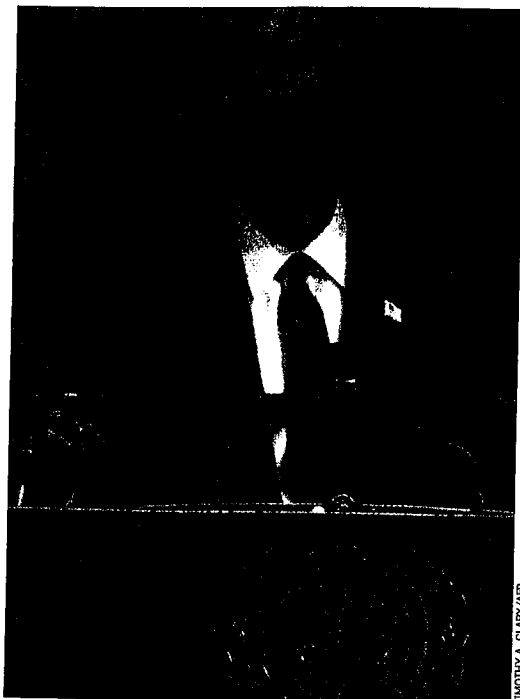
Remember the "quagmire" about to consume U.S. and coalition forces in the first days of the invasion of Iraq? Some home-based journalists and talking heads all but warned that Saddam Hussein's formidable military and a hostile Iraqi desert were sure to bog down U.S. troops in another Vietnam [see "Out of the 'Quagmire,'" April 29-May 12]. Nonsense, the Pentagon said, with civilian and military leaders alike confidently describing the remarkable progress being made despite the sandstorms and stretched supply lines. The front-line reporting by embedded journalists supported the Pentagon's prediction of the imminent fall of Baghdad.

Half a year after the liberation of Iraq, it is quagmire time again. To judge from much of the reporting and commentary during the last few months, the United States is headed for an even bigger Vietnam in Iraq with little to show for its efforts. Critics point to continued scarcity of electricity, potable water and sanitation, a decrepit oil infrastructure, anti-American protesters, divided political forces, street crime, U.S. insensitivity to local culture, assassinations of moderate Iraqi leaders, friendly-fire incidents against supportive Iraqis and the almost-daily shootings and bombings that on average have taken the lives of one U.S. or allied soldier a day. And, oh yes, the United States hasn't yet produced enough evidence of Iraqi weapons of

mass destruction, so the whole invasion was based on a lie.

The sky is falling. Again.

But the emerging facts tell a different story, one of remarkable successes against tremendous odds and despite major screwups in the occupation of Iraq. During the few weeks of combat operations last spring, more than 700 embedded Western journalists provided the world with a window on the victorious U.S.-led coalition forces and the realities of Saddam's Iraq. Today, however,



Loud and clear: Bush's speech to the United Nations highlighted the accomplishments of the U.S. effort.



only about 27 Western journalists are on the ground in Iraq, and the reduced quality of reporting shows. A bipartisan group of congressmen visited Iraq in September to see the situation firsthand. One of their conclusions: The big media generally have it wrong.

"The media stress the wounds, the injuries and the deaths, as they should, but for instance in northern Iraq [the U.S. Army 101st Airborne Division] has 3,100 projects, from soccer fields to schools to refineries. All good stuff that isn't being reported," said Rep. Ike Skelton (D-Mo.), the ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee who organized the seven-member bipartisan delegation.

Rep. Jim Marshall (D-Ga.), a Vietnam combat veteran, came back convinced that "we have a reasonable chance of success." But, he added in a hard-hitting op-ed in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, "I'm afraid the news media are hurting our chances. They are dwelling upon the mistakes, the ambushes, the soldiers killed, the wounded." The press and television, Marshall alleged, are "not balancing this bad news with 'the rest of the story' — the progress made daily, the good news. This falsely bleak picture weakens our national resolve, discourages Iraqi cooperation and emboldens our enemy."

Emboldening the enemy? "We have a



Welcome wagon: Iraqi children (as well as many of their parents) are eager to come out and meet and greet U.S. troops as they patrol the country.

regime," Wilson says, "by emphasizing the perceived dissolution of resolve in America, a perceived Vietnamization in America where the public grows tired of supporting the troops."

The Bush administration is on the offensive, emphasizing real accomplishments in Iraq in what it acknowledges will remain a tough and costly challenge. For all the inevitable mistakes and difficulties, the coalition is making extraordinary progress in helping Iraqis get back on their feet, administration officials say. "If one looks back at Germany or Japan or Bosnia or Kosovo and measures the progress that has taken place in this country [Iraq] in four or five months, it dwarfs any other experience that I'm aware of," Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told reporters while visiting Iraq in early September. The facts show substantial progress — and tend to vindicate President Bush's policy.

Forty-five of the 52 Iraqi figures on the deck of "Wanted" playing cards either have turned themselves in or have been captured or killed. Saddam Hussein's defense minister, Sultan Hashim Ahmad, surrendered peacefully to the 101st Airborne in Mosul on Sept. 19. The feared enforcers of Saddam's rule, and the only ones capable of resurrecting his regime, are dead. A senior Pentagon official tells *INSIGHT*, "The order is capture or kill the high-value targets. I stand by that order. I have no preference, particularly."

More than 45 countries have offered military forces to the peacekeeping effort in Iraq, with more than 13,000 forces from 19 nations in-country at last count. Even Russia is considering the dispatch of troops to Iraq under U.S. command. The United Kingdom and Poland are preparing to lead multinational divisions. Fourteen countries are committed to deploy another 12,000 troops, Defense Department documents say.

Iraqis are starting to assume security roles in their country. The United States and its coalition partners already have trained and armed more than 50,000 Iraqis for new police and civil-defense forces, and for a new Iraqi army, Pentagon and congressional sources say. "A relatively new concept is a civil-defense force, roughly a cross between a police and paramilitary force," says a senior Pentagon official. "They will take over fixed sites where we don't need our troops, like hospitals," and are intended to establish security nationwide.

narrow window to get this right and things could still go very badly," Skelton told reporters.

"In fairness, the war is neither going as well as the administration says it's going or as badly as the media say," added Rep. Gene Taylor (D-Miss.).

One of the returning lawmakers, Rep. Joe Wilson (R-S.C.), noted the differences in news coverage of an attack in which three U.S. servicemen were killed. "It was a classic differential. I saw the Fox News presentation on the three troops who had been killed. The next segment was the report on the Florida National Guard opening a school [in Iraq]. That's reporting the bad and the good," Wilson tells *INSIGHT* that while driving in his car he heard a different story. "On the radio, I heard the CBS report on the three deaths, and it had an analyst come on and, in a virtually hysterical analysis, announce that this was a new stage in the conflict and that the remnants of Saddam's forces had clearly re-established themselves. I almost went off the road. Our three troops had stumbled across Saddam's remnants in Saddam's hometown of Tikrit. That's not a surprise. That's not a regrouping of the forces."

U.S. military leaders agree. Army Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, commander of Combined Joint Task Force 7 in Iraq, told reporters, "When you look across

this country there is no practical threat. There is no tactical threat. There is no strategic threat or operational threat that exists to the coalition or to America." Sanchez added with a shake of his head, "It is very disturbing to me to sit here every day and watch the news back home that focuses on the bad things that are happening in Iraq."

Some see the bias as symptomatic of pack journalism, in which reporters based in foreign capitals hang out with each other at the same hotel and develop the same story. An occasional soldier getting blown up makes more exciting headlines than good news and is easier to report.

Wilson sees another problem: politicization as the 2004 presidential campaign heats up. "There are some people in the press, not all, who are emphasizing the negative. It's very short-sighted. It has a short political agenda as opposition to George W. Bush," Wilson tells *INSIGHT*.

Based on Saddam's emergency plans captured at the end of the war, his Ba'athist loyalists were depending upon Western correspondents to continue hyping the militarily insignificant but emotionally charged daily attacks on coalition forces, as in Vietnam. "Indeed, I think the media are putting our soldiers at risk by giving false encouragement to remnants of Saddam Hussein's

The coalition is raising a new Iraqi Militia Force to help root out Saddam loyalists, death squads and foreign terrorists. The United States now is training 4,000 Iraqi militiamen, the first of whom are expected to graduate soon and will work under U.S. command. Some Iraqi security forces, such as the 500-man Basra River Police, have been on patrol since June. Already 58 of Iraq's 89 cities have their own police forces, with 34,000 police already hired and trained, the official said, "with uniforms, with guns, in place and more coming online all the time. It's not without hazard because they're being intimidated and they're paying a price."

The United States is sending nearly 30,000 more Iraqis to Hungary for police and military training. "In less than a year they'll have a division, and in less than three years they'll have two divisions," a senior administration official tells *INSIGHT*. "They will free up U.S. forces to do what we need to do." Gen. Sanchez rejects calls from politicians calling for deployment of more U.S. troops, insisting, "I don't need any more forces here."

While international teams quietly continue their search for weapons of mass destruction, evidence is mounting of a connection between the former Iraqi regime and al-Qaeda. Gilbert Merritt, a federal judge helping Iraqis rebuild their judicial system, wrote an article in July describing "strong proof" of a connection between an Iraqi official in Pakistan who was "responsible for the coordination of activities with the Osama bin Laden group." Merritt, a Democrat and family friend of former vice president Al Gore, said, "Until this time, I have been skeptical about these claims. Now I have changed my mind." Vice President Dick Cheney described the al-Qaeda-Baghdad connection to NBC's Tim Russert on Sept. 14, including Iraqi involvement in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City.

The United States and the coalition are making headway on the soft hearts-and-minds side, too. The internationally funded programs are being implemented seemingly without end. U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded projects in Iraq span the social spectrum in the hearts-and-minds campaign. Through them U.S. taxpayers will refurbish the Aqrah Sports Stadium in Arbil (to "foster interethnic friendship in Aqrah and the surrounding villages," USAID says); equip soccer teams in Fal-lujah, from field refurbishment to

36 Countries Pledge Funds for Iraq

In strong gestures of support, at least 36 countries have pledged or contributed funds to support the U.S.-led humanitarian effort in Iraq. As of July 15, the latest date for which figures are available, the top 12 donors were:

United States: \$565.3 million
 United Kingdom: \$335.1 million
 Canada: \$215 million
 Japan: \$101.8 million
 Australia: \$60.6 million
 Germany: \$56 million
 Norway: \$55 million
 Denmark: \$54 million
 United Arab Emirates: \$47.6 million
 Saudi Arabia: \$36.6 million
 Spain: \$32.3 million
 Kuwait: \$27.5 million

SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

soccer balls, cleats and uniforms; and provide education programs for lactating women. Emergency USAID grants have strengthened new Iraqi human-rights groups to help them document the crimes of the Saddam Hussein regime. One of the projects was to assist Iraqis "to continue collecting and researching information on missing persons and mass graves."

More and more Iraqis are collaborating with U.S. forces, yielding big results. Iraqis are coming forward to provide

intelligence to the United States. "Increased Iraqi-civilian help to U.S. forces has resulted in many of the great accomplishments of late, especially identifying wanted figures and arms caches," a senior Pentagon official tells *INSIGHT*. A U.S. official working in Iraq tells this magazine, "We couldn't have made the weapons discoveries we've been making without a lot of help from the local people." CIA adviser David Kay, a weapons inspector, agrees, saying more Iraqis are "collaborating and cooperating" with the United States.

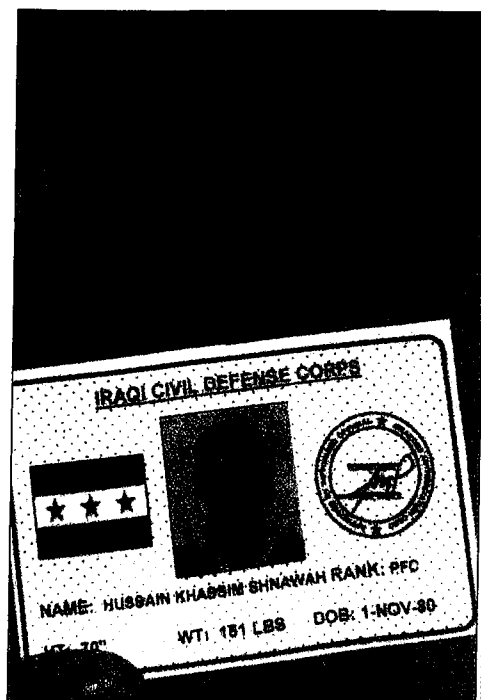
U.S. troops report that most Iraqis like them in place. Rep. Wilson met in Iraq with servicemen of all ranks from his home state of South Carolina who told him that between 70 and 90 percent of Iraqis support the U.S. troop presence. "That's an astounding number," Wilson says. "For politicians we're looking for that 50 percent plus one."

Such support is necessary if the coalition is to ensure an orderly transfer of power to the Iraqi people. The transfer process began on July 13 when Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, chief of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) who technically has dictatorial powers in Iraq, formally established a transitional national political leadership called the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC).

Meanwhile, "Iraq has no constitution, no laws, no civil or criminal code. It has no functioning judicial system. Almost everything remains as under the Saddam Hussein regime," a senior administration official tells *INSIGHT*. "We just can't leave Iraq without putting in place the necessary structures to ensure a stable civil society." So the 25-person IGC that Bremer assembled after consultations with Iraqi tribal and regional leaders is organizing itself and forming commissions and committees to serve as Iraq-led task forces to identify problems and devise solutions. It is empowered to name interim government ministers, oversee their performance and require testimony from them about how they plan to run their respective ministries, according to a senior U.S. official in Baghdad. It prepares policy initiatives for Bremer and proposes policies on reform of police, the judicial system, the armed forces and national security in general.

The IGC increasingly is taking on responsibility for a national government budget. "The council will be able to consider amendments to the 2003 emergency budget," according to a Pentagon fact sheet. Iraq's 2004 budget will be subject to IGC approval.

Flashing the badge: A new member of the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps proudly displays his identification card.



The United States intends for the IGC to assemble a Preparatory Constitutional Commission to recommend guidelines for writing and ratifying a new constitution. Already the IGC is considering a process for regional assemblies to elect their own delegates to a national constitutional convention. Once ratified, the constitution would provide a legal basis for an independent and sovereign government through national presidential and legislative elections.

In a series of diplomatic breakthroughs that have legitimized U.S. policy, the IGC has been gaining greater acceptance and legitimacy in the Arab world. The Arab League recognizes the IGC as the legitimate representative of Iraq. The IGC represents Iraq

JOYCE MALTCHAM/AFIP



JAMAL A. WILSON/EPH

On the same page: Skelton, left, laments that the media do not report on the successes in Iraq. Rumsfeld, right, says rebuilding efforts in Iraq are proceeding better than those mounted in Germany and Japan after World War II.

at the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. The United Nations has yet to recognize a new Iraqi government, but the IGC has sent envoys to the world body and some of its members met with Secretary-General Kofi Annan in late September — a meeting that IGC officials say is the first tacit recognition that the United Nations recognizes and accepts new realities about U.S. strategy against terrorism.

Realities in Iraq, and recognition that the situation is still very fluid, appear to have cemented bipartisan support for a continued and costly U.S. commitment. “I was very pleasantly surprised,” Rep. Wilson says of his mission with his Democratic colleagues. “I didn’t want to be argumentative when I was on the trip. I was very surprised to see that Congressman Skelton said we were in 99 percent agreement. I agree with him.”

These lawmakers see the constant carping about continued attacks on U.S. personnel to be damaging in the long term. “Congressman Marshall was very pointed in his view that the negative reporting from the media was very injurious to our troops,” Rep. Wilson says. “If I said that as a Republican, it wouldn’t mean anything. For a Democrat to say it, that’s startling.”

Quality-of-Life Scorecard in Iraq

- Much of Iraq has been restored to prewar conditions.
- There is no food crisis in Iraq. The country has an ample food supply and is importing additional food stocks.
- The U.S.-funded Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) is purchasing local harvests to keep agriculture intact, pump legitimate cash into the Iraqi economy and ensure an adequate food supply. To date the CPA has purchased 750,000 tons of Iraqi grain.
- The public-health system is improving. Basic health-care services have been restored to 90 percent in the north, 80 percent in the south and 75 percent in Baghdad. The Iraqi Ministry of Health has a \$210 million budget through October and is purchasing basic health-care

services, medical equipment, pharmaceutical supplies and equipment, as well as generators for health-care facilities. By contrast, Saddam Hussein spent \$13 million for health care in 2002.

- Restoration of electric power is sporadic and slow and fraught with looting and sabotage, but electricity is usually available in Baghdad in rotating three-hour periods. In Basra electric power is on for about 18 hours a day, and parts of southern Iraq have electricity 24 hours daily. Iraq’s decrepit electric-power system is being rebuilt, with 39,000 local electrical workers back on the job and \$294 million budgeted through December for improvements.

SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

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