

# Out of the Quagmire



By J. MICHAEL WALLER

Media managers covering an awe-inspiring military campaign seemed determined to turn war in Iraq into a U.S. defeat as in Vietnam.

**T**he attitude of many reporting on the war in Iraq seemed to be, "Daddy, are we there yet?" Day after day the mood in the TV studios was one of impatience and incoherence about what U.S. military leaders now are calling one of the most awesome military campaigns in history. At the same time, in the three weeks it took U.S. forces to topple Saddam Hussein's regime and seize Baghdad, Americans were treated to some of the most professional and thorough war reporting ever — contaminated

from the editorial suites and studio directorate by a steady, noxious dripping of ill-informed speculation, whining and defeatism.

War reporting from Iraq, beamed home instantly via TV and the Internet, with comprehensive yet detailed coverage in the daily newspapers, rested heavily on the military technology that pummeled and destroyed the Iraqi regime. Few news organizations could tell the story effectively without using U.S. and British warships, tanks and armor as transportation and reporting platforms,

and sharing the same communications satellites used by the Pentagon and Her Majesty's forces. Embedding journalists with coalition military units not only allowed the story to be told in real time, but gave reporters a new appreciation of the hardships and heroism of the military and helped give military professionals an appreciation of the press.

No one credibly could complain that the military was covering up. Indeed, some complained of too much access to the front lines as young soldiers and Marines shared their cramped armored vehicles with civilian reporters.

Fine desert grit replaced the studio pancake makeup of the TV personalities, who stank of sweat and dirt just like the combatants. At least three talented American journalists have died on the job: Atlantic Monthly editor at large and Washington Post columnist Michael Kelly, a great analyst and wordsmith, and NBC's energetic David Bloom.

## Reporters not just baggage:

Even lazy or inexperienced journalists on a battlefield with live video made liberal managers look like they were cheering.



JAM. EDWARDS JR./THE WASHINGTON TIMES



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Often the reporting was incomplete or shorn of strategic context as if blind men were describing the elephant, but it seemed accurate from the reporter's perspective, one piece of a mosaic in panorama. Facts frequently were mangled, especially concerning military nomenclature. MSNBC confused military ranks, repeatedly calling the commander of British forces in southern Iraq, Air Marshal Brian Burrridge, a "major." (A British air marshal is equivalent in rank to a three-star general.) *INSIGHT* lost count of reports that confused U.S. Marines with Army "soldiers," though National Public Radio and Reuters managed to combine them, reporting on April 7 about "Marines with the 101st Airborne Division, which was following up behind the Army after it seized Baghdad's international airport." The Marines have no airborne division, and the Screaming Eagles of the famous 101st are proud to be in the Army.

But the story of journalists who did their job with only an occasional silly mistake is not news. The real news is about the reporters and commentators who got it wrong through ignorance, avarice, old-think, attempts to fit the war to their personal bias and, in the case of some, political ambition. Some of this *INSIGHT* survey of media coverage was surprising. CBS anchorman Dan Rather wasn't the bad guy here. By and large, the liberal *Washington Post* was more balanced than the liberal *New York Times*, combining daily dispatches, anecdotes and statistics with big-picture reporting and intricate maps and diagrams to provide some of the war's most comprehensive coverage for its printed pages, Website and partnership with MSNBC.

A day-by-day record of Big Media reporting shows which journalists and news organizations failed the credibility test. Indeed, one finds that two defeatist themes passed off as American "news"

actually were surfaced by the late Saddam Hussein regime through its information minister, Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf.

We start with R.W. Apple, a Washington-based correspondent for the *New York Times*, grand pooh-bah of what William Powers of *National Journal* calls "the Quagmire Club." Readers may remember Apple's reporting when President George W. Bush sent in the military to destroy al-Qaeda and its Taliban protectors in Afghanistan following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Apple pecked out a story headlined, "A Military Quagmire Remembered: Afghanistan as Vietnam" on day 24 of the war in Afghanistan.

"Like an unwelcome specter from an unhappy past, the ominous word 'quagmire' has begun to haunt conversations among government officials and students of foreign policy, both here and abroad. Could Afghanistan become another Vietnam?" Apple wrote. "Echoes of Vietnam

are unavoidable." Kabul fell five weeks later.

This time, on March 30, Apple warned of heavy casualties and street fighting in the Iraqi capital. As coalition forces advanced, Apple noted the "stunning speed" of the offensive against Saddam, commenting, "No less remarkable has been the transformation of the political atmosphere at home and, to a lesser degree, abroad." He quickly became his old self, raising the specter in a separate piece about how Saddam might survive, and that President Bush made "no vain-glorious pledge" to take the Iraqi tyrant dead or alive.

"There's a ritual, a kind of quagmire Kabuki that never varies," Powers notes. "Someone employs the word in a war-news report or one of those deeply important 'analysis' pieces that are just opinion columns in front-page drag. The most famous quagmirist, R.W. Apple Jr. of the *New York Times*, doesn't even have to use the word anymore. He just does an interpretive fan-dance around it and everyone knows what he means."

Jack Shafer writes in *Slate*, "Ridiculing Apple is easy — he's a large, slow target that bleeds profusely when hit. But many others in the press are guilty of Appleism, writing whatever story is required to fit the arc of the wartime news cycle."

The wartime reports and comments of ABC news-reader Peter Jennings makes him a charter member of the Quagmire Club. On March 17, before the attacks began, Jennings said twice, falsely, that the United States was "going it alone" against the regime. ABC was the only major TV news organization to be caught unprepared when the war began on March 19, according to a survey by the Media Research Center, which provided many of the network quotes cited in this story. *INSIGHT's* chronology of the war coverage shows the pattern.

**Day 2, March 20:** Within 24 hours of the U.S. attempt at decapitating the Iraqi leadership, Jennings showed a video of an injured Iraqi girl at Al-Yarmouk Hospital in Baghdad. Al-Jazeera and the Saudi channel Al-Arabia furnished the videotape, after the Iraqi Ministry of Information led ABC correspondent Richard Engel through the facility. "We cannot tell you what these pictures represent, except some poor child has been hurt," Jennings said. "It's a little out of context, but there it is."

Reporting from New York City, ABC's Chris Cuomo covered a growing antiwar demonstration, with footage featuring buttons and signs saying "No blood for oil." Twice that night, Jennings explained to viewers, "They believe the United States wishes to occupy Iraq in the long

term to have the oil, just so we understand why they wear those little buttons, 'No blood for oil.'" He said he was "very struck" by the "huge ads in some of the nation's newspapers on the very eve of all this, being opposed to the war."

**Day 3, March 21:** Thirty-six hours after President Bush gave the go-ahead, U.S. ground forces made military history, tearing more than 250 miles to the outskirts of Baghdad. With the so-called shock and awe campaign under way from the sky, Brian Williams of MSNBC compared U.S. precision strikes to the carpet bombing and firebombing of civilian areas during World War II. He told viewers at midday, "The vista on the lower left looks like Dresden; it looks like some of the firebombing of Japanese cities during World War II." Not only was this not true, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld immediately addressed reporters at a Pentagon briefing to counter Williams' analogy: "The weapons that are being used today have a degree of precision that no one ever dreamt of in a prior conflict."

One reporter demanded of the defense secretary, "We keep talking about this overwhelming force that we're supposed to use. I'm wondering, are you concerned at all that we will be seen as a bully?" Tom Bowman of the *Baltimore Sun* carped at Rumsfeld about precision-guided weapons inflicting casualties on Iraqis. On ABC that evening, Jennings promoted the antiwar protesters, tossing them easy questions but not mentioning the radical, pro-North Korea groups that organized the major rallies [see "Marching for Saddam," March 4-17].

**Day 4, March 22:** The *New York Times* carried a David Chen article saying that

the U.S. attack on Baghdad reminded New Yorkers of the 9/11 al-Qaeda attack on their city. ABC was no better. Even though jubilant Iraqis joined British troops in tearing down images of Saddam in Basra, Jennings opened ABC *World News Tonight* with reference to antiwar protests at home. He presented a sliver of Gen. Tommy Franks' news conference when a Middle Eastern reporter asked, "Was it a big lie or just a cover to justify your invasion of Iraq and to remove its regime which still cannot use any kinds of weapons to defend itself against your attacks?" Showing Iraqis destroying pictures of Saddam, Jennings suggested the event was staged "for the cameras."

In southern Iraq, ABC reporter John Donovan was upset because the British military wasn't ensuring that journalists would remain safe from land mines and gunfire if they wandered off on their own. Back in Baghdad, regime "minders" took Engel to what he called "a community center that had been hit by five separate rockets," with Jennings showing a video of empty children's swings in an adjoining playground. Cuomo remained in Times Square with the demonstrators, saying they only wanted "government accountability, they want environmental justice and, most of all, they're calling for peace." He admitted that the protesters were just "a statistical minority," but said that history shows that demonstrators "like this have been prescient indicators of the national mood." CNN's Maria Hinojosa likewise covered the "peace" march, while Ashleigh Banfield of MSNBC chose to cover a pro-military rally in Tennessee.

**Day 5, March 23:** A sandstorm gave the lead U.S. forces a chance to sleep and

## Tactical Surprise and 'A Great Plan'

Responding to allegations of failed military planning, Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, tried to educate journalists about military plans, inevitable changes in those plans and the concept of surprise against the enemy.

"Gen. Franks — and for the benefit of our troops — wanted to protect tactical surprise," he said in an April 1 briefing. "How do you protect tactical surprise when you have 250,000 troops surrounding Iraq on D-Day? How do you do that? Well, you do it by the method he did it: by having the types of forces — you do it by starting the ground war first, air war second. Do you think there was tactical surprise? I think there was. Do we have the oil fields in the south? About 60 percent of the oil wealth has been preserved for the Iraqi people. You bet. Have we had a Scud fired against Jordan or Israel yet? No. Why? Because we went in very early, even before the ground war, to secure those places. Do we have humanitarian supplies flowing into Umm Qasr now? Yes. Why? Because we put the ground forces in there early. Were we 200 miles inside Iraq in 36 hours? Yes. ... Are we going to adjust? You bet. Are we light on our feet, can we adjust? Yes. Can they adjust? They try, but it's futile. Okay?"

"You've got to be careful with the sources you use and try to figure out what they're really trying to say. I will stick by my statement that this is a great plan and it's one I've signed up to; it's one all the Joint Chiefs signed up to and it's one we're going to see through to completion."

— JMW



**Armchair quarterbacks:**

Gen. Myers fired back at Clark, top, for his criticism; protesters in Boston complained about reporters' empathy with troops.

were captured and killed, a personally tragic but militarily insignificant number. Thomas E. Ricks filed a page-one analysis headlined "U.S. Losses Expose Risks, Raise Doubts About Strategy." The *New York Times* ran an editorial saying, "Yesterday, the Marines were bogged down in tough fighting in Nasiriya, a bridgehead town on the Euphrates River." Gen. Barry McCaffrey, an NBC analyst, told the BBC that the coalition could take as many as 3,000 casualties. Tom Brokaw of NBC spoke of "high-profile allied blunders," such as the lost Army maintenance unit that made a wrong turn, allowing its members to be captured or killed.

When the Army lost a single attack helicopter during a swarming raid of 40 Apaches against Iraqi troops, ABC *World News Tonight* presented Engel in Baghdad spreading regime disinformation that a "poor farmer" had shot down the helicopter with an old rifle. In a prime-time special, Jennings wondered why the Iraqi people weren't cheering and why coalition troops hadn't found any weapons of mass destruction yet. ABC reportage focused on the "humanitarian disaster" that surely lay ahead; by contrast, as the Media Research Center notes, Rather of CBS on the same evening showed coalition forces as helping the Iraqi people.

However, Bob Simon on the same network alleged that "Saddam has done remarkably well right now. In fact, the most remarkable achievement of the Bush administration so far has been cre-

wait for the supply lines to catch up to them. But to a few in the press the Vietnam quagmire had begun. At coalition command headquarters in Qatar, Abu Dhabi TV posed the following polemic to American Lt. Gen. John Abizaid: "We have been seeing reports of U.S. soldiers killed, missing and captured, and the state of resistance of Iraqis in many cities which you claimed before to have taken full control, such as An Nasiriya and Umm Qasr. Are you facing a new Vietnam in Iraq, or are you victims of over-self-confidence?" A Reuters story in the *Washington Post* said that Marines were "bogged down" in An Nasiriya. Reporting from the Iraqi capital, *Post* correspondent Anthony Shadid wrote, "After days of preparing Baghdad for a last stand, President Saddam Hussein's government emerged emboldened today and asserted that its carefully laid plans to create a quagmire for U.S. forces was succeeding." Iraq's al-Sahhaf declared, "They [coalition forces] are in a quagmire from where they will leave only as corpses."

The *Post* devoted an entire page to a

full-color montage of anti-American protests around the world. ABC was still on a rant. Charles Gibson, hosting *Good Morning America*, pressed Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, four times about whether "we have enough" troops over there. Commenting on the cautious welcome of coalition troops in Basra, Diane Sawyer asked rhetorically, "What happened to the flowers expected to be tossed the way of the Americans? Was it a terrible miscalculation?" Is it, she asked herself, "going to be a long, protracted, quagmire of a war?" Interviewing a Kuwaiti academic, Sawyer wondered if U.S. officials miscalculated "the way the Iraqi people really feel about Saddam Hussein." Her guest disappointed her, saying, "I don't see this as a long quagmire."

**Day 6, March 24:** Defeatism set the tone in some of the big media. The *Washington Post* ran a two-line, front-page banner headline screaming, "Clashes at Key River Crossing Bring Heaviest Day of American Casualties." The story referred to the wayward 12-person Army maintenance convoy whose members

ating quite a bit of worldwide sympathy for Saddam Hussein, who was until this war began perceived all over the world, including the Middle East, as just one horrible thug." Simon implied that President Bush was a hypocrite for demanding that Baghdad respect the Geneva Conventions in regard to treatment of American prisoners of war. "What I found a little bit ironic yesterday was when administration officials called on [Saddam] to abide by the Geneva Convention[s]," Simon said. "And it was also interesting that this administration — which has been so cavalier about its own commitments to conventions and multilateral agreements and treaties and has insisted on setting its own rules, making its own rules, doing its own thing, doing whatever it deems best — is now all of a sudden invoking international conventions."

**Day 7, March 25:** ABC White House correspondent Terry Moran asked presidential spokesman Ari Fleischer, "Does the administration take any responsibility for the plight of the people in Basra?" Earlier, on March 21, he had asked if Bush had talked about his "responsibility which may weigh on him heavily today, and that is for the deaths of innocents." Meanwhile, Saddam's chief propagandist stressed the bogged-down theme. Columnist William Hamilton wrote in *USA Today*, "While the Umm Qasr skirmish was in progress, the Iraqi information minister came on Iraqi and Al-Jazeera television to claim that our forces were hopelessly bogged down in Umm Qasr. In a dazzling display of ingenuity, his exhibit 'A' was to show the embedded television film of the Marines stopped at Umm Qasr." John Kifner of the *New York Times* reported flatly that the Marines were "bogged down." *Newsday* carried a similar tale.

Interviewing Secretary of State Colin Powell, Lesley Stahl of CBS said that the United States was losing the fight. "We're beginning to hear that this force isn't massive enough," she said in an interview that aired March 25 and 26. Powell filleted her argument. He explained what the coalition had achieved so far, including a five-day, 300-mile push toward Baghdad. "That's a heck of an achievement," he said.

"Yeah," Stahl retorted, "but our, the rear is exposed."

"It's not. Exposed to what? Exposed to small ..."

"Exposed to *fedayeen*, exposed ..."

"Fine," said Powell. "So? We'll get them in due course. They are not exposed to a massive Iraqi army that is

operating in a coordinated way that can assault our flanks and stop our assault."

The discussion continued. Stahl persisted, "But you can't get your supplies, well you can't ..."

"Who says?"

"... get the humanitarian ..."

"Who says?"

"Well you can't get the humanitarian aid there."

Not so, said Powell. The only delay was to clear minefields and a seaport, but water already was getting to Basra and to the combatants.

**Day 8, March 26:** Jennings said that Iraq sometimes "feels like Vietnam." By now, backstabbers in the Pentagon and elsewhere in the administration were several days into telling reporters and paid TV military analysts that the quagmire, dangerously stretched supply lines and near-certain failure were Rumsfeld's fault.

**Day 9, March 27:** The *New York Times*, *Chicago Sun-Times* and others continued to report that the Marines were "bogged down" at An Nasiriya and might stay that way for a while. Quoting only anonymous sources, Thomas E. Ricks, in a front-page *Washington Post* story, said that despite rapid advances, the war was likely to drag on for months. Another *Post* headline, over a story by Shadid in Baghdad, showed the cruelty of U.S. precision bombing: "In a Moment, Lives Get Blown Apart."

**Day 10, March 28:** More stories of American warriors being "bogged down" in southern Iraq, courtesy of Glenn Kessler and Philip P. Pan of the *Washington Post*, and Geoffrey Mohan, Jeffrey Fleishman and Paul Watson of the *Los Angeles Times*. Two *New York Times* reporters contradicted one another. Patrick E. Tyler quoted a Marine lieutenant colonel near Najaf as saying that, due to enemy fire, "I'll be here a month-and-a-half." Translation: quagmire. If fellow *Times* reporter Steven Lee

**Perilous job:** Kelly, an American journalist, was killed on April 3 while on assignment covering the war in Iraq.



Myers was accurate, Tyler took the quote out of context. According to Myers, the officer said he wasn't going to put his men into the village, because if he did, "I'll be here a month-and-a-half." The officer, Lt. Col. Jeffrey Randall Sanderson, was charging ahead, not bogged down.

Journalists who knew nothing about real warfare thought a few hours' worth of *fedayeen* gunfire and an occasional rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) was "fierce resistance." Not so. "The World War II battle of Okinawa was 'fierce resistance,'" notes Geoffrey Sherwood in the *Asia Times*, ridiculing some American press coverage. "Now, in the initial adrenaline rush of a new war, every *fedayeen* misfit with a musket or RPG launcher is a 'fierce resister' according to starry-eyed reporters and a few American commanders who allow themselves to be put on the defensive when explaining the delays on the drive to Baghdad. Every time the U.S. military juggernaut has to pause to deal with a mortar or a flat tire, resistance is deemed to be 'fierce' or 'stiff.'"

The media, especially the TV channels, made a big deal of single incidents: a suicide bomber, an angry crowd, a tank that lost a tread. "They're looking at the war through a soda straw," a Pentagon military planner tells *INSIGHT*. In a sarcastic critique of *New York Times* war coverage, the *New York Post* warns, "If the war 'stretches' into a whole second week, watch for talk of 'quagmire.'" The *New York Times* "wants you to think: Quagmire! Quagmire! Quagmire!"

Defense Secretary Rumsfeld's thin patience was wearing thinner. "One week and a few minutes ago, the air war began in Iraq," he told reporters in a March 28 press briefing. "So Operation Iraqi Freedom is now just a little over one week old. In that brief period of time, the coalition forces have made solid progress. And, interestingly, in that short period of a week, we have seen mood swings in the media, from highs and lows to highs and back again — sometimes in a single 24-hour period."

**Day 11, March 29:** National Public Radio's defeatist approach was subtler than most. Rather than declaring "quagmire" outright, host John Ydstie interviewed author David Halberstam, leading the interview with his guest's prize-winning reportage from nearly 40 years ago in Vietnam. "The war is a little more than a week old now, and already we're hearing references to Vietnam and to quagmire," Ydstie said. "Are these premature or are there parallels here?" Halberstam called such comparisons premature. But Knight Ridder reporters Juan O. Tamayo, Tom Lasserter and Martin Merzer reported that in addition to

## The British Media

British military commanders shared similar frustrations with certain news reporting by their own countrymen. Air Marshal Brian Burridge, commander of British forces in Iraq, had harsh criticism, chastising reporters, "The U.K. media has lost the plot. You stand for nothing, you support nothing, you criticize, you drip. It's a spectator sport to criticize anybody or anything, and what the media says fuels public opinion. That may sound harsh, but that's the way it feels from where I sit."

BBC reporter Paul Adams, based at coalition command headquarters in Qatar, agreed. In an internal memo leaked to a London newspaper and Fox News, Adams blasted his own news organization for what he called distorted, "one-sided" reporting. "Who dreamed up the line that the coalition are achieving 'small victories at a very high price?'" he asked. "The truth is exactly the opposite. The gains are huge and the costs still relatively low."

— JMW

whatever was happening to coalition forces in southern Iraq, "the ground war bogged down" in the new northern front.

**Day 12, March 30:** Apple was at it again in the *New York Times*, commenting, "With every passing day, it is more evident that the allies made two gross military misjudgments in concluding that coalition forces could safely bypass Basra and Nasiriya and that Shiite Muslims in southern Iraq would rise up against Saddam Hussein." But *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd beat Apple's record, calling Iraq another Vietnam after just a week and five days, as opposed to Apple's false prediction three weeks into Afghanistan.

Agence France-Presse reporter Peter Mackler in Kuwait tied Dowd. The Iraqi people weren't welcomed coalition troops, Mackler reported. Instead, the Americans were "caught in a military imbroglio the likes of which they have not seen since the Vietnam War a generation ago," though, he added, "nobody is suggesting at this point that Iraq will become the Indochina quagmire." Robert Timberg and Tom Bowman of the *Baltimore Sun*, reporting from the comfort of Washington, weren't so sure: "The war in its early stages recalls the pitched battles and bloody skirmishes of the Vietnam War more than the high-tech wizardry that highlighted the first Persian Gulf War a dozen years ago." Ethan Bonner, in a *New York Times* opinion piece, added a new twist. The United States, he

**Mutual respect?** *Ted Koppel and other reporters joined the U.S. military in Iraq and got to see firsthand the hardship and heroism involved in the effort.*

claimed, could be headed not for another Vietnam but for a Lebanon-style "quagmire."

**Day 14, April 1:** If Iraq was another Vietnam, Rumsfeld was another Robert Strange McNamara. At least that's how Bernard Weintraub and Thom Shanker portrayed it in the *New York Times*, building a story around anonymous complaints and accusations. "Here today, raw nerves were obvious as officers compared Mr. Rumsfeld to Robert S. McNamara, an architect of the Vietnam War who failed to grasp the political and military realities of Vietnam." The story was based on the well-known controversy that Rumsfeld's transformation policy has created within parts of the armed forces, where many officers continue to think more in terms of wars previously fought than in how to exploit new technologies to defeat the enemy using fewer troops and saving more American and innocent foreign lives. Weintraub and Shanker said as much, but only after their Vietnam metaphor in the lead. On NBC's *Today*, Seymour Hersh flacked his *New Yorker* story that trashed the defense secretary and made the Vietnam comparison.

By this time, Gen. Myers, who appears unusually mild-mannered and self-effacing for a four-star officer, had had enough. He appeared with Rumsfeld at a news briefing. The question, to the secretary, was this: "I want to ask you once again about criticism from current and former

officers about the flow of forces to the region and also whether there are sufficient forces in Iraq. Someone said there should have been at least two heavy divisions before you started to fight, and there are others who criticize you for delaying signing deployment orders — they point to the 3rd Armored Cav[alry] Regiment — and also delaying calling up [National] Guard and Reserve forces. ... And there are those who say that you're too enamored with airpower over ground forces."

Normally deferential to Rumsfeld, Myers broke in. He looked angry. "I would love to comment. My view of those reports ... and since I don't know who you're quoting, who the individuals are ... is that they're bogus. There is ... I don't know how they get started, and I don't know how they've been perpetuated, but it's not been by responsible members of the team that put this all together. They either weren't there, or they don't know, or they're working another agenda," Myers said. "It is not helpful to have those kind of comments come out when we've got troops in combat, because first of all, they're false, they're absolutely wrong, they bear no resemblance to the truth, and it's just ... it's just ... harmful to our troops that are out there fighting very bravely, very courageously." He tried to help journalists understand that every commander will have a different perception, and all the perceptions might be right.

In an apparent reference to retired generals Barry McCaffrey and Wesley Clark (the latter by now a paid CNN con-



HAROLD HENDEN/BLACK STAR

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sultant who had ditched his suit and tie for a macho black commando sweater and jacket and, by the way, is reputed to be a possible Democrat candidate to run against President Bush in 2004), Myers continued, "I think for some retired military to opine as aggressively as some have done is not ... helpful. I mean, when you have troops in combat, as most senior military would know, that's not the time to start putting ... different opinions, especially from senior people, on the table, particularly if they are not familiar with the plan. And, you know, to criticize something that they've never seen is pretty audacious, isn't it?"

Somebody in the press gaggle persisted: "We kept hearing that you kept sending the plan back ... wasn't imaginative enough."

"You say 'keep hearing things,'" Rumsfeld interjected. "The fact is that one person prints it, and then everyone else runs around and copycats it and writes it again — then pretty soon it's been printed 16 times, and everyone says, 'Well, it must be true.' That's nonsense."

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**Day 15, April 2:** With the Iraqi regime almost completely mowed down, not everyone at ABC was as negative as Jennings. Pentagon correspondent John McWethy contradicted the star newsreader's negativism, describing how Iraqi civilians were helping coalition forces root out Saddam loyalists and their weapons. NBC's Brian Williams started to change his tune, contradicting his March 21 comparison of the precision strikes against Baghdad with the carpet and firebombing of Germany and Japan: "Civilians used to be intentional military targets. The firebombings of Dresden and Tokyo in World War II were meant to kill civilians and then terrorize survivors. Here, we've seen the opposite happen. U.S. forces have more than once been the targets of civilian attacks and could be forced into killing coerced human shields despite all attempts to avoid it."

**Day 16, April 3:** Some journalists held out as doggedly as Saddam's *fedayeen*. The Associated Press pushed the Vietnam parallel with a story by Margie Mason, datelined Hanoi, about a rural woman who said that TV footage of Operation Iraqi Freedom was bringing back memories of the Vietnam War. The wreck of an American B-52 bomber provided a backdrop for the story. For two days, Jennings used the same Al-Jazeera report on the deaths of 18 Iraqi civilians, and he recycled more regime propaganda: "Using Iraqi government figures, which we cannot verify — they may be high or they may be low, we do not know — almost 700 civilians have been killed in the country since the U.S. invaded."

By now, though, the Americans had taken Saddam Hussein International Airport and renamed it for the capital city and made their first foray in an armored column downtown. With rival Dan Rather reporting "major progress and a stunning battlefield victory," Jennings conceded, "Today the march on Baghdad by the U.S. Army and Marines was described from the scene as easier than anticipated." If you can't praise it, minimize it.

**Day 17, April 4:** By now, U.S. troops were occupying Saddam's palaces, picnicking on his lawn and showering in his gilded bathroom. Shadid, the *Washington Post's* man in the Iraqi capital who focused on the emotions, death and destruction wrought by his country's bombs, told the *New York Observer*, "I don't think Baghdad's going to be a liberated city." Instead, he claimed, it would be a "defeated" one.

In an April 7 after-news discussion on Fox, commentators Morton Kondracke and Fred Barnes mused about the behav-

ior of elements of the press during the war: "There was a question at one of the early briefings during the shock and awe when we were roaring in, this was at the Pentagon, when somebody said, 'If we win this war too fast, are we going to look like bullies?'"

Barnes added, "And besides, there's a phenomenon ... that is shifting the goalpost, you know. It's too hard, oh well, okay, it's too easy, you know."

Deadpanned host Brit Hume, "You know what that tells you? That's why it's so great to be a journalist. You don't have to adhere to any fixed principles of any kind."

And that's the great thing about having sided with the loser: You can now join the winners. Even the deepest cynics and Rumsfeld-haters wanted to share the victory party when Baghdad fell on April 9. The next morning's headlines showed the total turnaround.

The *New York Times*, which had trashed Rumsfeld for the strategy of the campaign and for apparent shifts in tactics, now ran a page-one "military analysis" titled "American Forces Adapted to Friend and Foe." The piece, written by Michael R. Gordon, began, "If there is a single reason for allied success, it is the flexibility the U.S. military demonstrated in its campaign." Quagmire Apple now trumpeted, "The collapse of government authority in Baghdad constitutes the high-water mark for a new American determination to use the nation's military might."

And Ricks of the *Washington Post*, who also had questioned the Pentagon's strategy, marveled in his front-page analysis, "The U.S. military has already achieved some of its major objectives in just 21 days: A relatively small force has seized nearly two-thirds of a country the size of California, including its capital, while suffering just over 100 dead in combat and accidents. Military professionals attribute the success to three key elements: a seasoned and well-equipped military, a surprisingly inept Iraqi response and the decision at the end of March, when the U.S. and British attack seemed to be faltering in southern Iraq, to keep the Army and Marines focused on Baghdad."

From the Iraqi capital where less than a week earlier he had predicted that Baghdad would be "defeated" instead of "liberated," the *Post's* Shadid reported, again on the front page, that "thousands of Baghdad residents poured into the streets to celebrate the government's defeat and welcome the U.S. forces in scenes of thanks and jubilation."

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