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MRC Study: Despite Pledge of Objectivity, ABC Spent Pre-War Period Undermining Support for Bush

World News Tonight's Anti-War Agenda

Subtlety is for other networks. ABC advertised its editorial slant in the title of its three-hour news special on the coming war with Iraq: *When Diplomacy Fails*. While United Nations' approval was stymied by a French veto, the U.S. is poised to dislodge Iraq's dictator with the help of 17 other nations, but midway through Monday's show, anchor Peter Jennings asked a guest, "Can you recall a time when the United States has been quite so alone?"

Unfortunately, ABC's supposedly objective news staff has been displaying their dissatisfaction with Bush's anti-Saddam policies for months. MRC analysts reviewed 234 Iraq stories from *World News Tonight* between January 1 and March 7, plus ABC's live coverage of breaking news during the same period. They found a pervasive pattern of bias on four fronts:

■ Blaming Bush, not allies.

Despite UN incompetence and French intransigence, ABC reporters insisted that the lack of a compromise was Bush's fault. "I think a lot of people got the impression this week that maybe the Bush administration doesn't mind if the Western alliance as we've known it in the post-war period breaks up," Jennings argued during a February 14 special report.

On *World News Tonight* five days later, he charged "the administration is prepared to jeopardize its relations with several of its oldest and best friends in order to get its way about Iraq." Jennings would not say that several of America's "oldest and best friends" were jeopardizing relations with us to get *their* way about Iraq.

■ **No doubting the dictator.** While ABC treated U.S. claims skeptically, comments from Saddam's Iraq were usually relayed to American audiences without question. On February 28, ABC's Baghdad reporter Dan Harris aired an Iraqi nurse's claim that U.S.-led military action would be a disaster. "For sure there'll be premature labors, and for sure there'll be a high percentage of miscarriages. For sure it will be like that," she told ABC's camera, in English.

■ **Sanitizing the radical "peace" movement.** As with the last Gulf War a dozen years ago, organized protests against U.S. military action have been led by radical groups such as the Workers World Party, a Stalinist organization. But as they did in 1991, this year ABC went out of its way to show reasonable "peace activists," who mainstream Americans could identify with. "More and more these crowds are filled with middle-class Americans who have never demonstrated before," ABC's Judy Muller touted on January 12.

ABC omitted the radicalism of organizers and extremism of many anti-American speakers from sympathetic protest news. "So many voices, filling the streets, struggling to be heard," ABC's John McKenzie gushed on February 16. Of the three broadcast anchors, only Jennings stooped to promote the gimmicky "virtual" march on Washington on February 26, where no one gathered or spoke.

■ Playing with polls.

ABC stressed polls finding reservations about Bush's strategy, and downplayed surveys showing public support. On February 24, for example, ABC found support for war at 63%, steady from the previous period. But Jennings painted the public as anti-Bush: "We find that 56% of Americans want the administration to take it slower and try harder to get more UN support." Astonishingly, the same poll revealed Americans' low opinion of the UN — only 38% approved of its handling of Iraq, vs. 55% for Bush.

During a *Nightline/Viewpoint* special in January, ABC News President David Westin pledged his network's Iraq news would "be objective and give just the straight facts to the American people." So far, ABC's coverage hasn't fulfilled Westin's promise. — *Tim Graham and Rich Noyes*

How ABC Can Improve Its War News:

- 1) Healthy journalistic skepticism should focus on all key players, not just the United States;
- 2) Don't give untrustworthy enemy claims the same weight as statements from U.S. officials;
- 3) If the "peace" movement is newsworthy, then fully cover all aspects of it, including its radical anti-American organizers and extremist rhetoric;
- 4) Cover poll results accurately and completely.

L. Brent Bozell III, Publisher; Brent Baker, Rich Noyes, Tim Graham, Editors; Geoffrey Dickens, Jessica Anderson, Brad Wilmouth, Brian Boyd, Ken Shepherd, and Patrick Gregory, Media Analysts; Kristina Sewell, Research Associate; Liz Swasey, Director of Communications. Read the full study, "Peter's Peace Platoon," at www.mrc.org.