



# Media Reality ✓ Check

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Fox News Channel and Embedded Reporters Excelled, While Peter Jennings and Peter Arnett Flunked

## Gulf War II: Grading Television's War News

While it only lasted about three weeks, the second Gulf War was an unqualified success. Jubilant Iraqis danced in the streets as U.S. military forces rolled into the center of Baghdad, while the dictator Saddam Hussein and his evil cohorts were, as General Tommy Franks put it on April 11, either dead or "running like hell."

But what about TV's coverage of the war? A new MRC SPECIAL REPORT finds while the media covered many aspects of the war well — reports from embedded journalists were refreshingly factual and mostly devoid of commentary — TV's war news exhibited problems detected during previous conflicts: too little skepticism of enemy propaganda, too much mindless negativism about America's military prospects, and a reluctance on the part of most networks to challenge the premises of anti-war activists or to expose their radical agenda:

TV's War Report Card	
Fox News Channel	B
CBS	B-
NBC/MSNBC	C+
CNN	C+
ABC	D-

■ **Networks:** By refusing to copy the reflexive skepticism of most of the media elite, those who watched the Fox News Channel weren't misled by the unwarranted second-guessing and negativism that tainted other networks' war news. The main blemish on FNC's war record occurred on March 30 when Geraldo Rivera, traveling with the 101st Airborne Division, boastfully disclosed the unit's mission.

In contrast, ABC received a near-failing grade for knee-jerk negativism that played up Iraqi claims of civilian suffering, hyped American military difficulties and indulged anti-war protesters with free air time. ABC's Chris Cuomo even promoted anti-war protesters as "prescient indicators of the national mood," even as polls showed most Americans supported the war. (Details on all networks at [www.mrc.org](http://www.mrc.org))

■ **anchors:** All of the network anchors received high grades except for the highly tendentious Peter Jennings, who played up any defeatist angle he could find. Five days before Baghdad fell, Pentagon reporter John McWethy warned, "This could be, Peter, a long war." Jennings felt vindication: "As many people had anticipated."

■ **Embedded Reporters:** These reporters excelled when they acted as the viewers' eyes and ears in Iraq. NBC's David

Bloom, in his innovative Bloommobile, was the star of the group, offering hours of riveting live coverage of the Third Infantry's historic drive toward Baghdad, while CNN's Walter Rodgers narrated hour upon hour of armored troop movements, often under enemy fire, without straying from his "just the facts" style.

On the other hand, ABC's Ted Koppel spent his time pontificating as if he — not the vast military force that surrounded him — were the real star. "Forget the easy victories of the last twenty years; this war is more like the ones we knew before," he lectured on the March 24 *Nightline*. "Telling you if and when things are going badly for U.S. troops, enabling you to bear witness to the high cost of war, is the hard part of our job," he asserted. "We'll do our very best to give you the truth in the hope and the belief that you can handle it."

■ **Baghdad Reporters:** Until the Iraqi dictatorship ran away April 9, Baghdad-based reporters were controlled by the Ministry of Information. Given the impediments to accurate reporting, networks should have used such reporters sparingly. Instead, ABC gave a great deal of time to the uncorroborated stories of civilian suffering which freelancer Richard Engel reported, including an April 2 claim that the U.S. had bombed a "maternity hospital."

*National Geographic Explorer's* Peter Arnett, who was heavily used by MSNBC and NBC before he was fired, was the most outrageously biased Baghdad reporter. On March 26 on NBC's *Today*, Arnett twice reported Iraqi claims that the U.S. had used "cluster bombs" to kill dozens at a Baghdad marketplace, a claim later rebutted by NBC's Pentagon reporter Jim Miklaszewski. That was days before his infamous appearance on Iraqi TV, but spouting enemy propaganda on NBC's airwaves was not a firing offense.

— Brent Baker and Rich Noyes

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 report, "Grading TV's War News" at [www.mrc.org](http://www.mrc.org).