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MRC Study: As Surge Succeeds and Casualty Rates Fall, ABC, CBS and NBC Lose Interest In Iraq War

Good News = Less News on Iraq War

Back in September, when General David Petraeus reported that the surge in U.S. troops had improved the security situation in Iraq, the big three broadcast networks were openly skeptical.

"Insurgent attacks are down from 170 in January to 120 in August," ABC's Terry McCarthy noted on the September 9 *World News Sunday*, the day before Petraeus testified before Congress. "But that is still four attacks a day, on average. Iraq remains a very violent place....Life in central Iraq is still deadly dangerous."

"Victory is not at hand, not even in sight," CBS's David Martin similarly contended on the next night's *Evening News*. On the *NBC Nightly News*, reporter Jim Maceda found it "palpably quiet" in an area of Iraq once controlled by Sunni insurgents, but "this is really an exception....That civil war as, again, as you get out of the capital of Baghdad, it is truly brewing. So this is really just a partial success for this surge so far."

That was three months ago. Now, all three networks have become more optimistic in their on-ground reporting from the war zone, admitting that the surge in troops and new counterinsurgency tactics have reduced the violence. But as the news from the war front improves, a Media Research Center study finds ABC, CBS and NBC are less likely to tell viewers about it.

MRC researchers examined all 354 Iraq war stories that aired on the big three evening newscasts from September 1 through November 30, including weekends. That figure includes 234 field reports, plus 120 short headline items read by the news anchor.

■ **Vanishing War.** Back in September, as reporters voiced skepticism of General Petraeus' progress report, the networks aired a total of 178 Iraq stories, or just under two per network per night. (See chart.) About one-fourth of those stories (42) were filed from Iraq itself, with most of the rest originating in Washington.

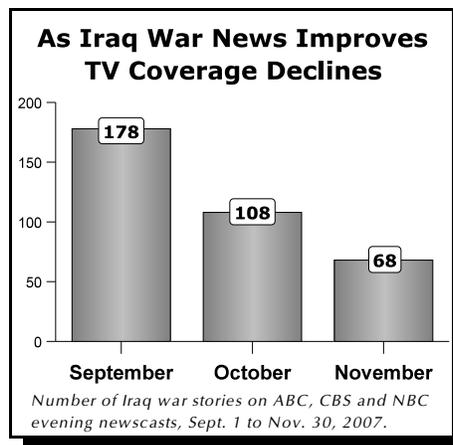
In October, TV's war news fell by about 40 percent, to 108 stories, with the number of reports filed from Iraq itself falling to just 20, or less than one-fifth of all Iraq stories. By November, the networks aired a mere 68 stories, with only eleven (16%) actually from the war zone itself.

■ **Pessimistic CBS.** Of the three evening newscasts, ABC's *World News* was the first to take serious note of the improving situation (back on October 1), and has offered the most stories (9 field reports, 7 from Iraq) detailing the progress. "Not only is there a huge increase in Iraqi citizens groups who are coming forward to help the Americans, but overall levels of violence have gone way down," Terry McCarthy enthused on November 22. In a Thanksgiving week interview with President Bush, anchor Charles Gibson was congratulatory: "You took a lot of doubting and rather skeptical questions about the surge. I'll give you a chance to crow. Do you want to say I told you so?"

On NBC, reporter Tom Aspell filed five stories about progress, generally balancing good news with bad.

"Refugees coming back to Baghdad are going to see a lot of changes. There are more people in the streets, shops are open and traffic everywhere," Aspell noted November 27. "But it is still a dangerous city."

For its part, the *CBS Evening News* has offered only three stories documenting the recent progress, just one from their reporter in Iraq, Lara Logan, on November 21. Five weeks earlier, Logan announced on NBC's *Tonight Show* that the war was going "extremely badly, from my point of view." Reality, she claimed, was "much worse than the picture, the image we even have of Iraq." — *Rich Noyes*



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