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On network news, war's a spectacle and debate's a bore

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**BODY:**

THE PREGAME SHOW IS TICKING toward the opening kickoff. The networks are updating their SHOWDOWN and COUNTDOWN logos, upgrading their drumrolls and trumpet snippets, cueing their cruise missile videos and maps of hitherto obscure regions. The color commentators and military consultants are sipping their coffee in the green rooms, getting pumped. War is the spectacle of spectacles, and for television news there's no business like spectacle business. To air debate about whether war makes sense is decidedly a lesser priority. The tedious stuff of policy chats is for Sunday mornings, when the political wonks get to come out and play, not the evenings, when, despite ratings declines, the pharmaceutical companies still pay top dollar to win the attention of maximum eyeballs. If you seriously crave an argument that takes more than five minutes, get you to C-SPAN. Thus, it is not exactly surprising that on Sept. 23, when Al Gore spoke in San Francisco against the Bush administration's gallop toward war with Iraq, all three network evening news shows contented themselves with brief anchorman paraphrases. None mentioned that Gore had, in the course of his speech at the Commonwealth Club, declared opposition to "an emerging national strategy that . . . appears to be glorifying the notion of dominance." And: "President Bush is presenting us with . . . one of the most fateful decisions in our history -- a decision to abandon what we have thought was America's mission in the world -- a world in which nations are guided by a common ethic codified in the form of international law." Ho hum, what a wooden guy.

Over on cable, MSNBC ran Gore's speech, but neither CNN nor FOX did. (Perhaps the FOX branding division is working up a new slogan: We Exclude, You Deride.) When it came time for MSNBC to discuss the matter, Brian Williams led (as E. J. Dionne Jr. pointed out on CNN's *Reliable Sources* on Sept. 28) with: "Is it un-American to speak out against the Bush plan to take on Iraq" And then: "Today our friend Rush Limbaugh told his radio listeners he almost stayed home from work not due to any health reasons, but because he was so livid at the speech given yesterday by former Vice President Al Gore criticizing the Bush administration's apparent march to war in Iraq." Liberal media, anyone?

At the networks, there's not even embarrassment about this short-shrifting of dissent and argument in a sound-bite culture. To network news chiefs, the notion that the news ought to expedite debate is hopelessly do-goody -- a relic of those musty days when it was Congress that declared wars, when the Federal Communications Commission uttered the phrase "public interest, convenience and necessity" with a straight face, and when some journalists thought their job was to ready the republic for its own momentous responsibilities when faced with constitutional matters of life and death. Anyway, when were the do-gooders in fashion? In the mid-1960s, following the trumped-up Gulf of Tonkin affair, Congress voted nearly unanimously for a blank-check, unlimited war in Vietnam, and it took the television

networks a year and a half before they broadcast a significant debate on the subject (the Fulbright hearings of February 1966). In 1990, when the administration of George Bush Senior had already deployed more than 200,000 troops around the Persian Gulf, it took a major split among Democrats to stoke a television debate. In recent years, the interest in genuine debate has become, if anything, feebler. The networks of our day are chiefly in the business of telling stories to stir up evanescent emotions; they barely bother with lip service to grander ideals.

When pressed, the networks will say that they're in a visual business and that words don't play to their strengths. This is, to put it mildly, naive. The year of Clinton-Lewinsky was mainly a year of talk. (The shot of Monica in her beret on the rope line was the exception that proved the rule.) What we know from 24-7 coverage of O. J. Simpson, Princess Diana, John F. Kennedy Jr., Chandra Levy, et al., is how easy it is to find pictures to provide the wallpaper behind the words when you really want to do so. Long video sequences of the waters off Martha's Vineyard as boat crews seek the remains of young Kennedy's plane, or the undergrowth of Rock Creek Park as the police thrash their way through in search of Levy's body -- and other such prolonged exercises in no-news -- mock the banner that adorns them: BREAKING NEWS.

None of these observations means that television fits snugly into a right-wing design. The claim that the networks are currently straightforward propagandists for Bush is, on its face, false. Skeptical snippets are in evidence. As early as Sept. 26, the day Bush declared that Saddam Hussein's Iraq "has long-standing and continuing ties to terrorist organizations," ABC's Martha Raddatz quoted "a senior intelligence official" to the effect that, when it comes to establishing Iraqi cooperation with al-Qaeda, there is "no smoking gun -- not even an unfired gun." Sen. Ted Kennedy's (D-Mass.) dissent later in the week did get excerpted on the network news, as Sen. Robert Byrd's (D-W.Va.) did not. Kennedy is a newsmaker, after all. Clips of antiwar demonstrators sporadically crop up on air, though the Oct. 6 Central Park gathering, which numbered some 15,000 by one newspaper account, got no network coverage.

But the main shortcoming of the evening news is that it reduces controversy to a spitball match, with occasional cutaways to the tacticians on the sidelines. Snippets of disagreement pop up, then melt away. The evening's serving of those snippets satisfies the standard interpretation of "balance." And though balance is incontestably virtuous, it is long past time for journalists to realize how a thoughtless insistence on balance pads the news without illuminating it. If Sen. Airhead says that the earth is round, no balancing statement is required. To the contrary, an automatic "on the other hand" may lend the appearance of legitimate controversy where it doesn't belong.

As Carl von Clausewitz didn't say, war news -- like political news -- is the continuation of sport by other means. So far as the networks and most of the press are concerned, the big questions of the evening are usually: "Who's ahead?" "Who's behind?" "Who's got momentum?" Next in priority come the color commentators, reducing all the players' moves to coaches' tactics.

To the networks, the big questions are rarely: "What's really going on here?" "What is at stake in an Iraqi war?" "Who stands to gain what, who stands to lose what?" We've heard precious little on these scores. The weighing of factors laid out in the best print journalism -- for example, James Fallows' long piece in the November issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* on what would be entailed by postwar reconstruction in Iraq -- has no equivalent on the nightly news, once the commercials, coming attractions, recaps, health tips, cute stories and such are stripped away. Thinking conspicuously about such challenges would not help you chart a route upward through the corporate mazes of Disney, General Electric or Viacom, the proprietors of our major networks.

As things stand, the fact that some people disagree over war, even strenuously disagree, is considered worth noting in a how-about-that sort of way. The reasons dissenters give for their disagreement get scant attention. In this vacuum, a Bush-Daschle exchange of sound bites on whether the Senate is treasonous (Bush's charge that the Senate, in rejecting his Homeland Security bill, was trifling with national security itself) plays like a medium-big story. It's a story, all right, but the vastly bigger one, the one with decidedly more at stake, concerns the debate over substance -- a debate that is taking place in fits and starts everywhere, among our allies, even within the confines of many Americans' own skulls.

What good are dueling sound bites and political scorecards? Americans already know they're of two or maybe more minds about war with Iraq. Are we not entitled to hear with some patience the cases that can be made for and against? And when the debate over Iraq, in turn, stands for larger debates concerning the contours of national-security policy, are these larger questions not worth some sustained attention? When the administration's "national security strategy" aims to set forth the guiding purpose of a generation, is it not worth taking seriously above and beyond voice-over snippets? Gore tried to join that debate, and whatever you might think of his case, you must concede that he took Bush at face value.

Even within the memory of most of today's sentient viewers, we've been here before. By any fair appraisal, the Gulf War was not network news' finest hour. Thrilled to the point of distraction by the latest gadgets, they collaborated in what writer Tom Engelhardt called a Pentagon-press co-production. The Gulf War of 1991 did produce some significant footage -- especially of Kurdish refugees climbing over the northern mountains during the aftermath -- but most of the famous pictures were gravely misleading. In truth, America's smart bombs were heavily outnumbered by America's old-fashioned dumb bombs; the Patriot missiles, looking so cartoon-cute in Pentagon-provided video clips, mainly missed their targets. The networks did not look gift footage in the mouth. None of the networks (or major newspapers) of that time joined in the lawsuit pursued by *Harper's*, *The Nation* and other press litigants who argued that Pentagon restrictions on coverage constituted First Amendment violations. Only when the war was safely over did the Washington bureau chiefs of the top news organizations write the Pentagon in protest.

Is *Showdown in the Gulf II* the network idea of a cool sequel?

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