

The So-Called War Critics

By Khody Akhavi | August 28, 2007

September 15, 2007 is the deadline for the George W. Bush administration to submit a report to Congress defending its Iraq “surge strategy,” an escalation of more than 30,000 U.S. troops designed to increase security in the war-torn nation.

Amid the gruesome attacks that continue to plague Iraqis—the casualty toll of last week’s bombing in a poor rural area near the Syrian border has soared to more than 500, making it the bloodiest coordinated attack since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003—and the crumbling political alliances and Sunni defections within Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s floundering government, the White House is hoping to bookend the latest chapter in the Iraq War debacle with some good news.

As usual, the Bush administration has been getting by with a little help—perhaps unwittingly—from its friends in the U.S. mainstream media.

The most recent “information surge” to pulsate through U.S. broadcast news outlets originated from the pens of Michael O’Hanlon and Kenneth Pollack, two self-described critics of the administration’s “miserable handling of Iraq,” who, in a July 30 *New York Times* op-ed entitled “A War We Just Might Win,” wrote that the U.S. forces “are finally getting somewhere in Iraq, at least in military terms.”

O’Hanlon and Pollack, who are both fellows at the Brookings Institution’s Saban Center for Middle East Policy, a Washington-based think tank, were careful not to acknowledge the possibility of “victory in Iraq”—an oft-used phrase that, along with “stay the course,” has been recently omitted from President Bush’s rhetoric. But they wrote that they were heartened by the morale of U.S. troops, surprised at the gains made by the “surge,” and confident in its potential to produce a “sustainable stability that both we and the Iraqis could live with.”

“There is enough good happening on the battlefields of Iraq today that Congress should plan on sustaining the effort at least into 2008,” they concluded. In doing so, O’Hanlon and Pollack jump-started an information surge that would end up providing political cover for the administration’s war policy.

Mainstream media news outlets—perhaps more out of complacency than collusion—jumped on the bandwagon, reporting that two longtime critics of the Iraq War were conceding military progress, while ignoring the fact that both O’Hanlon and Pollack had initially been very vocal supporters of the war effort.

During a July 30 interview on *CNN Newsroom*, anchor Heidi Collins painted Pollack as an opponent of the war who, based on his eight-day visit to Iraq, had ostensibly changed his mind and was becoming more supportive. “You are a self-proclaimed critic of the way the Bush administration has handled this war, you wrote a book about the situation in Iraq, you shared your thoughts all over TV and in some newspapers, but yet it seems like the tune is changing a bit,” she said.

Collins failed to mention the content of Pollack’s 2002 book, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq*, whose title speaks for itself, or that he heavily promoted the invasion of Iraq on Oprah Winfrey’s show in 2002.

O’Hanlon and Pollack were similarly introduced over the next few days in interviews on major U.S. news channels. As noted by Media Matters, a media monitoring organization based in Washington, on the July 30 edition of the CBS *Evening News*, national security correspondent David Martin incorrectly described O’Hanlon as “a critic” of the Iraq War “who used to think the surge was too little too late, [but] now believes it should be continued.”

“In fact,” Media Matters wrote, “while O’Hanlon has been critical of the Bush administration’s handling of the Iraq War, he supported the invasion and argued in a January 2007 column that President Bush’s troop increase was ‘the right thing to try.’”

One day after the O’Hanlon-Pollack op-ed was published, Vice President Dick Cheney appeared on CNN’s *Larry King Live* and extolled O’Hanlon and Pollack’s views, and attempted to add more credibility to the administration

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policy when he quipped that the op-ed had appeared in the *New York Times*, “not exactly a friendly publication.”

“They have both been strong critics of the war, both worked in the prior administration; but now saying that they think there’s a possibility, indeed, that we could be successful,” Cheney told King.

Curiously, in 2002, the Bush administration fed false intelligence to the *New York Times* about nuclear weapons in Iraq, and Cheney quoted the story in an interview on Tim Russert’s *Meet the Press*, part of a similar strategy to place the burden of proof on a news source, not the administration.

Yet for all the complacency exhibited by CNN, FOX, CBS, and other news outlets, the contradictions associated with O’Hanlon and Pollack’s analysis were not lost on media watchdogs.

“For sheer deceit and propaganda, it is difficult to remember something quite this audacious and transparently false,” wrote Glenn Greenwald of Salon.com. “Witnessing these two war lovers—supporters of the invasion, advocates of the surge, comrades of Fred Kagan—mindlessly depicted all day yesterday by media mouthpieces as the opposite of what they are was really quite startling.”

Kagan, one of the architects of the surge strategy, accompanied neoconservative polemicist Bill Kristol on his own tour of Iraq, which resulted in a laudatory evaluation of recent U.S. military efforts.

In an interview with Greenwald, O’Hanlon acknowledged that he was not exactly the Bush administration critic he was described as in numerous broadcast news interviews.

“That I’m being held up as a ‘critic of the war,’ for example by Vice President Cheney, it’s certainly fair to ask if that is a proper characterization of me. And in fact I would not

even use that characterization of myself,” O’Hanlon told Greenwald. “As you rightly reported, I was not a critic of this war. In the final analysis, I was a supporter.”

Perhaps the most stinging rebuke of O’Hanlon and Pollack’s tacit promotion of the surge strategy came in another *New York Times* op-ed published on August 19. In “The War as We Saw It,” seven noncommissioned officers with the 82nd Airborne Division at the tail-end of a 15-month deployment to Iraq wrote that “the claim that we are increasingly in control of the battlefields in Iraq is an assessment arrived at through a flawed, American-centered framework.”

Without explicitly referring to the O’Hanlon and Pollack’s op-ed, the seven authors echoed its language and challenged some of its claims.

“We are skeptical of recent press coverage portraying the conflict as increasingly manageable and feel it has neglected the mounting civil, political, and social unrest we see today,” they wrote.

Yet the U.S. mainstream media did not give it the same attention, even though it was, in many ways, a direct response to O’Hanlon and Pollack’s assertions. In an August 21 analysis piece published by the Associated Press, reporter Charles Babington wrote that Democrats were “wearily anticipating” the upcoming mid-September report, “realizing that opponents will use any upbeat assessment to portray them as defeatists just as glimmers of hope appear.”

Those glimmers of hope have been provided by O’Hanlon and Pollack, but the words of the seven U.S. servicemen appear to have gone under the radar. They were nowhere to be found in Babington’s report.

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