

Why Are We Back in Vietnam?

by Frank Rich

In his now legendary interview last month with Brit Hume of Fox News, George W. Bush explained that he doesn't get his news from the news media—not even Fox. “The best way to get the news is from objective sources,” the president said, laying down his utopian curriculum for Journalism 101. “And the most objective sources I have are people on my staff who tell me what's happening in the world.”

Those sources? Condoleezza Rice and Andrew Card. Mr. Hume, helpfully dispensing with the “We Report” half of his network's slogan, did not ask the obvious follow-up question: What about us poor benighted souls who don't have these crack newscasters at our beck and call? But the answer came soon enough anyway. The White House made Condoleezza Rice's Newshour available to all Americans by dispatching her to Oprah.

“No camera crews have ever been granted this much access to this national security adviser,” Oprah told her audience as she greeted her guest. A major scoop was not far behind. Is there anything you can tell us about the president that would surprise us? Oprah asked. Yes, Ms. Rice said, Mr. Bush is a very fast eater. “If you're not careful,” she continued, “he'll be on dessert and you're still eating the salad.”

And that's the way it was, Oct. 17, 2003.

This is objective journalism as this administration likes it, all right—news you can't use. Until recently, the administration had often gotten what it wanted, especially on television, and not just on afternoon talk shows. From 9/11 through the fall of Saddam, the obsequiousness became so thick that even Terry Moran, the ABC News White House correspondent, said his colleagues looked “like zombies” during the notorious pre-shock-and-awe Bush news conference of March 6, 2003. That was the one that Mr. Bush himself called “scripted.” The script included eight different instances in which he implied that Saddam Hussein had something to do with 9/11, all of them left unchallenged by the dozens of reporters at hand.

Six months later, the audience is getting restless. The mission is not accomplished. The casualty list cannot be censored. The White House has been caught telling too many whoppers, the elucidation of which has become a cottage industry laying siege to the best-seller list. Vanity Fair, which once ran triumphalist photos of the administration by Annie Leibovitz, now looks at this White House and sees Teapot Dome. The Washington Post, which killed a week of “Boondocks” comic strips mocking Ms. Rice a few days before her Oprah appearance, relented and ran one anyway last weekend on its letters page, alongside the protests of its readers.

But print, even glossy print, is one thing, TV another. Like it or not, news doesn't register in our culture unless it happens on television. It wasn't until the relatively tardy date of March 9, 1954, when Edward R. Murrow took on Joseph McCarthy on CBS's “See It Now,” that the junior senator from Wisconsin hit the skids. Sam Ervin's televised Watergate hearings reached a vast audience that couldn't yet identify the pre-Redford-and-Hoffman Woodward and Bernstein. Voters didn't turn against our Vietnam adventure en masse until it became, in Michael Arlen's undying phrase, the Living Room War.

However spurious any analogy between the two wars themselves may be, you can tell that the administration itself now fears that Iraq is becoming a Vietnam by the way it has started to fear TV news. When an ABC News reporter, Jeffrey Kofman, did the most stinging major network report on unhappiness among American troops last summer, Matt Drudge announced on his Web site that Mr. Kofman was gay and, more scandalously, a Canadian—information he said had been provided to him by a White House staffer. This month, as bad news from Iraq proliferated, Mr. Bush pulled the old

Nixon stunt of trying to “go over the heads of the filter and speak directly to the people” about the light at the end of the tunnel. In this case, “the people” meant the anchors of regional TV companies like Tribune Broadcasting, Belo and Hearst-Argyle.

Last Sunday, after those eight-minute-long regional Bush interviews were broadcast, Dana Milbank, The Washington Post’s White House reporter, said on CNN’s “Reliable Sources” that the local anchors “were asking tougher questions than we were.” I want to believe that Mr. Milbank was just being polite, because if he’s right, the bar for covering this White House has fallen below sea level. The local anchors rarely followed up any more than Brit Hume did. They produced less news than Oprah. Will countries like France, Russia and Germany provide troops for Iraq? one of them asked Mr. Bush. “You need to ask them,” was the reply.

When an administration is hiding in a no-news bunker, how do you find the news? The first place to look, we’re starting to learn, is any TV news show on which Ms. Rice, Mr. Card, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell and Donald Rumsfeld are not appearing. If they’re before a camera, you can assume that the White House has deemed the venue a safe one—a spin zone, if you will. They will proceed to obfuscate or dissemble at will, whether they’re talking to Oprah, local anchors or a Sunday morning network chat-show host.

A TV news venue that the administration spurns entirely, by contrast, stands a chance of providing actual, fresh, accurate information. There have been at least two riveting examples this month. Ms. Rice, Mr. Powell and Mr. Rumsfeld all refused to be interviewed for an Oct. 9 PBS “Frontline” documentary about the walkup to the Iraq war. Yet without their assistance, “Frontline” nonetheless fingered Ahmad Chalabi as an administration source for its pre-war disinformation about weapons of mass destruction and the Qaeda-Saddam link. It also reported that the administration had largely ignored its own state department’s prescient “Future of Iraq” project—a decision that helped lead to our catastrophic ill-preparedness for Iraq’s post-Saddam chaos. “Frontline” didn’t have to resort to leaks for these revelations, either: the sources were on-camera interviews with Lt. Gen. Jay Garner, our first interim leader in Iraq, and Mr. Chalabi himself.

The administration officials who stiffed “Frontline” habitually do the same to ABC’s “Nightline.” Ted Koppel explains why in a round-table discussion published in a new book from the Brookings Institution Press, “The Media and the War on Terrorism”: “They would much rather appear on a program on which they’re likely not to get a tough cross-examination.” On Oct. 15, the week after the “Frontline” exposé, the White House was true to form when asked to provide a guest for a “Nightline” exploring the president’s new anti-media media campaign. But later in the day, the administration decided to send a non-marquee name, Dan Bartlett, its communications director. Mr. Koppel, practicing the increasingly lost art of relentless follow-up questioning, all but got his guest stuttering as he called him on half-truth after half-truth. Mr. Bartlett tried—but soon failed—to get away with defending a litany of prewar administration claims and insinuations: that the entire American contribution to rebuilding Iraq would be only \$1.7 billion; that Iraqi oil income would pay for most of the reconstruction; and that the entire war would proceed as quickly as a cakewalk.

It’s at times like this that we must be grateful that Disney didn’t succeed in jettisoning “Nightline” for David Letterman. (The administration is only too happy to send its top brass to Mr. Letterman when it doesn’t send them to Oprah—Colin Powell most recently.) If the Oct. 15 “Nightline” wasn’t an Edward R. Murrow turning point in the coverage of the war on terrorism, it’s the closest we’ve seen to one since 9/11. There will be others, because this administration doesn’t realize that trying to control the news is always a loser. Most of the press was as slow to challenge Joe McCarthy, the Robert McNamara Pentagon and the Nixon administration as it has been to challenge the wartime Bush White House. But in America, at least, history always catches up with

those who try to falsify it in real time. That's what L.B.J. and Nixon both learned the hard way.

Even as President Bush was using a regional anchor to tell "the people" that congressional delegations were visiting Iraq and would come back with happy progress reports, Fox News and Newsweek were telling us that these delegations were spending their nights in the safety of Kuwait, not Iraq. Even as identical, upbeat form letters from American soldiers mysteriously turned up in newspapers across the United States, Stars and Stripes, the Pentagon-financed armed forces newspaper, was reporting that half the troops it polled had low morale. "Some troops even go so far as to say they've been ordered not to talk to V.I.P.'s because leaders are afraid of what they might say," observed Stars and Stripes' Jon Anderson in a Koppel-style interview with the commander, Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez. This week The Post's Mr. Milbank reported that the administration is shutting off TV images of dead American soldiers, too, by enforcing a ban on "news coverage and photography" of their flag-draped coffins returning to American military bases.

In-bed embeds are yesterday's news. It's only a matter of time before more dissenting troops talk to a reporter with a camera—and in TV news, time moves faster now, via satellite phones, than it did in the era when a network report had to wait for the processing of film or the shipping of video. At the tender age of six months, the war in Iraq is not remotely a Vietnam. But from the way the administration tries to manage the news against all reality, even that irrevocable reality encased in flag-draped coffins, you can only wonder if it might yet persuade the audience at home that we're mired in another Tet after all.