

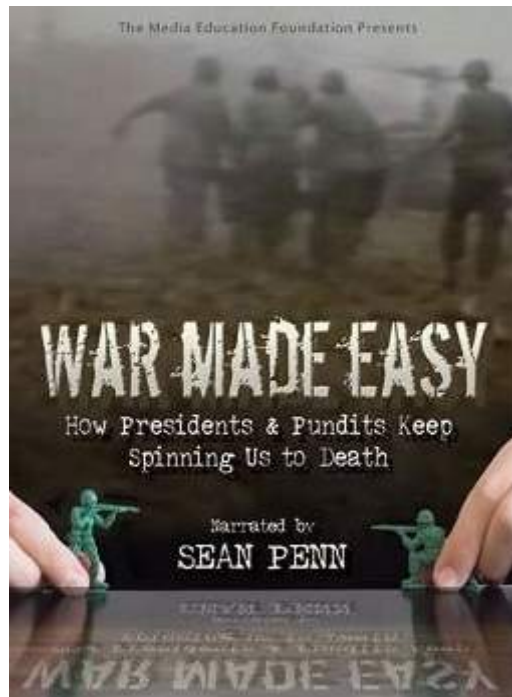
A Blurry Line Between Propaganda and News

by Khody Akhavi via rialator - IPS Saturday, Jul 28 2007, 11:23am

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WASHINGTON, Jul 27 (IPS) - A shocking thing happens midway through Norman Solomon's documentary film "War Made Easy".

While analysing the George W. Bush administration's lead-up to the Iraq invasion, Solomon plays a news clip of Eason Jordan, a CNN News chief executive who, in an interview with CNN, boasts of the network's cadre of professional "military experts". In fact, CNN's retired military generals turned war analysts were so good, Eason said, that they had all been vetted and approved by the U.S. government.



"I went to the Pentagon myself several times before the war started and met with important people," he said. "We got a big thumbs up on all of [the generals]."

In a country revered for its freedom of speech and unfettered press, Eason's comments would infuriate any veteran reporter who upholds the most basic and important tenet of the journalistic profession: independence.

But the relationship between the press and government in the U.S. during times of war is changing. In Solomon's film, it is just one example of the collusion between the government and the mainstream news media.

"War Made Easy", which is narrated by Hollywood actor and peace activist Sean Penn, begins as an anti-war film that decries the Bush administration's interventionist rationale and misinformation campaigns during the post-9/11 era. Through a montage of video clips from cable news networks, presidential statements, and historical footage from previous U.S. military interventions, it compares

the propaganda techniques of the past with the present, and draws striking parallels.

Richard Nixon's "Vietnamisation" rhetoric, which expanded the Vietnam War instead of ending it, sounds very similar to President Bush's declaration that "as the Iraqis stand up, we will stand down."

The first half-hour of this 73-minute documentary spends too much time explaining to the audience much of what it probably already knows. But it redeems itself by delving into the insidious tactics used by the Bush administration in managing a war of choice, and how the mainstream media colluded with the U.S. government to boost the war effort.

"Rarely if ever does a war just fall down from the sky. The foundation needs to be laid, and the case is built, often with deception," says Solomon during an interview in the film.

"War Made Easy" was produced and directed by Loretta Alper and Jeremy Earp for the Media Education Foundation, a non-profit that distributes educational programming "to reflect critically on the media industry and the content it produces," according to organisation's website. Its board of advisors includes prominent left-wing academics such as Noam Chomsky and Cornell West.

Six years after the terrorist attacks of Sep. 11, the U.S. news media's tepid performance during the build-up to the war has been exposed and criticised by the very establishment that was supposed to hold political officials' "feet to the fire," as the journalistic proverb goes.

In one interview clip from the Jon Stewart comedy show, CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer shrugs and says, "We should have been more sceptical," drawing a puzzled look from Stewart.

"War Made Easy" does not dispute the idea that the press is self-correcting, is willing to investigate its own reporting lapses (as the New York Times did after the Judith Miller WMD scandal), and issue apologies and retractions. But it warns against the ostensible collusion between press and government. In Solomon's view, the U.S. mainstream news media is cast as part and parcel of the Bush administration's war apparatus, an echo chamber that packages, builds support for, and, through the vehicle of "leaked misinformation," sells the war to the U.S. public.

For example, in the lead-up to "Operation Iraqi Freedom," CNN chairman Walter Isaacson sent a memo to his anchors and reporters asking them to "remind viewers why they are watching the war." As video of the clean-up at Ground Zero in Lower Manhattan rolls across the screen, one can't help but thinking about Sep. 11.

Solomon also labours over the parallels between U.S. government propaganda and how the rhetoric is now filtered into a more sophisticated media campaign, yet for all intents and purposes, fulfills the same goal. In short, it is more insidious than ever.

In one scene, he describes how a Hollywood set designer was hired to build a news set (with polished backdrop and sleek high-definition televisions) for the public relations arm of the U.S. military during the Iraq war. Presentations by military commanders and officials resemble news broadcasts. There is no discussion of the facts, and what the government says is accepted without question.

None of these revelations are exactly new, but the historical parallels between Vietnam and the Iraq war are becoming increasingly clear as the U.S. remains for a fifth year in Iraq. "War Made Easy" offers a timely criticism of the media, and portends an ominous future for the U.S. news viewing public should they sit back and accept without question the pronouncements of political leaders and

evening news anchors.

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