

How Hawkish Media Coverage Pushes America into War

A new account of a dangerous trend in mainstream journalism

Reporters, pundits, and editors face intense pressure to serve as propagandists rather than journalists in their coverage of U.S. foreign policy, according to senior fellow Ted Galen Carpenter in his new book, *Unreliable Watchdog*. As he shows, many members of the news media seem unwilling to play their proper role as watchdogs for the American people. The results can be catastrophic.

In *Unreliable Watchdog*, Carpenter focuses on the nature and extent of the American news media's willingness to accept official accounts and policy justifications, too often throwing skepticism aside. He takes readers through an examination of the media's performance with respect to the Vietnam War, the Persian Gulf War, the conflicts in the Balkans, the prelude to the Iraq War, the civil wars in Libya and Syria, and Washington's post-Cold War relations with both Russia and China.

The analysis explores why most journalists—as well as social media platforms—seem willing to collaborate with government officials in pushing an activist foreign policy, even when tactics or results have been questionable, disappointing, or even disastrous.

“Advocates of effective U.S. ‘global leadership’ tend to regard outside criticism as an annoyance at best and a menace at worst,” Carpenter writes. “From the perspective of officials committed to an activist foreign policy, a critical press is inconvenient, even dangerous.” But why do so many of the nation's media figures go along with it? As Carpenter shows, ideological biases mix with self-interest and the carrot-and-stick incentives of access journalism to produce media coverage that often amounts to uncritical propaganda.

The phenomenon isn't entirely new. In the late 19th century, yellow journalism helped stoke the demands for war with Spain. When the battleship USS *Maine* exploded in the harbor of Havana, Cuba, Americans were whipped up into a war frenzy in the name of revenge. But as the Spanish insisted at the time and modern investigations have proven, the explosion that destroyed the ship was an accident, not hostile action. That didn't stop the war, which produced America's first real foray



into colonial imperialism, not just in Cuba but also in acquiring Puerto Rico and the Philippines. The latter resulted in America fighting against a deadly years-long insurgency, presaging the guerrilla wars of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Often, this trend has resulted in promoting outright falsehoods, such as the notorious Gulf of Tonkin incident, which was used to justify escalating American involvement in the Vietnam War. In that instance, uncritical acceptance of official accounts led to the deaths of more than 50,000 Americans over the following decade.

To stoke the case for allegedly humanitarian military interventions, atrocities are inflated or even outright fabricated. At the same time, the liberal democratic credentials of allies and proxies are misrepresented and oversold, leading to support for groups that are often little better than the dictatorships they oppose. In the name of fighting for freedom, Americans have been swindled into weighing on one side or another of domestic civil wars and complicated ethnic and political disputes.

Unreliable Watchdog jump-starts a badly needed conversation about how the press must improve its coverage of foreign policy and national security issues. ■

UNRELIABLE WATCHDOG IS AVAILABLE ONLINE AND AT MAJOR BOOKSELLERS NATIONWIDE.