

## Is the Media Being Fair in Iraq?

The Bush administration has complained about the tenor of media coverage of the war in Iraq ever since the April 2003 looting that followed the fall of Baghdad. Ambassador Paul Bremer criticized the media frequently during the first year of the U.S. presence in Iraq. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney have often asserted that the media have a proclivity to overemphasize violence and to dwell on negative news stories. The complaint that the public hears only the bad news has become increasingly prevalent among members of the U.S. armed forces as well.<sup>1</sup> This problem is potentially serious. Many critics of the media believe that negative coverage could cost the United States the war. By their reasoning, the United States could fail in Iraq only if our national resolve falters, which could only happen if the American public gets an unfairly pessimistic view of the situation as a result of the media's fixation on violence and other bad news. If the United States and its coalition partners do not prevail, however, the failure will most likely result from events on the ground there, not from an untimely wavering of domestic political support. In fact, more than three years into the campaign, the U.S. body politic remains surprisingly tolerant of the mission in Iraq and, in general, resists calls for immediate withdrawal, despite far more bad news than anyone in the administration forecast or even thought possible when the war was first sold to the nation and launched. Given the facts, the U.S. public's view of the situation in Iraq is arguably just about where it should be. The public is exceptionally impressed by U.S. troops but depressed about the general lack of significant

---

Michael O'Hanlon is a senior fellow and Nina Kamp is a senior research assistant at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. They are the coauthors of Brookings' Iraq Index, located at <http://www.brookings.edu/iraqindex>. O'Hanlon and Kurt Campbell of CSIS are the coauthors of the forthcoming *Hard Power: The New Politics of National Security*.

---

© 2006 by The Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
*The Washington Quarterly* • 29:4 pp. 7–18.

progress on the ground. They are upset, moreover, with the Bush administration for overpromising and underpreparing in regard to the war.

It seems that the people of the United States remain committed to the effort in Iraq, having reelected in 2004 the president who took them to war, because all of the alternatives look worse. Indeed, even as President George W. Bush's personal popularity among the U.S. population has declined to well below 40 percent, a Pew poll conducted in the spring of 2006 found that 54 percent of U.S. citizens still expected some level of success in establishing a democracy in Iraq.<sup>2</sup> If the media are so consistently reporting only bad news and creating an image of a failure in the works, it is not clear on what information this 54 percent is basing its guarded optimism.

### **Measuring the Media's Reporting of Iraq**

---

To evaluate the claim of media bias systematically, we constructed a simple methodology for reviewing the reporting from Iraq over the last three years. First, we selected several news outlets that are considered among the most important in the United States and that also span its political spectrum, at least in the outlets' editorial instincts. Specifically, we assessed coverage by the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and NBC News and also looked at the *Washington Times*, *USA Today*, ABC News, and Fox News in more limited ways. This approach not only served to provide raw data that could help answer our basic question of whether media coverage is slanted but also helped to assess the degree to which the typical tone of stories might vary across organizations and thus the degree to which the reporting might reflect the political agendas of publishers, owners, editors, editorial writers, news anchors, and other key media figures.

Second, to make the analytical task more tractable, we selected a few specific months for examination. The goal was not to cover the whole three-year time period but to take only a random sampling of months. Specifically, we examined January, April, and May, the choice of the latter two months allowing for four years' worth of data for each year since the invasion of Iraq in March and April 2003.

We then used standard media search engines to obtain the headlines of all stories from each outlet for each month in question. This review allowed us to score the tone of each headline as positive, negative, or neutral. For example, a story about the killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the completion of a hospital construction project, or the high percentage of Iraqi voters going to the polls would be considered positive, whereas a story about violence against Iraqi citizens or U.S. forces, corruption, or economic mismanagement would be scored as negative. In rating the headlines, we assumed that headlines accurately reflected story content or, perhaps more importantly, at least

for newspaper articles, that the tone of headlines influenced most readers at least as much as the tone of the article content did.

Without question, our exact count of positive, negative, and neutral stories is subject to some imprecision. Someone else scoring the headlines would undoubtedly come to at least a slightly different result (we, of course, would be delighted if others would perform their own assessments as a check on ours). Moreover, the very stories we chose to examine required some degree of arbitrariness in the way we queried the search engines to find stories. Most notably, short news clips that mentioned Iraq only once or twice, such as those characteristic of the news summaries in the *Wall Street Journal* as well as many stories with just a few paragraphs of text in other papers, were generally not counted in our approach. For this reason, there were very few entries for three or four of the 10 months we examined in the *Wall Street Journal*. Therefore, caution should be applied in interpreting our specific statistics about the tone of that paper's coverage. Overall, however, this methodology was straightforward to apply and fairly convincing in the general story line it seemed to generate.

### Does It Depend on the Source?

Negative stories in the U.S. media have indeed outweighed positive ones by a factor of roughly 2.5 to 1 across several major outlets and in the course of the three years of the U.S. presence in Iraq. This number is a reasonable approximation averaged across the three major news sources we examined in detail and did not vary enormously from one outlet to another. That said,

**Table I: Assessment of Coverage by the New York Times**

	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Total	Ratio of Negative to Positive	Percent Neutral
May 2003	72	52	58	182	1.2:1	29
January 2004	46	14	27	87	1.7:1	16
April 2004	93	44	27	164	3.4:1	27
May 2004	128	51	40	219	3.2:1	23
January 2005	70	35	30	135	2.3:1	26
April 2005	40	8	13	61	3.1:1	13
May 2005	51	10	18	79	2.8:1	13
January 2006	43	7	12	62	3.6:1	11
April 2006	42	11	12	65	3.5:1	17
May 2006	39	6	14	59	2.8:1	10
Monthly Average					2.8:1	

within print media, the *New York Times* was indeed somewhat more critical in its coverage than the *Wall Street Journal* was, as most media observers would predict, given the former newspaper's reputation as more left-leaning than the latter (see chart 1). The difference between the two, however, 2.8 negative stories for every 1 positive story in the *Times* and a ratio of 2.4:1 for the *Journal*, was hardly drastic.

A smaller but still notable difference was the overall tenor of coverage of Iraq by the *Washington Times*, also viewed as a conservative news outlet, at least edi-

torially, which may have been somewhat more optimistic. Our assessments of this paper were more limited, but in April 2006 it carried 10 negative headlines, 6 positive headlines, and 12 neutral headlines. In May, the paper carried 13 negative headlines, 10 positive ones, and 10 neutral. The *Washington Times'* overall ratio of about 1.5 negative stories to 1 positive story was considerably more positive during those two months than the headlines that appeared

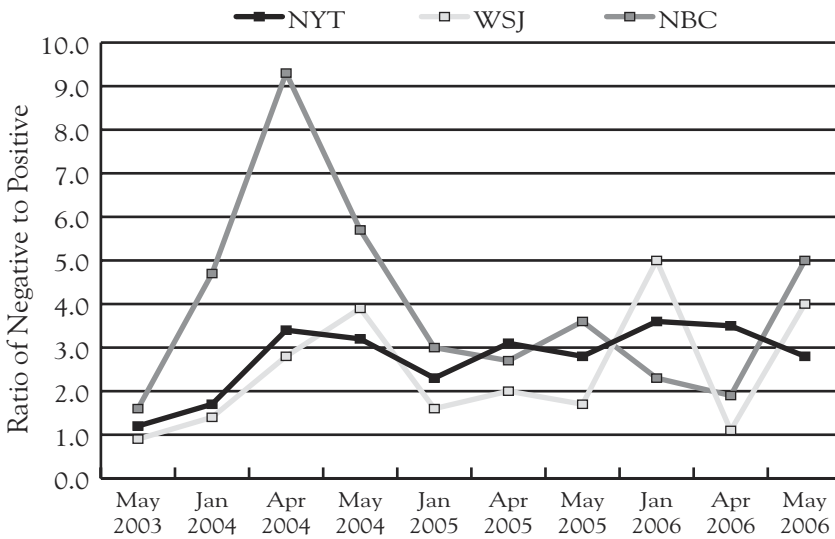
**The U.S. public's view of the situation in Iraq is arguably just about where it should be.**

in either the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*, and the tone was somewhat more positive than NBC's coverage. For the same two months in 2006, the overall ratio of negative to positive stories in *USA Today* was about 2.3:1.

Nonetheless, the data do vary more notably from month to month than from newspaper to newspaper. In other words, for some months, the news was far worse than it was for others. This variation suggests that events on the ground drove the tone of coverage much more than the emotional, professional, or political predilections of editors and journalists.

**Table 2: Assessment of Coverage by the *Wall Street Journal***

	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Total	Ratio of Negative to Positive	Percent Neutral
May 2003	15	17	17	49	0.9:1	35
January 2004	7	7	5	19	1.4:1	37
April 2004	45	11	16	72	2.8:1	15
May 2004	31	21	8	60	3.9:1	35
January 2005	19	6	12	37	1.6:1	16
April 2005	10	5	5	20	2.0:1	25
May 2005	5	5	3	13	1.7:1	38
January 2006	5	3	1	9	5.0:1	33
April 2006	9	2	8	19	1.1:1	11
May 2006	4	3	1	8	4.0:1	38
Monthly Average					2.4:1	

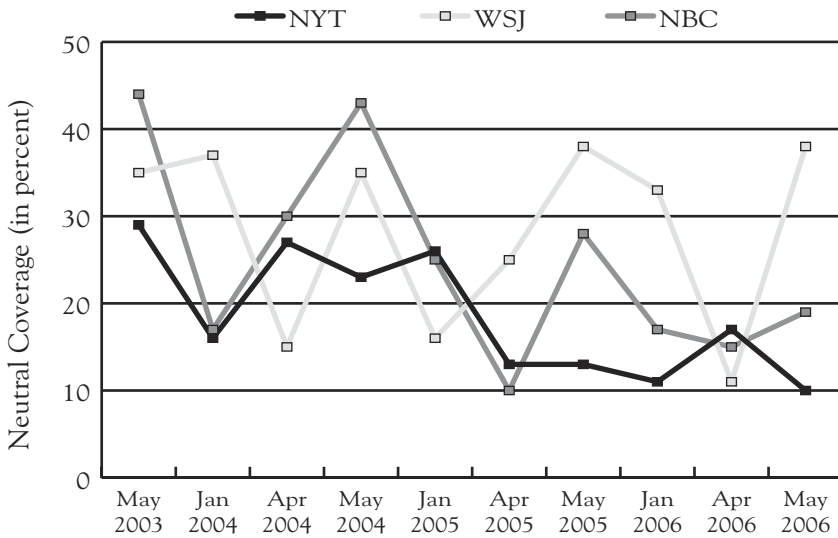
**Chart I. Ratio of Negative to Positive Stories**

Television may have had a somewhat greater proclivity to show bad news than newspapers had to report it. Specifically, data samples show that NBC's coverage of the war, as reflected in major story headlines across various shows at various times of day, was more negative than reporting by the *Times* or the *Journal*, especially in the early months of U.S. occupation (see chart 1). After the first year, however, less divergence was evident. As another check, we looked at ABC News for April and May of 2006. Its ratio of negative to positive stories for that period was about 3.5:1, again somewhat more negative than the main newspapers we examined but not dramatically so.

**Table 3: Assessment of Coverage by NBC News**

	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Total	Ratio of Negative to Positive	Percent Neutral
May 2003	24	31	15	70	1.6:1	44
January 2004	52	13	11	76	4.7:1	17
April 2004	112	53	12	177	9.3:1	30
May 2004	102	89	18	209	5.7:1	43
January 2005	79	34	26	139	3.0:1	24
April 2005	41	6	15	62	2.7:1	10
May 2005	47	23	13	83	3.6:1	28
January 2006	42	12	18	72	2.3:1	17
April 2006	33	9	17	59	1.9:1	15
May 2006	45	24	9	78	5.0:1	31
Monthly Average					4.0:1	

**Chart 2. Percentage of Neutral Stories**



Another point to consider is that newspapers grab attention with headlines, whereas television speaks most loudly with images. Violent imagery on television makes a greater impression on audiences than words or even photographs in a newspaper. It is therefore plausible that television coverage of the war in Iraq has conveyed an even more negative tone than the data suggest.

We found that Fox News, which is widely considered conservative leaning, had a far larger number of news stories about Iraq that were neutral in tone, whereas the other three outlets had comparable and much lower numbers of neutral headlines. The story headlines used by Fox News, regardless of time of day or program, do not lend themselves to the type of scoring that could be done as fairly straightforward as it was for headlines in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and NBC News. No doubt, a network that wishes to convey a different tone than the one adopted by the rest of mainstream media is capable of doing so. These initial assessments are entirely consistent with the possibility that Fox News made a decision to do just that.

### Getting into Issues

Consider how things are going and how they are being reported in each of the three major areas in Iraq: politics, economics, and security. On the former, the coverage has been thorough and fair of Iraq's impressive steps toward democracy, notably the transfer of sovereignty in June 2004, the interim elections in January 2005, the constitutional referendum in October

2005, the full-term elections in December 2005, and the formation of a new Iraqi government in the spring of 2006. The U.S. media have also accurately reported the horse trading, backroom dealing, and political maneuvering that abound in liberated Iraq, as they do in most of the world's democracies.

To be sure, there are not enough probing media stories about Iraq's economic situation. From what the data show, however, it is hardly clear that the additional accounts, if told, would be mostly positive. In a country of 25 million people with more than \$5 billion a year spent by the United States and large revenues brought in by high oil prices, there are countless incidents of new businesses successfully growing, schools opening, telephone services mushrooming, and satellite TV dishes sprouting. If the media should view their job as bucking up the morale of the U.S. public, the media could perhaps be criticized for not telling enough of these stories.

**T**elevision may have been more likely to show bad news than newspapers were to report it.

Despite some economic progress, however, the overall reality is simply not that good. Iraq's gross domestic product has been largely flat since the initial months of the post-Saddam period. The country's infrastructure remains at or below the pre-invasion levels in oil production, electricity production and distribution, water and sanitation services, and transportation. Additionally, the availability of heating and cooking fuels has declined substantially below estimated requirements.<sup>3</sup>

Corruption remains a widespread problem, and to date, only modest progress has been made to stem or eliminate it altogether. Consumer subsidies, although reduced somewhat this year, remain very high and create black markets in scarce goods, providing financial opportunities for criminals and insurgents. Most critically, unemployment remains at a level of 30–40 percent and perhaps higher in Sunni Arab regions.<sup>4</sup> The problem, of course, is not just one of economics but also of security. A low rate of employment creates embittered, disaffected, bored, poor, and angry young Sunni Arab men who become the main source of recruits for the insurgency, a connection that the media does not fully address.

Some initial data from the U.S. government in 2004 suggested that more Iraqi children were in school in 2004 than under Saddam's regime.<sup>5</sup> The Iraqi Ministry of Education recently confirmed that the trend had continued, as a prominent story in the *New York Times* explained.<sup>6</sup> Data gathered by the U.S. Agency for International Development indicate the likelihood that childhood vaccination campaigns have been relatively successful. Beyond that piece of good news, however, available data make it difficult to see much progress in the Iraqi health care sectors.

In the realm of security, the media have perhaps covered the violence in Iraq excessively, as they do at home. Some mistakes have been conceptual, for example, fixating on how many Iraqi units are in the top state of readiness (typically one or no battalions at any given time in the last year) rather than on the more significant indicator of how many Iraqi forces are at least reasonably competent to maintain security in the country. As of the early summer of 2006, Iraq has some 60,000 indigenous security personnel, most of them in the army and a few thousand in the police force, whom the United States government assess as capable of taking the lead in carrying out most security tasks, relative to an effective starting point near zero two years ago.<sup>7</sup> Proficiency is a more appropriate standard by which to judge Iraqi security forces, rather than the unrealistic ideal of maintaining the highest state of readiness.

Yet, the Bush administration itself bred skepticism about the training and equipping of Iraqi security forces by constantly overstating the progress that was being made in the first year after liberation. Thus, it has taken a while for the journalistic corps to build up confidence in the training programs undertaken by Gen. David Petraeus and Gen. Martin Dempsey since the spring of 2004. Now, however, that story is getting out; and in fairness, this should happen more widely and more often.

Nevertheless, this progress hardly constitutes unblemished success. Iraqi units may currently be more proficient technically, but they are poorly integrated ethnically and not yet dependable politically. These factors pose huge risks at a time when Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki rightly identifies Iraq's ethnic militias as among his country's most worrisome security problems, militias that, in fact, are often tolerated by security forces of similar ethnicity.

Moreover, the rate of sectarian strife has grown significantly in 2006 with an average of 10 violent incidents a day occurring throughout the first half of the year, most notably including the February 22 bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra, compared with only one or two per day previously.<sup>8</sup> The increased level of sectarian violence suggests that, even though improved security forces are necessary, they may also pose a danger to Iraq because of the possibility that they could ultimately take up arms against each other in a civil war. In fact, one analyst has gone so far as to argue that the intense programs to train these forces create more risk than they are worth.<sup>9</sup>

Just as in the case of Iraq's high unemployment rate, the media do under-report some negative security issues. For example, over the past year Iraqi security forces have been suffering about three times the number of monthly fatalities of the U.S.-led foreign coalition forces, whereas in the early months after liberation, Iraqis suffered fewer fatalities than the foreign forces.<sup>10</sup> One encouraging aspect of this grisly statistic is that at least the Iraqis are willing



to fight and die for their country, but the extent of the bloodshed underscores just how dangerous the environment remains.

Leaving aside the war per se, Iraq has far and away the highest criminal murder rate in the greater Middle East. Although it is difficult to give precise figures, in Baghdad the criminal murder rate is estimated at nearly one murder victim for every 1,000 people per year.<sup>11</sup> That rate is roughly 10 times the typical murder rate in inner cities in the United States. Kidnapping is another huge issue. Stories about kidnappings tend to be told only when a U.S. citizen, such as Jill Carroll or Nicholas Berg, is abducted, but kidnapping of foreigners is just the tip of the iceberg. The stunning reality in Iraq is that an estimated 30–40 Iraqis—professionals, political figures, doctors, lawyers, wealthy merchants—are kidnapped each day.<sup>12</sup> Many if not most are released once ransom is paid; few are killed through grisly beheadings or other such spectacles. Yet, the rate of kidnapping, probably the highest per capita rate in the world, is tremendously disruptive to life in Iraq.

**There are not enough probing media stories about Iraq's economic situation.**

On balance, Iraq is easily the most violent country in the broader Middle Eastern region. Leaving aside a couple of extreme examples, such as Sudan, Iraq is one of the most violent countries in the world. According to the best documented estimates, at least 1,000 civilians in Iraq have been killed by acts of war on a monthly basis since the invasion, a figure consistent with the estimate Bush offered in 2005.<sup>13</sup> The reality could potentially be two to three times that number. For most people, Iraq is actually a much more dangerous place to live today than it was in the later years of Saddam's reign (although the country is much better than the Iraq of the 1980s, when a brutal war against Iran was followed by Saddam's genocidal rampages against first the Kurds and then the Shi'a). These depressing facts are often not reported quite so starkly. If anything, the media typically underreport just how violent Iraq now is compared with the broader region and its own recent past.

Finally, the frequency of coverage of Iraq overall has dropped by roughly a factor of two over the last two years for the two newspapers and one television network examined. A recent analysis published in the *Chicago Tribune* reaffirmed the same result for a wider set of newspapers.<sup>14</sup> Again, the notable point is that trends on the ground do more to determine the nature of U.S. media coverage of Iraq than any biases of reporters. Recent news is less interesting, given that it increasingly reads like a repetition of previous news, at least in terms of the security and economic environments.

Undoubtedly, the quality of media coverage about Iraq is uneven. Some reporters are simply more entrepreneurial, courageous, or careful to address

**If anything, the media typically underreport just how violent Iraq is now.**

the inherent challenges of counterinsurgency warfare than others. As viewers of almost any nightly news broadcast know, televised news reports in particular tend to lead with violence rather than with positive stories. Thus, at

some level the media do emphasize the negative more than the positive, especially when visual imagery is required. Moreover, the media must keep looking for creative ways to report the bravery and sacrifices of U.S. soldiers. The public wants to hear such stories, and they help counter potentially misleading images that arise from isolated tragedies such as the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and what appears to have been a massacre at Ha-

ditha.<sup>15</sup> But to level these specific critiques and suggestions is one thing, to allege systematic media bias quite another.

### **What Is a Journalist's Job?**

---

When assessing the media's coverage of the war in Iraq, many critics seem to have in mind an earlier era, when the nation was firmly united in common cause against a clear enemy, such as during World War II. At that time, journalists were effectively part of the team, reporting on the march against tyranny and shoring up the faith, resolve, and morale of the public back home.

It is true that morale and patience are important in war. It is natural and appropriate, therefore, for the country's leaders to work to build up the confidence and optimism not only of the troops but also the public supporting them. (Clearly, the role of critics and dissenters is important too, especially when badly conceived or poorly led military operations are involved.) Without strong political leadership, the country would fail to marshal all elements of national power in support of a military mission, the national will could suffer, and enemies could target the nation's psyche as their main strategy. In the casualty-averse days of much of the 1980s and 1990s, this concern seemed especially serious.

But is it really the media's job to shore up public morale? Some columnists and talking heads can and should do so. Yet, reporters, editors, and news anchors do not have that same task. Their most important job is to provide independent and objective information and assessments. When news reporting is in accord with what political leaders are saying about a given situation, the messages reinforce each other, the government gains credibility, and the nation gains resolve. When media reports conflict with political messages, leaders are kept accountable; they are obliged to explain the reason for the dissonance and perhaps to reassess the thrust of their own policies. Other

political leaders then also gain more grist for developing policy alternatives. These basic dynamics are not only natural but essential to the healthy functioning of a democracy.

This natural and generally accepted role of the media as the Fourth Estate of political life in the United States underscores why coverage of the Iraq war should be critical. The war has gone far worse than the Bush administration had predicted or led the country to believe it would. The more the public learns about the administration's overconfidence that Iraq would remain peaceful after Saddam was overthrown, an overconfidence that conflicted with the predictions of most outside experts and that led the government to underprepare for the difficulty of the mission, the more natural it is for the Fourth Estate to be tough in reporting the operation.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Media Is Not the Problem**

---

The broad argument voiced by critics of the media in the United States is often badly overstated. Even though the overall image of Iraq conveyed by the mainstream media may be somewhat more negative than reality, it is not incredibly dissimilar from the situation on the ground. Iraq is a war zone in which progress has been largely elusive. Given this reality, accurate reporting naturally places more emphasis on the negative aspects than on the positive ones.

Journalists are missing quite a few stories in Iraq, but the ones they miss are just as often bad as they are good. If the journalists have faults, as they surely do, it is because they are more inclined to be ultracompetitive to beat their media rivals to a good headline than to work against the interests of the U.S. government deliberately. Even though the reporters in Iraq are not facing the same risks as those confronting the front-line troops, the journalists display remarkable commitment and courage, and they have been incurring casualties at substantial rates.<sup>17</sup> More than 100 journalists have died in Iraq, although most of them have not been from the United States. More U.S. journalists have lost their lives in Iraq, however, than field-grade officers of the U.S. armed forces.

It makes little sense to expect people reporting from a war zone to have a particularly happy set of messages to convey. Sometimes the reporters do get it wrong, and it is legitimate to hold them accountable when that happens and also to suggest specific ways they can improve their reporting. Rather than habitually berating the media in sweeping terms, we should read their critical stories for insights into where U.S. policy may be failing and how it can be improved in a war that we truly must win yet could still lose, on the ground in Iraq.

## Notes

---

1. See L. Paul Bremer, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), pp. 112–113.
2. The Pew Global Attitudes Project, “America’s Image Slips, but Allies Share U.S. Concerns Over Iran, Hamas,” Washington, D.C., 2006, p. 14, <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/252.pdf>.
3. “Iraq Index: Tracking Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq,” Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., <http://www.brookings.edu/iraqindex>.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Sabrina Tavernise and Sahar Nageeb, “Amid Iraqi Chaos, Schools Fill After Long Decline,” *New York Times*, June 26, 2006, p. A1.
7. U.S. Department of Defense, “Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq,” Washington, D.C., May 2006, pp. 45–48.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
9. Stephen Biddle, “Seeing Baghdad, Thinking Saigon,” *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 2 (March/April 2006): 2–14.
10. “Iraq Index.”
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, “President Discusses War on Terror and Upcoming Iraqi Elections,” December 12, 2005, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/12/20051212-4.html>.
14. Timothy J. McNulty, “Has the Iraq War Disappeared From the Front Page?” *Chicago Tribune*, June 11, 2006, p. 7.
15. Frank Schaeffer, “In This Paper, War Heroes Are MIA,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 2006. See Kathy Roth-Douquet and Frank Schaeffer, *AWOL: The Unexcused Absence of America’s Upper Classes From Military Service—and How It Hurts Our Country* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006).
16. On these latter points, see Kurt Campbell and Michael O’Hanlon, *Hard Power: The New Politics of National Security* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); George Packer, *The Assassins’ Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005); Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006).
17. “Iraq Index.”