

# The Elite Press Remains the Handmaid of War

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, pro-interventionist accounts have dominated the airwaves and op-ed pages.

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*Far too often, the elite U.S. press has been [a reliable mouthpiece](#) for Washington’s dubious foreign policies. That was true during the Cold War, except for a brief period of disillusionment and dissent once the Vietnam War became such an obvious debacle. That period of more vigorous scrutiny and skepticism did not last long, however. When George H. W. Bush launched his drive for U.S. military intervention in the Persian Gulf to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait, CNN, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and other elite outlets were fully on board with that agenda, as their shamelessly biased treatment of the relevant issues confirmed. That pro-interventionist bias became even more flagrant during the Balkan crises of the 1990s, the lead-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and Washington’s subsequent campaigns for forcible regime change in Libya and Syria. There was very little daylight between the official U.S. government positions on those issues and the dominant media narratives.*

A similar pattern has emerged with press [coverage of the war in Ukraine](#). Once again, pro-interventionist accounts dominate the airwaves and the leading editorial and op-ed pages. That was especially true of the first weeks of the war, when the media overwhelmingly supported the argument that America must “stand with Ukraine.” The imbalance has eased slightly as [concerns about the costs and risks](#) of the Biden administration’s policy of lavishing military and financial aid on Kiev mount. Nevertheless, hawks still provide the vast majority of commentaries on the war in top-tier establishment forums.

The elite U.S. press has even served as a conduit for outright Ukrainian propaganda. During the early weeks of the war, American news outlets circulated the story about the “Ghost of Kiev”—the fighter pilot who supposedly became an ace in a matter of days by shooting down numerous Russian warplanes. That account had all the characteristics of transparent propaganda, and the Ukrainian military ultimately conceded that [the story was fictional](#). In the meantime, however, it had served its purpose to influence credulous Western audiences.

Multiple unfiltered stories from *Ukrayinska Pravda*, *New Voice of Ukraine* and other Ukrainian media outlets routinely have appeared on Yahoo’s daily news feed, often accounting for a third or more of the site’s top dozen stories. Press releases from Ukraine’s government also have appeared in the U.S. media, at times without even an acknowledgment that the accuracy of those official accounts could not be confirmed. Moreover, there are virtually no competing stories from Russian news sources, creating an even greater pro-Ukraine imbalance. A similar imbalance has been evident on the principal social media platforms.

Much of the bias in news coverage of Ukraine and other high-profile U.S. foreign policy issues is brazen. However, there also are more subtle, insidious manifestations. A [new report](#) from Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) highlights one important example. Looking at the front pages of the *New York Times* during the first full calendar month of the 2003 Iraq War and the first full calendar month of the current Ukraine war, FAIR demonstrated that a difference in the scope and nature of the coverage was substantial:

In April 2022, there were a total of 179 stories on the *Times*’ front page, and 79 (44%) concerned the Ukraine invasion. All but three were located at the top of the page (i.e., with no articles above them), where editors put the stories they consider to be the most important of the day. Fully 75% of all top-of-the-page stories were about the Ukraine war. Not a single day went by without a Ukraine story being published on the top of the page, and on 14 different days *only* stories about Ukraine were published on the top of the front page.

The contrast between the coverage of the two wars is striking. The report noted that, “In May 2003, when there were 226 stories on the front page, only 41 of them (18%) reported on the Iraq invasion. Thirty-two of those were at the top of the page, with nine below; 25% of all top-of-the-page stories were dedicated to the Iraq War.”

The FAIR researchers highlighted the significance of that difference. A “major conflict launched by the country where the paper is published was given less than half as many front-page articles—and a third of the top of the front page, where highest-priority stories are placed—compared to a war in which that country was not directly involved. Six days out of the month, the paper did not feature a single Iraq story at the top of the page, and the top-of-the-page stories were never exclusively about Iraq.”

That disparity suggests just how much the elite media’s flagship publication had cast its lot with Ukraine’s cause and the policy agenda of the Biden administration. Another portion of the FAIR report noted that coverage on the nightly news shows at ABC, CBS, and NBC exhibited a similar pattern.

The study also discovered a stunning difference between accounts of civilian populations’ suffering in the two wars. “Of the 79 front-page *New York Times* stories on the war in Ukraine in May 2022, 14 of them were primarily about civilian deaths as a result of the Russian invasion, all of which appeared at the top of the page,” the report found. The extent of the coverage was arguably warranted. As the report added, “By the beginning of May, the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights ([5/2/22](#)) estimated that there were at least 3,153 civilian deaths in Ukraine.”

The *Times*’s handling of civilian suffering during the early phase of the Iraq War was quite different, however. In the first full calendar month of the conflict, there was only one story

on the front page about civilian deaths at the hands of the U.S. military. The FAIR researchers note that the lack of coverage “did not reflect a lack of civilian casualties during this period: [Iraq Body Count](#) estimated that at least 7,984 civilian deaths had occurred by the end of May 2003.” In other words, the civilian carnage was roughly twice as bad as it has been in Ukraine. Emphasizing that point, though, would have caused discomfort in Washington. Conversely, highlighting the suffering of civilians in Ukraine caused by Russian forces is fully consistent with the policy agenda of the U.S. national-security apparatus.

It should surprise no one that members of the elite press are again helping to advance a dangerous U.S. policy. It is a familiar pattern, and one that violates the supposed mission and purpose of an independent press. The news media should adopt aloof relationships with U.S. policymakers and serve as the public’s watchdog with respect to questionable foreign-policy initiatives. Instead, the elite press—the portion of the media with the greatest reach—is once again serving as the national-security state’s lapdog.

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