

Media Distortions: Preparing us for War with Iran

The difference between "a" and "the" can be the difference between no war and nuclear war

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Global Research, January 19, 2007

19 January 2007

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation, US NATO War Agenda](#)

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For the past decade or two, US journalism has become deficient, dysfunctional, defunct when reporting on international events. For finding out what is going on in the world, it is best to read Hong Kong's [Asia Times](#) or Britain's [The Independent](#)

A recent article in *The Independent* entitled "[Tensions rise as Washington accuses Iran over militias](#)" (by Andrew Buncombe, January 14) reports the anti-Iran rhetoric of President Bush and cites a secret executive order directing US troops to attack Iranians in Iraq. This order apparently authorized two recent US attacks on Iranian diplomats, who had in fact been invited and authorized by Iraq's elected government. In contrast, the December report of the Iraq Study Group (ISG) had in fact recommended diplomatic engagement with Iran as part of a plan to pacify Iraq and save America from defeat. But Bush has rejected that advice and would rather attack Iranians than talk to Iranians.

The article in *The Independent* also reported deployment of two US aircraft carrier fleets to the Persian Gulf and deployment of Patriot Anti-Missile batteries to the region, presumably to defend against Iranian missiles should US actions provoke a wider war. The British newspaper, *The Times*, last week reported that [Israel plans nuclear strike on Iran](#). Recalling Vice-President [Cheney's threat on 21 January 2005](#) that Israel could attack Iran if the USA does not, and recalling the report in the *New Yorker* on 14 August 2006 that Israel's war on Lebanon was planned and provoked as part of preparations for war on Iran, then it looks like the USA and Israel are in the final stages of preparation for a wider regional war. This new war will definitely not serve US national interests considering the dire consequences for US military personnel in the region and considering the catastrophic consequences for the US economy.

Nevertheless, Israel and the USA may even use their nuclear weapons to destroy **the** nuclear weapons program in Iran. Iran consistently says it has no nuclear weapons program, and IAEA inspectors have found "[no evidence of a nuclear weapons program](#)".

As part of preparation for war with Iran, US politicians and the public must be made to see **the** threat that Iran poses and made to see **the** actual evidence of Iranian aggression, even if in fact there is no such evidence and even if in fact Iran is trying to stabilize Iraq as the Iraq Study Group concluded and as Iran itself has confirmed.

We have been through this once before. Four years ago, in 2003, in preparation for invading Iraq in the first place, Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice, Powell and others succeeded in making US politicians and the US public see **the** threat posed by **the** weapons of mass destruction

possessed by Saddam, including **the** acquisition of uranium from Niger, **the** chemical plants for making **the** poison gas and **the** missiles capable of delivering **the** weapons on a few minutes launch warning. Secretary of State Powell gave a slide show at the UN show **the** manufacturing facilities, **the** storage facilities, **the** transport systems and all of **the** evidence for **the** weapons of mass destruction possessed by Saddam.

But it was all false. The supposed facts were fiction. We were fooled by public relations lies, by repeated propaganda, by so-called experts and authorities, and by rhetorical tricks, including clever use of "**the**".

American psychologist, Elizabeth Loftus, and her colleagues have shown how rhetorical tricks can make people misconceive reality. In one study by Loftus and Zanni (1975), people were shown a film of a car accident, and then asked questions about what they saw. A random half of the witnesses were asked "Did you see **a** broken headlight?" and the other half were asked "Did you see **the** broken headlight?" In the first version, 7% of the people said they saw **a** broken headlight. In the second version, 17% said they saw **the** broken headlight. In fact, there was no broken headlight. If someone uses the definite article "**the**", then listeners and readers tend to presume that what follows actually exists.

In another study by Loftus (1975), people viewed a film and one group answered a questionnaire that included, "Did you see **the** children getting on **the** school bus?" and the other group did not get this question. A week later, people filled out a second questionnaire that contained the question, "Did you see **a** school bus?" Only 6% of the people who had not been exposed to **the** question a week earlier recalled seeing a school bus, but 26% of those who had been exposed to **the** question a week earlier said "yes" they had seen a school bus. In fact, there was no school bus.

Thus, by the simple use of **the**, just one time, 10% of the people could be made to believe that something was there that was not there. With some additional details that fit, like children getting on school buses, and with the delay of a week to consolidate the false information, 20% of people could be made to believe that something was there that was not there.

Imagine the effectiveness of **the**, repeated over and over and over and over, for weeks and months, by authorities whom we are trained to trust, providing lots of information that coherently fits with the false claims. For example, *The Independent* article quoted President Bush using **the** three times:

"We will disrupt **the** attacks on our forces. We will interrupt **the** flow of support from Iran and Syria. And we will seek out and destroy **the** networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq."

There are in fact attacks on US forces (but done by anti-Iranian Sunni insurgents), and there are in fact networks providing advanced weapons for these attacks (but coming from pre-war Iraqi caches and pilfered from US supplies). Those two true facts serve to add coherence and believability to the unsubstantiated claim about "**the** flow of support from Iran and Syria" for which there is in fact no evidence. Thus we come to confidently believe something is there that is not there.

The Independent is careful not to serve as a propagandist for governments bent on misleading the public in order to make new wars. When unnamed officials make claims, they are not presented as true, but as alleged, reportedly. And when there is no evidence, *The Independent* says that there is no evidence:

“Officials have also reportedly claimed that thousands of Shia militia fighters have been trained in Iran by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security. Again, no evidence to support these claims has been made public.”

American journalists writing for US media are much less careful, and much more comfortable reinforcing beliefs for which there is no evidence, other than **the** repeated over and over and over. For example, *ABC News* headlined a report, “[EXCLUSIVE: Iranian Weapons Arm Iraqi Militia](#)”. The report quoted unnamed authorities that “*smoking-gun evidence*” has been found, that “**the material is going directly from Iranian factories to Shia militias**” and that “**the weapons have been supplied to Iraq’s growing Shia militias**”. **But the alleged weapons and other evidence are only hearsay, never made public and not seen by the reporter. The “smoking gun” is actually smoke and mirrors made by repeated use of the definite article the.**

The world is again being tricked into war by empty rhetoric and fear, unsupported by facts.

Americans and everyone else have good reason to be alarmed. We may be on the verge of an horrific war, that will kill people by the hundred thousands if not millions, that will send economic shock waves around the world, that can come to no good end. The US is now governed by incompetent and deluded leadership; there is no reason to trust its judgement on matters of war, and certainly not nuclear war. Citizens around the world need to make known to their representatives in government that they insist on effective actions to prevent the US and Israel from starting a new war. Active military personnel need to review their oaths and their codes of conduct. All experts, whether military, academic, political, journalistic, or theological, need to use what authority they have to prevent a new war, perhaps a nuclear war.

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