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Editorial

Where do our opinions come from?

Surely Adolf Hitler and Pol Pot must have been convinced that they were right too. And yet each and every one of us has that same dangerous tendency as they had: to form convictions, believe them without question, and act on them, so bringing down suffering on ourselves and all around us.—Sogyal Rinpoche



I was in Tucson recently and the front page of the *Arizona Daily Star* had a picture of an injured soldier returning from Iraq. The headline read: "Now I know freedom isn't free." The article's clear message, delivered with patriotic fervour, was that Americans must fight in Iraq for the freedom of their country. This is a widely held attitude in the U.S.—even though there is no evidence that American freedom is in jeopardy from the Iraqis. Fully 50 per cent of the American people believe that Saddam Hussein was involved in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, though even the Bush administration has admitted that Saddam had nothing to do with them.

Americans thought they were fighting for freedom in Vietnam too. In the recent documentary film *The Fog of War*, Robert McNamara, now 85, admits the U.S. government was wrong. McNamara, then Secretary of Defense and architect of the war, says they thought they were fighting the Cold War (defending against communism, therefore championing freedom), while the Vietnamese saw it as a civil war and an American invasion. Vietnam protesters believed at the time that the war was a huge mistake, and they stand vindicated by current understanding. McNamara also admits that the press was purposely misinformed about government action at the time.

Inaccuracy and distortion in the media continue today.

According to FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting; www.fair.org), government and military officials dominate U.S. TV news coverage of

the Iraq situation. The few critics of military operations on the nightly network news broadcasts rarely question the war as a whole, focusing on tactics and individual battles, and seldom reporting civilian casualties. A recent FAIR study categorized on-camera sources appearing in stories about Iraq on *ABC World News Tonight*, *CBS Evening News* and *NBC Nightly News* in October 2003. Of the 319 sources, 244 (76 per cent) were current or former government or military officials. The networks clearly promoted the official line on the war and minimized dissenting views.

People's attitudes and opinions are shaped by the media. Albertans too have fallen in with the official line. This past March 20, the one-year anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, I was in a popular store on 17th Avenue in Calgary when a small band of anti-war demonstrators marched by. The customers in the store expressed such seething hostility and disgust for the protesters that I wondered if I was living in a democracy at all. Surely in a democracy we value diversity and welcome different points of view. Surely we respect each other.

In this issue we examine the media in Alberta. We show how political cartoonists shape and reflect our attitudes. We investigate the demise of *Alberta Report*. We expose the compromises made by reporters in the CanWest Global empire.

Can it be said too often? In a democracy the media play a crucial role. It is essential, perhaps even a matter of life and death, to be able to read critically, to seek out alternative sources of information, to discuss issues with others, to think for oneself, to act thoughtfully and not out of mere conditioning. —Jackie Flanagan