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## Out of the press, out of mind

Contributed by Mark Mellman  
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Seven months ago, I suggested here that economic issues were rising in salience and might even displace Iraq as voters' primary concern. Nevertheless, it is hard to grasp how thoroughly Iraq has been supplanted as a public priority.

A year ago, 38 percent of Americans told Gallup that Iraq was the most important problem facing the nation, with only 7 percent citing the economy. Today, just 21 percent identify Iraq as the nation's top priority, with 35 percent focused on the economy.

In part, this dramatic turn of events stems from the very severity of our economic predicament. Real concerns about affordability joined with a credit crisis to bring on full-scale recession.

But the deepening economic crisis does not fully explain the substantial decline in concern about Iraq. In truth, as press coverage of Iraq has declined, we have become increasingly disconnected from events there and concomitantly less informed and less concerned.

Pew researchers tell us that the number of Americans following news about Iraq very closely has declined nearly 20 points in the past 15 months.

That disengagement increases ignorance. In August, 54 percent knew that about 3,500 American servicemen and - women had been killed in Iraq. Today, just 28 percent are aware that America's death toll has climbed to 4,000.

As Americans have become increasingly disconnected from, and ignorant about, Iraq, a more benign picture of the situation itself has emerged. The number who believe things are going well "for the U.S. in its efforts to bring stability and order to Iraq" has nearly doubled over the past year, according to the CBS poll.

Of course, this could all fit together in a neat package - voters could be less attentive because they understand things are going well and naturally focus on other areas where the problems loom larger.

It's not quite so simple, though.

Media coverage plays a central role in agenda setting - in determining the priority Americans attach to various issues. More than 20 years ago, when we were all studying together, Roy Behr and Shanto Iyengar demonstrated that responses to Gallup's "most important problem" question flowed directly from the level of TV news coverage issues received and not necessarily from "real world" conditions.

With the press abdicating its responsibility in covering the ongoing war in Iraq, it is not surprising that concern has waned.

According to the Tyndall Report, which monitors television news, the three broadcast networks devoted less time to Iraq in 2007 than in any previous year of the war. During the early part of last year, the three networks spent an average of 30 minutes per week on Iraq - now it's fewer than four minutes a week.

Of course, network news is no longer our sole source of information. However, the Project for Excellence in Journalism reports that Iraq consumed 24 percent of the airtime on cable news last year, but just 1 percent this year. All told, TV, Internet and newspapers gave Iraq 23 percent of their news hole in the first 10 weeks of 2007, but just 3 percent in the early part of this year.

There is serious competition, to be sure - the economy and exciting presidential primaries vie for a share of the fixed news hole. But the media has given up on Iraq. One media insider recently reported that while not long ago there were over 1,500 U.S. journalists in Iraq, today there are just 50.

Without reporters on the ground, the war won't be covered. And if the press doesn't cover the war, voters become less knowledgeable, more disengaged and come to see Iraq as a less serious problem - regardless of the real conditions on the ground.

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