

Anonymous sources fueling push for war

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By DOUGLAS TURNER

WASHINGTON - A generation ago, the great investigative reporter and columnist Jack Anderson said that when the press was doing its best work, it performed as "the alternative source of information."

He meant alternative to the government. Admittedly, it was another time, when editors and newsrooms ran newspapers. Anderson did his job so well that there were speculations in the Nixon White House about whether to have him killed.

Right now, with the Bush administration talking war almost daily, I think the country could use a bit more of Anderson's "alternative" approach toward reporting national affairs.

Despite the overwhelming vote in Congress for war, a lot of patriotic people back home are still trying to sort out whether we ought to send our young men and women in harm's way in Iraq.

One of the key issues is whether Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was working with Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, and if Saddam is in league with al-Qaida now.

The Bush administration, principally hawks like Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, are pushing this line very hard, despite the lack of hard evidence. No less than former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said the other day that, "The link between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida has not been made."

Even so, the link seems to have been made in the minds of many citizens back home by repetitive comments by administrative officials and, sad to say, the Associated Press, which I think has slipped toward the role of government organ in the run-up to a possible war, instead of the people's "alternative source of information."

The AP, as a result of insufficient resources, pressure or carelessness, has slumped toward this role because of broad overuse of anonymous sources for key stories on intelligence concerning al-Qaida, stories that have captured the front pages of the world's newspapers and topped the budgets on radio, TV and cable news.

We're not talking inside baseball here. The AP has fantastic political clout; it serves 1,550 American newspapers, including this one, and 5,000 stations, most of them exclusively.

There are many examples of the AP citing "sources speaking on condition of anonymity" on crucial war-fever information.

But the most recent and egregious item was the Nov. 18 AP story that "U.S. intelligence has concluded that an audiotape of Osama bin Laden broadcast last week is real and was recently recorded, providing the first evidence in almost a year that al-Qaida's leader is alive."

The AP's source of this muscular story that rocketed around the world was "one U.S. official, speaking on the condition of anonymity."

On Nov. 30, European news nets carried a story, naming real, not spectral, scientists at a named Swiss research organization saying the bin Laden tape was probably a fake. The second story didn't get anything like the play of the original AP report, and so most people back home "concluded" that bin Laden is alive.

A story that played right into Rumsfeld's hands went out from the AP's Washington office on Oct. 2, a month before the midterm elections. It said that "a top al-Qaida operative was in Baghdad about two months ago, and U.S. officials suspect his presence was known to the government of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein." The AP cited "a defense official."

Almost every reporter here uses anonymous sources. But it is a rare reporter or editor who will repeatedly use this device to convey information that might help start a war.

I have used the device on political stories, and on pieces about impending government grants. Issues of war, death and social chaos fall into a different slot, I think.

Tom Rosenstiel, vice chairman of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, said anonymous sources are sometimes necessary. "A lot of important information would never be published without them," said the former chief congressional correspondent for Newsweek.

But, Rosenstiel said, recourse to this should be rare, and not routine, and when it is employed, the article should clearly say why the identity of the source or sources must be withheld.

Central to our work as journalists, he said, "is transparency. As you move away from sharing your information with readers, you'd better have a good reason - and you'd better share the reason with your readers."

Anonymity is an ancient tool in opinion writing. Westbrook Pegler, Drew Pearson, Walter Lippmann and James Reston reinvented it as political columnists. But it was almost never used in strategic news stories until Watergate. The Aug. 2, 1964, stories on the Tonkin Gulf attack, which escalated the Vietnam War, were all attributed by the AP, by the way.

The Washington Post's Watergate stories needed at least two sources, even if they were anonymous. AP's current guidebook says one anonymous source will do.

Attribution is a way to stay out of trouble, as the AP recently found when it discovered one of its reporters regularly faked sources. It is also a way to keep a president from manipulating a news service.

In his "Life of (Samuel) Johnson," James Boswell recounted that Johnson wrote articles reporting 18th century parliamentary debates for a London magazine. Johnson was anguished when he learned that people actually believed them.

Boswell wrote: "Such was the tenderness of (Johnson's) conscience that a short time before his death he expressed a regret for his having been the author of fictions, which had passed for reality."