ONE of the whopping lies of our time is that journalists are simply innocent bystanders with no responsibility for the outcome of events. In fact, our own media may turn out to be the crucial variable in Iraq. They've already made a success of post-modern terrorism as surely as Colonel Tom Parker made Elvis a star.

The truth is that today's media shape reality - often for the worse. The media form a powerful strategic factor. They're not merely observers.

The media are not detached from all responsibility for the events they cover. A journalist will tell you - sometimes sincerely - that he or she only reports the facts. That's never quite the truth. And it's often an outright lie.

Even the best journalists must choose among the facts to form their reports. Ethical reporters do strive for accuracy. But phony efforts to provide "balanced coverage" - to report the mass-murderer's side of the story with evenhanded sympathy - skew reality. Struggling to be fair to the viciously unfair is a sign of moral weakness, not objectivity.

Still worse, the competition for headlines drives journalists to report only those tiny slivers of ground-truth that qualify as "news." Setbacks make the cut. Successes don't.

The selectivity with which the news is reported shapes opinion, here and abroad. The news we see, hear and read from Iraq is overwhelmingly bad news. Thus, the picture the American electorate and foreign audiences receive is one of spreading failure - even though our occupation has made admirable progress.

Recently, I visited Germany to speak with our soldiers, many just back from Iraq. The situation depicted in the media was unrecognizable to them. They'd just left a country where every indicator of success was turning positive. Yet the media insist we are incompetent and failing.

The Kurds are prospering. The Shi'ites no longer live in fear. Even most Sunni Arabs feel relieved that Saddam's gone. The mullahs are behaving. Local markets are busy and full of goods. The electricity's back on - more reliably than before the war. Schools are open. Oil's flowing. The Iraqi media is booming, boisterous and free. The Governing Council has convinced previously hostile factions to cooperate. Iraqis provide more and more of their own local security. And the torture chambers are closed.

What do we hear from Iraq? Another soldier killed. The rest is silence.

Of course, things still could go badly. Even if we do everything right, we may find, in the end, that the Iraqis aren't ready for prime-time. Iraq ultimately may fail because the Iraqis fail themselves.

But for now the signs are encouraging - especially given the run-down quality of the neighborhood we're helping to redevelop. Yet hopeful signs are grudgingly reported - if at all - while every attack upon our soldiers is depicted as another nail in our coffin.

Reporters, on whom we rely as our eyes and ears abroad, have refused to consider the implications of their activities. They enjoy their power, even as they deny its existence.

Far too many journalists refuse to acknowledge the truth about their role in this age of endless news cycles and global access to reportage. Even when reporters don't make up the news, they make the news by selecting what they report. And the public's perception of reality, delivered by journalists, becomes the new reality.

The media is a key strategic factor today. And it is profoundly dishonest for so powerful a player to pretend it bears no responsibility for strategic outcomes.
By ceaselessly focusing on the negative, the media wear down the judgment of the American people. Recent declines in support for our policy have far more to do with the way events are reported than with the reality in Iraq.

We're on the way to talking ourselves into defeat in the face of victory. Much of the media has already called the game's outcome as a loss before we've reached half-time. Even though the scoreboard shows we're winning.

What should the rest of the world believe when our own media declare failure?

The media must face up to their responsibility for strategic outcomes. This will be tough, since they've had a free ride for so long. Indeed, the media's all-purpose motto seems to be "Not our fault."

Yet negative outcomes increasingly are the media's fault. Terrorists use the media with great skill - it's no accident that the great age of terror coincides precisely with the expansion and globalization of the broadcast media.

To an extent few journalists will admit, terror as we know it depends on the media as its accomplice, amplifying the terrorist's deeds and shaping successes out of terrorist failures - the opposite of the media's approach to American efforts.

From the terrorists' perspective, 9/11 was, above all, a media event - a global demonstration of their power.

This is not an argument for propaganda, or for turning our press into mindless red-white-and-blue cheerleaders. But the media must face up to the responsibility that goes with their influence.

Some degree of inaccuracy is inherent in any human system, including the media. But don't tell me you're reporting honestly, when you're only reporting the negative one-tenth of one per cent of what's happening, while playing up each terrorist attack.

The media form as decisive a strategic factor as our military. Its professed neutrality is a sham. Distorted reporting is at least as deadly as any bomb in our arsenal.

Ralph Peters' new book is "Beyond Baghdad: Postmodern War and Peace."