

**THE BLOG**

Oprah Is to Iraq as Cronkite Was to Vietnam

By Marty Kaplan

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It's the war, stupid.

That's what came to mind as I watched Oprah Winfrey stump for Barack Obama this weekend. It's not about whether a star who can make a book a bestseller can also make a primary candidate the nominee, as the media are framing it. It's about reassuring the overwhelming majority of Americans who oppose the war in Iraq that they *are*, in fact, an overwhelming majority. It's also about giving courage or cover to every Democratic member of Congress who is tempted to swallow *The Surge Is Working™*, to take Iraq off the table, to forget that, more than Katrina, more than the mortgage meltdown, more than healthcare, it's the war — the Cheney Libby Chalabi Blackwater WMD Abu Ghraib Wolfowitz Rumsfeld Feith Perle Yoo Waterboarding Walter Reeding Oedipus Bush war — that looms over everything else casting lawless shadows across our country.

How do people know what other people think? The sad truth is that it doesn't come from talking to one another; it comes from the media. And the media, for reasons ranging from mercantile to ideological to laziness, frame every issue, including the Iraq war, as (at best) a battle between two plausible sides, or (at worst) as a crusade of the Right against the Wrong.

That's why no journalist can today occupy the place that Walter Cronkite did when, at the end of a CBS documentary about the 1968 Tet offensive, he said the U.S. was in a stalemate in Vietnam and should get out. That moment, it's said, caused LBJ to tell an aide, "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost Middle America." But today there's no MSM journalist who channels Middle America. Whatever their other virtues are, the ABC, CBS and NBC anchors are paid their multimillions not to tell the truth, but to sell the truth-has-two-sides story, which is also how you maximize audiences. (Drop a coupla zeroes from the salaries and viewerships, and it's true of PBS, too.) Bill Moyers, Keith Olbermann, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert actually *do* tell the truth, and they mercilessly deconstruct the biases of "fair and balanced" *faux* news and fatuous "narrative" narratives, but their audience sizes limit their impact, and their matter is more than matched by Republican media anti-matter.

But Oprah — well, in an age that has thoroughly blurred the boundary between news and entertainment, Oprah may actually be the twenty-first century's *de facto* national anchor. She really does channel — and change — Middle America.

And as I watched Oprah introduce Senator Obama in Iowa, the two-by-four that hit me on the head wasn't: *Oprah is for Obama*. It was: *Oprah is against the war*.

Maybe, just maybe, Oprah's audience will take from this the message that their own opposition to the war isn't a betrayal of the troops, as the Republicans claim; isn't giving comfort to the terrorists, as the administration asserts; isn't moral cowardice, as the Right's bile-spewing whiner intelligentsia insists. And maybe the message that current and aspiring members of Congress will take from Oprah's unembarrassed anti-war message is that it's not political suicide to stand with the decisive majority of the American people, that being called bad names by your opponents will not kill you, that if as canny a businesswoman and brand manager as Oprah doesn't think it's a fatal risk to tell the truth about Iraq, then maybe you can afford some campaign candor, too.

I don't know whether Oprah's endorsement will give Obama an edge over Hillary Clinton. But I do know that it gives a lift to every candidate and every citizen who rejects the "finish the job" neoconjob. Whether you think Senator Clinton's record warrants that mantle is a separate question. What's not in question is the message that Oprah's endorsement of the anti-war message sends to the country: If Oprah can feel it and think it and say it, then you can feel it and think it and say it. What's not in question is the message to Democratic politicians, especially incumbents, still weaseling on Iraq: If you've lost Oprah, you've lost Middle America.

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