

Bubble-wrapped: Americans and the American media

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [January 10, 2006](#) issue

Newsweek magazine's cover story "Bush in the Bubble" (December 10) features an image of the president trapped inside a bubble. It's an insightful story that does not go far enough. It is not just the president who is in a bubble: a substantial number of Americans are floating in a bubble too. For that we can thank the establishment media, including *Newsweek*.

When NBC's Brian Williams asked President Bush to comment on the *Newsweek* story, he responded, "I feel like I'm getting really good advice from very capable people and that people from all walks of life have informed me and informed those who advise me."

Representative Jack Murtha (D., Pa.) is not your average "walk of life" citizen. As a Vietnam war hero and a veteran member of Congress who supported both wars in Iraq, Murtha figured he had the standing to penetrate the president's bubble. Wrong. Murtha tried for seven months to tell the president that the occupation of Iraq was a failure. He went public only when those efforts failed. The White House's initial response (later softened) was to brand Murtha as part of the Michael Moore wing of the Democratic party—a stark indication that the president and his advisors are indeed in a bubble.

The American public may think it is receiving, as the *New York Times* once bragged, "all the news that is fit to print," but readers and viewers who rely on the mainstream media are insulated from alternate perspectives. The mainstream media provide support for any wars fought by volunteers, news that is entertaining, and stories about whatever is good for General Motors.

Want to break out of the bubble? Try reading (online) the British press, where the *Independent* has been pounding away at Tony Blair's support for American policy in the Middle East—almost bringing Blair down in his last election. Read the Al Jazeera Web site, which provides views from the Arab side of world affairs. Read an

establishment Israeli paper like *Ha'aretz*—as nationalistic as they come, yet far more honest in covering the Israeli government than the American media are.

By reading *Ha'aretz*, or turning to a U.S. Jewish publication like *Forward*, we may pop our protective bubble on internal Israeli politics. In its December 16 issue, *Forward* made more of the implications of a recent address by President Bush than did American media. Pushing his campaign to Americanize the Middle East, the president said, “If you’re a supporter of Israel, I would strongly urge you to help other countries become democracies. Israel’s long-term survival depends upon the spread of democracy in the Middle East.”

According to *Forward*, some participants at the regular monthly meeting of the American-Israeli strategic dialogue group warned that instead of helping Israel’s security, “Regime change and democratization threatened to destabilize the Middle East.” The *Forward* notes that Israel sees its security tied to regimes such as those in Egypt and Jordan, and is worried that democratization there might undermine support for Israel.

Even more unsettling is the threat to the American national Jewish consensus on the war in Iraq. When the Reform synagogue movement endorsed an exit strategy from Iraq, the Republican Jewish Coalition ran a full-page advertisement opposing the Reform group’s position. Neither side in the exchange mentioned Israel, but they did not need to. The never-spoken thought in the run-up to the Iraq war is the suspicion that a major motive for the invasion and occupation of Iraq was Israel’s security.

Writes the *Forward*: “Some pro-Israel activists and Israeli observers criticized Bush’s comments [because] they could end up fueling claims that Jerusalem and Jewish groups pushed the United States into an unpopular war.” The support of American public opinion is vital to Israel’s security. “American Jews don’t want American soldiers to be dying for Israel,” said Martin Raffel, associate executive director of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. Bush worried Israel’s supporters here and in Israel when he connected Israel directly to the war in Iraq.

Maybe the White House knew that “serious folks,” as conservative columnist David Brooks calls those who “pay attention,” would not attack the president because he linked Israel to Iraq. It could be that the White House wanted to remind pro-Israel voters that the president needed their firm support for his efforts in Iraq. And they counted on the fact that the media’s acceptance of the national consensus not to

name Israel as a reason for going to war would protect the president during his little venture outside the bubble.

Still, none of us can be protected from reality forever. Ilan Pappé, professor of political science at Israel's Haifa University, has written that generally people "are happy not knowing." That is why we willingly accept bubbles. But Pappé also points out, "It is convenient not to know, but if you start to know you begin to be troubled and you start to react and say 'not in my name.' In time, people will know." When that happens, our bubbles, which are actually our veils of ignorance, will be torn away. Then we will have to face the awful reality of what we have been doing and what we have permitted others to do in our name.