

NBC calls Iraq conflict 'civil war'



By DAVID BAUDER, AP Television Writer

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NBC News on Monday began referring to the Iraq conflict as a civil war, adopting a phrase that President Bush and many other news organizations have avoided.

Matt Lauer said on the "Today" show that "after careful consideration, NBC News has decided that a change in terminology is warranted, that the situation in Iraq with armed militarized factions fighting for their own political agendas can now be characterized as civil war."

The network's cable news outlet, MSNBC, drummed the point home repeatedly by using the phrase "Iraq: The Civil War" on the screen.

There are different criteria for defining a civil war. Webster's New World College Dictionary defines it simply as "war between geographical sections or political factions of the same nation." Some political scientists use a threshold of 1,000 dead, which the current conflict has long since passed.

There are more conservative definitions. The Web site GlobalSecurity.org, which provides information on defense issues, said five criteria must be met: The contestants must control territory, have a functioning government, enjoy some foreign recognition, have identifiable regular armed forces and engage in major military operations.

The Bush administration said Monday that it does not believe Iraq is in a civil war, and that Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki does not, either.

"You have not yet had a situation also where you have two clearly defined and opposing groups vying not only for power, but for territory," White House press secretary Tony Snow said. "What you do have is sectarian violence that seems to be less aimed at gaining full control over an area than expressing differences, and also trying to destabilize a democracy — which is different than a civil war, where two sides are clashing for territory and supremacy."

Matthew Felling, spokesman for the Washington-based Center for Media and Public Affairs, said that "not since Fox News Channel decided to stop saying 'suicide bombers' and start saying 'homicide bombers' has there been a starker linguistic stance taken by a news organization." The network began using that terminology in April 2002, shortly after the White House did.

Use of the phrase "civil war" could be seen in some circles as an escalation that could call into question the Bush administration's policy on the war.

The Los Angeles Times moved toward using the phrase this summer, carefully couching it in descriptions, but since October has been calling it a civil war, said Marjorie Miller, the newspaper's foreign editor.

"It's a very simple calculation," she said. "It's a country that's tearing itself apart, one group against another group or several groups against several groups. What country even admits that it is in the midst of a civil war?"

Editors at The Associated Press have discussed the issue and haven't reached a definitive stance, said John Daniszewski, international editor. Most often, the conflict is called "the war in Iraq" or identified with descriptive terms such as sectarian fighting, anti-government attacks or ethnic clashes, he said.

He pointed to the different definitions experts have for civil wars.

"From a historical point of view, not every civil war is called by that name, and wars by their very nature are not always neatly categorized," he said. "For instance, the American Revolutionary War, the Vietnam War and the more recent wars in Bosnia and Kosovo were all civil wars according to the broader definition, yet we do not normally think or speak of them that way."

Officials at both ABC News and CBS News said that they discuss the situation all the time, but that there's no network policy to use the term civil war.

"We are not there yet," said Paul Slavin, ABC News senior vice president, noting differing definitions.

The debate was discussed on air on "World News" last Wednesday between anchor Charles Gibson and correspondent Jonathan Karl. "Military officials say it could escalate into a full-scale civil war," Gibson said to Karl. "But with 3,700 people dying in a month and 100,000 people leaving the country and the kind of sectarian violence we're seeing, aren't we in a full-scale civil war already?"

Replied Karl: "That is certainly a debate that you can hear in the halls here at the Pentagon."

Similarly, CNN has no network policy, but on Monday correspondent Michael Ware said on the air, "If this isn't a civil war, I don't know what is."

On "Today," Lauer said NBC News consulted with many experts and carefully deliberated before making the call. He said there are two clearly defined groups, the Sunnis and the Shiites, using violence to gain political supremacy, and there's a government in place that's unable to protect people.

"Well, Matt, to be honest, I've been calling it a civil war, low-grade conflict, for 18 months," said retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey, an NBC News consultant.

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