

The news embargo on Iraq

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When preparing for this event I realised how little I know about the media! Of course - like many others - I have had my frustrations with the New York Times. In fact often just reading it is too much! I refer to Friedman/Safire and others on the op-ed page and those appalling editorials - although every now and then a good one emerges.

I met with a member of the editorial board some time ago and he described changing editorial policy ? even when the need for change is recognised by all the members - as turning around a super-tanker at sea, i.e. very, very slowly!

The Economist is often wrong too and I am sure many will agree that Economist coverage - when you know the subject specifically ? almost always has an establishment spin. I mean where does one find honest news reporting? Or is news like history, always slanted by those who win? Or in regard to Vietnam, those who lose but retain media power?

As for publishing something - have you ever tried a letter to the editor of The Times? The last one I sent in was edited four times, took three e-mails and five phone calls. At the end of the process I could not recognise my own letter - it was so emasculated!

My freedom of expression success has been when invited to write 800 words or so, be it in The Guardian or the Irish Times - that is much easier and goes in more or less as intended! But sadly here in New York City, we do not see these newspapers! Of course there are those glossy journals -that of Brown University comes to mind - totally unread I suspect, but they look wonderful and designed both to both marginalise the coffee-cup rings and dangerous radicals like us! Still they are a form of vanity press - which I sometimes resort to when depressed!

Strangely you may think - some of my best friends are journalists. I respect them, admire them, take their advice, keep up with their careers, work and thinking. In Iraq we enjoyed working with some excellent journalists - CNN/BBC/ABC/NBC/CBS and more. Baghdad was popular back in 1998 at one point - and now? Even CNN has closed down its office. Does that mean the bosses do not care? Or that genocide in Iraq is no longer news? Are we jaded by it? Immune to it?

Or are the media strangled by their owners and/or by the regimes in Washington? Or by the arms manufacturers with investments in those same mass media? Sadly they are thus unable to report the impact of US policy, the impact of the embargo, the impact of weekly bombing, and the impact of American illegal usage of depleted uranium (DU) during the Gulf War. This leaves the average American in the dark!

Journalists vs. editors

My own experience in Iraq was often of journalists of caring, intelligence and integrity, who produced for radio/TV or print materials sensitive to the price being paid by the innocent of Iraq: women, children, single mothers, unemployed and hopeless youth. The alienated, the lost, the permanently damaged by personal loss and tragedy - partial survival of the Basra road and other American massacres; the loss of a child - a baby only some few hours old; the death of a loved parent; the bombing of a friend's home; the guilt of survival when others have died. Sadly very little or none of this reporting survives the editors - TV, newspapers, radio.

For myself - I often find the pre-interview much more rewarding than the real thing - the live interview - when censorship kicks in before you begin! requiring that you hear the question and respond around it with the truth. There is nothing new in what I am saying. Despite having been part of some six or seven documentaries on Iraq -some I have never viewed and others I wish I hadn't!

My media career probably peaked in the South Pacific when Samoa radio gave me my own

programme ? every week! I spoke about local development issues or global issues that impacted on Samoa It was a great opportunity but dreadful after a while - as they played the programme again and again and every time I went into a store I would hear myself droning on and on!

I would like to share with you a book I recently found in Montreal, Canada, entitled It was, it was not - edited by Mordecai Briemberg. Among other aspects of the ?war against Iraq? it deals with media coverage or should I say miscoverage? For example he quotes The Guardian (February 1991) showing different languages uses for ?them? and ?us?

We haveThey have

Army, Navy, AirforceA war machine!

Reporting guidelinesCensorship!

Press briefingsPropaganda

We launchThey launch

First strikesSneak missile attacks

Pre-emptive moveswithout provocation.

It goes on. Our boys are professional, cautious, confident, loyal, obedient, resolute, brave. Theirs are brainwashed, cowardly, desperate, blindly obedient, ruthless, fanatical. Our missiles cause collateral damage, theirs cause civilian casualties. George bush was resolute, statesmanlike, assured, Saddam Hussein was defiant, an evil tyrant, a monster.

You may feel I am making light of this use of western propaganda and demonisation, but I am simply reminding you of the spin we know of, but sometimes forget.

I want to end with a little more sad humour. It is poem called ?General Lockjaw briefs the British media on proper word usage during the Gulf War?.

Don?t mention the oil.

We?re fighting because this war is just,

the bishop says so, and we must

stand up to aggression and evil deeds from which we recoil.

Our cause is this: to liberate

the suffering people of Kuwait,

and victory will vindicate - our intervention.

We can?t be expected not to act

just because of the accidental fact

that Kuwait is absolutely packed -

with the stuff you may not mention

So pay attention!

And don't mention the oil!

Try not to dwell on the dead

and KILL is better not heard or seen

except when it's modified by clean.

Forget about people refer, if you must, to personnel instead.

describe an allied bombing raid

as a kind of victory parade

And stress that our surgical strikes are made -

with great precision.

Collateral damage please employ

And take out rather than destroy.

Descriptions of mangled bodies annoy

- and will need careful revision

It's your decision

But don't dwell on the dead!

Please play down the fact

that we kept his military force supplied

as long as he seemed to be on our side

But it's a different ball game now that our interests are attacked

We knew his crimes, we made no fuss,

But now the brute has turned on us.

So what in the world is there left to discuss

but retribution.

You're all old hands, you know the score

Let's agree to forget what's gone before

and focus attention upon the war

- and it's successful prosecution.

Your contribution

is not to confuse us with facts

War is a serious game

we must unite to show we're strong

one line for all, one single song,

that's why to win the war at home - must be your primary aim

our battle plan is to neutralise

opposing voices which sympathise

with calls for peace, for they jeopardise

- our whole operation.

our PR firm is there to advise.

It isn't a question of telling lies

think of it more as an exercise

- in news co-ordination.

We need your co-operation

So don't mention the oil, don't dwell on the dead

don't confuse us with facts, help to boost morale

and play your part in the game.

Controlling the game

And I fear it still is a game - a critical game for those in Washington who play with oil resources, and prices, demanding cheap and assured availability. This is a game about control - where collateral damage represented by more than 1,000,000 dead children - carries no weight, is of no import in Washington, London or in the UN Security Council.

And this about an establishment-linked US-media that is emasculated by those in power - be it in Washington, or in the editorial board rooms of the right-wing newspapers of this country and I have met with more than 20 of them - from the Boston Globe to the Dallas Morning Star.

And is about the success of the so-called Christian right ? their kind of thinking that can endorse a 'just war', or as in the glory days of Cold War and then Vietnam - calling for the killing of a Commie for Christ!

It is about the failure of people's democracy in a country where corporate democracy thrives and the White House is purchased. It is about silence - the silence democracies. It is about racism, about ignorance, prejudice, about some misunderstood fear of Islam.

It's about a broken down education system, and appalling ignorance about the world and its peoples. It's about a serious media that fails its readership every day of the week. It's the kind of environment that produces the mindless readership of USA Today!

It is about letting an entire people, a culture die in Iraq! It is about double standards of behaviour in the Middle East, and around the world - about the apparent acceptability of our use of nuclear

weapons and about our use of chemical warfare.

It's about the invasion of Lebanon and the Kurdish north of Iraq by our allies without consequences: one international law for them and another application of law for us and our close friends. In fact it's about rejection of international law because we are above it until it seems useful when someone grabs your spy plane.

It is about corruption of the United Nations and its abuse in the name of US foreign policy. It is about punishing an innocent people, guilty only of living because you cannot punish that former ally and friend who turned on us! It's about being afraid of the word genocide, despite our own practices of the slave trade and killing of Native Americans

It is a pattern of behaviour. It is about us ? us first - above all others - to hell with everyone else! It's about us - not our survival (we have that under control), but about our dominance and our superiority, our needs. Who cares about global warming, the rape of globalisation, the exploitation of girls and women, and the weak and the poor? It's about structural adjustment in favour of debt servicing as opposed to health care and education. It's about using sanctions to kill, maim and destroy lives, destroy a people. It's about a humanitarian catastrophe. It's about lost opportunities to lead and make a better world for all. It's about a failed media machine that is being oiled by the military industrial complex and a western democratic and predominantly Christian west that often does not know and when it knows - simply does not care!

It is a tragedy for Iraq, and the children of Iraq and it is a different kind of tragedy, but nevertheless a tragedy for this country. And it makes me, like many of you, so angry!

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