

JULY 31, 2003

# The gang that couldn't talk straight

**W**e're living in an era when news coverage often involves plenty of absurdity. That's the case with routine U.S. media spin about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. So, on the July 29 edition of NPR's "All Things Considered" program, host Robert Siegel and correspondent Vicky O'Hara each recited scripts referring to a "security barrier" that Israel's government is building in the West Bank. The next day, many news outlets – including the Los Angeles Times, Baltimore Sun, New York Times, Chicago Tribune and The Associated Press – also used the "security barrier" phrase without quotation marks, treating it as an objective description rather than the Israeli government's preferred characterization.

Meanwhile, in contrast, a Washington Post article managed to be more evenhanded. When the phrase "security fence" appeared, it was inside a quotation from Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. And the Post story explained that part of the barrier "divides farmers from their fields, or other Palestinians from their neighbors." It takes varied form as a 20-foot-tall concrete wall and fortified stretches of razor wire, trenches and electronic fencing.

Overall, U.S. news media don't talk straight about the fundamental injustice of Israel's 36-year occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Illegal and morally indefensible, the occupation will fuel more killings on both sides until it ends completely.

From a media standpoint, the war on Iraq presents the administration with much bigger problems. Since this summer began, the Bush team has felt appreciable heat because of 16 words in the president's State of the Union speech: "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa." While journalists highlight the fact that Bush's statement was false, deeper and broader questions have been scarce.

At Bush's news conference on July 30, a reporter asked: "Do you take personal responsibility for that inaccuracy?"

"I take personal responsibility for everything I say, of course. Absolutely," Bush

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replied – and immediately launched into boilerplate rhetoric to justify the war. It was a classic politician's non-response. And, in the absence of strong media follow-up, the meaningless answer rendered the question ineffectual. (A few decades ago, the French leader Charles de Gaulle wryly alluded to such dynamics when he began a press conference this way: "Gentlemen, I am ready for the questions to my answers.")

A whole lot more than 16 words should be under scrutiny. For instance, eight days after the now-infamous State of the Union address, Colin Powell spoke to the U.N. Security Council. Today, there is no evidence that the gist of his boffo performance on Feb. 5 was anything other than smoke and mirrors.

Powell fudged, exaggerated and concocted. He played fast and loose with translations of phone intercepts to make them seem more incriminating. And, as researchers at the media watch group FAIR (where I'm an associate) have pointed out, "Powell relied heavily on the disclosure of Iraq's pre-war unconventional weapons programs by defector Hussein Kamel, without noting that Kamel had also said that all those weapons had been destroyed." But the secretary of state wowed U.S. journalists.

Many liberals were among the swooning pundits. In her Washington Post column the morning after Powell spoke, Mary McGrory proclaimed that "he persuaded me." She wrote: "The cumulative effect was stunning." And McGrory, a seasoned and dovish political observer, concluded: "I'm not ready for war yet. But Colin Powell has convinced me that it might be the only way to stop a fiend, and that if we do go, there is reason."

Also smitten was the editorial board of the most influential U.S. newspaper leaning against the war. Hours after Powell finished his U.N. snow job, the New York Times published an editorial with a mollified tone – declaring that he "presented the United Nations and a global television audience yesterday with the most powerful case to date that Saddam Hussein stands in defiance of Security Council resolutions and has no intention of revealing or surrendering whatever unconventional weapons he may have."

By sending Powell to address the Security Council, the Times claimed, President Bush "showed a wise concern for international opinion." And the paper rejoiced that "Mr. Powell's presentation was all the more convincing because he dispensed with apocalyptic invocations of a struggle of good and evil and focused on shaping a sober, factual case against Mr. Hussein's regime."

The prevailing media standards of sobriety and accuracy remain dangerously low. ■