

AUGUST 15, 2003

# News flash: This is not a 'silly season'

**C**ontrary to media clichés about “the silly season,” this is a time of very serious – and probably catastrophic – political maneuvers. From California to the U.N. building in New York City to the sweltering heat of Iraq, the deadly consequences of entrenched power are anything but humorous.

Can you remember watching a movie when some calamity is happening on the screen, and laughter ripples across the darkened theater? You might wonder why people are chuckling at the grievous misfortunes of others. To comfortable viewers, a disaster can seem quite amusing.

The market is hot for Hollywood extravaganzas that fill screens at multiplexes. The spectacles of high-tech weapons and cinematic bloodshed are experienced as just so much viewing pleasure. The unreality, we’re told, is just for diversion – people understand the difference between movie posturing and the real world.

But this summer, news outlets are agog with real-life versions of what could be called “Pulp Nonfiction.”

Of course there are plenty of assurances that people with power, and those ascending to it, have their heads screwed on right. But the line between make-believe and make-political-hay is so wispy that it has just about disappeared.

“I don’t run around every day with a gun in my hand,” Arnold Schwarzenegger has said. “So I want kids to understand the difference.” Fat chance, when plenty of adults – including Schwarzenegger – don’t seem interested in making the distinction.

In early July, with the Bush administration smoothing the way, the candidate-to-be went to Iraq and recited lines from movies in front of cheering U.S. soldiers.

Stepping forward to entertain troops in a summer palace that formerly belonged to Iraq’s dictator, Schwarzenegger had his opening line ready: “First of all, congratulations for saying ‘Hasta la vista, baby’ to Saddam Hussein.” Not content to start with a phrase from “Terminator 2,” the actor closed with a line from his first Terminator movie: “I’ll be back.”

True to his word, a few weeks later Schwarzenegger was back – again conflating

## **MEDIABEAT '03 | NORMAN SOLOMON**

movie dialogue with public discourse. After announcing his candidacy for governor of California, he proclaimed: "Say 'hasta la vista,' Gray Davis!"

There's been plenty of media eye-rolling about the California recall, but much of the coverage actually contributes to the wacky atmosphere it vaguely decries. Time magazine's 11-page spread on Schwarzenegger begins with the headline "All That's Missing Is the Popcorn." Actually, from a media standpoint, all that's missing is much discussion of the widespread poverty, transportation nightmares, unemployment, deteriorating health care and severe pollution that are integral to daily life in California.

With enough money and firepower behind them, we're led to believe, fantasies can become realities: on campaign trails, in diplomacy and during military occupation.

After violating the U.N. Charter by invading Iraq, the U.S. government wants the U.N.'s Security Council to bless the occupation and the "governing council" that the occupiers handpicked. This is akin to someone murdering all siblings and then demanding special consideration as an only child.

Sure, some post-war difficulties in Iraq have gotten quite a bit of negative press (though U.S. coverage generally understates the misery and repression involved). But the American media spin does not acknowledge the extreme arrogance of current U.S. proposals for U.N. backup of the occupation – while the White House would still call the shots in Iraq.

After proceeding as though military might can solve just about anything, the Bush administration is now trying a new tactic. The effort is to involve the United Nations as a kind of air freshener for the stench of a rotting occupation. In effect the manipulators in Washington want, retroactively, to get a "good war-making seal of approval" from the U.N. Security Council. But war, with continual deaths and serious injuries, is continuing in the form of escalating resistance and counter-insurgency.

In desperate need of public-relations cover from a U.N. mission in Iraq, the U.S. government is offering the United Nations a role of subservience to the conquerors. The message from Washington to the U.N. is: We have every right to make this disastrous mess and perpetuate it. And now you have every responsibility to follow our orders while providing humanitarian assistance – circumscribed, of course, by our priorities as occupiers.

But we get little media scrutiny of the fact that U.N. involvement would be largely dictated by a rogue superpower.

And so it goes: Why focus the media lens on reality when there's so much show-biz puffery to go around? ■