

UNITY IN DECEIT

THE BRITISH MEDIA
AND IRAQ'S ELECTION

DAVID EDWARDS

A **ColdType** Critical Essay

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First published as an alert from medialens.org, January 20, 2005

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People sometimes tell Medialens that we're too hard on the media. They say: 'Come on, there *is* a fair amount of diversity, a range of different views. And the Independent publishes some valuable stuff, so does the Guardian – take a look at the Comments section.'

Let's take a look at the astonishing coverage of Iraq's January 30 elections instead.

The United States has so far lost 1,100 troops killed in action in Iraq at a cost of \$200 billion. A key question for any rational person considering the issue can be formulated in a number of ways but runs along these lines:

Having incurred these immense costs, would the US superpower really be willing to allow genuine democratic elections in Iraq? By which must be meant, after all, that a government might be elected that is opposed to all US involvement in the country, including the continued presence of US troops?

A rational person must surely also wonder whether a free and democratic election can be held at all under conditions of war and superpower occupation.

Aren't these obvious starting points for any journalist considering the issue of elections in Iraq? Apparently not.

Manipulating democracy

Tony Blair's last ditch deception on Iraq involves claiming that, no matter what side people had been on before the war, there is "only one side to be on in what is clearly a battle between democracy and terror". ('Blair praises Iraqi election bravery in flying visit,' Sarah Left and agencies, The Guardian, December 21, 2004)

However, the American writer Edward Herman, co-author with Frank

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Brodhead of the classic work, *Demonstration Elections* (South End Press, 1984), points out that when an occupying power sponsors an election “it is not free and democratic because it was imposed by an external force and did not come from demands from within”. (Email to David Edwards, January 15, 2005) Moreover, because the election is externally imposed, participation can be interpreted as an implicit approval of the occupation, a corrupting factor in the vote.

And of course the 100,000 Iraqis killed under the occupation will not be voting; nor will the unknown thousands languishing without charge in US-run jails. The ongoing conflict will prevent many more from participating – the several hundred thousand refugees from Fallujah, for example, who are currently busy trying to survive. Nor will international observers be able to monitor the election inside the country.

On December 15, the *New York Times* reported that on a list of 228 candidates submitted by a major Shiite-led political alliance to Iraq’s electoral commission, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim’s name was entered as No.1. The *Times* reported that Hakim has close ties to Iran’s ruling ayatollahs: “For the United States, and for Jordan and Saudi Arabia, which have Sunni Muslim majorities, the prospect of Mr. Hakim and his associates coming to power raises in stark form the brooding issue of Iran’s future influence in Iraq.” (John F. Burns and Robert F. Worth, ‘Iraqi Campaign Raises Question Of Iran’s Sway,’ *The New York Times*, December 15, 2004)

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman warned ominously: “Iran [is] actively using its influence and money to push its candidates.” (Friedman, ‘Neocons need Iraqi neo-Baath,’ *The Times Union*, December 19, 2004)

Unreported by the mainstream US and UK press, another foreign power is also using its influence to push its candidates.

Washington-funded organisations with long records of manipulating foreign democracies in favour of US interests are deeply involved in the election. The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI) are part of a consortium to which the US government has provided over \$80 million for political and electoral activities in Iraq. NDI is headed by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, while IRI is chaired by Republican Senator John McCain.

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Professor William I. Robinson of the Global and International Studies Programme at the University of California calls NDI and IRI “extensions” of the US State Department: “I suspect that [NDI and IRI] are trying to select individual leaders and organisations that are going to be very amenable to the US transnational project for Iraq.” (Robinson, quoted, Lisa Ashkenaz Croke and Brian Dominick, ‘Controversial U.S. Groups Operate Behind Scenes on Iraq Vote,’ www.newstandardnews.net, December 13, 2004)

Robinson adds that these leaders must be willing to engage in “pacifying the country militarily and legitimating the occupation and the formal electoral system”. The goal being to guarantee that Iraq is controlled by “economic, political and civic groups that are going to be favourable to Iraq’s integration into the global capitalist economy”.

In a search using the LexisNexis media database, we found that no British newspaper has mentioned these NDI and IRI activities at any time over the last twelve months.

The interim government has forced the independent al-Jazeera TV station and critical newspapers to shut down. Former US proconsul Paul Bremer banned all reporting on the rebirth of the Baath Party and all protests calling for an end to the occupation. Baghdad-based journalist Borzou Daragahi reports that Iraqi reporters are under threat from US troops, Iraqi police and insurgents: “We’re unable to get access to anybody,” one journalist told him. “We’re frightened.” (Daragahi, Arab Reform Bulletin Vol. 2, December 11, 2004)

The same is true of electoral candidates who are unable to canvas voters and even reveal their names. Voters, therefore, are not in a position to make any kind of informed choice.

While US-subsidised media broadcast freely, officials working for interim prime minister and former CIA asset, Ayad Allawi, have been handing journalists envelopes stuffed with \$100 notes for simply turning up to press conferences. The money, of course, is American.

On bended knee – media at work

Remarkably, a search of the LexisNexis media database shows that there has

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been not one substantive analysis of press freedom in Iraq under occupation anywhere in the UK press over the last six months. And yet the media are almost unanimous in describing the elections as democratic and free.

On the BBC's main evening news this month, David Willis talked of "the first democratic election in fifty years". (Willis, BBC1, 22:00 News, January 10, 2005) A January 7 Guardian leader referred to "the country's first free election in decades". ('Vote against violence,' Leader, The Guardian, January 7, 2005) A September Guardian leader warned: "if the security situation does not improve, there is doubt, as Annan hinted, over the feasibility of holding the country's first democratic election in January as planned". (Leader, 'Kofi Annan on Iraq: The war was illegal,' The Guardian, September 17, 2004)

Ed Pilkington, foreign editor of the Guardian, once told us: "We are not in the business of editorialising our news reports." (Email to Media Lens, November 15, 2002)

Curiously, then, Sam Jones noted in a foreign news report on January 4: "A low turnout might undermine the legitimacy of the first free elections attempted since the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958." (Sam Jones, 'Car bomb in Iraq kills three Britons,' The Guardian, January 4, 2005)

In another news report, the Guardian's Ewen MacAskill reported that Blair had visited Baghdad as Iraq "prepares for the country's first democratic election next month". (Ewen MacAskill, 'Blair 'feels the danger' on visit to Baghdad,' December 22, 2004) 7

"The terrorists will do all they can to destroy democratic elections", the Times' editors noted on October 10. (Leader, 'Send more troops,' Sunday Times, October 10, 2004) "Iraq's first democratic election is unfolding under the shadow of a deadly insurgency", the Financial Times observed in December. (Steve Negus and John Reed, 'Allawi runs on claim of 'strong leadership', Financial Times, December 16, 2004)

Supposedly at the opposite end of the political spectrum from the Guardian, the Daily Telegraph wrote of "the first democratic elections". (Leader, 'Mission accomplished, Daily Telegraph, December 6, 2004) The Sunday Telegraph of "the first democratic elections there for more than 50 years". (Sean Rayment, 'Britain poised to send 1,000 more soldiers to Iraq,' Sunday Telegraph, November 28, 2004) The Independent of how "democratic and free elections

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can bring a hope of peace". (Borzou Daragahi, 'Bin Laden backs deputy Zarqawi' and urges boycott of elections,' The Independent, December 28, 2004)

The editors of the Express explained: "It is Britain and America that want to give the besieged people of Iraq their true freedom, to hold free elections and elect a democratic government." (Leader, 'Nothing short of insulting,' The Express, October 6, 2004)

Of course it is. The BBC's Andrew Neil indicates the motivation: "We went to Iraq to make it a better place." (Neil, Daily Politics, BBC2, January 19, 2005)

The Sunday Express wrote: "American and Iraqi officials have warned that rebels determined to expel foreign forces could step up attacks before Iraq's first free election in decades." (Simon Belgard, 'Marine rescuer pays the price of courage,' Sunday Express, December 19, 2004)

The 'free press' range of views and depth of critical thought are impressive, are they not? Stalin would surely have been aghast that such mindless servility to power could be achieved in the complete absence of threats of torture and death.

The Mirror declared that Iraq was approaching "its first democratic elections on January 30". ('Police chief and son assassinated,' January 11, 2005, The Mirror)

The Sun reported that insurgent attacks were "the latest bid to stop democratic elections on January 30". (Charles Rae, 'Carnage in Iraq,' January 5, 2005, The Sun)

And from the brave new world of the internet, Yahoo News warned: "A low turnout because of the fear of violence or a Sunni boycott could undermine the legitimacy of the country's first free elections since the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958." January 4, 2005

(Link http://story.news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story2&u=/ap/20050104/ap_on_re_mi_ea/iraq)

Guardian comment editor, Seumas Milne, even had the gall to complain that the elections "are routinely described by the BBC as Iraq's first free and democratic elections". (Milne, 'This election could plunge Iraq further into the abyss,' The Guardian, January 13, 2005)

How convenient to take a free shot at the media's favourite punchbag, when not just Milne's own paper, but his entire industry, is pumping out exactly the

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same crass propoganda. We made this point to Milne, who responded thus: “!!” (Email to Media Lens, January 13, 2005)

The confusion is understandable. Milne helped us publish an article strongly criticising Guardian performance in the Guardian itself in December – no mean achievement on his part. The unwritten media rule is that you back off from criticising people who help publish your work in this way.

But imagine if a school house were on fire and children were burning alive. What would we make of someone who shouted “Fire!” once and then fell silent? How impressed would we be? The fact is that, in the real world, children *are* burning – in Iraq, Colombia, Haiti and elsewhere – and the near-universal journalistic silence on corporate media corruption right across the industry plays a very real part in making it possible.

Yet again, a servile and corrupt media is failing to provide the public with even the most basic information that would expose Blair’s latest lie.

The Arab facade

The unity in deceit of our ‘free press’ is of course reflected in our ‘democratic’ political system. Political editor Michael White notes in the Guardian: “The elections are one issue which unites most MPs, and the anti-war Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesman, Sir Menzies Campbell, also stressed how ‘essential’ it was that they are held.

“‘Failure to hold elections on January 30 would be seen as a major triumph for the insurgence,’ he said. ‘But if these elections are to be credible they must cover the whole country and the whole population. No one should minimise the difficulty of carrying this through.’” (‘Beleaguered Blair gives warm welcome to announcement - US and Britain hope exit strategy can be hastened,’ Michael White, political editor, The Guardian, November 22, 2004)

Sir Menzies, a hero of “feigned dissent”, is famous for teaching the world the term “false prospectus” – a barely comprehensible reference to the fact that Blair used lies and deception to persuade the public to back an illegal war of aggression that has cost 100,000 Iraqi lives and devastated an entire country.

At the far limit of mainstream dissent, Sir ‘Ming’ suggests the elections can be credible. Anyone wondering why he is embraced by the media while others

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are blanked need look no further than this comment on the BBC's Question Time programme: "Andrew Gilligan got it wrong. But just ask yourself: how many hundreds of [BBC] programmes, how many thousands of hours of broadcasting, and of news broadcasting, have gone out, none of which have been able to be criticised?" (Campbell, Question Time, January 29, 2004)

The answer is close to none – an unthinkable thought to Campbell and the rest of the mainstream.

White notes: "If even moderately successful in legitimising the provisional central government of Ayad Allawi, the election will hasten the exit strategy whereby US, British and other forces will gradually withdraw from Iraq as the country stabilises."

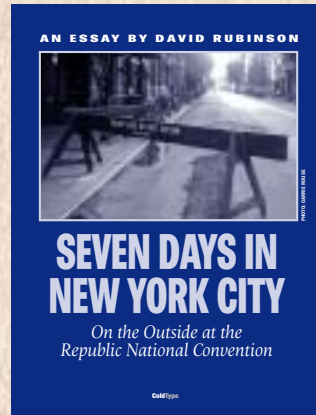
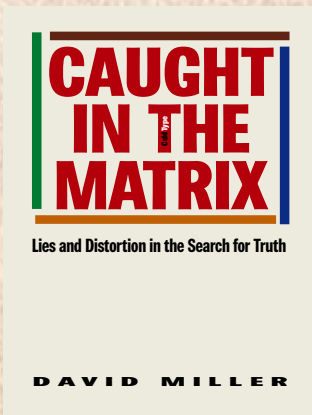
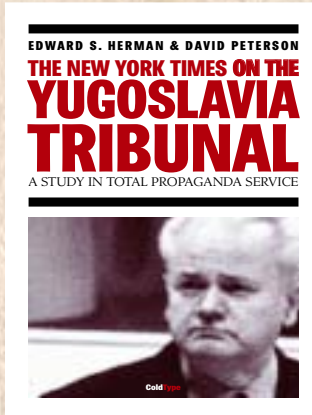
This is straight forward propaganda – no serious commentator has any illusions about the fact that the US is building a chain of large, permanent military bases around the country and has no intention whatever of withdrawing. The casual implication that all forces will leave when Iraq "stabilises" helps legitimise ongoing crimes by presenting the US as disinterested humanitarians who will of course stay only so long as they are needed to keep the peace.

Ultimately it is an irrelevance who actually wins the elections. Iraq is to be what British officials called an "Arab facade" when Britain ran the region. Now, as then, Western military power stands ready in the background if a country seeks too much independence.

The US, after all, has a long track-record that can hardly be wished away. Professor El-Lozy of the American University in Cairo notes that hostility toward the US originates precisely in its support for "every possible anti-democratic government in the Arab-Islamic world... When we hear American officials speaking of freedom, democracy and such values, they make terms like these sound obscene." (Quoted, Noam Chomsky, 'Wars of Terror,' New Political Science, March, 2003)

David Edwards is co-editor of the London-based media watchdog, medialens (www.medialens.org)

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