

# Truth, death and journalism

*"There is not one of you who dare to write your honest opinions, and if you did, you know beforehand that it would never appear in print. I am paid weekly for keeping my honest opinion out of the paper I am connected with. Others of you are paid similar salaries for similar things, and any of you who would be so foolish as to write honest opinions would be out on the street looking for another job. . . . The business of the journalist is to destroy the truth; to lie outright; to pervert; to vilify; to fawn at the feet of mammon." – John Swinton (1880), Former New York Times Managing Editor*

**WHEN** John Swinton made the remark cited above, he was already retired from his positions at both the New York Times and the New York Sun. Privileged with the luxurious freedoms of retirement, Swinton cut loose with this oft cited (usually cited incorrectly as having been said in 1953, 52 years after Swinton's death) remark one evening after some naive fool at a party offered a toast to our "free press." During the ensuing century and a quarter since that night, many mainstream journalists have echoed Swinton's sentiment. Like Swinton, almost all of them were already retired when the truth got the better of them.

This is the paradox of American journalism. The business of journalists is to inform and educate news consumers about the issues of the day. Most enter the profession taking this ideal to heart. Along their sordid roads to "success," however, they learn the dangers of compulsive truth telling. Those who can successfully ignore inconvenient truths have

the best shot at success.

Hence it was quite invigorating to see CNN Chief News Executive Eason Jordan candidly offer his version of the truth, while still gainfully employed in the corporate media. That employment, however, didn't last long. Jordan allegedly uttered what will no doubt be his most famous line (even if he never actually said it) at a candid "off the record" discussion on January 27th at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Witnesses claim Jordan told the audience that U.S. forces had deliberately targeted journalists in Iraq. The idea is nothing new. Journalists in other countries, especially colleagues of journalists killed by U.S. troops, have made these charges repeatedly. It was the job of people like Jordan, however, to ignore them. To hear them echoed from a CNN official meant the rules of the game were broken.

The U.S. corporate media had a feeding frenzy, with CNN's competitors all lining up to scavenge meat from Jordan's bones. CNN, and even Jordan himself, dutifully lined up to distance themselves from Jordan's suddenly on-the-record off-the-record comment. In a scene reminiscent of China's cultural revolution, Jordan denounced the comment, claiming that it didn't come out as he had meant it, and feigned his support for U.S. troops with whom he was formerly embedded. Jordan told the world, ".my friends in the U.S. military know me well enough to know I have never stated, believed, or suspected that U.S. military forces intended to kill people they knew to be journalists." He then resigned from his post at CNN.

### **What report?**

At about the same time the media was celebrating Jordan's fall from their ranks, the international journalists group, Reporters Without Borders, issued the results of their investigation into the U.S. killing of two European journalists at the Palestine Hotel in Baghdad. Needless to say, the report was one of those truths that must remain untold.

Before getting to the report, I want to put Jordan's remarks into context. During the first three weeks of the U.S./British invasion of Iraq, coalition forces directly killed seven journalists. On the same day U.S. forces fired on the European journalists at the Palestine Hotel, killing two of them, U.S. forces also bombed the Baghdad studios of Al Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV – even though both networks supplied U.S. forces with their GPS coordinates and descriptions of their buildings. One Al Jazeera correspondent was killed in the attack. Four other journalists were either shot when U.S. forces opened fire on their press vehicles, or were victims of coalition bombs.

The Iraq situation is not without precedent. Two years earlier, U.S. forces also bombed the Al Jazeera studio in Kabul, Afghanistan. On the same day, they also attacked Kabul's

BBC studio. Five years before that, U.S. forces bombed Serbia's RTS TV offices in Belgrade, killing 13 media workers – in an attack the Clinton administration never claimed was accidental. This history would give some context to Jordan's retracted remarks. But like most history, it constitutes an untellable truth.

### **Information Dominance**

This brings us up to the Reporters Without Borders report. The actual document is not as damning as its title, "Two Murders and a Lie," insinuates. Based on interviews with journalists who were in the Baghdad Hotel at the time of the attack, journalists embedded with U.S. forces elsewhere at the time, and with U.S. soldiers themselves, including those who fired on the Baghdad Hotel, the report is thorough.

Here's the skinny: On February 28th, 2003, U.S. Presidential Press Secretary Ari Fleischer warned media organizations to pull their reporters out of Baghdad before the invasion. University of Pennsylvania Wharton School Professor Emeritus Edward S. Herman, writing for Coldtype and Z Magazine, talks about the U.S. military theory of "Full Spectrum Domination" in propaganda wars, explaining that "the war-makers must dominate the frames and factual evidence used by the media." Hence, all uncontrolled media must leave Baghdad before ugly visual images appear.

David Miller, author of "Information Dominance: The Philosophy of Total Propaganda Control," explains that friendly media are rewarded with privileged access to information, as is the case with the "embedded reporter." Miller goes on to explain that "hostile media," as in any media not deemed friendly or useful, is "degraded." Now let's get back to Fleischer's press conference. When asked if his warning was meant to be a veiled threat, he replied, ". if the military says something, I strongly urge all journalists to heed it. It is in your own interest, and your family's interests. And I mean that." I suppose that's a yes. There were to be only two types of journalists in Iraq. Embedded reporters under the physical control of U.S., forces, and potentially dead journalists. CBS, NBC, ABC and Fox all pulled out of Baghdad before the invasion. The Iraqi government expelled Jordan's CNN.

### **Two guys without a TV**

For three weeks prior to the attack on the Baghdad Hotel, the world watched daily news reports broadcast by the remaining international press corps housed in the Baghdad Hotel. Well, not the entire world was watching. Sgt. Shawn Gibson and his commanding officer, Capt. Philip Wolford, according to the Reporters Without Borders report, were busy 24/7 on the move fighting a war – without the luxury of cable TV. Hence, the big

English language sign reading "Palestine Hotel" meant nothing to them. And it was Gibson who turned his tank gun toward The Palestine and opened fire.

For two months following the attack, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell argued that Gibson came under fire from the Palestine Hotel and simply returned fire. Maj. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff vice-director of operations, echoed this falsehood, explaining to the media weeks after the killings that American soldiers "had the inherent right of self-defense. When they are fired at they have not only the right to respond, they have the obligation to respond."

Robert Fisk of the London's *The Independent*, was on the ground at the time, between the Palestine Hotel and Gibson's tank. He reports that there was no gunfire or rocket fire audible before the tank opened fire. Likewise, a French TV camera recorded the time leading up to the attack – and there was no audible close-range gun or artillery fire. Gibson and Woford verify this – never having claimed to be under fire. Hence, according to *Reporters Without Borders*, the official U.S. response was an intentional lie. Gibson and Woford said they were shooting at what they believed were "enemy spotters" with binoculars who were calling tank coordinates in to Iraqi forces. The enemy spotters turned out to be the press corps through whose cameras most of the rest of the world, with the notable exception of Gibson and Woford, were watching the war.

The report exonerates both men for their actions, drawing the conclusion that neither intentionally targeted journalists. Ignoring the Serbia attack, where the U.S. does not deny targeting journalists, and ignoring for the moment, the other less well investigated incidents in Afghanistan and Iraq, it would seem that the *Reporters Without Borders* report counters Jordan's retracted truth about U.S. forces targeting journalists.

### **Who knew cats kill mice?**

The report, however, raises one pivotal question. Why were the gunners on the ground not informed that the Palestine Hotel was full of journalists? The report concludes that this withholding of information constituted either criminal negligence at the very least, or that it was intentionally withheld out of contempt for the unembedded journalists who had refused to vacate Baghdad. With U.S. forces trained and ordered to fire on people with binoculars or long lenses, it's a no-brainer that eventually they'd wind up shooting at a building full of photographers. There was no need to order them to attack journalists. The attack was a predictable outcome of not informing tank gunners about what the rest of the world knew – that the Baghdad Hotel was full of journalists. This is plausible deniability. No one ordered anyone to kill journalists. Who knew the cat would kill the mice?

## **TRUTH, DEATH AND JOURNALISM / 5**

Anyway – forget this whole story. Its dissonance doesn't fit the accepted script. If I worked for CNN or another puppet of the corporate media I'd have to denounce myself for writing it. But tell me again in case I missed the point of my own destruction – what part of it isn't true?