

July 22, 2003

OUR JESSICA: ONE MORE TIME

The TV trucks are lining up in the hills of West Virginia in a field they are calling Jessica's Beach or Camp Jessica. Every station from miles around is there to mark the homecoming of PFC Jessica Lynch, who returns home for rest and rehabilitation in the unemployment capitol of America. Yesterday they gave her some medals; today they use her again to prime the fading pump of patriotism. And yes, folks, it will be live; a moment TV news lives for.

Never mind that the story of her heroic rescue has been debunked; never mind that her less attractive POW comrades have been forgotten, and never mind that yet another US soldier was killed outside of Baghdad today and air strikes were called in during a raid in the Northern town of Mosul; never mind that the occupation is unraveling and that a delegation of Iraqis has been dispatched to make nice to the UN in hopes of wooing the world body back in after so many months of disgraceful dissing by the "UN is evil" crowd. Move over real world. This is Jessica's day.

"Private Ryan" (Yes one reporter really called her that; Hollywood images swept reality aside) is coming home.

She will read a two-and-a-half minute statement to the media about her incarceration and capture, an incident she previously could not remember. How ironic that it all takes place in a hamlet called Palestine, as if to remind us of that other unsolved madness across the sea. (Didn't part of the space shuttle come down in a place

called Palestine Texas?)

CNN's man on the spot reported this morning that while the story of her rescue is now deemed controversial, that doesn't matter now. Jessica is coming home to the new extension neighbors built on the house in one of the most depressed parts of the country. And so the media war against comprehension continues.

CBS: SANCTITY VIOLATION ADMITTED

THE Hollywood Reporter reports: "CBS chairman and CEO Leslie Moonves conceded Sunday that CBS News probably erred earlier this year when it raised the possibility of a TV movie and other entertainment-related incentives in a pitch letter seeking an interview with former Iraqi prisoner of war Jessica Lynch."

"A controversy erupted last month regarding CBS' efforts to land the interview when the New York Times published excerpts from a letter sent to Lynch's camp by CBS News.

The letter hinted at a range of possible perks for Lynch if she granted them the exclusive interview, from a made-for-TV movie of her war experience to appearances on CBS' sibling network MTV to a book deal with Viacom-owned Simon & Shuster.

"Probably, if we had it to do all over again, a movie of the week never would have been mentioned in [CBS'] letter to [Lynch's] representatives," Moonves told reporters during the network's portion of the Television Critics Associa-

tion press tour in Hollywood. “Maybe that went over the line,” Moonves said. “That was not respecting, possibly, the sanctity of CBS News.”

PEACE GROUPS MONITOR IRAQ OCCUPATION

LAST night, just by chance—if anything is ever just by chance—I was having some Thai Food, just minding my Pad si Eew, when three women sat down at the adjoining table and started playing musical chairs. When I looked up, lo and behold, it was the Code Pink Team led by Medea Benjamin just back from Baghdad where they are setting up an Occupation Watch (www.occupationwatch.org) with a center in Baghdad. They are reporting on a stream of human rights abuses and who is controlling the oil industry.

They gave us a preview of some of their footage and shared some anecdotes about attending a press conference with occupation chief Paul Bremer. (“He has no neck,” said one of the three.) They were all upset by what they said was a lack of real questioning by the media assembled. They also reported being told that reporters there are complaining that while their spot news is getting out, longer features are not. They hold a press conference later today and also complain that their work is being ignored by much of the media. No surprise there.

CONSCIENCE INTERNATIONAL

THE Institute for Public Accuracy passes along an interview with James Jennings of conscienceinternational.org, a humanitarian aid organization based in Atlanta. “Jennings has just returned from his third trip to Iraq this year. Jennings was in Iraq before, during and after the bombing. He said

today: “Several of the claims Paul Bremer recently made are quite the opposite of what our three health, education, and cultural resources teams observed in Baghdad and the vicinity over the past several weeks. Our team undertook a ‘street attitudes survey’ — where I personally interviewed about a hundred Iraqis from all walks of life — and discovered that it is not accurate to claim, as Bremer does, that the coalition has ‘the support of the vast majority of Iraqis.’”

“At best, people are suspending judgment — and getting impatient in the process. Meanwhile, we observed that robbery, rape, car-jacking and murder are rife; electricity and telephones work intermittently; clean water is not available to most of the population; the currency is worthless; and there are no jobs. Inflation is rampant, gasoline may require a three-day wait in line, and cooking gas costs 100 times what it used to. Unexploded missiles and cluster munitions litter the country, with 800 unexploded ordnance sites in Baghdad alone.... It’s hard to see how Washington can succeed by just plopping down a mini-State Department in Saddam’s palace — a sort of Foggy Bottom by the Tigris.”

Writing in the New York Times today, Op-ed dissenter Paul Krugman questions the impact of the US occupation on military readiness: “Of the Army’s 33 combat brigades, 16 are in Iraq; this leaves us ill prepared to cope with genuine threats. Moreover, military experts say that with almost two-thirds of its brigades deployed overseas, mainly in Iraq, the Army’s readiness is eroding: normal doctrine calls for only one brigade in three to be deployed abroad, while the other two retrain and refit. And the war will have devastating effects on future recruiting by the reserves. A widely circulated photo from Iraq shows a sign in

the windshield of a military truck that reads, “One weekend a month, my ass.”

THE CARNAGE IN LIBERIA

A MONTH ago, President Bush demanded that Charles Taylor leave Liberia. He is still there. Only half of the “crack marines,” as the BBC calls them, landed in Monrovia yesterday before the neighborhood in which the US embassy is located came under mortar fire from so-called rebels. The local people say 600 have died in fierce urban combat and many bodies are being stacked in front of the US embassy. Bush says that the US will only act if West Africa peace keepers act first. The West Africans say they will only act if there is a cease-fire. And around we go. The Mail and Guardian says that Charles Taylor, the thug-life leader of this war-torn country has put his trust in “God and CNN.”

The best coverage continues to come from AllAfrica.com reporting today: “West African leaders, along with United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, have appealed to President George Bush for a significant American role in the operation, but no U.S. decision has been announced.

One eyewitness reported “tens of thousands of people walking with their belongings” on Saturday and Sunday. As people trekked towards the city seeking a safe place to escape the bullets, government militia forces stripped them of their goods. “They take away radios, cell phones, money,” he said. “It’s like the last big pay day for them.” The humanitarian crisis goes worse as cholera has been reported. Relief is not in sight.

BISI SHARES HER PAIN

THIS prompts despair for a new friend of ours, Bisi Iderabdullah, who who lived in Monrovia for years and now runs Imani House in Brooklyn and has been advocating for peace in Liberia for years. Her latest thoughts, most eloquently expressed:

“Yes, Liberia is worse than anyone can imagine. One of those Escape From NY scenarios. Very desperate situation. Civilians are being attacked from four different groups. Taylor’s Elite SS, his Black Berets, and his boy soldiers (troops HA!) and LURD. My friend, mother of 4, finally left and called me to bring me up to date. She couldn’t stop crying. Her husband refuses to leave.

“Sharpton! Why did it take him 13 years? (Al Sharpton is reportedly next door in Sierra Leone on his way to a fact finding mission to Liberia that has been interrupted by the resurgence of violence.—DS) Did you know that Taylor, in a phone interview with Samori Marksmen, in 1990 said, “We are resolving the problem between Prince Johnson and I. Jessie Jackson will be here in October?” He was implying that Jackson would serve as a mediator and help end the war. At that point, Doe had been killed (Sept. 90), and there were only 2 forces fighting each other, Taylor and Johnson.

“When I came to NY (which was often to seek help for Liberia and try to end the war), I did scores of radio, workshops, and other lectures, as well as calls to mediation groups and of course ALL of the Black leaders, trying to get people involved in helping stop the war. My major issue besides the obvious was that the war in Liberia was threatening to destabilize the entire West African region. No one seemed to listen. Within that 4 year period of 1990-94, without mediation

between these two groups, we ended up with 7 fighting forces, all fighting each other and then of course by '93 or so Sierra Leone did their own thing, then Ivory Coast, and the beat goes on.

“You cannot imagine the loss of lives, minds or the number of murders, slaughters, mutilations, rapes, broken families, loss of value, Liberian children in jail here in the US, divorces and misery caused by this war.”

MISERY USED

BISI continues: “So Sharpton’s visit can’t be much better than “too little, too late!” And that other guy? How sad for the innocent Liberians that their misery is being used as a political stepping stone.

“As I write, the city is under attack, IDP’s in the millions are living in squalor and when they go out to try to find food or water they must duck and dodge bullets, mortar or have the little food they find taken by boy soldiers. Nothing is left.

“Sorry for the run on sentence, I think that I am imploding as well.” Thanks Bisi for letting me publish this. I know that she does not want to criticize black leaders with very little capacity to do much when the leaders of countries stand by. Some 4,500 US soldiers are said to be ready to deploy. Waiting for the signal from Mr. Bush, who has been busy entertaining Silvio Berlusconi on the ranch. The barbeques must apparently come first y’all. Although there was some time for saber rattling: “El Presidente” waved that finger at Iran and Syria yesterday, accusing them of harboring terrorists and hinting at the consequences. “This behavior is completely unacceptable,” he said. And then it was time for a hunt.

UNMENTIONED: HUMAN RIGHTS IN CHINA

TONY BLAIR was being grilled by Chinese students yesterday. He defended his stance on Iraq. I didn’t see any reports of outspoken criticisms of China’s human rights policy on his part. For example, no comments of the abuses against Falun Gong, which were described in by James Li in the pages of the International Herald Tribune: “Four years ago, on the night of July 20, 1999, a campaign was started across China to round up citizens practicing Falun Gong, a spiritual movement just rising in the West. From the rust belts of Manchuria to the boomtowns bordering Hong Kong, tens of thousands were jailed in the darkness of that night.

“Four years later, the campaign continues, now with a confirmed death toll of 748, all of whom died in police custody. Falun Gong has become an embarrassment for China, marring the global infatuation with its booming markets and cheap labor. The persecution serves as a reminder that the hulking monster behind the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and the Tiananmen massacre is still very much alive.

“No one would have predicted the stunning resilience and tenacity of the movement four years ago, when it was targeted by China’s then-leader, Jiang Zemin, as the biggest threat from within. No dissent movement had managed more than four days of resistance before. The pro-democracy movement in 1989, when a million people gathered openly, was crushed within a day and remains marginalized to this day.”

THE MEDIA BEAT BEATS UP ON THE MEDIA

IN our media news, the BBC-British government conflict continues to rage. The Media Guardian gives us a taste of the coverage. That paper Reports: “BBC stakes all on Andrew Gilligan in face of Downing Street onslaught. (The Guardian incidentally is reportedly on the verge of launching a magazine in the US) The Times of London reads: “First cracks appear in the unity of the BBC

board over the dossier row.” The Daily Telegraph: “Blair tries to rein in the judge he has appointed to investigate the death of David Kelly.” The Independent: “Greg Dyke’s attempt to draw a line under row rebuffed by No. 10.” Daily Mirror: “Lord Hutton warned the government not to interfere in his inquiry into the death of David Kelly. Who is telling the truth in the David Kelly affair?”

And on and on. The Murdoch media is lining up behind the government; how surprising.

