

June 05, 2003

ALL SMILES ON AIR FORCE ONE

As I write, our President is winging west, heading home, satisfied that he has struck a blow for peace in the Middle East and justice in the world. He stopped in Qatar (not Iraq like Tony Blair) to thank the Emir for services rendered and tell the Boys that they had done good, and that there is no more evil Iraqi regime to give Weapons of Mass Destruction to terrorists who mean us no good. That was a big applause line as he went on to assure all in listening range that mobile bio-war labs had been found and there would be more to come.

Never mind that another US soldier has been killed and others wounded in an RPG attack because as BBC, not CNN, reports that many Iraqis consider the US presence an occupation not a liberation. A major battle raged as well in Afghanistan with 40 Taliban reported dead (I thought the Taliban were no more, didn't you?).

Writing about the conflict on Alternet, Ross Levine of Morphism notes: "No, the war is not over, far from it. In some ways it may have just begun, like the Israeli-Arab war can be said to have begun at the end, not the beginning, of those six days in June 1967. The war in Iraq is now a "coal mine" of a war, burning below the requirements of a "major story," flaring up in spots, with real fire, but for the most part, emitting a great deal of noxious, toxic smoke.

WATCHING THE FCC ON THE HILL

I SPENT an hour watching the playback of Wednesday's hearings on the FCC rules on Wednesday. What a crew! The majority offered mealy-mouthed responses to tough questions while immersing themselves in arcane regulatory detail. They acted apparently because they didn't want "The Courts" to strike them down, which in effect arrogated to themselves the role of judicial prognosticators. Forget about any principle or respect for public interest concerns. Chairman Michael Powell (wouldn't you know it) referred to himself as an "anti-trust lawyer."

This evokes a story told by Bob Herbert in today's New York Times: "A particularly revealing moment occurred Sunday, the day before the vote, on the ABC program "This Week." During an interview with F.C.C. chairman, Michael Powell, the moderator, George Stephanopoulos, noted that a survey of 500,000 comments on the F.C.C. Web site showed that more than 97 percent "were opposed to the new rules." [Testimony at the hearing put the number even higher~editor]

"Doesn't that make you wonder," Mr. Stephanopoulos asked, "whether you might be misreading the public interest here?"

Mr. Powell didn't think so. He said the F.C.C. had "taken those comments into deep consideration." He even said, "I think that they're valid."

Oh?

SENATE COMMITTEE CRITICAL

CBS MarketWatch reported the hearing this way (Note how this issue tends to be covered more as an issue for business, not the citizenry.) “Michael Powell, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, told a panel of mostly critical U.S. senators that the old regulations could not withstand legal scrutiny. The new rules stood a better chance of being upheld, he said. After strong denunciations earlier this week, many senators critical of the ruling tempered their remarks. Still, lawmakers in both parties called for the agency to reconsider its new rules and some called for the Congress to override the FCC. Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., issued the sharpest reproach, saying the agency acted more like a ‘lapdog’ for big media companies instead of a ‘watchdog’ for the public interest. ‘I hope to overturn what you did,’ she said. The two Democrats on the FCC commission seconded that idea. ‘We really need your help,’ said Jonathan Adelstein. ‘The public interest, if not dead, is mortally wounded.’ Michael Copps called Powell’s handling of the issue ‘grossly violative’ of the spirit of the agency process.”

The Senate Commerce Committee huffed and puffed but could not blow the FCC house down. But a mighty citizens, movement is coalescing from below, driven by a spirit of optimism in times that usually do not allow for many illusions. MoveOn.org wrote to its members explaining: “Luckily, democracy’s awful resilient. Congress has the power to overturn these rule changes. More than 100 members of the House and roughly 20 members of the Senate asked the FCC not to approve these rule changes at this time. The members of Congress were right to be concerned,

and they have the authority to act on those concerns now by introducing legislation that will undo these changes. Our friends at Common Cause have made it easy to contact your Representatives and Senators and let them know that you want the FCC’s rules repealed.

You can take action now at:

<http://causenet.commoncause.org/afr/issues/alert/?alertid=2446521>

WHAT MOVEON HAS MOVED

HERE’S what they say has been accomplished:

“The Stop Media Monopoly petition now has just under 200,000 signers – one of the largest public statements ever made on this issue. Combined with comments from members of the NRA, Common Cause, the Consumer Federation of America, and other groups, the FCC has received over 700,000 comments on this issue. As of last count, about 1 in 1,000 of these supported the rule change. So the FCC clearly knows where the public stands.

So many MoveOn and Common Cause members called and emailed the FCC on Friday that their voicemail system and web site went down. CNN covered the story.

MoveOn members raised over \$180,000 to pay for print and TV ads, which we ran in partnership with Common Cause and Free Press. The ads played an instrumental role in making newspapers and TV stations cover the rule change: the day after they were launched, the Washington Post discussed them in a front-page story. George Stephanopoulos showed our TV ad to Michael Powell and Senator John McCain on Sunday, and grilled them on the media issues. They also attracted the attention of the New York Times, ABC World News Tonight, CNN, MSNBC, New-

shour with Jim Lehrer, and even The Guardian in the UK – and that’s only a partial list. Common Cause President Chellie Pingree and I were both invited on to cable news shows to debate the issue.”

INTERNATIONAL JOURNALISTS OPPOSE FCC

OVERSEAS, international media groups are also concerned with the FCC decision. The 500,000-member International Federation of Journalists has issued a statement condemning it. It reads in part: “The International Federation of Journalists today warned that the relaxation of media ownership rules in the United States and Europe opens the door to a new era of global media power that could damage democracy and diversity.

IFJ leaders gather in Brussels this weekend only days after regulators eased restrictions in the United States that will allow some of the world’s biggest media companies to strengthen their grip on local press, radio, and television outlets throughout the US. At the same time, new laws in the United Kingdom will open up the world’s second largest English-language media market to further concentration.

“The power of media moguls to change the rules to suit themselves is reaching unprecedented levels,” said Aidan White, IFJ General Secretary. “For instance, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, one of the biggest global players, has been given an early Christmas present by political leaders in Washington and London, but it is a giveaway at the expense of pluralism and quality in media.”

“AN INTOLERABLE ASSAULT”

THE IFJ is concerned that across Europe and in other settled democracies, such as Canada and Australia, traditional rules to protect diversity in media will come under renewed pressure. “We are already seeing an intolerable assault on the values and quality of public broadcasting,” said White, “with people who work in the industry paying the price with cuts in jobs and living standards.”

The power of global media corporations - most of which are based in the United States - has grown enormously in recent years and the IFJ says easing existing rules will further reduce the scope for alternative opinions to be heard and will increasingly place these corporations outside the orbit of democratic accountability. “We need to urgently consider how international institutions can play a role in restraining the growth of media corporations that may pose a danger to democratic pluralism,” said White.

WOLFOWITZ OF ARABIA COMES CLEAN

REMEMBER all those people screaming no blood for oil. They were dismissed at the time by administration officials. Now, The Guardian reports: “Oil was the main reason for military action against Iraq, a leading White House hawk has claimed, confirming the worst fears of those opposed to the US-led war.

“The US deputy defence secretary, Paul Wolfowitz – who has already undermined Tony Blair’s position over weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by describing them as a “bureaucratic” excuse for war – has now gone further by claiming the real motive was that Iraq is “swimming” in oil.”

The Washington Post reported meanwhile, “Former and current intelligence officials said they felt a continual drumbeat, not only from Cheney and Libby, but also from Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz, Feith, and less so from CIA Director George J. Tenet, to find information or write reports in a way that would help the administration make the case that going into Iraq was urgent.

“They were the browbeaters,” said a former defense intelligence official who attended some of the meetings in which Wolfowitz and others pressed for a different approach to the assessments they were receiving. “In interagency meetings,” he said, “Wolfowitz treated the analysts’ work with contempt.”

SOME MILITARY FAMILIES MAD

NOT everyone in the US military or their families supports the growing US military occupation there. A letter from Fran Johns, the mother of a soldier in Iraq is bouncing around the net: “My son, a Sergeant in the First Marine Division, 1st Battalion/4th Marines was just informed this morning that, instead of coming home in June or July as they were once told, they will be in Iraq until September. This group left California in January, was in Kuwait until the start of the war, traveled north under attack, suffered casualties and deaths, assisted with the unearthing of mass graves in Hillah, and is now ‘guarding’ one of Saddam Hussein’s palaces near Babylon. They are physically and mentally exhausted, fighting 110-degree heat, flies, and boredom. They have not had a decent meal, shower, or rest in months. There are rumors that they may be sent up to Baghdad to help the army restore order.

“The situation in Iraq continues to deteriorate with soldiers being killed, anti-American sentiment rising, the ‘coalition of the willing’ apparently UN-willing to send help to restore the country we have destroyed, and our troops once again in danger.

“I think we have a right to know the plan we are financing, if there IS a plan. Where is this so-called coalition of the willing? Why have we refused help from France, Germany and the UN - preferring to keep our already-tired troops for 3 more months? And how does this administration get away with not answering any questions about their actions? Please ask your representatives in Washington to demand answers as to how our troops are being used in Iraq. Thanks.”

FORIGN MEDIA BANNED IN ACEH

THE Jakarta Post reported yesterday that international journalists were denied visas to cover the conflict in Aceh: “The martial law administrator in the restive province of Aceh has rejected requests from about 10 overseas journalists to cover the war there, an Indonesian Foreign Ministry official said Tuesday.

“Yes, there were several requests but nearly all were not accepted,” said the official, Wahid Supriyadi, as quoted by AFP. He said Maj. Gen. Endang Suwarya has denied requests from about 10 foreign-based journalists wishing to cover the conflict.”

RICHARD GERE VISITS RAMALLAH

WHILE major media was covering the Palestinian-Israeli talks, actor Richard Gere was having a look for himself at how Palestinians live. The

Palestine Monitor reports that the actor and human-rights advocate visited the West Bank town of Ramallah. After a short wait at Qalandiya checkpoint, Gere drove into Ramallah, which has been under military curfew for the past 24 hours, and had a briefing with many members of Palestinian civil society, including Dr. Mustafa Barghouti, Souad Ameri, Vera Tamari, Cairo Arafat, Riad Malki, Assad Al Asad and others. He also met with the Minister of Culture and his staff.”

The visit was coordinated by Palestinian film makers who wanted to show Gere the reality of the Israeli occupation and its consequences for the 3.2 million Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

TALKING BACK TO THE MEDIA

INCREASING, media consumers are writing to media outlets critiquing their coverage. Here’s a letter I received that was sent to NPR

“Dear Morning Edition,

“I believe I’ve discovered the new administration spin on the Bush/Rumsfeld/Cheney lies about the US “Intelligence” about Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction. Unfortunately, it appeared without attribution at the end of Tom Gjelten’s report on the review, presumably in-house by the CIA, and in the Senate and House by their respective Intelligence Committees.

“The spin came at the end of the report when Gjelten reported that Rumsfeld welcomed the review because it will clarify “what we knew, what

we suspected, and how Iraq was able to mislead us.”

“Not how the US was able to bamboozle the world, or at least Tony Blair and unfortunately many of the US public, using tales invented by disreputable Iraqi exile groups, Wolfowitz’s Office of Strategic Planning, or other villains left over from previous Republican administrations (i.e., Daniel Pipes, Elliott Abrams, and that unsavory Iran-Contra crew).

“Oh, no, “how Iraq was able to mislead us” is the new administration line {spin}. Why, oh, why, was there no rebuttal in your story? Heaven knows there’s enough evidence of Bush administration lies, from Hans Blix and Mohamed El Baradei to unassailable proof that supporting documents presented by the Bush administration were crude forgeries or plagiarized from old academic theses.

“What’s wrong with you, NPR? To quote Joseph Welch, “Have you no decency?”

Sincerely,

Elaine Shinbrot

DEPLETED URANIUM REDUX

MIKE GARVIN writes: “Danny, If you have a moment take a look at this rather incredible Pentagon training video on the risks associated with depleted uranium:

<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article3581.htm>. And the official line is they deny there’s any risk!”

