

June 26, 2003

A CONSPIRACY – OR SOMETHING MORE?

More trouble in Iraq” is a phrase that’s turning into a daily segment on CNN. There was yet another incident this morning, this time on the “safe” road between Baghdad and its dramatically liberated airport. It was a battle in a war slowly receding into memory – though it began just a few months ago. (“What we are learning Carol,” chimed CNNer Jane Araf this morning, “is that nowhere is really safe.”) Such is the logic of occupation. In Britain, there’s a continuing “post mortem” of the killings of six British troops. Now that the proverbial dust has cleared – if it ever clears in that part of the world, what really happened is poking its ugly head through the “fog” of the post-war period.

MAD DOGS AND ENGLISHMEN

THE BBC added some details this AM; Fox News some others. For one thing, we learn that 5 Iraqis were killed, and there was a protest that turned into a riot. It started when British raids to search for weapons outraged the Iraqis. The searchers had dogs with them, and dogs are considered ritually “unclean” in that part of the world. The male military expert on Fox News Channel, who seemed like a John Wayne with a small streak of cultural sensitivity, explained that troops cannot paw through personal belongings, “There are no nos,” he said, and informed us that you “can’t coddle those people. You have to be tough.” He also noted that Arabs “are either at your feet or at

your neck.”

Valentine Low of The Evening Standard picks up a story that’s percolating into the US news stream.

“It all started going wrong as long ago as last Saturday. British soldiers had come to the small town of Majar al Kabir looking for heavy weapons, but their approach – bursting into houses with sniffer dogs as they pointed their weapons at women and children, according to residents – angered the local population.

“Two days later, the troops were back – and with exactly the same attitude, locals said. More words were exchanged but, according to Iraqis, the troops agreed to let local police patrol the town on condition that the weapons were handed over within two months.

“But yesterday tension was still high and thousands took to the streets to protest at the British military presence. ‘A British soldier held the underwear of a woman and stretched it,’ Faleh Saleem said. ‘How can we accept this as Muslims and as Shi’ites?’

“One resident, who refused to give his name, said: ‘I yelled at them because they pointed their rifles at a child. I told them “don’t do that”, but a soldier hit me with the butt of his rifle in the face. Then the shooting started.’ ”

Ah, Sherlock, this suggests a very different story that deals more with British colonial-style arrogance – as in “we will show these buggers” – than a tale of being victimized by elements of the old

regime. The latter is the framework for the resistance, and what is emerging is a war of attrition, not one of classic battles. And, yes, it conjures up Vietnam, yesterday's blog theme.

APOCALYPSE THEN?

PAUL KNOX explores the parallel in Toronto's Globe and Mail: "Iraq is not Vietnam, but the resort to deception is common to both campaigns. In 1964, after hearing allegations of attacks on two U.S. destroyers by North Vietnamese patrol boats, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, giving then President Lyndon Johnson a free hand in pursuing the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. The first was a trivial incident, and not unprovoked. Mr. Johnson later admitted that he had no idea whether the second attack actually took place. Neither his doubts nor those of a key naval commander were shared with the public.

"Sound familiar? Action based on faulty, partial or misleading information is bound to be bad policy and worse strategy. It will come to grief either because it is the wrong thing to do or because it leads to a loss of public trust."

People's historian Howard Zinn noticed this too, and writes about it on Tom Paine.com.

"The war in Iraq is different in so many ways from the war waged by the United States in Vietnam that we wonder why, like the telltale heart beating behind the murderer's wall in Edgar Allan Poe's story, the drumbeat of Vietnam can still be heard..."

SMOKING GUN? WELL, NO

ANOTHER drumbeat roused the "I told you so" crowd on the cable nets. An Iraqi scientist dug up some components of Iraq's well-known nuclear program that he buried in his back yard at the

instructions of one of Sadaam's sons and for a minute, it looked like the "smoking gun" (oh, how they love that endlessly recycled cliché) had been found. Our frequent correspondent Jackie Newberry noticed this too.

"The urgency of Wolf Blitzer's voice about the VERY SIGNIFICANT FINDING of WMD under an Iraqi rose bush today was like fingernails on the blackboard. I recognize that the parts could serve as templates to conceivably be used to make nuclear weapons. But these were not the WMD on which the rush to war was based, they were not waiting in the wings to start them up, there was no indication that they would ever be used." What was funny was to hear that the scientist didn't know who to turn the booty over to without being punished.

The NY Times today reveals more conflicts within the Bush Administration: eg : "The State Department is disputing the C.I.A.'s conclusion that trailers found in Iraq were for making biological weapons." And last night on Nightline, Ted Koppel spoke with Rand Beers, a former Bush Administration counter-terrorism expert who believes that that the war on terror is being lost in part because of the war in Iraq. He left his post and now works for John Kerry. He didn't offer too many details, but his defection may lead others to do the same. He did say he was not persuaded that there was a connection between Al Qaeda and Sadaam Hussein.

Nightline commented in its email:

"What's astonishing is that the counter-terrorism czar for President Bush decided to leave at a critical time in the post-9/11 world, on an issue that has defined the Bush Administration. Yesterday at a congressional hearing, Beers lashed out at the Bush Administration for inadequate funding

and weak oversight of domestic security. ‘The cup of homeland security and the cup of the war on terrorism is more empty than full.’”

NUKES IN THE HOLY LAND

AS for hidden and undisclosed nukes in the Middle East, the BBC will be airing a program Saturday on a more lethal discovery in the neighborhood. Headline: “The first Mid-East inspector of Weapons of Mass Destruction, was from the “wrong” country!” A Norwegian activist writes:

“This Saturday BBC World will show a very interesting movie on Israel’s nuclear weapons with emphasis on Mordechai Vanunu, Israel’s nuclear whistleblower who gave information and photos from his workplace, the Dimona nuclear reactor - a secret nuclear bombs factory - to a London paper, The Sunday Times, back in 1986.

“In blatant violation of international law the Israeli secret police, Mossad, lured and forced Vanunu back to Israel where, in a closed trial, he was sentenced to 18 years in jail. He spent nearly 12 years in solitary confinement. The Israelis have now set the date for his release, 22. April 2004, after 17 1/2 years in jail.”

BBC’s promo has infuriated Israel. It asks:

Which country in the Middle East has undeclared nuclear weapons? Which country in the Middle East has undeclared biological and chemical capabilities? Which country in the Middle East has no outside inspections? Which country jailed its nuclear whistleblower for 18 years?

Israel’s Foreign office condemned the program “There is a feeling that the station (BBC) became simply a channel that serves [the interests of] the Arab world. Somehow the promo doesn’t mention the fact that Israel is the only state in the region whose existence is threatened.”

Israeli Government Press Office Director, Daniel Seaman, then raised the issue of possible anti-semitism: “The BBC is an unfair, non-factual and anti-Israel station that borders of being anti-Semite. It is interesting that the BBC isn’t bothered by the terror or by the direct threats against Israel’s existence, e.g. through Iran.”

BBC ON THE HOT SEAT

AS for the BBC, it is increasingly on the hot seat with critics challenging its notion of objectivity while BBC people see themselves as reporting stories that the US media refuses to. Examples: The astute William Bowles writes on the always provocative Information Clearing House site:

“The idea that there is some kind of ‘objective,’ ground from which to view events, particularly of the political variety, is a long-held fantasy, especially of British journalism. It’s still taught in British universities would you believe, that out there, somewhere, there’s a space that the journalist can occupy, which sits perfectly in the middle, between one view and another (pre-supposing of course, that there are only two sides to an issue). This illusion of course, is based on the idea that all political situations have a left and right hand. The journalist, armed with the ‘facts,’ first presents one view and then the other and the reader (or listener) draws their own conclusions based upon, what exactly? It first assumes that the reader has no views until presented with the ‘facts’. If not, then the reader already has a view that either the ‘facts’ will reinforce or per se, will be rejected. The journalist, having executed his role of go-between can then sleep comforta!

ably in bed safe in the belief that he (or she) has done the ‘right thing.’ But there is a more insidious and pervasive sub-text to the notion of jour-

nalist as impartial reporter.

Here's an example of what I mean from today's (23/06/03) London Independent Review section. It's a piece on the journalist John Simpson, an apparently much respected international journalist for the BBC who prides himself on not revealing any kind of 'bias' in his stories. It concerns the young Iraqi translator he'd hired and who got blown to pieces by 'friendly fire'. Simpson visits the mother of the young man and writes, "Was the overthrow of Saddam Hussein worth all the violence and chaos in Mosul, Kirkuk and Baghdad? Was it worth the death of my 25-year-old translator, the only support of his widowed mother? She doesn't think so."

"He then adds a final sentence: "At the moment I am finding it hard not to agree with her."

The writer of the story on Simpson, Vincent Graf comments, "Now he [Simpson] fears that he has compromised, to some extent at least, his **outward** lack of bias. It is a decision he regrets profoundly."

So it's okay to have an inward bias and hope that it doesn't show? Simpson goes on to say that the comment was, "A real betrayal of what my function is supposed to be. Because people who think that this war was absolutely right have got the perfect right to feel that I am not slanting my reporting against them, any more than I would slant it against people who think it's wrong."

BBC INTROSPECTION

BOWLES raises some key questions, but I am conflicted about his stance. The same BBC seems to be offering far more challenging coverage than its US counterparts. Example: Justin Webb of the BBC calls the US media "timorous" and describes

a recent press conference at the Pentagon.

"Just as the storm over the failure to find said weapons was breaking in Britain, deep in the bowels of the Pentagon one of the deputies of the Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, was asked a potentially tricky question on the subject. His imperious response: "I'm not here to answer that."

"And, lo and behold, he didn't. And nobody complained about it.

"It reminded me of the famous BBC doorstep interview with Clement Attlee, which went something like this: 'Prime Minister, do you have anything to say...?'

"No, British broadcasters have moved on since then. The American media, well...'

"So why the transatlantic journalistic rift? Are American journalists simply spineless? Do they toe the line because they love the President? Or because their employers do?

"The answer, I think, is more complex. Americans in all walks of life have a respect for authority that the cynical Brits jettisoned.

"Let's be honest, though: much of the questioning of American motives and purposes in the British press is equally one-sided. My heart sinks when junior producers ring from London, enthused by an article in a British paper that proves that the war was all about oil, or that the Zionists are in charge, or that the Vice-President's former company is taking over the world. The view from this side of the Atlantic is that the Brits have axes to grind."

AND THIS JUST IN ABOUT BBC

FROM MiddleEast Online: "LONDON, June 26, 2003 – The BBC dug in its heels and refused Thursday to bow to demands by British Prime

Minister Tony Blair's "sultan of spin" to apologize for its reporting on the Iraq war and weapons of mass destruction.

"Blair's powerful director of communications, Alastair Campbell, took the world's biggest and best-known public broadcaster to task Wednesday when he appeared before a parliamentary committee.

"He told the House of Commons foreign affairs committee that there was no truth to a BBC radio report, quoting an unnamed source, that Downing Street embellished a September 2002 dossier on Iraq to beef up the case for war.

"In relation to the BBC story: it is a lie, it was a lie, it's a lie that's continually repeated and until we get an apology for it I will continue making sure people know it's a lie," Campbell said.

But, speaking on BBC Radio Thursday, the network's director of news Richard Sambrook snapped back at Campbell for "seriously misrepresenting" BBC journalism. "He said we had accused him and the prime minister of lying. That's not true. We haven't," Sambrook said.

THE WAY IT WORKS HERE

NOW, on to the US media.

I don't think US reporters are any less cynical than their British counterparts. Our journalistic cultures are different. For one thing, journalists for a public service broadcaster like BBC face less pressure than journalists for commercial outlets here – because of the role and interests of big media companies. As readers of Mediachannel are aware, I have been suggesting a link between the deferential coverage of the war and the then-impending FCC rule changes most media companies desperately wanted.

Few media reporters investigated this connec-

tion and even fewer suggest any agreement with a view that can all too easily be dismissed as conspiratorial. (As if conspiracies in high places don't exist or as if interests don't influence policies and even coverage.)

Anyway, Michael Wolff of New York Magazine, a contrarian by nature, and a brilliant writer has now opined on the subject. He is anti-conspiracy of course, but he does, not dismiss the idea that the patriotically-correct coverage was motivated by money more than morality or ideology. You've got to slog your way through this:

"Every news organization from CNN to Fox to the networks to the big newspaper chains to the New York Times (although, heroically, not the Washington Post) was eagerly petitioning the Bush FCC (led by the secretary of State's son, Michael Powell) for the freedom to substantially alter the economics of the news business. And as the war got under way, everybody knew the decision would come soon after the war ended.

"It's important to understand how much this FCC ruling means to these companies. News (especially old-fashioned headline news) is a sick business, if not a dying game. For newspaper companies, the goal is to get out of the newspaper business and into the television business (under the old rules, it's a no-no to own newspapers and television stations in the same market). For networks with big news operations, the goal is to buy more stations, which is where the real cash flows from. The whole point here is to move away from news, to downgrade it, to amortize it, to minimize it.

"Anyway, you've got all of these media organizations that want something for the most basic reason up-against-the-wall companies can want something: because they think this is what will

save them (and transform them). There's almost nothing~really~they won't do for this. They've already spent many years and millions of dollars trying to make the FCC change the rules. What's more, all of these companies are in lockstep (save for the Washington Post) – nobody's breaking ranks.

“All right then. The media knows what it wants, and the media knows what the Bush people want.

“So is it a conspiracy? Is that what I'm saying? That the media – acting in concert – took a dive on the war for the sake of getting an improved position with regard to the ownership rules? Certainly, every big media company was a cheerleader, as gullible and as empty-headed – or as accommodating – on the subject of WMDs as, well, Saddam himself.

“But conspiracy wouldn't quite be the right word.

“Negotiation, however, would be the right one. An appreciation of the whole environment, the careful balancing of interests, the subtleties of the trade (at this point, the ritual denial: ‘There was no quid pro quo’).”

The interesting thing is that in most newsrooms, you would find lots of agreement on this view of how businessmen and politicians get the things they want. There's a general acceptance of the realities of ass-kissing, if not a higher level of corruption. You'd find nearly everybody saying,

Yes, duh, everybody gets something in return~but not when it come to the news. Not like that. Not so . . . “quid pro quo.”

SAFIRE OFFERS SOME MORE WORDS

ON this same issue, the mighty William Safire, voice of the conservative old school criticized media outlets which downplayed the story about their own lobbying efforts:

“No thanks go to the biggest media, where CBS's 60 Minutes, NBC's Dateline and ABC's 20/20 found the rip-off of the public interest by their parent companies too hot to handle. Most network newscasts dutifully covered the scandalous story as briefly and coolly as possible, failing to disclose how much it meant to their parent companies, which were lobbying furiously for gobble-up rights.

“Unencumbered by such a conflict of interest, public television's liberal Bill Moyers inveighed for months against the power grab, and Consumers Union is on the job. The conservative Joe Scarborough blew the whistle on media giantism on cable's MSNBC, which included an interview with the New York Daily News publisher (and mini-mogul) Mort Zuckerman, outspoken foe of the conglomeration crowd.”

He praised rightwing groups for speaking out and called for more activism on the issue.

