

May 13, 2003

HERE WE GO AGAIN: AL QAEDA IS BAAACK

The signs had been there. A threat from Al Qaeda was reported over the weekend. Was the terror alert level raised?

“Al-Qaeda Reportedly Plans Big New Attack”

“By SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press Writer
“DOHA, Qatar (AP) – An Arabic weekly is reporting an interview with a purported new spokesman for al-Qaida who claims the terror network has completely reorganized. He says old operatives have been replaced by new ones who are planning an attack against the United States on the scale of Sept. 11.

“The Americans only have predictions and old intelligence left,” the magazine quoted bin Qais as saying. “It will take them a long time to understand the new form of al-Qaida.”

SPRING OFFENSIVE?

THEN, there had been reports of a ‘spring offensive’ from a re-energized Taliban in Afghanistan, the latest on the BBC this morning. The Saudis had cracked a cell earlier in the month but the people they were after got away. And then, last night, once again bombs rocked the Kingdom.

At least ten Americans (and we are not yet sure how many others) died as three housing compounds were attacked in Saudi Arabia. This morning Colin Powell arrived in Riyadh and made the requisite comments about the need to step up the war on terror. We will hear later today from President Bush and Dick Cheney. The terrorism

experts are back, all over the airwaves with CNN reaching out to one in far away Singapore.. An expert on BBC, an Arab woman scholar from some Royal Institute, spoke of a failure – on the part of the Saudis who have been cracking down on peaceful dissent; on “The Americans” for aggressive policies; on the Israel’s for undermining all peace initiatives; and the Arab world for its mounting passivity and cynicism. Failure all around, she said.

We did not hear similar views on the US networks although Fox had a Saudi newspaper editor on who made the point that extremists are to be found all over the world, not just in the Muslim world.

MIXED SIGNALS ON TERROR THREAT

WRITING last week in the New York Times-owned International Herald Tribune, published in Paris last week but not in reprinted in New York, William Pfaff pointed to mixed messages we have been getting about terrorism. “Foreign ministers of the Group of Eight leading industrial nations met in Paris on Monday to affirm that terrorism remains a “pervasive and global threat.” Just three days earlier, the State Department had announced that terrorism is at its lowest level in 33 years. One wonders if anything would have changed had that news reached the G-8 foreign ministers. The war against terrorism, like the war against Iraq, functions in all but total indifference to facts.

ANGST ON WEST 43RD STREET

REACTION is continuing to the disclosure by the New York Times that one of its junior reporters, Jayson Blair, had made up stories and deceived editors. According to the hardly un-self-interested New York Post: “Times in Mutiny over Bosses whitewash.” It quotes staffers as saying heads should roll at the top after a memo circulated indicting “our editorial safeguards and our individual responses were insufficient.” The Post as is common, does not cite the names of disgruntled staffers it claims to have spoken to.

INAPPROPRIATE REACTION?

ON the left, the response is more nuanced. Bill Vann and David Northwrite on the world Socialist site: “What is so extraordinary, even bizarre, about the reaction of the Times is the immense amount of space devoted to the merciless career-shattering exposure of someone who was one of the paper’s junior employees, as well as the angry and personal tone that characterizes the paper’s denunciation.

“The article produced by the Times is itself a parody of objective journalism. Veering erratically between an unconvincing presentation of the timeline of Blair’s transgression and wildly subjective editorializing, the Times describes Blair’s actions as “a betrayal of trust and a low point in the 152-year history of the newspaper.” It refers to the reporters’ laptop and cell phone as “his tools of deceit,” and goes so far as to release personal details, stating that he had “considerable personal problems,” suggesting that he suffered from alcoholism and revealing that he had been referred to a company counseling program.

“That is not all. The article descends into vindictive character assassination, stating that Blair was considered by unnamed “others” to be “immature, with a hungry ambition and an unsettling interest in newsroom gossip.” From a legal standpoint, the Times’ reaction can only be described as grossly inappropriate.”

WHY DID HE DO IT?

WRITING on NarcoNews.com, Al Giordano raises some other questions about why a young journalist like Blair may have self-destructed in the pressure cooker that is the Times: “Nowhere in the confessional tome of the Sunday Times is there any mention nor consideration of the institutional pressures on journalists, particularly young journalists, at that newspaper or at commercial media institutions in general.

“Those institutional pressures, not addressed, will continue. A kid in his twenties killed the New York Times? Does anybody believe that, kind readers? No. The Market killed the New York Times, years ago (the recent circulation dip of five percent in Times sales came prior to the Jayson Blair crisis), and all of the public hand-wringing going on today at that newspaper won’t change a damn thing about its corrupted Modus Operandi.

“To work at the New York Times a reporter must, first, pee into a bottle both to prove that he doesn’t smoke grass and to simultaneously show his willingness to suffer the most personal kind of humiliations to get a job there. If he likes tobacco, he has to go outside in the winter cold to smoke cigarettes; this predates the new city laws against smokers by years. He has to wear a suit and tie (or equivalent feminine uniforms if he is a she; indeed, prior to his downfall, the Times now reports, one of the chief concerns one editor had about Blair

was the “sloppy” way he dressed, and that’s being spun, incredibly, now as an early warning sign of his deviancy). In other words, he and she are neutered and spayed before they sign their first byline as Timesmen. That’s how the Times weeds out the free spirits and free thinkers, for starters.

“Being “prolific” is a requirement at the Times, not an option. “Times journalists have so far uncovered new problems in at least 36 of the 73 articles Mr. Blair wrote since he started getting national reporting assignments late last October,” the newspaper tells us today.

“Let’s do the math: 73 articles in seven months brings an average of about ten a month, or one article every three days. Or, presuming a five-day workweek, that would be one article about every two days for the rookie reporter at the mighty New York Times. Add to that workload the context of the extensive travel requirements to go out into the North American heartland and do the “real people” stories that became his trademark, and there was a lot of pressure on this kid that came from the very same Times that now rattles sabers against him.” See NarcoNews.com

REMEMBER ELIZABETH NEUFFER

WHILE so many are focused on what the media does poorly, there is not enough attention paid to what it does well. This was a point raised yesterday by Dan Kennedy in his media log: “It’s sad but predictable that an outrageous eruption of journalistic wrongdoing – the apparent fabrications and plagiarism of former New York Times reporter Jayson Blair – has entirely overshadowed the death of Boston Globe reporter Elizabeth Neuffer.

“But Neuffer is what this business is, or should

be, all about. A tremendous reporter with an uncanny ability to drop into dangerous, chaotic places and make sense out of them for those of us back home, Neuffer and a Globe translator, Waleed Khalifa Hassan Al Dulaimi, were killed in a car accident in Iraq on Friday.’

NANCY SNOW: “AT THEIR BEST WHEN THE DANGERS ARE GREATEST”

MEDIA critic Nancy Snow published a tribute to Neuffer (Thanks to Mediachannel advisor Anna Kaca for sending it along): “Elizabeth Neuffer was a rare breed in journalism, according to Globe Publisher Richard Gilman, among that cadre of reporters who are at their best when the danger is greatest. With virtually no regard for their personal safety, they feel compelled to be wherever in the world that news may be occurring.

“On March 20, 2003, the day after the bombs began to fall over Baghdad, Elizabeth Neuffer was interviewed by Fresh Air’s Terry Gross about her weeks spent in Baghdad before the start of the war. When asked by Gross whether or not Iraqis looked at the war as liberation or occupation, Neuffer responded, “Absolutely occupation, not liberation. And every time I hear the Bush Administration use the word “liberation,” I must admit I wince because that is not perceived on the ground in Baghdad even by the Iraqis, as I said, who I got to know who are very critical of the regime. This is a very proud nation that looks to its past civilization, that looks to the fact that it invented handwriting. It sees itself as a historical player and does not want to be ruled by anyone else.’

“Too often in our haste to excoriate the media for going after the man-bites-dog story or the drippy celebrity news, we forget that there are

journalists like Elizabeth Neuffer, who died en route to Baghdad from Tikrit, doing what was her calling, exemplifying the best that American journalism has to offer us. Those of us committed to bettering the world owe a debt of gratitude to those journalists on the frontlines who provide the stories we use to strengthen our case for social justice and human rights.”

OUR CELEBRITY KULTUR

THE NEW YORK POST today went after actor Danny Glover with a story that MCI, the phone company for which he does ads, may drop him because of his political views. Other more acceptable voices in Hollywood are not given this kind of treatment. Frank Rich wrote about the Hollywood political connection Sunday in terms of the resurgence of right wing advisors: “the Democrats – ostensibly the party of Hollywood – are as clueless about the medium that can make or break them as the Republicans were when they let Richard Nixon go before a camera without makeup when debating John Kennedy in 1960. Embarrassing as it is that the Democrats have no convictions, it’s not clear that they would know how to convey them even if they did. And they are up against a popular incumbent who, for all his obvious unease with a teleprompter, knows his

message and is exploiting TV more cagily to send it than any president in history, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton included.

“The Bush presidency might well be the Jerry Bruckheimer presidency – after the hugely successful producer of “Armageddon,” “Black Hawk Down” and “Top Gun,” the movie re-enacted by Mr. Bush in his flyboy landing on the Abraham Lincoln. Mr. Bruckheimer has enjoyed a happy partnership with the Donald Rumsfeld Pentagon from the get-go.

“While the nation and the administration snoozed in the late spring of 2001, unaware that the next Pearl Harbor was less than four months away, the gala premiere party for Bruckheimer’s summer extravaganza, “Pearl Harbor,” took place on the aircraft carrier U.S.S. John C. Stennis, which had been sent from San Diego to Hawaii for the festivities.

As Ben Affleck and a giddy corps of press junketeers watched, F-15 fighters flew overhead and Navy Seals parachuted onto the deck from a Black Hawk helicopter. This year Mr. Bruckheimer and the Defense Department collaborated once more, on an ABC prime-time entertainment series, “Tales From the Front Lines,” which presented the American mission in Afghanistan as an MTV-paced joy ride.”

