

May 14, 2003

# IS OUR MEDIA STATE RUN?

**T**he body hunt seems to be far more successful in Iraq than the hunt for weapons of mass destruction, even as mass destruction is what is being revealed. I think it is called cognitive dissonance or something when two people talk past each other. It happened again on BBC World this morning when a reporter was trying to understand why US marines in Iraq were not imposing order on the chaos of people scrambling to find bodies buried by Saddam's goons in 1991. The killing fields were being dug up with no attempt to collect forensic evidence that could be used in future prosecutions. Bones and skulls were being tossed around. Human rights groups were horrified and demanded the marines intervene but they clearly had no clue about what to do, or any orders to do anything.

## SHOOT TO KILL

**"WE** are helping the Iraqi people" was all one public affairs office could say as he described sending a team over to take pictures and shoot video. He couldn't even understand what he was being asked or why. It was more evidence, we need it, of the mess that passes for an occupation. The New York Times reports that new occupation chief L. Paul Bremer has ordered looters be shot. That is certain to add to growing hostility if only because untrained soldiers are likely to shoot first and ask questions later. Meanwhile Iraqbodycount.net, the group monitoring the civilian casualties that the Pentagon isn't, reports that the

death toll has climbed possibly to 4,771 – as of May 13, 2003. [Note: This doesn't include military deaths or civilian woundings. Those casualties are much higher.]

<http://www.iraqbodycount.net/bodycount.htm#total>

Arab News is amazed at the ineptness of the US occupation to date. "The abrupt shake-up of the US administration in Iraq so soon after the Americans took over the country is nothing less than an admission of failure." What is astounding about the shake-up is Washington's evident failure to know what it was getting into in the first place. It proves that the Bush administration did not even begin to understand the scale of what it was going to have to do after the invasion. Having decided Saddam Hussein must go, it simply went in, guns blazing. It is a vivid example of the "Shoot first: Ask questions later" attitude which the rest of the world so often accuses Americans of and which incenses Americans to hear . . . It is an irony that a nation so often accused of imperialism should prove to be so incompetent when it comes to playing the colonial administrator.

## AMERICAN JUSTICE

**PRESIDENT BUSH** yesterday vowed to first catch and then treat the Saudi terrorists, who he called "killers," to "American justice." That was a big applause line similar to the response to an earlier vow to smoke out and get Osama bin Laden

“dead or alive.” Officials are also admitting that they had ample warning of imminent attacks in Saudi Arabia just as some now admit that warnings of a similar nature were ignored before September 11th in the United States. Terrorism “experts” were all over TV yesterday predicting more. Nightline’s Ted Koppel interviewed one who called Iran worse than Iraq in this department and beat the drums loudly for war against that country.

### NEW MEDIA FOR THE NEW IRAQ

**PR WATCH** carries a piece from The Hill, the congressional newspaper, reporting: “The White House expects congressional funding to the tune of \$64 million for the first-ever, 24-hour Arabic-language satellite television network. “The aim is to provide the Middle East’s tens of millions of viewers with an alternative to their usual viewing diet of unremediated anti-American propaganda,” the Hill’s Melissa Seckora reports. This type of comment will not endear the US to the Arab media, which rejects this charge. Last night I watched a Middle East broadcasting report from the United Arab Emirates (via CSPAN) and heard reports denouncing Al Qaeda and extremism.

G. Beato writes on Alternet.org that it is “Sweeps week” in Iraq and that there is a media war for readers, viewers and listeners in Iraq. “Al-Alam, a TV channel produced by the Iranian government, is perhaps the most-watched source of news in Iraq at the moment. Reuters reported that its correspondents “became celebrities on the streets of Baghdad” during the war; currently the channel “[emphasizes] the role of fundamentalist Shiite Islam while portraying the fledgling U.S. administration in the country as a disaster for

common Iraqis.” Last week the Washington Post reported that the Pentagon finds Al-Alam’s influence increasingly troubling. “Alas, the Pentagon’s primary media offering to date, a radio show called “The Voice of New Iraq” that airs on an AM station in Umm Kasr, doesn’t sound likely to win many loyal listeners. According to the Associated Press, the show counsels children to avoid “approaching military vehicles” and warns them to stay away from “leftover war objects that could explode.”

### ROAD MAP TO SOWETO

**TO** no one’s surprise, Israel’s Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is not exactly embracing the new road map to peace. He continues to raise objection after objection. His latest is to dismiss demands that he dismantle settlements. He says that is not “on the horizon.” What is on the horizon? Ha’aretz reported yesterday that this statement was “Sharon’s second rebuff to U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell’s overtures for confidence-building measures made at weekend talks with Israeli and Palestinian leaders.” Sharon rejected easing a military clampdown on West Bank towns, a step Palestinians say would give them leverage to rein in militants waging a 31-month-old uprising for independence.”

The same newspaper also reported on a recollection by a visiting Italian politician as to what arrangement Sharon does favor. “During his visit two weeks ago to Israel, former Italian prime minister Massimo D’Alema hosted a small group of Israelis –public figures and former diplomats –to a dinner at a Jerusalem hotel. The former premier from the Italian left said that three or four years ago he had a long conversation with Sharon, who was in Rome for a brief visit. According to

D'Alema, Sharon explained at length that the Bantustan model was the most appropriate solution to the conflict.

"The defender of Israel quickly protested. "Surely that was your personal interpretation of what Sharon said." D'Alema didn't give in. "No, sir, that is not interpretation. That is a precise quotation of your prime minister." Bantustans were at the heart of South Africa's policy of forced separation of apartheid.

### SENATE WEIGHS IN ON MEDIA RULES

**MEDIA** issues are finally coming to the fore in Washington. Reuters reported yesterday that a "bipartisan group of U.S. senators on Tuesday introduced legislation to head off an effort to allow a television network to own stations reaching more than 35 percent of the national audience.

With the Federal Communications Commission poised to vote June 2 on lifting several media ownership restrictions, the lawmakers said the cap was needed to preserve diversity of voices in a market and local reporting and programming.

"I do not think the 35 percent cap should be lifted at this time," Sen. Ted Stevens, Republican of Alaska and one of the bill's sponsors, told a committee hearing on the rules.

### TURNUED OFF AND TUNING OUT

**PAUL KRUGMAN** noted yesterday in the New York Times what many others have referenced – that US TV media is turning off US viewers who are now turning elsewhere. He writes: "A funny thing happened during the Iraq war: many Americans turned to the BBC for their TV news. They were looking for an alternative point of view –

something they couldn't find on domestic networks, which, in the words of the BBC's director general, "wrapped themselves in the American flag and substituted patriotism for impartiality."

"Leave aside the rights and wrongs of the war itself, and consider the paradox. The BBC is owned by the British government, and one might have expected it to support that government's policies. In fact, however, it tried hard – too hard, its critics say – to stay impartial. America's TV networks are privately owned, yet they behaved like state-run media.

### STATE MEDIA?

**GENEVA OVERHOLSER**, a former ombuds person at the Washington Post, now with the Poynter Institute, seems to agree: "The comments I've been hearing about U.S. media becoming ever more like state-run media seem to me to evoke something deeper than partisanship or ideology. What I sense is a narrowing of the discussion, a "ruttedness" – call it an echo chamber of conventionalism. Sure, we have the appearance of controversy, what with our shouting heads and sneering pundits. But real debate – substantive representation of viewpoints not currently in vogue, of people not currently in power, of issues not currently appearing in our narrowly-focused eye – is almost absent." Writing in Madison Wisconsin's Capital Times, Ed Garvey links this concern to what is happening over at the New York Times. (The Times is having a company-wide meeting today to discuss its current crisis. The US attorney's office has announced plans to investigate charges of doctored journalism – a first.)

"The New York Times ran a front-page apology Sunday for a reporter who filed deceptive stories. It is unusual for a news source to admit a mistake

and the Times is to be commended.

“But read the opening paragraph and ask if it should be applied to a much broader group of journalists: “A staff reporter for the New York Times committed frequent acts of journalistic fraud while covering significant news events in recent months, an investigation by Times journalists has found.”

“Wouldn’t it be refreshing if Fox News, CNBC, CBS and others were to make the same apology for the what can only be described as “journalistic fraud” as they slant the news to favor President Bush and his factually unsupportable justification of the invasion of another country?

### THOMAS FRIEDMAN AS METAPHOR

**MATT TAIBBI** takes on New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman in this week’s New York Press. He is scathing and hysterical. Here’s a comment in one column. “Needed: Iraqi Software,” May 7. The hallmark of the Friedman method is a single metaphor, stretched to column length, that makes no objective sense at all and is layered with other metaphors that make still less sense. The result is a giant, gnarled mass of incoherent imagery. When you read Friedman, you are likely to encounter such creatures as the Wildebeest of Progress and the Nurse Shark of Reaction, which in paragraph one are galloping or swimming as expected, but by the conclusion of his argument are testing the waters of public opinion with human feet and toes, or flying (with fins and hooves at the controls) a policy glider without brakes that is powered by the steady wind of George Bush’s vision.

“In this piece, Friedman revives the ancient “Too Much Democracy” argument, a clunky descendant of the theory that giving blacks the vote would rob them of their natural cheerfulness and musicality. Used in Vietnam in 1955 and countless times since, the idea here is that in Iraq, as in all other places where the population is savage and lacking the wisdom and intellectual enlightenment we enjoy in America, too much democracy can be a bad thing. Elections might just be counterproductive.

“There are obvious, effective ways to illustrate this idea. Friedman might have said that you can’t put the cart before the horse, or that you need to plant seeds before the harvest, or some variation thereof – there are any number of at least superficially plausible ways of saying that you need civilization and education before you can have the vote. But Friedman, desperate to seem like the hip computer-age priest of globalization he has worked so hard to market himself as, decides instead to say that you need software (free institutions) before you can have hardware (elections).

“But in the real world, does software naturally come before hardware? Does that make sense? You’re still scratching your head over that one when Friedman zooms into his next mangled metaphor. “With Saddam’s iron fist now removed,” he writes, “the U.S. must help an authentically Iraqi moderate center emerge and sink roots.” The correct word here is “lifted,” not “removed.” Friedman has left a giant Iron Saddam, minus one fist, hovering over Iraq, while the half-vegetable, half-human Iraqi center first “emerges” and then “sinks roots.” (See nypress.com)

