

May 19, 2003

THE NEWS (RE)CYCLE

Welcome to a new week with old headlines conjuring up the words of the singer Bill Horowitz, “all the news just repeats itself as in an old dream that we once knew.” Terror tops the news parade again with reports tying Al Qaeda to those bombings in Saudi Arabia and as the lead suspects in Morocco. But remember please that Al Qaeda means “the base” in Arabic. From what we know it has a decentralized apparatus with cells and units which often have an agenda of their own. That’s why “getting” bin Laden is unlikely to end what is now a war that has gone on at least since 1991. Grievances, anger, rage, resistance and revenge are built into the geo-political fabric. Actions like “pre-emptive war” produce reactions just as the Israeli occupation and recent round of assassinations and military interventions in the West Bank and Gaza fuel more suicide bombings.

DEADLY LOGIC

EVERYONE who follows these events over time finds all of this perfectly predictable and even understandable – that is when you get into the thinking of the different parties. There is a logic to it, a sad and deadly logic, but none of us should be surprised that the “road map” is shredding or that Sharon is being Sharon. Even as the new Palestinian leadership accepted the “peace” plan imposed by the so-called Quartet, Sharon rejected its key demand that the settlements be scuttled. And off we go into another round of killings, counter-

killings, and a “piece” plan that leaves the region in pieces and more turmoil. So Sharon cancels his trip to the White House as if that is big news. They have telephones don’t they? There is little evidence that Bush has the guts (or the political will) to push his oversized ally toward peace. It seems as if it is the United States (and especially the hapless Mr. Powell, who Sharon dismisses as an errand boy) are the ones being pushed around. Next?

THE VICTORY IN IRAQ

UNDERSTAND that no people want to be told what to do or be dictated to. That includes the Iraqis who were glad to be rid of Saddam but now confront a situation that is spiraling out of control even further. Defeat is being snatched from the jaws of “victory.” The US press seems to be finally finding some spine and telling it like it is. Underline that phrase “some spine.” Today’s New York Times reports: “Looting Is Derailing Detailed U.S. Plan to Restore Iraq. Enduring violence has forced the U.S. to impose control with more troops and delay efforts to turn power over to Iraqis.” A day earlier, Susan Sachs reported: “President Bush said he wanted to liberate Iraq, not occupy Iraq, and that was the basis for our supporting military action, said one Iraqi who took part in the leadership consultations [where Paul Bremer told them there would be no interim government.] This puts all the political leadership in a very difficult situation and gives fuel to all those extremists who

said the U.S. had a secret agenda to occupy Iraq and exploit its oil resources.”

On Sunday The Observer (out of London) was more explicit: “US and British plans for rebuilding Iraq were descending into chaos this weekend as officials admitted they had indefinitely scrapped plans for a transitional government, and Spain revealed a gaping hole in funding for reconstruction.”

It seems that the oil revenues that the “coalition” planned to steal to rebuild what it had destroyed were not what they were projected to be. There have been a growing number of conflicts-of-interests emerging on this front as well: “The US-led effort to rebuild Iraq was facing more criticism yesterday after the Texan businessman installed to run the country’s oil industry admitted having financial links to a company bidding for reconstruction work. Philip Carroll acknowledged in an interview with the Los Angeles Times that he could be accused of a conflict of interest because of his relationship with Fluor. The disclosure will pile more pressure onto the Bush administration for its handling of the rebuilding program.”

CCC: CIVILIAN CASUALTY COUNT

HATS off to the LA Times for keeping its eye on the ball, and also reporting what the government wants us to forget – the number of civilian casualties. That paper has some new numbers: “At least 1,700 Iraqi civilians died and more than 8,000 were injured in Baghdad during the war and in the weeks afterward, according to a Los Angeles Times survey of records from 27 hospitals in the capital and its outlying districts. In addition, undocumented civilian deaths in Baghdad num-

ber at least in the hundreds and could reach 1,000, according to Islamic burial societies and humanitarian groups that are trying to trace those missing in the conflict.

“More than a month after the war’s end, no official tally of civilian casualties has emerged. Amid the disorder attending the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the nascent American military occupation, one might never be made – although such a reckoning could play an important role, in the eyes of a watching world, in weighing the conflict’s moral costs.”

INDY MEDIA SITE IN BAGHDAD

IF you want to follow events in Baghdad from independent sources in that city, check out a new Indy media-related site, which just went up in Iraq. <http://www.almuajaha.com/>

The team behind this initiative also posted an appeal for help: “The staff at Al-Muajaha like to say and express all the troubles that we are facing. First we don’t have funding, although we put a lot of announcement in the website, and in all the hotels in Baghdad that are full with press and TV channels. We were asking for a small help, but no one responded. That’s right, they said it’s a great thing, no one did it before, especially for young people like us, but what we get until now it’s just compliments – which it can’t be exchanged in any bank. You know that don’t make any sense, because they paid for this war billions. One missile cost more than \$1 million. They’re paying a lot of money for those war things, but no one paid any attention for a group of young people trying to do a precious thing for the Iraqis, and Iraqis trying to represent the masses. No one, no one – and by they way, we didn’t ask for millions or billions.

We're asking about 25 or 30 thousand dollars only just to bring some equipment in order to make this work.

"Because we don't have an office, we don't have computers, we don't have the telephones, we don't have electricity, we don't have anything, and you're going to see the pictures of the first issue – it's good, but we shot these shots by cheap camera. We try to be independent. If you don't help us to do that, should we go three different ways to do it?"

1) "Should we ask American military for help?"

2) "Should we ask the Parties and Factions for help?"

3) "Should we ask the fancy people in Iraq for help? These will be the same thing. Our responsibility as Iraqi youth, to make a start for Iraqi independent media, as the base of a great building, but you know that great pressure is on the base. We as Iraqis are not used to ask anyone for help, like the very difficult life for 30 years. When we asked now it is because we are witnesses. We call our paper "The Iraqi Witness." We want to tell you that we are independent media and you can support us, but we are not for sale."

There is information on the site on how you can help.

VIVA SOCIALISM?

JUST one last note about Iraq on this May 19th birthday of Malcolm X and Ho Chi Minh. It comes to us with some tongue-in-cheek praise for US Policy in Iraq. Barbara Ehrenreich's piece, "Socialism Lives!" was carried on Alternet.org. She writes in part: "With Washington fixated on the looming war between the departments of State and Defense, almost no one has noticed an even stranger development within the Bush adminis-

tration: its sudden, and apparently wholehearted, embrace of socialism. "Echoing sentiments expressed in an earlier era by Eugene V. Debs and Woody Guthrie, Colin Powell declared recently, 'Iraq's oil belongs to the Iraqi people.' There's been no comment yet from Exxon Mobil on the possible application of this principle to the homeland, but Powell's words seemed sincere, unlike those other feel-good phrases the right is always tossing off, like 'compassionate conservatism' and 'free elections.'"

WAR ON HOLD FOR AWHILE

IT looks like there will be a temporary respite in more wars as defense contractors work overtime to replace all the weapons dumped on Iraq. The replacement business is booming. According to the German daily Tageszeitung (5/15/03), this may mean that Washington lacks the arsenal for more preemptive campaigns at the moment. It quotes a research report written for the German Central bank by its New York-based analyst Peter Garber.

According to an E-mail just in from Berlin:

"Noteworthy points are:

"—a shortage of JDAMS precision munitions and refits of three aircraft carriers makes a war in the coming four months unlikely; this is the time required to recover level of preparedness for a war similar to the last.

"—US confrontational policies vis-à-vis Syria, Iran and North-Korea will become practical around Sept-Oct

"— Syria is expected to become a prime target. France, Russia, and Germany are not expected to put up more than nominal resistance to an attack on Syria

"— world economic recovery will be slowed down further because of continued uncertainty."

CHANGING THE SUBJECT

THE media coverage of the war is now being challenged by one of its boosters, the New York Times's inscrutable Thomas Friedman, who complains that the media is already "bored with Baghdad" and is "changing the subject." He wrote yesterday:

"The buildup to this war was so exhausting, the coverage of the dash to Baghdad so telegenic, and the climax of the toppling of Saddam's statue so dramatic, that everyone who went through it seems to prefer that the story just end there. The U.S. networks changed the subject after the fall of Baghdad as fast as you can say "Laci Peterson," and President Bush did the same as fast as you can say "tax cuts."

Editor and Publisher deals with this issue through an interview with a voice that deserves more amplification, New York Times war reporter, Chris Heges. "We don't have a sense of what we have waded into here," said Hedges, author of *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, a winner of the Amnesty International 2002 Global Award for Human Rights Journalism, and a finalist for a National Book Critics Circle Award. Says Heges: "The deep divisions among the varying factions could be extremely hard to bridge, and the historical and cultural roots are probably beyond the American understanding."

"The hard work of both reporting and analysis will inevitably be the province of newspapers, he asserted, though only a handful of publications will grapple with it: 'Now that the feel-good, flag-waving part of war is over, the real culprits, the commercial-broadcast media, are going to pack up and leave. What they've done is a huge disservice to the nation. They have no sense of

responsibility to continue reporting as the story gets more complicated and difficult to report.'"

BLIND TO ANY HOPE OF COHERENCE

EDITOR Lewis Lapham, as is usually the case, goes much deeper in the June issue of Harper's, blasting what passed for coverage. He writes in part in another must-read essay: "The news transmissions from the fog of war were as relentless as the bombing raids on Baghdad. Incessant, deafening, blind to the hope of any coherent narrative." He quotes MSNBC official Eric Sorenson defending the jingoistic coverage that consumed the channel he ran. "After September 11, the country wants more optimism and benefit of the doubt ... it's about being positive instead of negative."

Gag me with many spoons.

WAR AS SPORT

SINCE I am finishing a book on the media coverage of the war, I am trying to find as many perspectives on it as I can. (Hint to readers!) One fascinating one was published on the Globalvision News Network and Media Channel by economist Paul de Rooij, who says that the coverage design was influenced more by the Sports Division than the news department. He writes:

"Propaganda campaigns usually follow a theme or have a flavor-of-the-month. The propagandists borrow from product advertising campaigns that are conducted in a similar fashion. During the 1991 Gulf War, the theme was the "video game," which was evident due to the number of demolition video clips. This theme couldn't be reused because the video-game scenes raised some uncomfortable questions about this enterprise especially among opponents of the war. It was therefore nec-

essary to conjure a new theme, and all indications are that this campaign followed a “sports show” metaphor.

“The main advantage of this approach is that Americans are very comfortable with the “sports show” – it is part of their daily diet, it is intelligible to them, and it gives them a passive “entertained” role. Casting propaganda in such a known, comfortable framework makes people adjust favorably to the message.

“Presenting the war as a sports event enabled the propagandists to circumvent the thorny issue of why the US was so eager to engage in this war in the first place. When one watches a sports game, there is no need to think about the “why” of anything; it is only an issue of “supporting our team”. Equally important is that sports fans are supposed to react on cue, and otherwise are expected to be quiet. This passivity is ideal for the propagandists, and possibly this can be imbued in the war spectacle.”

His article quotes Jerry Broeckert a Marine Corps media specialist as saying: “Just as weapons

have gotten ‘smarter,’ so too has the military gotten more sophisticated about how to use the media to meet military objectives.” In the military he says, propaganda is seen as a “force multiplier.”

“PANAMA DECEPTION” FORESHADOWED THIS DECEPTION

NONE of this is new, of course, only more sophisticated. Last night I spoke after a screening of Barbara Trent’s 1992 film “The Panama Deception,” which won the Academy Award for documentary (but was never shown on PBS.) It deals with the US invasion of Panama and features a cavalcade of familiar faces and themes. There’s Cheney, Powell, and an attempt to keep the public from knowing the damage the war caused. After the war, like this one, mass graves have been discovered. Only the ones there were filled with victims of US firepower. There is also a clear exposition of the role of the media in obscuring the truth of what happened. If you changed the soundtrack, it might have passed as a film about Iraq.

