

May 20, 2003

JEROLD – BEARER OF BAD TIDINGS

Every time I see Jerold Kesler I know what he's going to tell us. He is the "breaking news" bearer of bad tidings. He gets automatic face time on CNN whenever there is a suicide bombing. You can close your eyes and hear him cite the body count and then describe the retaliation already underway, as in "Israeli Defense Forces are already responding with tanks and planes and armed intervention."

He is a bear of a man, bearded, soft spoken, clearly very informed but always recycling the same storyline ad infinitum, live via satellite. There is rarely any other. All the news seems to sound like all the other news. The incidents merge with each other except when there is an exploitable element – like this morning's report in the New York Post that a suicide bomber wore high heels. (This adds the sniff of sex to the smell of blood – always a good tabloid subtext.) The official rationale is always about insuring security even as insecurity spreads. Week after week, month after month, there's the ever-earnest Jerold in my living room, acting as spokesman for the grim reaper. Now that Ari Fleisher is resigning, he may have the field to himself.

Every time I see Jerold I know what he's going to tell us, although this morning for the first time in recent memory he interviewed a leader of the "opposition" Labor Party who called for a peace settlement. Sharon is holding off for now because, having destabilized the Arafat Administration, he wants to put this new one in place even though it

barely has the capacity or the stability to act decisively. Strange how, after you destroy the Palestinian Authority security force, that you then demand it end all violence. Road map anyone?

It's cycle of violence time again. The images are as familiar as the words: bearded Israeli men out searching for body parts in the streets and Israeli soldiers filling body bags in the "territories." It is a familiar script of a predictable and depressing scenario that seems to escalate whenever peace threatens to break out, even on the smallest scale.

The media focus on these incidents, on the bloodshed, just reinforces the sense of tragedy and futility of two peoples pictured only as hating each other. The cumulative impression: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is beyond redemption, beyond solution. (I am working on a longer version of this assessment that will appear soon in the region at the invitation of the Israel-Palestine Journal published in Jerusalem).

GUSH SHALOM: SHARON LOVES IT

THE Israeli Peace group Gush Shalom comments on how all of these terror incidents buttress Sharon's rule. They were writing about the one just two days ago: "the timing of the blast could hardly have been better from the point of view of Ariel Sharon: a few hours after a futile meeting between the Israeli PM and his recently-appointed Palestinian counterpart Abu Mazen, in which Sharon had nothing to offer but which provided a

cheap and easy way to appear a peacemaker; a few hours before Sharon was due to embark on a flight to Washington and a meeting with George W., at which some commentators hesitantly expected the US president to apply some pressure on the long-festering issue of the illegal settlement outposts. (Now, Sharon has gotten the perfect pretext to put off that meeting.)

“Indeed, so perfectly does today’s blast fit in with Sharon’s program that one is tempted to indulge in conspiracy theories. But a sober examination would get to the conclusion that Sharon has no need to do anything complicated and risky, like infiltrating agents into the Hamas command. In the past month he had simply done again what he has done with extreme success again and again over the past two years: provoke and manipulate the radical Palestinian groups into doing his work for him, while sincerely believing themselves to be patriotic Palestinians and devout Muslims.” Lest my selection of these comments be misunderstood: Acts of violence against non-combatants on every side are self-defeating, wrong and criminal. They are easy perhaps for some to rationalize but totally unacceptable. The climate of hatred – with its anti-Semitism and contempt for the Muslim faith – has to be challenged. However, it’s unlikely that this climate will change anytime soon. The “road maps” we have been following so far lead only into a cul-de-sac.

SO MAYBE IT WASN’T AL-QAEDA

YESTERDAY, I noted that blaming all the recent terror attacks on a centralized Al Qaeda command was an oversimplification. Sure enough, today, the “experts” are now saying that the bomb blasts in Morocco probably grow out of

a regional issue – continued resistance to that country’s intervention in the neighboring Western Sahara, a 30-year story that gets no attention here. Africa remains blacked out in most of the Western media. You could check AllAfrica.com for smart reporting. Another crisis out of the news – the fighting in the Congo, which amounts to a world war in terms of the number of casualties and countries involved. There’s no coverage. Just today the Mail and Guardian reports from South Africa:

“Allegations of cannibalism once again circulated in the troubled northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo, with terrified witnesses describing the mutilation and eating of the dead during more than a week of tribal fighting that killed scores and forced thousands to flee.” Ah, that’s an angle. Cannibalism. I can hear an exec over at the Faux News Channel saying, “Yes, that could sell.”

“SO TIRED WHEN HE GOES ON LIKE THAT”

AS for Saudi Arabia, here’s an account by Sam Smith of the Progressive Review on how NBC’s Tim Russert was covering that story. “In an extraordinary tirade, even for the age of Bill O’Reilly, Tim Russert on ‘Meet the Press’ took up nearly half of the words – 47% – in the transcript of an interview with Saudi foreign policy adviser Adel Al-Jubeir to castigate the Saudis for their failure to protect American lives, form of government, and anti-Semitism. Even more remarkable than Russert’s time-hogging and his rhetorical, unjournalistic, and hyperbolic questioning, was the interview sounded suspiciously like something produced at the Bush Pentagon rather than by NBC. If it was in fact the work of the network, then several people there, starting with Russert,

need to go back to journalism school for “unembedding” instruction. It was also a bit unseemly for Russert to berate the Saudis’ for considering Islam the one true religion, when Russert’s own Catholic faith was still officially anathematizing many Protestant sects until a few years ago. Russert’s distaste for misbehaving foreigners is not new. Some years ago, your editor attended a Washington dinner party where Russert was leading a conversation dedicated to blessing America’s imperial impulse of the moment. I listened quietly as long as I could and then asked gently, “Well, how many more civilians do you think we need to kill in order to make our point?”

The room seized up. I parried a bit and then retreated, realizing that no good was going to come of all this. On the other hand, something interesting did. Sitting next to me was the wife of a killer scribe, herself a noted journalist. She had said nothing but after I asked my question, she patted my arm. This nationally known reporter was ever so gently and civilly egging me on but saying nothing. When it was time to leave, Mrs. Tim Russert took me aside and remarked, “I’m glad you said what you did. I get so tired when he goes on like that. Sorry, but it seems to be getting worse with age.”

WHO ARE TERRORISTS?

AS we think about terrorism today, let us remember a terror incident from our own history. The New York Times reminds us that today is an anniversary: “On May 20, 1961, a white mob attacked a busload of “Freedom Riders” in Montgomery, Ala., prompting the federal government to send in United States marshals to restore order.” At the same time, despite all the terror talk, terror news, and terror blues, the terror war is

pretty screwed.

Here’s Mark Fazlollah in yesterday’s Philadelphia Inquirer: “In the first two months of this year, the Justice Department filed charges against 56 people, labeling all the cases as “terrorism.” But an Inquirer investigation has found that at least 41 of them had nothing to do with terrorism – a point that prosecutors of the cases themselves acknowledge.” Is it any wonder that jokes like the following rocket from one inbox to another? Here it is: “Latest terrorist news: Apparently a teacher has been arrested in the UK in possession of compasses, protractor, and straight edge. It is claimed he is a member of the Al Gebra movement bearing weapons of math instruction.”

WAR COVERAGE

MEDIA TENOR, the international monitoring group, has now issued a 59-page report on international news coverage of the Iraq War. “MEDIA TENOR conducted a detailed analysis of the main evening news broadcasts of three U.S., one British, three German, two Czech and two South African TV networks between March 20 and April 16 to determine how news of the war was presented to their respective audiences.

“Several questions appear in the context of media coverage of the war, to which our news content analysis provides a solid basis for discussion. To what degree are American patriotism and European anti-Americanism a by-product of news coverage of the war? For one, our research indicates that even among coalition countries, the degree of criticism and vindication the allies met both in their respective countries and internationally differed greatly. The British and their actions in the war, e.g., did not suffer nearly the same extent of vilification the U.S. met on many news

broadcasts outside of its borders.

“Furthermore, what were the actual benefits of embedding journalists with the troops? Here, we found that the amount of reports from the front, compared to reports from Baghdad, the studio or other locations, varied significantly among different networks. Journalists were also unusually introspective about their working conditions. In fact, of all the news broadcasts we analyzed, it was only on U.S. broadcasts that journalists evaluated their working conditions in the war more positively than negatively, namely on NBC and CBS.

“Perhaps most importantly, but also most difficult to discuss: To which degree were journalists in the U.S. and abroad serving the interests of their governments, intentionally or not? Was the media merely part of a larger war strategy? Many facts about this and other facets of the war will surface only over the course of the next decades, but our research does indicate that news media in different countries, if they did not lend outright support to their governments, cloaked in voices of patriotism and criticism, certainly did not oppose them.” See www.mediatenor.com for more.

MORE MILITARY CASUALTIES

ANOTHER US military aircraft crashed in Iraq with 4 or 5 deaths, depending on which news outlet you watched. YellowTimes.org reports: “When U.S. forces first rolled into the outskirts of Baghdad on April 6th, the number of coalition fatalities stood at 126 – 96 U.S. and 30 British. In the month following the “liberation” of Baghdad, the eradication of Saddam’s Baath party, and the control of all Iraqi territory by the coalition and their allies, that number jumped to 172 total fatalities. In the week since May 6th, the number rose further to 186 – 155 U.S. and 31 British deaths.

“The reports from military sources seem to cover all action/accidental deaths in Iraq up to May 10th; the change in the total number reflects late reporting or pending investigations into cause of death. Some reports, mentioned by CNN, seem to indicate bizarre accidents: “Killed when he fell from a ladder, causing his M4 rifle to accidentally discharge on May 3, 2003; killed April 17, 2003, in a Kuwait vehicle accident; killed on April 28, 2003, when he was struck by a civilian vehicle.”

WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY

DID you know that yesterday was World Communications Day? UN Secretary General Kofi Anan marked that day of days by calling on all nations “to help bridge the global digital divide between developed and developing nations.”

“The terms ‘information society,’ ‘digital era,’ or the ‘information age’ have all been used to describe our era,” said Annan. “Whatever term we use, the society we build must be open and pluralistic – one in which all people, in all countries, have access to information and knowledge.” So reported the UN, and virtually no one else.

SUPPORT DANNY GLOVER

THERE was some other telecommunications news though. The New York Times reports today, “MCI Agrees to Pay \$500 Million in Fraud. The payment, which will ultimately be given to investors, resolves the biggest fraud case ever filed by the S.E.C.” And speaking of MCI, TransAfrica is rallying supporters of actor Danny Glover to demand that this scandal-scarred company not succumb to a right-wing campaign to dump his services on commercials for “the neighborhood” phone service. Bill Fletcher of TransAfrica writes

about “an attempt to have the telecommunications giant MCI distance itself from Danny Glover who has signed on to a series of television spots. In fact, the political right is organizing a campaign demanding that MCI formally terminate its relationship with Danny.”

TransAfrica continues: “Letting MCI know how we feel is an important statement against the campaigns to demonize, discredit and destroy that has characterized this administration and its supporters on both international and domestic fronts. TransAfrica Forum calls upon its allies, friends and families, as well as friends and supporters of Danny Glover, to contact MCI immediately.” So far, Danny G has not commented. He is performing on Broadway in the play, *Master Harold and the Boys*, written by South African playwright Athol Fugard.

MICHAEL MOORE

FROM Cannes comes this internet report on a pitch meeting in which Michael Moore promoted his new film-in-the-making, called *Fahrenheit 911*, to film buyers. The person who wrote this wanted anonymity calling him or herself “Nobody.”

Nobody reports: “Prior to the event I was told in confidence that Mel Gibson’s Icon Productions had to drop the project due to the White House calling Mel. Icon had announced the project, and

as it obviously is at odds with Mel’s politics, it was dropped.

Nobody continues: “Moore had this to say about the film: ‘It’s about the Bush family, their extensive connection with the Bin Laden family and the environment within the USA post-Sept 11. He has footage of the Bush family dining with the Bin Laden family. It elaborates on the business relationship between the families that has existed for many years. It explores how a Saudi charter plane traveled to the US immediately after Sept 11 and how the FBI was pissed that they couldn’t interrogate its Bin Laden passengers as they were ferried to Paris. It looks at the way in which the government used the events of Sept 11 to push their own agendas.’”

Nobody continues: “During question time one audience member questioned his ability to finish the film, to which his answer was, ‘Any attempt to stop it will just create more interest.’ He also said he would explore the reasons as to why Blair put his arse on the line to support Bush and in the process try to make a film that is funnier and more shocking than *COLUMBINE* . . . Thus began the distributor buying frenzy. *FARENHEIT 9-11: THE TEMPERATURE AT WHICH TRUTH BURNS* will be ready for Cannes next year and release Sept in North America, prior to the elections, I’m told.”

