

May 30, 2003

ROADMAPS: THEIRS AND OURS

Poof: “President Bush The War Maker” turned into “President Bush The Peace Maker” this morning as he lifted off for a trip overseas, including the Middle East where he will meet the Israelis and Palestinians and try to cement some new relationships in that violence- and injustice-wracked area. (But that’s after meetings in “Old Europe” with our “allies” (read adversaries). The New York Post is spinning this as a great victory for Ariel Sharon, the Israeli leader who has until now brushed aside peace overtures. “OLIVE BRANCH: Ariel’s Historic Bid For Peace” is how they headline it on Page 1. “Sharon takes giant step towards Peace” is the page two headline. The New York Times is playing it straighter as CNN this morning carried sound bites from negotiators on both sides about how sincere they are. “Mahmoud Abbas reiterated his intention to put a halt to violence, while Ariel Sharon promised an easing of restrictions on Palestinians.”

How quickly images are transformed. Will a Nobel Prize be next? To gain a better perspective on what we are really talking about, or more precisely what the US media is NOT talking about, read on.

HOPE IN THE MEDIA, DESPAIR ON THE GROUND

TO kick things off there was another Israeli incursion into Gaza. Amira Hess, the brave Israeli journalist who covers the Palestinians for Ha’aretz in

Israel, wrote yesterday of the gap between the rhetoric in the media and the reality on the ground: “Talk and declarations have more influence than facts and actions on the ground. This can be seen once again in the contradictory reactions – furious or welcoming – to the government’s approval of the road map and to the fire-breathing statements by Ariel Sharon that it’s wrong to rule over 3.5 million Palestinians, that occupation is not good, that there’s no alternative but to agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state.

“The facts on the ground, which don’t create as strong an impression as the rhetoric, are established every day. The facts are called the separation fence and security fences around settlements, security roads and bypass roads that continue to cut off the Palestinian villages from each other and the villagers from their land, and construction in the settlements that were already vastly expanded during the Oslo era to the point where they constitute about half the total area of the West Bank.

“The Palestinians are exhausted by the unequal struggle with Israel, which is a world-class military power. Maybe that’s why, lacking any alternative, they might decide to accept the Bantustan state that is meant to absorb hundreds of thousands of refugees. The “closure camps” will nurture poverty and economic distress, without any room for development. Whether their children agree to continue living in “peace” in suffocating

enclaves, is another question entirely." Is this peace or a land in pieces?

SPEAKING UP ABOUT THE FCC

I WAS on four radio stations yesterday talking about next Monday's expected FCC decision which will lift restraints, revise regulations, and otherwise give more power to media cartels. Barry Diller, the one media exec who speaks out for continued regulation refers to his counterparts as oligarchs. See Mediareform.net for a full report on the growing opposition to the FCC decision. It is a marvelous source. The Center for Democratic media says there is still time to file comments. Here's a URL. Do it.

<http://www.democraticmedia.org/getinvolved/directAction.html>

This enables you to file opposition at FCC and in Congress. June 16th is the deadline. But even as the insiders say the dirty deal is done, fresh disclosures are coming out about the way the "regulators" at the FCC operate. Bob Williams of the Center for Public Integrity (CPI) reports: "The nation's top broadcasters have met behind closed doors with Federal Communications Commission officials more than 70 times to discuss a sweeping set of proposals to relax media ownership rules, the Center for Public Integrity has discovered.

"The private sessions included dozens of meetings between broadcasters and the agency's five commissioners and their top advisors. The 71 meetings FCC officials have held with top broadcasters were in stark contrast to the number of private sessions with Consumers Union and the Media Access Project, the two major consumer groups working on the issue. Those two groups have had only five such sessions with commis-

sioners and other agency officials since the proposals first surfaced eight months ago.

SCANDAL TIME ON THE POTOMAC

THIS follows an earlier disclosure by the CPI, which Texas columnist Molly Ivins writes about. (See Alternet.org) "The Public Integrity people examined the travel records of FCC employees and found that they have accepted 2,500 trips, costing nearly \$2.8 million over the past eight years, paid for by the telecommunications and broadcast industries, which are, theoretically, "regulated" by the FCC. The industry-paid travel is on top of about \$2 million a year in official travel paid for by taxpayers.

"According to the center, FCC commissioners and agency staffers attended hundreds of conventions, conferences and other events all over the world, including Paris, Hong Kong and Rio de Janeiro. They were put up at luxury hotels such as the Bellagio in Las Vegas and ferried about by limo. Vegas was the top destination – 330 trips; New Orleans second with 173; then New York at 102; and London with 98 trips. Why London, you may ask. Well, do ask.

"The FCC is what is known in government circles as a "captive agency." It has been captured by the industry it is supposed to regulate. Those who work at captive agencies come to identify with their industry and believe their function is to service it, not regulate it."

RUSH AND TED AND MICHAEL

P JACKIE NEWBERRY, also in Texas comments on yesterday's blog concerning FCC Chairman Michael Powell's refusal to appear on *Nightline*. "Yes, I noticed Ted's disgruntled demeanor. I

heard on Rush that Powell, who he hailed w/flowery verbosity, was on CNBC last night. Rush played clips including Powell's response to MoveOn's ad (which he found entertaining) and said, "it just goes to show you the level of [ignorance or lack of understanding]" or something dismissive along those lines. Powell gloated; I could tell that in his smarmy speech. I think he must have found the reception at CNBC more to his liking."

Rupert Murdoch's New York Post reports on all thism too. Not disclosing Murdoch's interest, its report is all rosy. There's a picture of Powell with the caption "Playing by the rules." There's a headline that says: "Media ownership rule change unlikely to yield media merger." 'Nuff said.

WAR WITH IRAN NEXT?

CHRISTIANE ARMAPOUR of CNN had a decent report on Iran – it looked like part of a documentary on the air this morning. She showed the conflict underway by the elected President and Parliament and the religious authorities. ABC News is reporting that the United States may be on the verge of further destabilizing that country. "The Pentagon is advocating a massive covert action program to overthrow Iran's ruling ayatollahs as the only way to stop the country's nuclear weapons ambitions, senior State Department and Pentagon officials told ABC News.

The proposal, which would include covert sponsorship of a group, currently deemed terrorist by the U.S. government, is not new and has not won favor with enough top officials to be acted upon. But sources say it is a viable option that is getting a new look as the administration ramps up its rhetoric against Iran, and it is likely to be one of the top items on the agenda as high-level U.S. policymakers meet today to discuss how to

deal with the Islamic republic."

Please underscore the phrase "ramps up its rhetoric." It is safe to predict that a compliant media will soon "ramp up" its coverage.

IT IS DAY 71

MEANWHILE, next door in Iraq more instability and another American dead. Nicholas Kristof writes in the New York Times: "On Day 71 of the Hunt for Iraqi WMD, yesterday, once again nothing turned up. Maybe we'll do better on Day 72. But we might have better luck searching for something just as alarming: the growing evidence that the administration grossly manipulated intelligence about those weapons of mass destruction in the run-up to the Iraq war."

President Bush this morning cited the presence of two "mobile labs" as evidence of the presence of such weapons. There has been no outside verification of this much-ballyhooed discovery. Online, The Guardian reported on a more promising discovery:

WEAPONS FOUND. GUESS WHERE?

"**THE** Pentagon has finally discovered evidence of weapons of mass destruction – buried in a US Army base 50 miles from Washington DC.

"Investigators at Fort Detrick in Maryland have unearthed more than 2,000 tons of hazardous waste, including 100 vials of anthrax and other dangerous bacteria. They are believed to be left over from a US germ warfare program that ended in 1969.

"They also found a non-virulent form of anthrax. The potent form of the disease was brewed by the gallon at Fort Detrick until the weapons program was shut down by President

Richard Nixon. “You never know what’s there until you start digging,” said Colonel John Ball, the Fort Detrick garrison commander.

“We’ve generally ruled out finding a nuclear weapon.”

US MEDIA OUTLETS: WE HAVE BEEN HAD

ANOTHER bombshell has legs. American media outlets are now confirming the BBC report that we were all misled by the Jessica Lynch escape story in Iraq. CBS News reports: “The April 1 rescue of prisoner-of-war Pfc. Jessica Lynch was a huge morale booster for the United States, and a big propaganda victory – that much is certain.

“The proof is in the grainy night-vision footage of the raid, and the still picture of Lynch in a rescue helicopter with a folded American flag on her chest. But whether it was a military operation or a photo opportunity depends on whom is asked.

“An Associated Press reporter spoke to more than 20 doctors, nurses and other workers at the Iraqi hospital where Lynch had been held.

“In interview after interview, the assessment was the same: The dramatics that surrounded Lynch’s rescue were unnecessary. Some also said the raid itself was unneeded because they were trying to turn Lynch over, although they conceded they made no attempt to notify U.S. troops of that effort.

“If they had come to the door and asked for Jessica, we would have gladly handed her over to them. There was no need for all that drama,” said Dr. Hazem Rikabi, an internist.

CIA MEMORANDUM: ARREST THE MEDIA

HERE'S a worrisome development reported by

MSNBC.com. A new CIA report threatening the prosecution of media outlets under espionage laws for broadcasting or leaking classified information.

The memorandum, called “The Consequences of Permissive Neglect,” argues that the U.S. media has become an “open vault of classified information on U.S. intelligence collection sources and methods,” which “pose a serious, seemingly intractable problem for U.S. national security.” In effect, the CIA wants the vault sealed shut.

The CIA memorandum, written by James B. Bruce, a senior official on the agency’s “foreign denial and deception committee,” surprisingly has received no national media attention so far, even though it goes straight to the heart of the current government-media relationship. These memoranda, generally written by active CIA staff or recent retirees, do not represent official CIA policy. But they have in the past been used as a way for the intelligence agency, which technically is not supposed to tamper in domestic politics, to get on the record with Congress and with the public on issues that it regards of critical importance.

The proposal to treat leaks of classified information as a criminal act is, in itself, not unusual or particularly controversial. Virtually every president, at one time or another, demands that his cabinet investigate the source of particular leaks to the media – usually those that prove politically embarrassing, but also some which are judged to be potential violations of the Espionage Act of 1917.

SILENCING DISSENT

THIS announcement just in from Coldtype.net: “Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times foreign correspondent Chris Hedges made headlines after

MEDIA DIARY DANNY SCHECHTER

being booed from the stage as he tried to deliver an anti-war commencement day speech at Rockford College in Illinois on May 20. According to one report, ‘his microphone was unplugged within three minutes. Voices of protest and the sound of foghorns grew. Some graduates and audience members turned their backs to the speaker in silent protest. Others rushed up the aisle to vocally protest the remarks, and one student tossed his cap and gown to the stage before leaving.’

What did Hedges say (or, rather, try to say) that was so inflammatory? ColdType’s special 14-page report reprints Hedge’s speech, together with the transcript of a radio interview with Democracy Now’s Amy Goodman and an introduction by Danny Schechter, editor of Mediachannel.org.

CHOMSKY ON C-SPAN

C-SPAN announces that Noam Chomsky will be featured this Sunday on “Book TV’s” monthly live three-hour interview and call-in show. This interview will be aired three times: Sunday, June 1 at 12:00 pm and at 6:00 pm; and Monday, June 2 at 12:00 am. For more info: <http://Noam-Chomsky.com>

COMING SOON: THE FIRST BOOK ON MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE WAR

MEDIACHANNEL.ORG announces the imminent online publication of a new edition of WEAPONS OF MASS DECEPTION, a new book by Danny Schechter on the media’s role in the War on Iraq. This book collects weblogs, longer articles, and essays and new material to assess the

media coverage and its political impact. Published in PDF format by Tony Sutton on Coldtype.Net, the book is the first full day-by-day assessment of what we heard and saw, and how propaganda and deception influenced our understanding of the conflict. This new book will be available soon.

Mediachannel.org invites our readers to order a copy now (a print edition will be available from Innovatio Books in Germany, and we hope to arrange other publications.) We encourage readers to get this ‘instant’ and timely book and Danny Schechter’s other book, MEDIA WARS: News At A Time of Terror (Rowman and Littlefield). For a \$100 donation to Media Channel (Checks to The Global Center) we will also send you a copy of the Media Wars CD containing new music about the media. Contributions are tax deductible. Order the two books and CD now.

“NOT FOR US” AGAIN

LISTENING to all the talk by Hollywood heavies about the destruction of the independent media sector there has not been encouraging. Once again, yesterday, a TV outlet told me that a documentary I want to do about the media coverage in Iraq, the subject of a new book (see above), is “a great idea but not for us.” The squeeze is on the ad market for critical media shrinks.

At the same time, I would like to think that the growing disaffection with the media, and the realization that our system of news and information is corrupted, degraded, and unbalanced may inspire some people of means to invest in new ventures and initiatives that we might take part in. The need has never been greater.

