

September 8, 2003

PANCHO V AND GWB BATTLE FOR RATINGS

On Sunday night, I was flipping around the dials waiting for President Bush to address the nation. To my surprise, he had scheduled his speech at the same time as Showtime was airing that docudrama “DC 911” in his honor. Maureen Dowd of the New York Times noticed that too. “W is preempting himself,” she wrote. On one channel, there was Bush the iconic; on the rest of them, Bush the ironic. Perhaps even he was embarrassed by being impersonated by an actor whose last outing in the role was ridiculing him on the Comedy Channel. Perhaps, Showtime was just not not enough to contain his ego. He craved prime time too.

The speech also pre-empted “War Stories with Oliver North” a Fox News staple. (Talk about fiction!). Before THE SPEECH, Faux was featuring a live report from Baghdad talking about all the “progress that is being made” in Iraq in the form of hospitals “back on line,” schools opening, and a new made by the USA government in waiting. It was a mood setting exercise to predispose us to genuflect toward Mr. Bush as that Channel so often does. On MSNBC, Republican pollster Frank Luntz was telling Chris Matthews how important this exercise was to getting Bush’s “numbers” up. The approval rating had fallen; the numbers of people opposing his policies rising. “Why had he waited so long,” was the public opinion pundit’s question.

What are those numbers? The data here from

polling report.com is as follows: “CNN reports, “41% of all registered voters say they will definitely vote AGAINST Bush; just 29% say they will definitely vote FOR him. So Bush must woo about seven in ten swing voters — not a difficult task for a popular incumbent, but far from a certainty.” Not clear to me is why 29% makes him so popular?

SHOWTIME V. SHOWTIME

AND then it was show time (with a small s) for the speech while his entertainment program ran on Viacom’s big S, SHOWTIME, which packaged this movie makeover as part of a series called “No Limits.” There were no limits to the contradictions in, and chutzpath of, a propaganda exercise which he carried off with only a few minor gaffes.

I heard the word “CIVILIZED WORLD” four times, an allusion to the clash of civilizations thesis that I thought the Administration wanted to get way from. But no, there it was: we are defending the CIVILIZED world and battling terrorists where they live. (I remembered Ghandi’s comment about western civilization. He said he thought it WOULD be a good idea.)

No one mentioned before or afterwards that whatever terrorists are now in Iraq seem to have arrived after we did. Iraq is now the “central front” in the war on terror or as the President put it, it is freedom’s frontier. Note the absence of the phrase “Axis of Evil” or much on those WMDs (The Iraqi reaction on CNN and BBC was incredulity.) Duh?

After he spoke, three more American soldiers were wounded in the latest “incident.” While he spoke, American troops were carrying out more raids in Tikrit, perhaps hoping to bag some big game to add a “Breaking News” capper to the evening.

Of course, the big headline is that we are going to be trying to browbeat the UN again to support a new resolution. “Frantic negotiations continued this weekend in New York to secure a United Nations resolution,” the Observer explained on Sunday, “that would open the way for other countries to deploy peacekeeping troops to help after Bush - with one eye on next year’s presidential election - signalled a change of heart on America’s refusal to allow any but coalition forces into Iraq.)

SHOW ME THE MONEY

THE other headline is that that the Administration is asking for a mere \$87 BILLION to wage this war in/on Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries to be named later. The lack of specificity was stunning but none of that troubled, Senator Joe Biden who showed up on cue on NBC and CNN afterwards. Nor did it bother General Electric’s-General in residence Barry McCaffrey, well known for “winning” the drug war. Tom Brokaw kept asking if someone in the fantasyland of Washington should not be held accountable for the disaster that befell Iraq after our liberators came marching in. No one answered the question although General M did point the finger at Donald Rumsfeld for trying to run a war “on the cheap,” not exactly a responsive reply. A top Congressional Democrat has since demanded Rumsfeld’s head.

Over on MSNBC, Chris Matthews did get another Republican for all Administrations, David Gergen to admit that the Bush speech sounded an

awful lot like Lyndon Johnson talking about the light at the end of the tunnel in Vietnam. No one else mentioned this obvious Vietnam parallel. There were no real critics on as far as I could see anywhere, and in fact, CBS and ABC didn’t even feature commentary. With nearly half the country ragging on Bush, don’t you think these networks could find one outspoken critic? The only left of center pundit I saw on the air was Michael Parenti on CSPAN being interviewed about his book on the assassination of Julius Caesar. What century was that?

Later, Dennis Kucinich issued a statement that no one that I saw picked up. “It’s time to get the UN in and the US out!,” he said. “The Bush Administration’s arrogant occupation of Iraq has harmed the United States’ position in the world community, caused the deaths of 289 American soldiers at last count, and diverted tens of billions of dollars from domestic needs. Now the President is asking for another \$87 billion. Even with that, he will not be able to achieve his objectives.

NOW, NOW

CNN was busy plugging Paula Zahn’s new show originally titled PAULA ZAHN NOW. Sounds like a rip on what Bill Moyers calls his show. That is just plain NOW. It felt like a rip to me of our series SOUTH AFRICA NOW. What happened to originality? Is that the best they could steal? Paula’s first guest is a gutsy choice – George Bush Sr, talking about his son. I am sure we are going to get an independent and critical perspective there. You can’t make this stuff up.

The Bush promotion of all the “progress” being made in Iraq seems to be contradicted totally by thoughtful observers on the ground. In last week’s NATION, Peter Davis of “Hearts and Minds” fame

back in the Vietnam days, actually speaks to ordinary Iraqis, something that Secretary of Defense did not have time to do during his recent trip. He writes “Between most Americans and most Iraqis there is a gulf more unbridgeable than the nearby Persian Gulf, both in terms of worldview and self-recognition.” Mark Danner’s piece in the New York Review of Books goes into more detail on the carefully planned “war beyond the war” that was planned and well executed by Iraqi forces and their allies. Perhaps that’s why the Pentagon is now screening the revolutionary classic film “Battle of Algiers” for tips on how to fight a popularly supported insurgency,

A CALCULATED EXERCISE

THE Bush speech was a calculated exercise in using the media to puff up his position. (“He was playing Commander in Chief,” said Monica Crowley on Fox this morning, unaware of how silly that sounds.) That so many media outlets embraced the speech so uncritically is another disgrace that demands challenge. On the other hand, as Norman Solomon, explains in his column, this week, this approach has been rather consistent, a pattern really since 9/11. He writes this week:

The dramatic changes in political climate after 9/11 included a drastic upward spike in an attitude – fervently stoked by the likes of Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and the president – that our military should be willing to attack potential enemies before they might try to attack us. Few politicians or pundits were willing to confront the reality that this was a formula for perpetual war, and for the creation of vast numbers of new foes who would see a reciprocal logic in embracing such a credo themselves.

“One of the great media cliches of the last two

years is that 9/11 “changed everything.” The portentous idea soon became a truism for news outlets nationwide. But the shock of September 11 could not endure. And the events of that horrific day – while abruptly tilting the political landscape and media discourse – did not transform the lives of most Americans. Despite all the genuine anguish and the overwhelming news coverage, daily life gradually went back to an approximation of normal.”

PANCHO VILLA TO THE RESCUE

BUT even as DC 911 moved into its climatic moment on Showtime with scenes that recreated Bush’s first major TV speech before Congress after 9-11, HBO was countering with its own drama on another media conscious leader, Presidente-revolucionario Pancho Villa of Mexico, who in the pre-TV age made a deal with a Hollywood Film Company to star in a movie of his own war of liberation.

In one scene, Pancho threatens to rip up the studio’s contract because it only guaranteed him 10% of the profits. With a few guns aimed at the head of the studio’s representative, that figure was changed to a previously agreed upon 20%. Pancho, as played by Antonio Bandaras, knew who he was dealing with. Later in the film, the Mutual Film Company returns to lobby Villa for a sequel. They tell him it will help his image because he has “enemies in high places.” He responds; That’s the best place for enemies. We can keep our eye on them.” The epic ends with a comment about how films can distort history and that truth is the first casualty of war. Never mind that that that comment was said by another. It certainly applies to what was happening on that other movie channel

too.

THE 9-11 ANNIVERSARY

THE weather this weekend reminded me of how beautiful it was here in New York on September 11. Blue skies above, warm but not oppressive summer-like heat. Peaceful. Down at the World Trade Center, the souvenir merchants were doing good business to tourists who come to gawk but can't see much. The burning hulk they hoped to see is long gone. Plans for new buildings and some type of memorial are underway. A new state of the art downtown information center has opened under the auspices of an organization called Wall Street Rising. (www.downtowninfocenter.org)

To judge by the performance of the stock market, Wall Street is not rising all that much. What are rising are questions, concerns, and skeptical challenges to the official view of what happened here two years ago this week.

WHO WON?

THE New York Times asks a question that was verboten until now, "WHO WON?" It speaks of the climate of fear and anxiety that still stalks the city and the country. It references the billions that have been spent on homeland security for a country that still feels less secure – and with many good reasons – than it did before the twin towers came crashing down.

Other questions are being raised as well. Many are on websites outside the realm of mainstream acceptability. But outside the United States, there is more skepticism that is finding its way onto TV documentaries and even in leading newspapers. Our media shields us from them because they seem to far out for domestic consumption. Are they?

9-11 AS "IDEAL PRETEXT"

THIS weekend for example, the Guardian carries a piece by a Member of Parliament who was in Tony Blair's Cabinet. His name is Michael Meacher. He charges, "the 9/11 attacks gave the US an ideal pretext to use force to secure its global domination."

He writes "It is clear the US authorities did little or nothing to pre-empt the events of 9/11. It is known that at least 11 countries provided advance warning to the US of the 9/11 attacks. Two senior Mossad experts were sent to Washington in August 2001 to alert the CIA and FBI to a cell of 200 terrorists said to be preparing a big operation (Daily Telegraph, September 16 2001). The list they provided included the names of four of the 9/11 hijackers, none of whom was arrested.

"It had been known as early as 1996 that there were plans to hit Washington targets with airplanes. Then in 1999 a US national intelligence council report noted that "al-Qaida suicide bombers could crash-land an aircraft packed with high explosives into the Pentagon, the headquarters of the CIA, or the White House."

So what happened to this warnings? Why weren't they acted upon? Meacher ask: "Was this inaction simply the result of key people disregarding, or being ignorant of, the evidence? Or could US air security operations have been deliberately stood down on September 11? If so, why, and on whose authority? The former US federal crimes prosecutor, John Loftus, has said: "The information provided by European intelligence services prior to 9/11 was so extensive that it is no longer possible for either the CIA or FBI to assert a defense of incompetence.

His conclusion:

“The conclusion of all this analysis must surely be that the “global war on terrorism” has the hallmarks of a political myth propagated to pave the way for a wholly different agenda – the US goal of world hegemony, built around securing by force command over the oil supplies required to drive the whole project. Is collusion in this myth and junior participation in this project really a proper aspiration for British foreign policy? If there was ever need to justify a more objective British stance, driven by our own independent goals, this whole depressing saga surely provides all the evidence needed for a radical change of course.”

CONFERENCES AND TEACH-INS

A CONFERENCE dealing with these questions took place recently in Berlin, and another series of meetings is being convened later this week in New York’s Riverside Church sponsored by WBAI radio and organizations which include the families of WTC victims. (I will be speaking on a panel at the Church on the role of the media next Saturday morning.) The German event framed its questions this way: “A sober look into the disturbing oddities and background of the Sept. 11 attacks raises countless legitimate questions that demand answers. Questions about accountability and the possible degree of foreknowledge among responsible officials - about the background to the intelligence and law enforcement failures that preceded the attacks – and about the failure of response by U.S. defenses on the day of Sept. 11.

“In a democracy, any disaster on this scale calls out for a fully-funded, independent investigation, with subpoena power and testimony under oath. Yet for two years the White House has blocked all independent efforts to investigate.”

PEACEFUL TOMORROWS

ONE organization of families of those killed in New York is calling for Peaceful Tomorrows. Colleen Kelly, one of the family members has issued a call of circles of hope. She asks: “beyond granite, beyond the confines of eighteen acres, how do we as a nation want 9/11 remembered in history? The choice is before us, in the here and now. Was that clear blue day two years ago the beginning of an endless war on terror? Or was it the day the deaths of three thousand people gave the world pause, and after a few false starts, shifted us all towards a new understanding of global justice and peace.

“On this two-year anniversary, we invite you to gather with the families of Peaceful Tomorrows as we remember 9/11 with a circle of hope. We will encircle the World Trade Center site with a vigil on the night of September 10, 2003. Please gather with us in New York City to reclaim the anniversary of 9/11.” I hope to be covering these events.

MIDDLE EAST IMPLOSION

SPEAKING of peace and progress in the Middle East, not that President Bush totally ignored the unraveling of his “road map” The resignation of Abu Mazin, prime minister of the Palestinian Authority rated nary a mention nor his condemnation of the US and Israel for not supporting the process. Now the speaker o the Palestinian Parliament may give it a try if he receives assurances from the US and Israel that they will honor the roadmap. Much of the press, especially in Israel blamed Arafat for this failure, blamed Hamas (whose spiritual leader Sheikh Yassin was the target of a botched Israelu assassination attempt), blamed everyone but the people that the Israeli

peace movement was blaming. Gush Shalom was quite explicit about who they think is responsible.

“The resignation of Abu-Mazen (Mahmud Abbas) is a great victory for Ariel Sharon. From the beginning, Sharon intended to topple Abu-Mazen. It was obvious that President Bush’s has taken a liking to this Palestinian leader, and this endangered Sharon’s exclusive status in the White House. Therefore it was Sharon’s aim to bring about the political elimination of Abu-Mazen in a way calculated to put the blame on Yasser Arafat. Thus Sharon hoped to kill two birds with one stone: safeguard his exclusive influence on Bush and prepare the way for the elimination of Arafat.

WILL ISRAEL EXPEL ARAFAT

AS for Arafat, Israeli news sources report: “Several government ministers are in favor of expelling Arafat, an option that has been discussed on and off for over two years. Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom said, “Arafat’s expulsion is an inevitable consequence after his many years of involvement in terrorism, and his many years of trying to murder Israelis and prevent any type of organized peace process between us and them.” Public Security Minister Tzachi HaNegbi, speaking with Arutz-7 today, took a more moderate position, saying that he had not yet made up his mind. He said he is not sure if allowing Arafat to roam from one world capital to another would be advantageous for Israel. Prime Minister Sharon is leaving for India tomorrow, and has not said if and when he will convene a meeting on this issue.”

AL JAZERRA AND AL QAEDA

THE arrest in Spain of an Al Jazeera reporter for alleged links to Al Qaeda was condemned by the Qatar-based network as false. CNN reported: “Authorities believe that Tayseer Allouni – who interviewed al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden nearly two years ago – provided support for two suspected members of the group, a Spanish court official told CNN. Many felt the charge may be credible because the arrest warrant was issued by a widely-respected Judge. Baltasar Garzon. He is leading the Spanish investigation into Al Qaeda and was the Judge who pursued Chile’s Pinochet for human rights abuses.

Allouni’s wife Fatima Hamed Layasi rejected the accusation. Al Jazeera’s new English website reported; “Aljazeera spokesperson Jihad Ballout criticized Spain’s detention of Alouni saying it “is another inconvenience to which journalists in general and those from Aljazeera in particular fall victim”. Alouni appears in Court today. A source of mine at Al Jazeera saw the indictment as one more effort to discredit Al Jazeera. He called it “pathetic.”

The aggressively pro-Israel website, Littlegreen-footballs.com, carries comments which indictate that its readers have already convicted Allouni before he is even tried~that is, if he ever comes to trial. Someone named Joshua wrote “ have suspected for some time that Al-Jazeera is the nerve center of Al-Qaeda, sending messages from top leaders to grunts via tapes and reports. We should use our power to destroy that network, it is the

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part of the beast and it must be neutralized.” Another letter writer accused Al Jazeera of paying people to fire on Americans in Iraq. Another reader writes; “I am very happy that we arrested that scumbag, and hope it leads to more arrests.” So much for innocent until proven guilty.

Not everyone agrees with this view. According to one little green football, the conservative Canadian columnist Eric Margolis, author of “War At The Top Of The World” said: “that al-Jazeera was under tremendous pressure from the US because it didn’t “toe the party line,” that al-Jazeera offices in Kabul, Basra, and Baghdad had been attacked by the US Air Force (I think B’dad was the 3rd Infantry Division, but whatever), and that – when asked by the interviewer Myles O’Brien if he intended to imply that the US “pressure” on the

network included US military action, said yes!”

Meanwhile, Al Jazeera reports today that “Iran repeatedly offered to exchange al-Qaida suspects in its custody for Iranian opposition leaders exiled in the United States, a German newspaper has reported. Tehran proposed to swap al-Qaida leaders for members of the Iranian People’s Mujahideen opposition group, the German weekly Welt am Sonntag reported. Quoting “German and Iranian intelligence services”, the paper said Iran wanted the deal to be kept secret and to include its own removal from Washington’s “axis of evil” list of countries. But US authorities “did not take them seriously”, the paper said, despite receiving several such offers, some using Germany as an intermediary, between October 2002 and February this year.”

