

Toppling reality - image warfare in Iraq

THE American media is awash in images of cheering Iraqis welcoming their American “liberators.” Our visual lexicon will forever contain toppling Saddam statues along with images of a falling Berlin wall, crumbling Twin Towers, Iwo Jima flag raising and a naked Vietnamese girl running from a napalm attack.

Network anchors are obsessively telling us we’re witnessing history. And we are. It’s just not the history they’re telling us we’re watching. What we are seeing is the ultimate triumph of the image – with the pivotal battles of war playing out in the theater of informatics. Welcome to the post-modern media war.

Last week’s toppling of a Central Baghdad statue of Saddam Hussein marked the turning point in the Iraq invasion. Pundits were tripping over themselves to compare this new image to the destruction of the Berlin wall. But, in reality, there’s one main difference. The German people tore down the Berlin wall. Saddam’s statue was pulled down by an invading army. Ultimately, who pulled the statue down is unimportant. What’s important is the image of the statue falling.

Marshall McLuhan’s war

Marshall McLuhan once said that World War Three would be an information war. We’re certainly seeing that. From a military perspective, the US invasion plan initially didn’t make much sense – with US forces recklessly pushing forward, without securing their supply lines or any territory along the way. If the battle in Baghdad proved to be drawn out, American troops would have found themselves in a very precarious situation. But the plan was never really to fight a drawn out battle – it was to create the illusion of victory. Once the illusion was created, reality would soon follow suit.

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Here's how it worked. US forces charged forward and put Ted Koppel in the Baghdad Airport before the area was secured – creating the TV image of US forces “in Baghdad.” Next, on April 9th, they made a bloody stab into the heart of Baghdad. The cost in civilian lives of that incursion was staggering, with the International Red Cross complaining that they were overwhelmed and could no longer accurately count casualties. The point of this move was not to secure territory per se, but to secure an image – the now famous scene of a toppling Saddam. The US was careful to not knock out electric power across Iraq – so that once the images were broadcast around the world, Iraqis with satellite dishes quickly saw them, too. The image said the war was over. And within moments, the government of Iraq, such as it was, dissolved into oblivion. As word spread that US troops were in Baghdad, Iraqi soldiers peeled their uniforms off, and the war, more or less, faded to pockets of resistance.

The statue event quickly became a metaphor for “liberation.” NPR reported how Iraqis first tried chipping away at the legs of the bronze dictator, then at the concrete base, before ultimately asking the US forces to assist. The images that we saw, however, were tightly controlled and scripted. Dozens celebrated while millions hid in mortal terror. We have no idea who the people in this all male “crowd” were, who brought them to the square, why they didn't fear the otherwise trigger-happy American troops or why those troops didn't fear them or think they were among the 4,000 suicide bombers the media told us entered the country? This wasn't a time to ask questions.

Journalists targeting

And nobody was likely to venture out to ask questions. That's because on April 8th, US forces, in a preliminary raid on Baghdad, fired a tank mortar into the Reuters “office” in the Palestine hotel, launched an air strike on Al Jazeera's office, and attacked the office of Al Jazeera's main competition, Abu Dhabi TV, with small arms fire. When all the shooting was done, a Reuters correspondent, a Spanish Telecino correspondent and one of Al Jazeera's best known correspondents were dead. Six other journalists were wounded. According to Reporters Without Borders, “The US Army deliberately and without warning targeted journalists.” The committee to Protect Journalists declared that the US violated the Geneva Convention by attacking journalists.

Pentagon officials claim they were simply “returning fire” after being fired upon with rockets from the Palestine hotel. Robert Fisk, reporting for the London-based Independent witnessed the attack, and reported hearing no fire before the tank attack. He described the attack as “looking very much like murder.” According to journalists from a host of diverse countries, there was no weapons fire in the area prior to the US attack

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on the journalists' hotel. Witnesses say the tank, over a period of two minutes, sat facing the hotel, adjusting its gun barrel to point to the 15th floor Reuters office, and fired – a scene caught on videotape by a French TV crew.

Pentagon officials also claim they were being fired on from the Al Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV offices as well – charges that the journalists adamantly deny. US forces also shelled an Al Jazeera office in Basra on April 2nd and shot at a clearly marked Al Jazeera vehicle on April 7th.

The end result of these attacks is that most journalists not “embedded” with the US military were basically pinned down under fire and unable to move easily or safely about Baghdad when the “fall of Baghdad” images of a toppling Saddam were recorded by embedded journalists. Hence, the US military public relations forces had near absolute control of the images being produced.

Riding Saddam's head

The powerful images of the Saddam statue's bronze head being dragged through the streets of Baghdad also bore signs of being choreographed, albeit poorly. By freezing the frame of the televised image, one can see that a third of the supposed celebrants being photographed were themselves photojournalists. The image, however, still served its purpose.

In the American press nobody questioned the fact that the footage shot by embedded journalists of the initial images of Iraqis cheering on their American “liberators” was looped, with the same few seconds running over and over again. Once these images entered our visual lexicon, reality followed suit – and we suddenly were awash in images of Shock and Awe survivors suddenly celebrating their liberation. But these images were severed from history and without context. Pundits compared them to World War II era shots of French citizens cheering on their American liberators – but absent from this dialog was any reference to near identical images of citizens cheering on their supposed German “liberators” as the Nazis brutally marched across Europe.

The sad reality is that people quickly adapt to political realities and suck up to whoever is in power – often as quick as possible. Hence we quickly saw images of Iraqis carrying pictures of George W. Bush – and we quickly forgot that they were carrying around similar images of Saddam Hussein last month. For people weaned on generations of totalitarian oppression and colonial occupation, such behavior typifies survivors. We certainly shouldn't humor ourselves into believing we are loved – we're just the new game in town. And people are hungry.

The images are powerful – and they are toxic to a democratic discourse. They are

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extremely sophisticated and designed to elicit an emotional response – which should quickly trump a rational response. Watching these images reminds me of the final scenes of George Orwell's classic work, 1984. Life would be much easier if we could just learn to be like everyone else and love big brother – cheering on the global conquests. Even the best-read peace activist feels a twinge of self-doubt. That wasn't so bad. Then the SUV ad comes on. And it doesn't look so bad. If only we could get with the program. This is what propaganda theorists call the bandwagon effect. People like to cheer for perceived "winners." There's a natural urge to suck up to power; to line the streets and celebrate your own destruction – as we saw in Nazi Germany.

Then the horror of reality sinks in. The endless deaths. The endless war. Boundless hate. Generations of terror. And the Pearly Gates slammed shut in your face because, whether or not you voted for George W. Bush, you're a citizen in a democratic country and this travesty occurred under your watch. ●

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