

July 2, 2003

BECKHAM, BECKHAM AND BECKHAM

The next time you hear how “serious” the BBC is as compared to US networks don’t believe it. The Beeb can pander with the best of them, especially when footballer David Beckham is involved. BBC and CNN were live this morning in Spain as the soccer god was unveiled as a member of Real Madrid to the operatic sounds and the cheers of his many fans. With his long hair impeccably coifed (he travels with his hair dresser, natch) and in a fashionably correct off-white suit, the well tanned sportsman said that he loves his family, has a great life, but it is football that comes first. (I was surprised at how soft spoken and squeaky he sounded in contrast to that superman glow.)

The club unveiled a new shirt with the number 23 (a number well known to Chicago Bulls fans) that is expected to allow the club to recoup its multi-million dollar investment. “Its all about money folks,” is how CNN’s commentator explained it, pointing out that T-Shirt sales has become the profit center. (CNN cut away from the ceremony promising to return live when the great one returned to speak. They missed it and had to rerack the tape.) Back on BBC, they were still Beckhamizing.

I thought I escaped the Beckham bacchanal when I left my apartment. But then I passed the movie theater next door which is playing (you guessed it) “Bend it Like Beckham,” which is supposed to be more interesting than the real thing.

MEANWHILE, IN THE WORLD OF NEWS, AND NEWS ABOUT NEWS

IN the news world, focus was on the latest Israeli pullout from Bethlehem, a murder in a Midwest factory, a missing basketball player, and another US soldier dead in Iraq. The New York Times carries this reassuring word: “Bush Says Attacks on U.S. Forces Won’t Deter Him From the Rebuilding of Iraq.” The Village Voice reports that the US is now paying off the enraged ex-members of the Iraqi army who were promised to be taken care of, only to find that their Organization had been dissolved leaving many penniless. After protests, they won a monthly stipend from \$50 to \$150. The newspaper points to “terrible planning” for the snafu that nearly started a revolution against the US occupation.

ONLINE FROM IRAQ

LOOKING for direct reports from Iraq? Dan Hill writes to advise that there are two web sites that feature writing by veterans of actual combat as well as e-mails from those currently serving in Iraq.

<http://www.hackworth.com> is the web site of retired Col. David Hackworth, most decorated living army veteran.

<http://www.sftt.org/> soldiers for the truth

You can read the firsthand accounts from an educated Iraqi in Baghdad at

http://www.dear_raed.blogspot.com/

Reassessments are underway of how the war was covered, a subject that I have weighed in on daily and with a new book. Most perplexing of course is why the public believes the link between Iraq and 9/11 story even though most journalists never reported it – and despite the lack of evidence. Forgive me, more evidence was offered up to disprove it rather than prove it. And yet the a new survey out yesterday reports: “Only four in 10 of those polled, 39 percent, said they thought the government was being fully truthful when it presented evidence of links between Saddam and al Qaeda. But among those who thought the government was not telling the truth, people were more likely to say the government was “stretching the truth, but not making false statements” rather than “presenting evidence they knew was false.”

WHY DO WE BELIEVE WHAT WE DO?

CLEARLY this is a reflection of the power of the “punditocracy” and the limits of journalism. With the ratio of “opinionizer” to reporter now 3-1 in broadcasting, its not surprising that insinuation, intimation, suggestion, conspiracy mongering, and prejudice are more influential than facts. Especially on television where context is so often absent.

WE SAW IT ON TV

OVER in the UK, the Guardian has a forum about news coverage. Roy Greenslade reported: “War, unlike any other news event, asks profound questions of journalists. How do we separate truth from propaganda? How do we overcome the dilemma of political and military leaders controlling access to vital information? What value

do we place on what we see on the frontline as against what we are told back at headquarters?

“Then come those tough questions which bedevil the relationship between the media and the warriors. Is objectivity unpatriotic? Why should we be fair to both sides? Should we always suppress what we know in the interests of operational security? It would appear from the media’s experiences during the invasion of Iraq by the US and Britain that we are no nearer to finding solutions.

“Michael Wolff’s keynote speech underlined this difference. He said that US journalists working for an “uncritical media” accepted President Bush’s argument for war, appeared sanguine about the way it was prosecuted and, by implication, were therefore happy about their coverage.”

THE MEDIA “KISSED ASS”

WOLFF was particularly struck by the way all the TV network reporters “kissed ass” and he attracted fire from the Bush administration because he dared to point out, quite rightly, that the briefings in Doha by the US military top brass were worthless.

Perhaps the most perceptive and witty comment of all came from James Meek, who in spite of observing battles in the desert, said: “I felt I missed the war because I hadn’t seen it on TV.”

<http://media.guardian.co.uk/mediaguardian/story/0,7558,987506,00.html>

COVERING PRIVATE LYNCH

THE current issue of the Nation investigates the role of the press in the Jessica Lynch rescue drama story, now a largely discredited tale. Daphne Eviatar explains: “In truth, reporters covering the war were in a tough spot. Everyone interviewed for

this story said it was impossible to confirm the Lynch story's details with anyone outside the government in those first days. "No reporters witnessed it," says Gordon. "It was frustrating." New York Times spokesman Toby Usnik said the paper "gave as full an account as possible." Paul Slavin, senior vice president of ABC News, says: "As with many stories, we were left with our sourcing being other government agencies. The whole war was characterized by reporting through straws. There were thirty tiny visions of what was going on on that battlefield at any time.

"Still, many journalists say that news organizations should have acknowledged just how little they actually knew." She then asks: "Why were the American media so easily misled?"

"Although reporters won't say their editors pressured them into blowing up the story, it was clear that good war news was selling better. Fox News, which kept an American flag on its screen throughout the war and adopted the military's propagandistic war slogan "Operation Iraqi Freedom" as its own official news banner, was drawing more viewers than any other cable news channel. CNN, even ten days later, was still describing the story based purely on the military's version."

'HORRENDO' AT WAR

CHECK out the new Columbia Journalism Review for several pieces on coverage of the war, including one by John Laurence, a great writer with whom I once worked at ABC. He cut his spurs, (as they used to say) in Vietnam and has written a fine book about those experiences, "The Cat from Hue." He tells the story of how he was "de-embedded" because he had to leave his unit to replenish his batteries. The Pentagon then said they couldn't provide transportation. He contrasts

his experience with that of his former colleague (and mine) Geraldo Rivera whose pro-war attitude and larger-than-life persona ingratiated him to the military.

Writes Jack: "Upon joining the 101st on March 27, Rivera had shown up at Udairi airfield wearing a black cowboy hat, black leather jacket with a brightly-colored neck scarf, black trousers and boots, and orange-tinted sunglasses, presumably to protect his keen reporter's eyes from the setting sun. "I've just come in from Afghanistan," he said proudly, as if to explain why he was just then arriving in the war zone. Waiting in line outside the mess tent a few minutes later, Rivera was surrounded by admiring GIs with still cameras asking for pictures with him and autographs. "Looks like he's working the line," a reporter quipped. When asked how many pictures were being taken with himself and the troops, he replied, "At least five hundred a day. No, thousands."

"David Zucchini, the veteran foreign correspondent of the Los Angeles Times, who was also embedded with the 101st, said to him, "Geraldo, you must be the Bob Hope of this war."

"I'd rather be thought of as the Ernie Pyle," Rivera replied.

"Some of the troops quickly dubbed him "Grrr-aldo," although he did not spend a night with the battalion, preferring instead the more comfortable (and more secure) surroundings of the Third Brigade command post." See Cjr.org for more.

IDEOLOGICAL WARFARE

ON a more serious note Bob McChesney writes in Monthly Review about deeper problems undermining journalism. He discusses what he says is the government's emphasis that makes "ideological warfare as important to its operations as mili-

tary and economic warfare.” A crucial component of this ideological war has been the campaign against “left-wing media bias,” with the objective of reducing or eliminating the prospect that mainstream U.S. journalism might be at all critical toward elite interests or the system set up to serve those interests.

“So why is the conservative critique of the liberal news media such a significant force in U.S. political and media culture? To some extent this is because this critique has tremendous emotional power, fitting into a broader story of the conservative masses battling the establishment liberal media elite. In this world, spun by right-wing pundits like Ann Coulter and Sean Hannity, conservatives do righteous battle against the alliance of Clinton, Castro, bin Laden, drug users, gays, rappers, feminists, teachers unions and journalists, who hold power over the world. As one conservative activist put it, the battle over media is a “David and Goliath struggle.” At its strongest, and most credible, the conservative critique taps into the elitism inherent to professionalism and to liberalism though this right-wing populism turns to mush the moment the issue of class is introduced. To be sure, some conservative media criticism backs away from fire breathing and attempts to present a more tempered critique, even criticizing the rampant commercialization of journalism.

McChesney continues: “The main reason for the prominence of the right-wing critique of the liberal news media, however, has little or nothing to do with the intellectual quality of the arguments. It is the result of hardcore political organizing and it takes a lot of financial backers with deep pockets to produce that result. The conservative movement against liberal journalism was launched in earnest in the 1970s. Conservative critics claimed

that the liberal media was to blame for losing the Vietnam War. Pro-business foundations were aghast at what they saw as the anti-business sentiment prevalent among Americans, especially middle-class youth, usually a core constituency for support.

“Mainstream journalism, which in reporting the activities of official sources was also giving people like Ralph Nader sympathetic exposure, was seen as a prime culprit. At that point the political right, supported by their wealthy donors, began to devote enormous resources to criticizing and changing the news media. Around one-half of all the expenditures of the twelve largest conservative foundations have been devoted to the task of moving the news rightward.

“The pro-business right understood that changing media was a crucial part of bringing right-wing ideas into prominence and politicians into power. “You get huge leverage for your dollars,” a conservative philanthropist noted when he discussed the turn to ideological work. There is a well-organized, well-financed and active hardcore conservative coterie working to push the news media to the right. As a Washington Post White House correspondent put it, “the liberal equivalent of this conservative coterie does not exist.” Monthly Review press will publish McChesney’s next book that delves deeply into this subject.

THEY ARE B-A-A-C-K

US troops are back in action in larger numbers in Afghanistan. Syued Saleem Shahzad of Asia Times Online explains: “Despite the best efforts of its military and intelligence apparatus and political manipulation in Pakistan, in the year and a half since the demise of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the United States and its allies have

failed to break the Taliban and al-Qaeda in that country. Indeed, the resistance movement in Afghanistan has fully re-organized itself, even setting up offices, and official claims to the contrary, US forces are fighting in the dark.”

MARCHING IN HONG KONG

SLATE.COM reports: “As many as 500,000 demonstrators marched through the streets of Hong Kong Tuesday in what the Hong Kong Standard described as “an outpouring of frustration and anger on a scale not seen since the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989.” The crowd, which was at least five times larger than organizers had expected, gathered on the sixth anniversary of Hong Kong’s handover from Britain to China to protest an anti-subversion law that is due to be enacted next week.” Protecting press freedom is a key demand.

NO AMERICANS OR ELSE

ATTENTION: everyone living in these countries: Andorra, Antigua and Barbuda, Austria, Barbados, Belize, Benin, Brazil, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Central African Republic, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cyprus, Dominica, Ecuador, Estonia, Fiji, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lesotho, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Malawi, Mali, Malta, Marshall Islands, Namibia, Nauru, Niger, Paraguay, Peru, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Samoa, San Marino, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, Venezuela and Zambia.

“You are being cut off from US military aid until you buckle to US demands not to support the International Criminal Court’s right to ever try US military personnel for any crimes they may be alleged to have committed. Yes, you heard it right:

The US has cut off nearly FIFTY countries unless and until they agree that Americans must be treated differently than anyone else in the world.

THE MEDIA CHALLENGE

MEDIA got you down? Wanna do something about it? A project called Media Challenge in Los Angeles has issued this call: “Fed up with the mainstream media’s omissions, distortions, and refusal to challenge lies? It’s time to send them a message: we’re not taking it anymore. During Independence Day week – June 30-July 6, 2003 – join with thousands of others across the country and act to oppose corporate media and support independent media!

“Media Challenge!, a project of peace and social justice groups, is joining with a number of media reform groups around the country who have initiated Media Liberty Week. We seek to turn around a corporate media dominated by pseudo-patriotic cheerleading and by megaphoning for the Pentagon and for Bush administration deceit instead of by journalism.”

Here’s four things they say you can do:

“1. There is a real chance that Congress will overturn the FCC’s June 2 deregulation vote, but most urgent is that our Senators and Representatives hear from us. Contact them this week and ask them to become co-sponsors of legislation that would overturn the FCC ruling (SB 1046 in the Senate, which backers are pushing for a vote on in July).

“2. Take your media activism to the doorstep of the national television networks: join Media Challenge! in calling for the resignation or firings of the TV Network News Chiefs for the distortions and omissions in their coverage of the war against Iraq.

MEDIA DIARY DANNY SCHECHTER

“3. Give your local paper a time-out. Suspend your subscription in a “vacation hold” for the first week of July.

“4. Turn off your mainstream TV watching for the week.

Looking for alternatives: “check out: The web site the Global Village CAT links to community and public access television channels worldwide.

<http://www.openchannel.se/cat>

IN response to some criticisms we are trying to add more links to this blog. Usually, I am in too

greater rush to get the column posted by 9 but, with help from Doug George, will do better. If you are interested, a piece I wrote on the blog appears in the new issue of Nieman Reports, the journal of the Nieman Foundation for journalism at Harvard University.

I also have a view point today in NEWSDAY, the Long Island-based daily called: “What do Americans Know: Not very much.” Check it out:

<http://www.newsday.com/news/opinion/ny-vpsch023355487jul02,0,2481098.story?coll=ny-viewpoints-headlines>

