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'DARK ACTORS PLAYING GAMES'

The BBC boasts, often with legitimacy, of the impartiality it brings to the coverage of the news. But now what happens when the world's most respected broadcaster becomes the news? Moreover it is news that has a nation on tender hooks in the aftermath of the death, they say, by suicide of biowar weapons scientist David Kelly who warned by email obliquely of "many dark actors playing games."

This is a thriller on its way to becoming a chiller now that a judicial inquiry has been announced with the Prime Minister Tony Blair volunteering to testify. The Judge du jour, Lord Hutton, has announced he will move quickly in the open. The BBC was initially silent on charges that Kelly was its principal source in a story suggesting that the Blair Government had "sexed up" an overly alarmist dossier making the case for war with Iraq. Now BBC says, yes indeed, Kelly was the source. Kelly earlier waffled on the issue confirming he met BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan but insisted that he didn't think he was the key source.

WHAT THE BBC SAYS

NOW that Dr. Kelly is dead, as supporters of Tony Blair seek to shift blame on the BBC amidst some calls that Blair, who is traveling in China, resign, BBC News Chief Richard Sambrook released a statement confirming that Dr. Kelly had spoken with their reporter: It reads in part: "The BBC believes we accurately interpreted and

reported the factual information obtained by us during interviews with Dr. Kelly.

"Over the past few weeks we have been at pains to protect Dr. Kelly being identified as the source of these reports. We clearly owed him a duty of confidentiality. Following his death, we now believe, in order to end the continuing speculation, it is important to release this information as swiftly as possible. We did not release it until this morning at the request of Dr. Kelly's family."

The BBC bashers are out in force with many British papers reporting on pressures on the independent corporation that runs the network to fire executives and reporter Gilligan. The BBC stands accused of having an anti-war agenda and at least one member of Parliament says a new media regulatory body should now oversee BBC. This is, as I explained last week, (scroll below) part of a strategy for limiting the power of an independent broadcaster at a minimum with hopes of privatizing some of its functions in the longer run.

UNBALANCED NY TIMES REPORTING

THE New York Times reports on the charges that BBC had an anti-war agenda, but not on two studies that demonstrated rather conclusively that the BBC had, if anything, been pro-war in the bulk of its coverage. Rather insidiously, and in a backhanded war, the Times takes BBC reporters to task for being too aggressive, a spirit NY Times reporters don't know much about anymore.

Warren Hoge of the Times also gives Israeli officials a platform in his piece for blasting a BBC documentary that the government there accused of bias without any balancing information. They call it a propaganda piece but its truthfulness is not examined by the newspaper of record in the US. (The Israelis now say they won't cooperate with the BBC and banned one of its reporters from a Washington, D.C. media breakfast with visiting Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.) Interesting isn't it how The Times, which has just been through its own media scandal, seems intent on building up this BBC controversy. Check out media-guardian.co.uk for more on the British coverage and the issue.

ABC in Australia reports that it too is being accused of war bias by its pro-Iraq war government: "The ABC has delivered its response to Communications Minister Richard Alston's complaints about "biased" and "anti-American" coverage during the Iraq war. In May Senator Alston made 68 complaints about ABC radio current affairs program, AM.

"The Minister believed the program's coverage of the war had been biased and anti-American. The 68 cases were referred to the ABC's Complaints Review Executive, an independent office. It upheld two of Senator's Alston's complaints and rejected 66."

BEYOND THE NIGER PROBLEM

THE question of fudged intelligence at the heart of the British controversy remains very much alive in the USA. While the focus has been on forged documents and claims of uranium from Niger in Africa going to Iraq, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting reminds us that many media outlets are focusing on that to the exclusion of other serious

areas of misrepresentation:

One reader who sends us their report notes: "The Bush administration has made misleading and unsupported claims about aluminum tubes and a pair of abandoned trailers found in Iraq. Both discoveries turned out to be nothing. President Bush himself made direct references to a United Nations IAE report that turned out not even to exist. Colin Powell went so far as to alter some of the wording of an intercepted Iraqi transmission so that it would sound more ominous when he presented a transcript of it to the United Nations. And the president, believe it or not, is still insisting that links exist between Iraq and al-Qaeda despite a glaring lack of evidence. Moreover, he is still telling reporters that Saddam Hussein ejected U.N. weapons inspectors when in fact it was the White House that removed them so that the bombing campaign could begin."

ANOTHER NAME ON ANOTHER WALL

ANOTHER US soldier along with an Iraqi interpreter has now been killed. The US military is increasingly calling it a guerilla war and recalibrating its troop levels and fighting stance. On the propaganda front—get this: The Independent reports that "Bush Launches Magazine to Teach Young Arabs to Love America." The story describes a "new magazine published by the Bush administration and going on sale in the Middle East targets young people with articles on celebrities and relationships."

ON THE ENEMY LIST: ONE GAY CANADIAN REPORTER

LAST week ABC News carried a report about growing anger and frustration among US soldiers

in Iraq. One soldier, who called on Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld to resign, will probably be punished for his unauthorized exercise of freedom of speech. The thin-skinned White House then sought to discredit the reporter (i.e. shoot the messenger) by revealing that the journalist who brought us the story was – egads GAY.

Our nominee for best media journalist Antonia Zeribias of the Toronto Star had a field day with this: “the White House had a dirty trickster tip gossip monger Matt Drudge to show the reporter was (Up against the wall!) “openly gay” and (No blindfold! No last cigarette!) Canadian.

“And so, on Wednesday, for eight minutes, Drudge’s headline screamed “ABC News Reporter Who Filed Troops Complaint Story – Openly Gay Canadian,” before being edited to read “ABC News Reporter Who Filed Troops Complaint Story Is Canadian.”

“But neither headline linked to (Jeffrey) Kofman’s online story, describing how the boys (and, presumably, the girly-men) of the U.S. army’s 3rd Infantry want to go home, how they feel “kicked in the gut” by the repeated extensions of their tours of duty, how they couldn’t care less about the Iraqi people.

“Kofman related how several pointed accusatory fingers at President George W. Bush, Rumsfeld, and members of their posse, saying their faces also belong in the Pentagon’s infamous deck of cards featuring the Iraqi most wanted.

“If Donald Rumsfeld was here, I’d ask him for his resignation,” volunteered Spc. Clinton Deitz, in the online story and on the TV report.

But does Drudge get into any of that?

“Or why it is the 148,000 troops in Iraq – who have seen 85 of their number killed and who knows how many wounded since a Top Gun-out-

fitted Bush declared the war over on May 1 – would feel so aggrieved?

Nope. Click on his links and you’ll land on a 2001 story from The Advocate, the venerable gay and lesbian newsmagazine, which profiles Kofman, mentioning his Canadian roots, his insistence on being “openly gay,” his part in establishing a gay and lesbian journalists association in Toronto, and his thoughts on being “a role model.”

“Of course! So how can Kofman be trusted? He’s a traitor, not one of us, and a sissy boy, too. A Canadian, from the land which ran away when the real men went to play in Iraq and where homosexuals can get hitched.

“Now my `secret’ is out,” Kofman joked yesterday, after logging another 18-hour day in Baghdad.

“According to yesterday’s Washington Post, Drudge blamed his sliming of Kofman on brand new White House spokesperson Scott McClellan, who inherited his flack jacket from Ari Fleischer just last week.

REMEMBERING RUTH AND JOE

ON Friday, I wrote about Nelson Mandela’s birthday and the big bash in South Africa honoring him. It was great to see CNN’s Charlayne Hunter-Gault reporting on Mandela’s influence on youth from around the world. I mentioned seeing Madiba in London at a ceremony honoring Joe Slovo and Ruth First, two of his comrades whose home in exile was being distinguished with an English heritage plaque. It is rare when revolutionaries earn such a distinction, especially in a foreign country, and perhaps

rarer still when a world famous black leader

pays tribute to two white activists who became legends in their own right for their years of commitment and service. I did a disservice by not telling you more about them and how they helped mold my own commitment.

In praising him, Nelson Mandela recognized that it was a multi-racial movement that made the change, not just one icon or celebrity. He recognized that whites, Indians, Coloreds and Africans worked together to bring down the apartheid state. That lesson cannot be lost in all the hoopla and mystique of Mandela as a demi-God as is so often reinforced in the press or the history books who salute Great Men as if they alone are responsible for social change. This view is reinforced in our celebrity-obsessed media culture which hypes up heroes and invariably ends up tearing them down.

HONORING OUR "SHEROES"

IN praising Ruth First, Joe's partner and a person who became my mentor, he recognized the role of committed journalists and intellectuals, and the role of women in the struggle. In every meeting and march I attended it was the women who often took the lead and were the organizers while raising their children. And trying to keep their families together.

This is sometimes lost when we think of all the male icons who tend to get revered. Mandela praised Ruth for qualities and courage that many in the movement even lacked – an intelligence which criticized pomposity, arrogance, and mechanistic ideology. She too was a communist who challenged her own husband, who challenged the ANC to be honest and consistent. In the end, she was assassinated in Mozambique where she went to teach and work to be closer to the front line.

She was murdered by agents of the apartheid state, one of whom I actually met. I visited her grave – and the grave of her other fallen comrades in a cemetery in Maputo in 1986 while on assignment for 1986.

Nelson Mandela would later marry Graca Machel, the widow of the charismatic Mozambican President Samora Machel, a liberation movement General who was also to be assassinated under shadowy circumstances.

I met Ruth as a student in Ralf Miliband's inspiring lectures at the London School of Economics. I was dazzled by her beauty on every level, mesmerized really by her brain and its ability to synthesize arguments and dismiss fools of the academic or political varieties. She was an African, a Jew, a feminist, a skillful author and a gutsy fighter who also felt guilty about time away from her three girls and never always being able to do it all.

She didn't have an easy time establishing herself in a pretentious English academic community, She was miles ahead of many of her teachers. She was fashionable and ferocious. She was the South African New Left before there was a New Left. She was a one woman role model, for the unity of theory and practice. I wept in London last week as the great South African writer and editor Ronald Segal paid tribute to her accomplishments concluding "I loved her then, I loved her now."

Ruth and Joe became people I wanted to emulate with my own synthesis of activism and attitude. Unlike them, I didn't have a home in a movement or party or an organization. I guess I was more the lone ranger. They inspired me to get involved with South Africa and I did so for the next thirty years as a researcher, writer, TV producer and filmmaker, often traveling all over Southern Africa and the world, meeting their

comrades and friends including the late Mandela law partner Oliver R. Tambo, whose leadership role of the ANC must never be forgotten.

SOUTH AFRICA NOW AND THEN

MOST recently, I helped produce (with Prudence Solomon, Michael Lee and Anna Pizarro) an updated TV program modeled on our series SOUTH AFRICA NOW. The new special is called “South Africa Now and Then” and looks back and ahead as South Africans assess what they have achieved in the last decade. It will air on New York’s CUNY TV next month and has already been seen nationally on World Link Television. We hope to get it on in South Africa and there will be a screening and celebration next week in Times Square.

Next year is the tenth anniversary of the first democratic elections in that country. I had the privilege of documenting Mandela’s run for office back in 1994 with producer Anant Singh in the film COUNTDOWN TO FREEDOM. Whenever people I know tell me they can’t bother to vote, I think of the thousands I filmed standing in long lines on April 27th for a right that had long been denied them.

While in London I was welcomed to a dinner at the home of Lindiwe Mabuza, the Ambassador or High Commissioner as she is known, who earlier gave a moving speech explaining how black South Africans came to understand the need for a non-racial movement to free South Africa and “all who live in it.” She spoke of Ruth and Joe and the many whites who sacrificed in the struggle in South Africa. Now she is helping to organize a conference so that today’s South African leaders can reconnect with the many anti-apartheid activists who worked in solidarity with their

struggle.

SOUTH AFRICA PROVES CHANGE IS POSSIBLE

TO those of us who despair about the prospects of change or worry about how often truth is massacred in the mainstream media, let us point to the truth of Joe and Ruth’s lives and the real world success of their work.

None of us in London then would have guessed that the apartheid state would have crumbled the way it did, or that a man convicted of terrorism named Nelson Mandela would emerge as the hero he did. I never thought when I came to Sunday Brunch on Lyme Street in Camden Town so many times, so many years ago, that I would be back 35 years later for a ceremony with hundreds of onlookers including Mandela, members of Parliament, and the government. It was so impressive to hear the Slovo daughters Shawn, Gillian, and Robyn speak so powerfully about their parents and their passions.

I once heard Bill Clinton say that we all want to be Mandela on our best days. True enough, but we all can be like Ruth and Joe today, and commit ourselves to ideas and ideals that are larger than our own lives and hopefully achieve the victory and the glory that they helped make possible.

AFRICA IN UPROAR

THE word is that 40 more US soldiers are on their way to Liberia. Presidential candidate Al Sharpton is trying to get to Monrovia, but it looks very dangerous. No one is sure yet if President Bush will send more force. (See This week’s New Yorker for an assessment of the issue.)

While I was away, President Bush was in Africa. I saw some scenes of his visit but it was only later

MEDIA DIARY DANNY SCHECHTER

when a former Globalvisioneer, who is in Dakar, sent me a report on what actually happened. Contrast this eye witness account with what you saw on CNN:

“It was the first time a president arrived in Senegal without ceremony. Furthermore the paths through which George Walker Bush traveled were entirely devoid of inhabitants. Dakar was shut down, residents locked tightly within their homes from Dakar to Goree Island. Residents of Goree Island were forbidden to leave their homes. Telephone lines were blocked. No one was allowed to conduct any business in the Place du Indpendence, the economic sector of Senegal (equivalent to Wall Street). And all this for the purpose of maximum security. The four hours during which President Bush was present, Senegal held its breath.

“Bush’s visit to the House of Slaves on the historic slave port Island of Goree was followed by his discourse on the history of slavery...a history

all too familiar to the Senegalese. Radio reports ridiculed Bush’s chosen subject, “while residents are imprisoned in their homes, an American President delivers a lecture on slavery.” Once Bush left the Island of Goree, locals dashed out of their homes in celebration of Bush’s departure, dancing, rapping and rejoicing their liberty to step outside.

“The main TV station RTS (Radio Television Senegal) covered the event live. Their reaction to Bush’s discourse and visit was curious – following the visit they played pop music star Youssour ‘N Dour...’NAK FOOLA AK FAYDA” - “People who lack personality and regard for others.”

Villagers remarked , “Gee the American President certainly eats up a lot of money traveling so far with his limos and plane for a 2-hour visit to tell us about our history.” Other reports I saw claimed that 100-year-old trees were cut down as the Secret Service took charge of the country.

Even its president was not allowed to speak on Goree Island.

