

July 31, 2003

THAT WAS THEN, OR IS IT NOW?

It is an old saw: no matter how much things change, the more they stay the same. That feeling came through loud and clear last night after wallowing one more time in the miasma of Watergate at 30 on PBS only to click later onto CSPAN for an upbeat “things are just great” press conference in the rose garden at the White House. The PBS history featured a parade of white men in suits explaining, blaming, and otherwise regurgitating a history that I lived through.

The only bombshell, if that’s what it was, came from Jeb Macgruder, a Nixon Campaign aide, who says he recalls overhearing a conversation in which the president authorized the bugging of the office of the chairman of the Democratic National Committee. Given Richard Nixon’s far more serious crimes – including the invasion of Cambodia for which he was also cited in impeachment proceedings – this sounded like much ado about very little. There is a lot more to discover about Watergate and the Watergates that followed. This film stuck to the PBS center for the most part, telling us what we already knew.

THE WIT AND WISDOM

IT was fun to be reminded of the wit and wisdom of those days and of the political characters, men like Judge Sam of North Carolina, and the folksy Herman Talmadge of Georgia. It seemed like there was bit of blood pumping through the veins of Congress. That was before the coagulation set in

and the corporatization took over. Watching Bush in the Rose Garden claiming to take responsibility for what he has done, next question, typified not only the games Presidents play but the oh-so-deferential status of a colorless White House press corps. He could say anything, especially if there was a bit of a jibe or joke attached, and there would certainly be no follow up, no Watergate-style interrogation.

Phillip Weiss alludes to this “on bended-knee royal stenography” in reporting in the NY Observer this week about that media and the war conference that I told you about last week that was sponsored by New York Magazine and The Guardian.

He quotes the New Statesman’s John Kampfner on the difference between US and British journalists: “When the President comes into the room, American journalists stand erect with their backs rigid, British journalists stay slouched in their chairs,” Kampfner said at the conference. “American journalists regard the people in authority as good men who should have the benefit of the doubt. In Britain, we work on the assumption that they need to prove to us that we should believe them.” He quotes a BBC official to the same effect: “We do not practice passive journalism,” Adrian Van Klaveren, the head of news-gathering for the BBC, explained at the New School. “It’s about trying to get at information other people don’t want us to know.”

WASHINGTON POST COVERING ITSELF?

AT least the documentary, which seemed to have been produced in an unusual “association” with the Washington Post, the news organization which still exploits the glow of its glory days and is part of the story, did go on to make some points about continuing Presidential uses and abuses of secrecy without directly commenting on the current occupant at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. It did note that Watergate’s impact in terms of reforming a corrupt political system was, shall we say, limited.

Back then, Senator Howard Baker asked: “What did the president know and when did he know it? Today we can ask “what did the president know and when did he STOP knowing it?”

JOHN DEAN: STILL DIAGNOSING CANCER

FORMER Nixon lawyer John Dean was the most outspoken last night as we was thirty years ago when he warned of a cancer on the presidency. (Today the presidency is the cancer.) He is also speaking out on 9/11, challenging the White House decision to hide behind national security justifications. This is not a man whose credibility is easily impeached.

Dean writes: “The recently released Report of the Joint Congressional Inquiry Into The Terrorist Attacks of September 11, and its dismal findings, have been well reported by the news media. What has not been widely reported, however, are the inescapable conclusions that must be drawn from a close reading of this bipartisan study.

“Bluntly stated, either the Bush White House knew about the potential of terrorists flying airplanes into skyscrapers (notwithstanding their

claims to the contrary), or the CIA failed to give the White House this essential information, which it possessed and provided to others.

“Bush is withholding the document that answers this question. Accordingly, it seems more likely that the former possibility is the truth. That is, it seems very probable that those in the White House knew much more than they have admitted, and they are covering up their failure to take action.”

MORE BODYBAGS PLEASE

THERE were more shootings of American soldiers in Iraq. There was one confirmed death early this morning and another shooting being reported as I left home to begin blogging. The conscience of the NY Times Op Ed Page Bob Herbert who usually focuses on domestic injustices commented on Iraq policy as the body count mounts:

“The credibility of the Bush administration is approaching meltdown. The White House won't level with the American people on the cost of the war, or the number of troops that are really needed, or the amount of taxpayer money that is being funneled to the politically connected corporations that have been given carte blanche for the reconstruction.

“While the Bush crowd was happy to let the public believe that Saddam Hussein was somehow connected to the Sept. 11 attacks, it won't come clean about the real links between the Saudis and Al Qaeda. And you won't hear from the administration that the phantom weapons of mass destruction were never the real reason for the war, but merely the pretext. The real goals were to establish a military foothold in the region, remake the Middle East, and capture control of

Iraq's fabulous oil reserves.

"Iraq is not Vietnam, where more than 58,000 Americans were killed. But it is like Vietnam in that deceptive leaders have maneuvered the country into a tragic situation that I do not believe Americans will support over time."

POLICY PITFALLS

NYU'S Global Beat reports of an often conservative analyst blaming the lack of planning by the Administration: "Anthony Cordesman's latest report on Iraq makes it clear that the Pentagon's inability to effectively think through the termination of the conflict, and the clumsy management that followed the U.S. seizure of Baghdad has put the U.S. in danger of facing protracted guerrilla warfare. Ironically, the problems cited by Cordesman are exactly the pitfalls that the rejected Powell doctrine's insistence on clearly defined goals and a realistic exit plan were intended to guard against. (Anthony Cordesman, CSIS, July 25, 2003)

<http://www.nyu.edu/globalbeat/index.html#quagmire>.

AL (NOT GORE) LIVES

AS the debate over the killings of Saddam's two sons goes on, Israel's Debkafile is reporting that there is a third son that no one seemed to have known about. Just call him Al. Saddam apparently had a weapon of mass procreation that we are now just learning about. (Sorry, couldn't resist): "The decision to kill Saddam Hussein's two sons Uday and Qusay when they were surrounded in a villa in Mosul – instead of taking them alive – was made by high-ranking officials in Washington to meet the overarching goal of showing the Iraqi people that Saddam Hussein and his like were doomed to be eliminated root and branch from Iraq's ruling sys-

tem, never to return. Washington needed to hammer this message home to counteract the corrosive effect on Iraqis of the mounting guerrilla campaign on American troops and their failure to take out a single senior member of Saddam's inner circle since invading the country in March.

After the two sons' deaths were confirmed, DEBKA-Net-Weekly published a world exclusive in its last issue of July 25 that, even now, the Saddam succession lives on in the person of a third, virtually unknown younger son called Ali. Uday and Qusay had the same mother, Sajida. Ali's mother is Samira Shahbandar, the daughter of an aristocratic Syrian-Iraqi family."

SHADES OF "SCARFACE"

AS for this liquidation, a fourteen-year-old boy and a bodyguard were also there but their presence has also been deleted from most of the reporting. He too was killed. Colin Freeman and Tim Cornwell of the Scotsman newspaper offered a report that no one else that I saw carried:

"The officer who finally cornered Uday and Qusay Hussein sat slouched in a Humvee outside the hideaway, which the five-hour firefight had turned into little more than rubble with a roof. "If you're asking did they put up a fierce fight, the answer is, 'yes,'" he growled, in a low Chicago drawl.

"Lieutenant Colonel Rick Carlson reached for the movies to describe what he'd seen: the Eighties gangster classic Scarface, where Al Pacino's drug baron makes a defiant last stand with a machine gun on the staircase of his gaudy mansion. "That film was mentioned a couple of times yesterday," said Lt Col Carlson.

"Saddam's grandson, Mustapha, 14, may have been the last man standing. After the missile bar-

rage on their hide-out left his father and uncle dead around him, soldiers said he fired on them as they stormed into the ruins. They shot him down.”

PROGRESS ON THE ROAD MAP? NADA

ARIEL Sharon has returned to Israel. The President spoke of “progress” at his press conference yesterday. Gideon Samet of Israel’s Ha’aretz newspaper scoffs: “This round in Washington is going to end nearly like all the previous ones. A summary can be typed ahead of time. A little hint of dispute, and a lot of public understanding between the Israeli and American leaders. There’s always some punch line by a spinner, whether local or distant. This time it is: “There’s no separation fence between Bush and Sharon.” Hats off to the creative flack.

But walls aren’t built with blurring and babbling. The visits this week could have been a turning point if President Bush wanted one. It didn’t happen, and it is very possible that there won’t be as good an opportunity that was missed in the foreseeable future.

“If Bush had wanted, he would have demanded disciplined behavior from both sides according to a detailed timetable. If he wanted, he wouldn’t have swept the matter of the outposts, one of the veteran issues on which the administration has been vehemently critical of Israel, under the rug. Of all the burning issues, Bush chose the fence. And for that he received a typical Sharon response and possibly showed that he still hasn’t learned to deal with Sharon. ... Sharon will come home completely happy: No outpost removal, no tangible pressure to improve the lives of the Palestinians. In fact, nothing.”

SINCE WHEN IS A WALL A “FENCE?”

ACCORDING to South Africa’s Mail and Guardian, The Palestinian government said yesterday that Ariel Sharon had jeopardized last month’s ceasefire by rejecting President Bush’s plea to stop building his security fence through the West Bank... By the way, what is this fence that William Safire of the Times supports today. Eli Stephens, a reader, wrote to his local paper, the San Jose Mercury to ask: “The Mercury News describes the structure being constructed by Israel as a “Security Fence.” This “fence” is a 25-foot high concrete wall, higher than the Berlin Wall or the sound walls lining our freeways. Since when is that a fence?”

MEDIA NEWS

WHAT’S next with the battle over FCC rule changes? The Washington Post reported yesterday that Senate measure that would effectively overturn the FCC’s new media ownership rules has garnered enough support to move to a floor vote as early as September. The resolution of disapproval, a rarely used tactic by the Senate also known as a “congressional veto,” was introduced by Senator Byron Dorgan and has 20 co-sponsors in total. “This galloping concentration in broadcast ownership is unhealthy,” Dorgan said at a joint news conference with Sen. Trent Lott.

“We feel very strongly we have to send a message from the Congress to the FCC to do it over and do it right.” The measure would require a majority vote in both houses and either the President’s signature or enough votes for a veto override.

