

June 17, 2003

# “WHAT WOULD COME, WOULD COME”

**A**t the conclusion of “The Goblet of Fire,” the world’s best-known, best-selling and most-hyped author, the impressive former welfare mom J.K. Rowling writes, “What would come, would come ... and he would have to meet it.”

And so he is, and so are the rest of us, bracing for the arrival of the new Harry Potter which “drops” next Monday. The cash registers, which hadn’t had a break since Hillary’s moment in the charmed author’s circle, are raring to go.

## **SCORPIONS VS. SHARP SHOOTERS**

**WHAT** is coming, in Iraq at least, and the Middle East, and here in the US of A is still a hard rain, as none of the issues we have been confronting of late are going anywhere. As in President Bush, who is “whistles-stopping” to raise a mere \$200,000 million to hold on to power, and blasts his critics by bashing Saddam one more time. It’s another good use for the erstwhile “Butcher of Baghdad” who continues to perform services for the empire by his apparent survival.

Meanwhile the score yesterday was another American soldier dead and nine wounded – the most in any single day since the liberation was proclaimed. Operation Desert Scorpion (a rip-off of some movie, no doubt) is in full sway with 400 Iraqis detained. CNN reported last night that most will be released.

## **WE WON, DIDN’T WE?**

**DID** we “win the war” that is now being celebrated again, almost weekly, with a new round of “docu-sales” spiels? CNN has been advertising its latest with promos in which the wife of a dead soldier says: “There may have been few casualties, but I lost my husband.” And so did countless Iraqis who remain unmentioned. Meanwhile, in the New York Times, Paul Krugman fires another round of biting sarcasm into the White House. He writes in part:

“Real counterterrorism mainly involves police work and precautionary measures; it doesn’t look impressive on TV, and it doesn’t provide many occasions for victory celebrations.

“A conventional war, on the other hand, is a lot more fun: you get stirring pictures of tanks rolling across the desert, and you get to do a victory landing on an aircraft carrier. And more and more it seems that that was what the war was all about. After all, the supposed reasons for fighting that war have turned out to be false – there were no links to Al Qaeda; there wasn’t a big arsenal of WMDs.

“But never mind – we won, didn’t we? Maybe not. About half of the U.S. Army’s combat strength is now tied down in Iraq, facing what looks increasingly like a guerrilla war – and like a perfect recruiting device for Al Qaeda. Meanwhile, the real war on terror has been neglected, and we’ve antagonized the allies we need to fight that war. One of these days we’ll end up paying the price.”

### SUICIDE ALARMERS

**ALREADY** paying the price are those suspected – underscore – suspected of being bad guys. Carlotta Gal, who has done some painful stories on prisons in Afghanistan, turns her attention the gulag in Guantanamo today and in a story written with Neil A. Lewis reveals, “Afghans and Pakistanis who were held by the U.S. military say conditions were so bad that some captives attempted suicide.” How long have we been waiting for continuing coverage of these detainees?

Dan Kennedy asks in his Boston Phoenix blog yesterday: “So why aren’t more of the Democratic presidential candidates speaking out? Because, as Ryan Lizza notes in the New Republic, most of them are complicit, having expended a good deal of energy in the run-up to the war denouncing Saddam’s WMD capabilities. The silent candidates include John Kerry, Joe Lieberman, John Edwards, and Dick Gephardt. Even Howard Dean, who was vociferously antiwar, is being cautious for the moment – perhaps, Lizza writes, out of concern that WMDs may still be found. (Bob Graham is blasting the White House, but I think we can agree that he doesn’t matter – at least not yet.)”

Tonight, BBC airs a program tonight at 9pm U.K. time reporting on a worldwide survey in eleven countries on what people of the world think of U.S. policy. Among the findings, according to The Guardian: “The US-led military campaign in Iraq and the policies of George W. Bush have been condemned in an 11-country opinion poll conducted by the BBC.”

### WILL JESSICA GO PRIME TIME?

**NOTHING** seems to matter when it comes to

pandering to public opinion. I am sure you saw or heard about the front page story in The Times about the American networks who are fawning all over Private Jessica Lynch to get her exclusive rights. To get this “get” (as it’s known in the TV biz), network anchors are sending gifts and promising stardom.

“Katie Couric of NBC News sent Private Lynch, now 20, a bundle of patriotic books, including Rudolph W. Giuliani’s memoir, “Leadership.” Diane Sawyer of ABC News sent a locket with a photograph of Private Lynch’s family home in Palestine, WV.

“But CBS News, in addition to the usual personal touches, exhibited an apparent new gambit in its pursuit of an exclusive interview with the newsmaker of the moment, known in the television business as “the get.”

In its letters (obtained by The New York Times) to Private Lynch’s family and officials at the medical center, CBS News combined its pitch for a two-hour documentary with many other projects envisioned by the other divisions of its corporate parent, Viacom.

“In the process, CBS renewed concerns among critics about the independence of news divisions owned by media giants.

“Attached you will find the outlines of a proposal that includes ideas from CBS News, CBS Entertainment, MTV networks, and Simon & Schuster publishers,” Betsy West, a CBS News senior vice president, wrote to Private Lynch’s military representatives. “From the distinguished reporting of CBS News to the youthful reach of MTV, we believe this is a unique combination of projects that will do justice to Jessica’s inspiring story.”

### **BURYING THE CONTROVERSY**

**UNMENTIONED** in the story, were all the stories on BCC and in the U.S. media questioning the veracity of the whole Jessica Lynch affair, which has been debunked as far less than it was pictured as being. Myths trump reality on TV, especially on “reality programming.” The networks refuse to investigate their own coverage and the Times doesn’t even bother to mention the controversy.

At least the Lynch family seems to understand how it is being used.

Coming as it does from one of the poorest parts of the US (and from a town called Palestine, no less), they are being tempted:

“A spokesman for the West Virginia Department of Military Affairs, Ron Coleman, said, “The Lynches have absolutely not concerned themselves with specifics of the offers. They just want to see their daughter getting better.”

Still, the Lynches are expected to sign with an agent soon.”

### **MEDIA REFORM ON THE AGENDA**

**PETITIONS** are flowing into Washington signed by people who want to stop the FCC rule changes. The Commerce Committee takes up the issue on Thursday. The Portland Oregonian called me yesterday for my take. I think there may be some compromises accepted, if only to keep the GOP from splintering on the issue. Reuters is reporting: “U.S. Senators Seek Ban on Industry-Paid FCC Travel: “The Center for Public Integrity says FCC officials have received 2,500+ trips costing \$2.8 million since 1995 paid for by the media industries they regulate.”

### **ANOTHER VIEW: FREEDOM FOR MEDIA MOGULS**

**IN** a tongue-in-cheek column in Newsday, the wonderful Marvin Kitman says the FCC didn’t go far enough. He is demanding total freedom for media moguls: “I think the FCC didn’t go far enough. It should have mandated no more than one owner per market because then we’ll get tremendous diversity of programming. Owners never will have to worry about ratings again.

“The problem is, when you have two or three owners, they compete for ratings. And that’s always been the big problem in television. It leads to appealing to a lower level of audience – the 18-24 age group advertisers think most desirable. With two or three owners in the same market, TV viewers always go for the Least Objectionable Program, according to a theory by the late Paul Klein, NBC research guru and a founding father of HBO, of how viewers go around the dial and stop on the program they find least objectionable. Which then is acclaimed as a hit and becomes a model for other shows viewers don’t necessarily like.

“But if you get it down to a single owner, just think of the amazing possibilities.

“If you want to be in the TV business,” as it was explained to me by the champion of one-owner markets, Mark Schubin of Manhattan, a technological consultant, “you should be required to do all of it. Then it will be like the BBC in the old days in the UK. Without competition, you can do programs like ‘Sister Wendy’ in the arts, ‘I, Claudius,’ in drama, ‘Black Adder’ and ‘Yes, Minister’ in comedy and all that other great stuff they don’t do anymore ever since Margaret Thatcher and her ilk got the insane idea of introducing competition in

UK broadcasting.”

When you have a monopoly, Schubin explained, who cares what you put on? You’re going to get the highest ratings.

“As this visionary sees it, you will still have 150 channels in each city. But all the channels will be owned by the same media company or conglomerate.”

### **EUROPEAN VIEWS AND MEDIA NEWS**

**OVERSEAS**, the European Parliament wants changes but of another kind. EJC reports: “European Parliament members (MEP) are calling for a complete overhaul of the ‘Television Without Frontiers’ Directive. The Parliament’s Culture Committee believes that the increasing concentration in the media industry throughout Europe presents a major threat to integrity and pluralism, and thus it seeks to establish EU-wide rules on ownership of television media.”

In some other media news, the New York Post claims that NY Times coverage has become “more sedate” since editor Howell Raines was forced to step down ... In Baltimore, journalists at the Sun newspaper withheld bylines yesterday as contract negotiations get underway. In Chicago, the Tribune reports that a priest has launched a boycott of a TV station after two black reporters were fired. PC World carries a piece suggesting, according to IwantMedia.com, that “ISPs owned by media giants may push their own content and exclude others, moving the Internet toward a pay-as-you-go model like cable TV, warns a consumer group rep.”

In England, the Media Guardian reports that “The BBC’s 24-hour news channel is to be extensively revised in the coming year to make it more

distinctive from such rivals as Sky News and CNN. The BBC has admitted that it tried too hard to ape the style pioneered by Sky and did not think hard enough about how to be different. When will US channels take similar action?

### **OOPS (AGAIN)**

**BENJAMIN PARKE** asks: “Did the person who wrote the e-mail cited in today’s web log really have a name that similar to mine? Or 1) did you not drink enough coffee this morning and thus mix up e-mails, or 2) is someone trying to impersonate me for whatever reason (which I can’t see as bringing them much profit)? Just curious.” No, you had it right the first time. Not enough coffee!

### **DISSECTOR’S JURY NULLIFICATION**

**THE** folks who wrote with advice on getting off of and serving on juries may be pleased to know that my number was not called and that the special narcotics grand jury for which I was summoned will be dissector-free. In years past, I watched jurors rise and denounce the war on drugs and refuse to serve. This time around, the State has wisely preempted that by simply advising those with “moral problems” to ask to be excused and go across the street to indict people accused of other crimes. Every time I enter the halls of justice, I am reminded of Lenny Bruce’s dicta that “the only justice is in the halls.”

### **ME AND HARRY**

**THANKS** to those who have begun to order our new Mediachannel book: *Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception*. (See Coldtype.net) Needless to say that my work is not being given the full Harry

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## **MEDIA DIARY** DANNY SCHECHTER

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Potter treatment that Michelle Chihara describes on AlterNet: “The publisher has already reportedly distributed some three million bumper stickers, 400,000 buttons, 50,000 window displays and 24,000 stand-up posters with countdown clocks. There are fridge magnets, magic wands and lightning-bolt temporary tattoos. The \$3 or \$4 million marketing campaign (which doubles the amount spent on the last campaign) includes Harry Potter Days at baseball stadiums nationwide, with scoreboard promotions and costume contests.”

### **AND NOAM**

No countdown clocks for me although one of my stories compares the countdown to war like the clock counting down to New Year’s Eve. I can report my first “blurbed” endorsement from someone who refused to say anything until he read the book. Realizing how busy he is, I figured

that was not to be. But small miracles happen. So, now, I am honored to share Noam Chomsky’s assessment:

“In this compelling inquiry, Danny Schechter vividly captures two wars: the one observed by embedded journalists and some who chose not to follow that path, and the “carefully planned, tightly controlled and brilliantly executed media war that was fought alongside it,” a war that was scarcely covered or explained, he rightly reminds us. That crucial failure is addressed with great skill and insight in this careful and comprehensive study, which teaches lessons we ignore at our peril.”

Enough self-promotion for one morning—although the book, dear reader, is an outgrowth of Mediachannel and benefits our site with its fast-depleting resources, so you might want to spring into action and buy a few.

