

Spectacle and Media Propaganda in the War on Iraq: A Critique of U.S. Broadcasting Networks

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The 2003 Iraq war was a major global media event constructed very differently by varying broadcasting networks in different parts of the world. While the U.S. networks framed the event as "Operation Iraqi Freedom" (the Pentagon concept) or "War in Iraq," the Canadian CBC used the logo "War on Iraq," and various Arab networks presented it as an "invasion" and "occupation." In this study, I provide critique of the U.S. broadcasting network construction of the war that I interpret as providing a conduit for Bush administration and Pentagon propaganda.¹

As 2002 unfolded, the Bush administration intensified its ideological war against Iraq, advanced its doctrine of preemptive strikes, and provided military build-up for what now looks like an inevitable war. Whereas the explicit war aims were to shut down Iraq's "weapons of mass destruction," and thus enforce UN resolutions which mandated that Iraq eliminate its offensive weapons, there were many hidden agendas in the Bush administration offensive against Iraq. To be re-elected Bush needed a major victory and symbolic triumph over terrorism in order to deflect from the failings of his regime both domestically and in the realm of foreign policy.

Moreover, ideologues within the Bush administration wanted to legitimate a policy of preemptive strikes and a successful attack on Iraq could inaugurate and normalize this policy. Some of the same militarist unilateralists in the Bush administration envisage U.S. world hegemony, the elder Bush's "New World Order," with the U.S. as the reigning military power and world's policeman (Kellner, 2003b). Increased control of the world's oil supplies provided a tempting prize for the former oil executives who maintain key roles in the Bush administration. And, finally, one might note the Oedipus Tex drama, where George W. Bush's desires to conclude his father's unfinished business and simultaneously defeat Evil to constitute himself as Good helped drive Bush to war against Iraq with the fervor of a religious Crusade.

With all these agendas in play, a war on Iraq appears to have been inevitable. Bush's March 6, 2003 press conference made it evident that he was ready to go to war against Iraq. His handlers told him to speak slowly and keep his big stick and Texas macho out of view, but he constantly threatened Iraq and evoked the rhetoric of good and evil that he used to justify his crusade against bin Laden and Al Qaeda. Bush repeated the words "Saddam Hussein" and "terrorism" incessantly, mentioning Iraq as a "threat" at least sixteen times, which he attempted to link with the September 11 attacks and terrorism. He used the word "I" as in "I believe" countless times, and talked of "my government" as if he owned it, depicting a man lost in words and self-importance, positioning himself against the "evil" that he was preparing to wage war against. Unable to make an intelligent and objective case for a war against Iraq, Bush could only invoke fear and a moralistic rhetoric, attempting to present himself as a strong nationalist leader.

Bush's rhetoric, like that of fascism, deploys a mistrust and hatred of language, reducing it to manipulative speechifying, speaking in codes, repeating the same phrases over and over. This is grounded in anti-intellectualism and hatred of democracy and intellectuals. It is clearly evident in Bush's press conferences and snitty responses to questions and general contempt for the whole procedure. It plays to anti-intellectual proclivities and tendencies in the extreme

conservative and fundamentalist Christian constituencies who support him. It appears that Bush's press conference was orchestrated to shore up his base and prepare his supporters for a major political struggle rather than to marshal arguments to convince those opposed to go to war with Iraq that it was a good idea. He displayed, against his will, the complete poverty of his case to go to war against Iraq, he had no convincing arguments, nothing new to communicate, and just repeated the same tired clichés over and over.

Bush's discourse also displayed Orwellian features of DoubleSpeak where war against Iraq is for peace, the occupation of Iraq is its liberation, destroying its food and water supplies enables "humanitarian" action, and where the murder of countless Iraqis and destruction of the country will produce "freedom" and "democracy." In a pre-war summit with Tony Blair in the Azores and in his first talk after the bombing began, Bush went on and on about the "coalition of the willing" and how many countries were supporting and participating in the "allied" effort. In fact, however, it was a Coalition of Two, with the U.S. and UK doing most of the fighting and with many of the countries that Bush claimed supported his war quickly backtracking and expressing reservations about the highly unpopular assault that was strongly opposed by most people and countries in the world.

On March 19, the media spectacle of the war against Iraq unfolded with a dramatic attempt to "decapitate" the Iraqi regime. Large numbers of missiles were aimed at targets in Baghdad where Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi leadership were believed to be staying and the tens of thousands of ground troops on the Kuwait-Iraq border poised for invasion entered Iraq in a blitzkrieg toward Baghdad.² The media followed the Bush administration and Pentagon slogan of "shock and awe" and presented the war against Iraq as a great military spectacle, while triumphalism marked the opening days of the U.S. bombing of Iraq and invasion.

The Al Jazeera network live coverage of the bombing of a palace belonging to the Hussein family was indeed shocking as loud explosions and blasts jolted viewers throughout the world. Whereas some Western audiences experienced this bombing positively as a powerful assault on "evil," for Arab audiences it was experienced as an attack on the body of the Arab and Muslim people, just as the September 11 terror attacks were experienced by Americans as assaults on the very body and symbols of the United States. Whereas during Gulf War I, CNN was the only network live in Baghdad and throughout the war framed the images, discourses, and spectacle, there were over twenty broadcasting networks in Baghdad for the 2003 Iraq war, including several Arab networks, and the different TV companies presented the war quite diversely.

Al Jazeera and other Arab networks, as well as some European networks, talked of an "invasion" and an illegal U.S. and British assault on Iraq. While Donald Rumsfeld bragged that the bombings were the most precise in history and were aimed at military and not civilian targets, Arab and various global broadcasting networks focused on civilian casualties and presented painful spectacles of Iraqis suffering. Moreover, to the surprise of many, after a triumphant march across the Kuwaiti border and rush to Baghdad, the U.S. and British forces began to take casualties, and during the weekend of March 22-23, images of their P.O.W.s and dead bodies of their soldiers were shown throughout the world. Moreover, the Iraqis began fiercely resisting and rather than cheering for British and U.S. forces to enter the southern city of Basra, there was fierce resistance throughout southern Iraq.

Soon after, an immense sandstorm slowed down the march on Baghdad and images of Iraqi civilians maimed or killed by U.S. and British bombing, accounts of mishaps, stalled and

overextended supply lines, and unexpected dangers to the invading forces created a tremendously dramatic story. The intensity and immediacy of the spectacle was multiplied by “embedded reporters” who were accompanying the U.S. and British forces and who beamed back live pictures, first of the triumphant blitzkrieg through Iraq and then of the invading forces stalling and subject to perilous counterattack.

A great debate emerged around the embedded reporters and whether journalists who depended on the protection of the U.S. and British military, lived with the troops, and signed papers agreeing to a rigorous set of restrictions on their reporting could be objective and critical of their protectors. From the beginning, it was clear that the embedded reporters were indeed “in bed with” their military escorts and as the U.S. and Britain stormed into Iraq, the reporters presented exultant and triumphant accounts that trumped any paid propagandist. The embedded U.S. network television reporters were gung ho cheerleaders and spinners for the U.S. and UK military and lost any veneer of objectivity. But as the blitzkrieg stalled, a sandstorm hit, and U.S. and British forces came under attack, the embedded reporters reflected genuine fear, helped capture the chaos of war, provided often vivid accounts of the fighting, and occasionally, as I note below, deflated propaganda lies of the U.S. or U.K. military.

Indeed, U.S. and British military discourse was exceptionally mendacious, as happens so often in recent wars that are as much for public opinion and political agendas as for military goals. British and U.S. sources claimed the first days into Iraq that the border port of Umm Qasar and major southern city of Basra were under coalition control, whereas TV images showed quite the opposite. When things went very bad for U.S. and British forces on March 23, a story originated from an embedded reporter with the Jerusalem Post that a “huge” chemical weapons production facility was found, a story allegedly confirmed by a Pentagon source to the Fox TV military correspondent who quickly spread it through the U.S. media (BBC was skeptical from the beginning).³

When U.S. officials denied that they were responsible for major civilian atrocities in two Baghdad bombings the week of March 24, reporters on the scene described witnesses to planes flying overhead and in one case found pieces of a missile with U.S. markings and numbers on it. And after a suicide bombing killed four U.S. troops at a checkpoint in late March, U.S. soldiers fired on a vehicle that ran a checkpoint and killed seven civilians. The U.S. military claimed that it had fired a warning shot, but a Washington Post reporter on the scene reported that a senior U.S. military official had shouted to a younger soldier to fire a warning shot first and then yelled that “you [expletive] killed them” when he failed to do so. Embedded newspaper reporters also often provided more vivid accounts of “friendly fire” and other mishaps, getting their information from troops on the ground and on the site, instead of from military spinners who tended to be propagandists.⁴

Hence, the embedded and other reporters on the site provided documentation of the more raw and brutal aspects of war and telling accounts that often put in question official versions of the events, as well as propaganda and military spin. But since their every posting and broadcast was censored by the U.S. military it was the independent “unilateral” journalists who provided the most accurate account of the horrors of the war and the Coalition of Two military mishaps. Thus, on the whole the embedded journalists were largely propagandists who often outdid the Pentagon and Bush administration in spinning the message of the moment.

Moreover, the U.S. broadcast networks, on the whole, tended to be more embedded in the Pentagon and Bush administration than the reporters in the field and print journalists. The

military commentators on all networks provided little more than the Pentagon spin of the moment and often repeated gross lies and propaganda, as in the examples mentioned above concerning the U.S. bombing of civilians or the checkpoint shooting of innocents. Entire networks like Fox and the NBC cable networks provided little but propaganda and one-sided patriotism, as did, for the most part CNN. All these 24/7 cable networks, as well as the big three U.S. broadcasting networks, tended to provide highly sanitized views of the war, rarely showing Iraqi casualties, thus producing a view of the war totally different than that shown in other parts of the world.

The dramatic story of “Saving Private Lynch” was one of the more spectacular human interest stories of the war that revealed the constructed and spectacle nature of the event and the ways that the Pentagon constructed mythologies that were replicated by the TV networks. Private Jessica Lynch was one of the first American POWs shown on Iraqi TV and since she was young, female, and attractive her fate became a topic of intense interest. Stories circulated that she was shot and stabbed and was tortured by Iraqis holding her in captivity.⁵ Eight days after her capture, the U.S. media broadcast footage of her dramatic rescue, obviously staged like a reality TV spectacle. Soldiers stormed the hospital, found Lynch, and claimed a dramatic rescue under fire from Iraqis. In fact, several media institutions interviewed the doctors in the hospital who claimed that Iraqi troops had left the hospital two days before, that the hospital staff had tried to take Jessica to the Americans but they fired on them, and that in the “rescue” the U.S. troops shot through the doors, terrorized doctors and patients, and created a dangerous scene that could have resulted in deaths, simply to get some dramatic rescue footage for TV audiences.⁶

The Fox network was especially gung ho, militarist and aggressive, yet Fox footage shown on April 5-6 of the daring U.S. incursion into Baghdad displayed a road strewn with destroyed Iraqi vehicles, burning buildings, and Iraqi corpses. This live footage, replayed for days, caught something of the carnage of the hi-tech slaughter and destruction of Iraq that the U.S. networks tended to neglect. And an Oliver North commentary to footage of a U.S. warplane blasting away one Iraqi tank and armored vehicle after another put on display the hi-tech massacre of a completely asymmetrical war in which the Iraqi military had no chance whatsoever against the U.S. war machine.

U.S. military commanders claimed that in the initial foray into Baghdad 2,000-3,000 Iraqis were killed suggesting that the broadcasting networks were not really showing the brutality and carnage of the war. Indeed, most of the bombing of Iraqi military forces was invisible and dead Iraqis were rarely shown. An embedded CNN reporter, Walter Rogers, later recounted that the one time his report showed a dead Iraqi the CNN switchboard “lit up like a Christmas tree” with angry viewers demanding that CNN not show any dead bodies, as if the U.S. audience wanted to be in denial concerning the human costs of the war.⁷

An April 6 interview on Fox with Forbes magazine publisher and former presidential candidate Steve Forbes made it clear that the U.S. intended to get all the contracts on rebuilding Iraq for American firms, that Iraqi debts held by French and Russians should be cancelled, and that to the victors would go all the spoils of war. Such discourse put on display the arrogance and greed that drove the U.S. effort and subverted all idealistic rhetoric about democracy and freedom for the Iraqis. The very brutality of Fox war pornography graphically displayed the horrors of war and the militarist, gloating, and barbaric discourse that accompanied the slaughter of Iraqis and destruction of the country showed the New Barbarism that characterized the Bush era.⁸

Comparing American broadcasting networks with the BBC, Canadian, and other outlets as I did during the opening weeks of the U.S. war against Iraq, showed two different wars being presented. The U.S. networks tended to ignore Iraqi casualties, Arab outrage about the war, global antiwar and anti-U.S. protests, and the negative features of the war, while the BBC and Canadian CBC often featured these more critical themes. As noted, the war was framed very differently by various countries and networks, while analysts noted that in Arab countries the war was presented as an invasion of Iraq, slaughter of its peoples, and destruction of the country.

On the whole, U.S. broadcasting networks tended to present a sanitized view of the war while Canadian, British and other European, and Arab broadcasting presented copious images of civilian casualties and the horrors of war. U.S. television coverage tended toward pro-military patriotism, propaganda, and technological fetishism, celebrating the weapons of war and military humanism, highlighting the achievements and heroism of the U.S. troops. Other global broadcasting networks, however, were highly critical of the U.S. and U.K. military and often presented highly negative spectacles of the assault on Iraq and the shock and awe hi-tech massacre.

In a sense, the U.S. and UK war on Iraq found itself in a double bind. The more thoroughly they annihilated Iraqi troops and conquered the country, the more aggressive, bullying, and imperialist they would appear to the rest of the world. Yet the dramatic pictures of civilian casualties and harrowing images of U.S. bombing and destruction of Iraq made it imperative to end the war as soon as possible. An apparently failed attempt to kill Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi leadership on April 7th, destroyed a civilian area and killed a number of people, followed by the killing of journalists in two separate episodes by the U.S. military on April 8, produced an extremely negative media spectacle of the war on Iraq. But the apparent collapse of the Iraqi regime on April 9, where for the first time there were significant images of Iraqis celebrating the demise of Hussein, provided the material for a spectacle of victory.

Indeed, the destruction of a statue of Saddam Hussein on live global television provided precisely the images desired by the Pentagon and Bush administration. Closer analysis of this spectacle revealed, however, that rather than displaying a mass uprising of Iraqis against the Baath regime, there were relatively few people assaulting the Hussein statue. Analysis of the pictures in the square revealed that there was only a relatively small crowd around the statue of Saddam Hussein while most of the square was empty. Those attacking the statue were largely members of the U.S.-supported Iraqi National Congress, one of whose members shown in the crowd attempted to pass himself off as the “mayor” of Baghdad, until U.S. military forces restrained him. Moreover, the few Iraqis attacking the statue were unable to destroy it, until some U.S. soldiers on the scene used their tank and cable to pull it down. In a semiotic slip, one soldier briefly put a U.S. flag on top of Hussein’s head, providing an iconic image for Arab networks and others of a U.S. occupation and take-over of Iraq.

Subsequent images of looting, anarchy and chaos throughout Iraq, however, including the looting of the National Museum, the National Archive that contained rare books and historical documents, and the Ministry for Religious Affairs, which contained rare religious material, created extremely negative impressions.⁹ Likewise, growing Iraqi demonstrations over the U.S. occupation and continued violence throughout the country put on view a highly uncertain situation in which the spectacle of victory and the triumph of Bush administration and Pentagon policy might be put into question, domestically as well as globally.

For weeks after the fall of the Iraqi regime negative images continued to circulate of clashes between Iraqis and the U.S. forces, gigantic Shia demonstrations and celebrations that produced the specter of the growing of radical Islamic power in the region, and the continued failure to produce security and stability. The spectacle of Shia on the march and taking over power in many regions of the country created worries that “democracy” in Iraq could produce religious fundamentalist regimes. This negative spectacle suggests the limitations of a politics of the spectacle that can backfire, spiral out of control, and generate unintended consequences.

Indeed, in Gulf War I, the Iraqi flight from its occupation of Kuwait and apparent military defeat of the Iraqi regime was followed by images of Shi’ite and Kurdish uprisings and their violent suppression by the Saddam Hussein regime, ultimately coding the Gulf War as ambiguous and contributing to George H.W. Bush’s defeat in 1992. Likewise, while the September 11 terror attacks on the U.S. by the Al Qaeda network appeared to be a triumph of the Islamic radicals, worldwide revulsion against the attacks and the global and multilateral attempts to close down its networks ultimately appear to have seriously weakened the Al Qaeda forces. Politics of the spectacle are thus highly ambiguous and unstable, subject to multiple interpretations, and generate ambiguous and often unanticipated effects, as when the Republican attempts to use Bill Clinton’s sexual escapades to promote his impeachment backfired and created sympathy and support for him.

Media spectacles can backfire and are subject to dialectical reversal as positive images give way to negative ones. Spectacles of war are difficult to control and manage, and can be subject to different framings and interpretations, as when non-U.S. broadcasting networks focus on civilian casualties, looting and chaos, and U.S. military crimes against Iraqis rather than the U.S. victory and the evils of Saddam Hussein. It is obviously too soon to determine the effects of Bush Junior’s Iraq war but the consequences are likely to be complex and unforeseen, thus rendering claims that the adventure represents a great victory premature and possibly quite erroneous.

References

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_____ (2003a) Media Spectacle. London and New York: Routledge.

_____ (2003b) From 9/11 to Terror War: Dangers of the Bush Legacy. Boulder, Co.: Rowman and Littlefield.

Notes

¹ For my previous studies of war, media, and propaganda, see Kellner 1992 and 2003b. For my daily Internet commentary on the media, Bush administration, Iraq, and other topics, see blogleft at <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/courses/ed253a/blogger.php>.

² On May 29, 2003, CBS News reported that no bunker, bodies, or evidence that Saddam Hussein or his family was at the site bombed the opening night of the war was found.

³ Soon after, British and then U.S. military sources affirmed that the site was not a chemical weapons production or storage facility. For a critique of a series of “smoking gun” discoveries of weapons of mass destruction facilities and their subsequent debunking, see Jake Tapper, “WMD, MIA?” Salon (April 16, 2003) and “Angry Allies” Salon (May 30, 2003).

⁴ On the Baghdad bombings, see the reporting of Robert Fisk in the London Independent and for the story that questioned official U.S. military accounts of the checking shootings of a civilian family, see William Branigin, “A Gruesome Scene on Highway 9,” Washington Post (April 1, 2003).

⁵ A Washington Post April 3 story headlined “She was fighting to her death” based on unnamed military sources claimed that Lynch “continued firing at the Iraqis even after she sustained multiple gunshot wounds,” and claimed that she was also stabbed by Iraqis who captured her. In fact, Lynch’s vehicle took a wrong turn, overturned, and she was hurt in the accident not fighting Iraqis.

⁶ See Mitch Potter, “The real ‘Saving Pte. Lynch,’” Toronto Star (May 5, 2003); the Associated Press also confirmed this story, as did the BBC on May 15 and CBS News on May 29.

⁷ Rogers was interviewed on Howard Kurtz’s poorly named CNN media review “Reliable Sources” on April 27, 2003.

⁸ For systematic analysis of the New Barbarism accompanying and in part generated by the Bush administration and their hardright supporters, see Kellner, 2003b. See also Jim Rutenberg, “Cable’s War Coverage Suggests a New ‘Fox Effect’ on Television” (New York Times, April 16, 2003). Rutenberg provides examples of Fox’s aggressively opinionated and biased discourse, as when anchor Neil Cavuto said of those who oppose the war on Iraq: “You were sickening then, you are sickening now.” Fox’s high ratings during the war influenced CNN and the NBC networks to be more patriotic and dismissive of those who criticized the war and its aftermath.

⁹ Evidently, the museum community thought it had an understanding with the US military of the need to preserve Iraqi national treasures which were allowed by the US military to be looted and destroyed while they protected the Petroleum Ministry; see <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/16/international/worldspecial/16MUSE.html?pagewanted=print&position=>. On the looting of the Ministry for Religious Affairs, see <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/16/international/worldspecial/16BAGH.html?pagewanted=print&position=>. Later reports indicated that some of the museum artifacts believed destroyed were hidden, but there were also reports of continued looting of Iraqi archaeological sites throughout the country that were not protected by the U.S.; see Edmund L. Andrews, “Iraqi Looters Tearing Up Archaeological Sites,” New York Times (May 23, 2003).