

# 1 Iraq, the Pentagon and the battle for Arab hearts and minds

## ABSTRACT

Two months after ‘liberating’ Iraq, the Anglo-American authorities in Baghdad decided to control the new and free Iraqi press. Newspapers that publish ‘wild stories’, material deemed provocative or capable of inciting ethnic violence, are being threatened or shut down. A controlled press is a ‘responsible press — just what Saddam Hussein used to say about the press his deposed regime produced. In this edition of *Pacific Journalism Review*, essays by media commentators present several perspectives on the war and its aftermath. **Patrick Ensor** gives an overview, **Louise Matthews** provides media context for the war, **John Pilger** challenges journalists, **Mohamed Al-Bendary** profiles the pan-Arab satellite boom, and **Alastair Thompson** and **Russell Brown** examine the New Zealand media connection. Cartoonists **Steve Bell** (*The Guardian*) and **Deven** (*Le Mauricien*) add their views. Critical of the ‘embedded’ media, Bell laments: ‘There’s never been a more dangerous time to be a journalist at war.’

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**T**O UNDERSTAND how the 2003 war on Iraq and the aftermath were reported, we need to understand what the war aims were of the United States and Saddam Hussein. The language and images of war dictate how its conduct and success are perceived by both friends and enemies, but particularly by those in whose name the war is being fought.



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One of the US's early tactical aims was to create the impression of an overwhelming force that would crush the enemy psychologically. Hence the 'shock and awe' campaign where the media were briefed in advance about the variety, precision and power of the latest-generation bombs and missiles being targeted at the heart of Saddam's regime. The hope was that Saddam's troops, terrified by the initial US aerial bombardment, would surrender before a shot was fired.

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Basra's resistance and the hold-up of the American advance by Iraqi fedayeen fighters in Nassiriya dashed the Pentagon's hopes of a quick and bloodless war, so the message had to be adapted and President Bush wheeled out to warn the American public of a possibly long campaign, resolutely pursued.

A far more central aim was to portray the American (and British) troops as 'liberators' of the Iraqi people from the cruel, dictatorial regime of Saddam. Since the war had failed to win UN backing and was being called illegitimate by enemies and allies alike, it was vital to portray the campaign as a just war with a strongly humanitarian aim. (The fact that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction — the ostensible *casus belli* — have not been found remains an embarrassment, but not one likely to concern the majority of Americans, for whom Saddam was always the true target.)

Thus it became important to the Pentagon to dissuade the media from publishing images of badly wounded civilians — hurting the people you have come to save amounts to rotten public relations. The heated argument over who was responsible for the Baghdad market bombs that killed dozens of innocent bystanders saw the US Defense Department's spin-masters indulge in an orgy of denial. When Robert Fisk, whose reports from Baghdad were consistently 'off-message' by focusing on the suffering inflicted on civilians, said that the Iraqis had shown him a shard of bomb discovered in the market area with a US serial number, the Americans accused him of being gullible and unprofessional. How could a self-respecting journalist accept any evidence from the Iraqi regime at face value, they demanded to know.

Images of badly wounded American soldiers — or worse, body bags coming home — also needed to be suppressed, particularly in the US media, so as not to upset voters' morale: the lesson of Vietnam is still deeply engraved on the Pentagon's heart. Which is why the European press was asked not to publish pictures of the coffins of early US victims returning home for burial. If the war wasn't going to be short, it was definitely going to appear bloodless. One telling image from the early stages of the war appeared on the front page of *The Sydney Morning Herald*. It depicted a prone Iraqi soldier with a look of pain on his face having his wounds (invisible to the viewer) treated by a helmeted US medic in the middle of a sand storm. The picture seemed to be saying (to misquote Wilfred Owen): 'You are the enemy I healed, my friend.'

Other features of the Pentagon's propaganda effort were press briefings at the Hollywood-designed Central Command in Qatar where generals were long

on campaign aims and short on military details, and notably silent on US casualty figures. ‘Embedded’ journalists, especially American ones, generally played their part in helping the US propagandist effort.

While the US march on Baghdad seemed to be getting bogged down, and retired US generals complained that too few troops were trying to protect dangerously stretched supply lines, the US defense secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, was uncharacteristically forced on the back foot: this was General Tommy Franks’s plan, and if too light a force had been sent to do the job, then blame the military. He also deplored the media’s Henny Penny-style sense of doom.

Once US troops reached Baghdad and entered the city almost unopposed, the Pentagon recovered its poise. The Abrams tanks swept all before them: the war of liberation was back on track. No images could have suited the allies better than TV footage of frenzied Iraqis taking a sledgehammer to a felled bronze statue of Saddam. As relief at the swift victory replaced fear of a street-by-street battle for Baghdad, the Iraqi information minister’s press briefings became a comedy turn for Western viewers and spawned a popular website.

The Bush administration benefited hugely from a compliant media that gave its patriotic support to the war. When Peter Arnett, the veteran TV reporter, told an Iraqi TV station that he thought the US campaign was not going according to plan, he was promptly sacked by NBC despite apologising for what he said. His remarks were insensitively timed, but post-9/11 America is intolerant of dissent.

### **What of the Arab view of the events in Iraq?**

Saddam’s key aim was to win the sympathy and support of his fellow Arabs as he fought for his personal survival. How better to portray it than as a shared struggle against an occupying force maiming and killing Iraqi families and children? His propaganda masterstroke, as an Egyptian media commentator, Mamoun Fandy, pointed out in a perceptive article he wrote in *The Washington Post* on March 30, was to align himself with the Palestinian plight — the only issue to unite every Arab nation. Fandy writes:

Consider his use, only since the start of the war, of the term ‘fedayeen Saddam’ to describe his protective force. ‘Fedayeen’ has been used for years to refer to the PLO fighters of the 1960s and 1970s. By appropriating it, Hussein is attempting to blur the lines between the Palestinian cause and his own . . . Palestinians fielded the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade

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against the Israeli army, for instance. And now the Iraqi leader, too, has an al-Aqsa brigade, which, like his fedayeen, is fighting a battle that eerily echoes the Palestinian one.

The same parallel pervades television coverage. For instance, on al-Jazeera and some other networks, the Americans are described as an 'invading' or 'occupying' force. The Iraqi military is the 'resistance'. Al-Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV have shown dead Iraqis being paraded through the streets by crowds shouting 'Allahu Akbar' — intifada-style. Broadcasters and viewers alike speak of Hussein using the language developed for speaking of Arafat: both are corrupt dictators, but the issue now is that America and Israel are occupying Arab land.

Fandy also makes the point that, while the 24-hour Arab satellite news channels, principally al-Jazeera, have been modelled on CNN, they are staffed by young broadcasters freed from the constraints of state-controlled Arab television. Not for them the self-imposed restraint of US TV channels, where images of war are toned down so as not upset American viewers (or advertisers). On the contrary, they competed with each other to deliver the most bloody and painful images of civilian suffering, while showing no scruples in parading captured prisoners of war for their viewers. Fandy comments:

With few exceptions, ethical constraints are rarely discussed in the Arab media, where the notion of editorial judgment sounds to many like censorship. Several have said it reminds them of what they had to do while they were working for state-owned broadcasters. Reporters and producers know what their viewers want to see: images of empowerment and resistance because of past defeats.

The US's swift campaign is being portrayed by the Bush administration as a benign projection of military power to oust a hated dictator and replace him with democracy. In Arab eyes the American victory is seen as a catastrophe, the more so because the victory was humiliatingly swift as the defenders of Baghdad melted away and Saddam signally failed to live up to his self-styled image as a latter-day Saladin. And no one questions what is perceived by Arabs as America's true motive in engaging in war — to secure and control Iraq's oil wealth for the benefit of the West.

Rumsfeld and the Pentagon have scored a PR triumph back home, but they

will have an uphill struggle to persuade Iraqis that the US occupation of their country is benign. America may have won the battle on the ground, but al-Jazeera may still emerge the winner in the war for Arab hearts and minds.

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