

3 Drawing fire without a cartoonist's flak jacket

STEVE BELL

The Guardian

HOW would I like to be an embedded cartoonist? Not one little bit. I believe passionately in the idea of cartoon reportage, but not at my age, and certainly not in the present circumstances with the military breathing down my neck.

Don't get me wrong — I would love to hurl myself into foxholes and I really enjoyed the only time I have been paintballing. But I fear this would be paintballing with extreme prejudice — and just imagine the indignity of being at the beck and call of nuclear-powered wankers like Air Marshall Bertrand Bollocks or whatever his name is.

Would I care to be an embedded one? Not in the conditions during the invasion of Iraq. The Rumsfeld doctrine, as clearly expressed by the US Defence Secretary during the Afghan war in late 2001, means that un-embedded journalists of any description can expect no protection from the forces of freedom.

There's never been a more dangerous time to be a journalist at war.

If you don't believe me then take a look at *To Afghanistan and Back* by the US cartoonist Ted Rall, an excellent little book that supplies a first hand account of what really happened to journalists in that particular conflict.

And look at what they did to the Palestine Hotel. To hit the offices of al-Jazeera once in Kabul could be construed as carelessness; to blast them for a second time in Baghdad seems like something other than misfortune.

So that leaves me back in my armchair, or seated at my desk, wading up to my metaphorical eyeballs through the swollen torrent of shit pouring out of my radio and TV.

IRAQ AND THE MEDIA WAR

One of the real advantages of being able to draw in this awful context is that it affords the chance to manipulate a little of this flood of imagery and turn it back on itself; since I'm certain the vast bulk of these mega-pictures constitute a deliberate campaign of obfuscation.

This explains the Western media's strange combination of squeamishness and prurience. They don't want the gory bits, thank you very much, but they are inexorably drawn towards them nonetheless. Then they shut their eyes tight at the crucial moment, for isn't such explicit imagery both tasteless and intrusive? Surely that's the bloody idea.

I might be a little more sympathetic to the Bush-Blair axis if they would at least own up to the effects of what they are actually doing out there. But they manage the precise opposite: repeating blatant lies and shrouding their campaign of supposed (but impossible) surgical accuracy in a blanket of misinformation.

For at the end of the day, no matter what your views on the legitimacy of this war, there is no escaping the grisly equation that high explosives plus densely populated areas equals civilian casualties.

Apart from the inevitable risk of seeming flippant and trivial in the face of tragedy and heroism, is it any more difficult working as a cartoonist now than under normal conditions? Personally speaking, there is no more 'censorship' than usual.

The only thing I've been obliged to adapt slightly was the 'turd count' in my cartoon on the role of the UN, published on April 4 — I agreed to remove three splattered turds from the version that appeared in the printed edition of *The Guardian*. The version on the web went unaltered.

The response to my war cartoons (which have made up my entire output during the last couple of months) has been interesting, particularly by email.

Since, by its very nature the web version ends up in all sorts of exotic, weird and wonderful places, I have almost become used to getting a steady supply, occasionally building to a flood of righteous abuse, from across the Atlantic.

But since the outbreak of hostilities, this seems to have eased and given way to a generally more positive electronic mailbag from the other side of the pond (if I discount the offers of porn, Viagra and Nigerian bank scams). However, I'm not sure this means anything other than people of like mind wishing to stick together in times of trouble and strife.

Whatever happens I'm always very grateful for any response, though my frequent failure to reply may give the opposite impression. The web has also

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been an invaluable source of information and imagery unavailable in any other medium (I can't get al-Jazeera on my cable account). I often wonder what I would do if I were ordered to pack up pen, paper, scanner and laptop and head for the front — something which is technologically perfectly possible, but which I've only ever done in the less threatening context of a party conference.

I think after I'd been prised out of a wardrobe in which I would be trying to hide, I would endeavour to keep my head down and draw whatever came in front of me. Which, if I really kept my head down, would be absolutely bugger all.

However, the great thing about drawing cartoons is that you can do it from memory. So, looking at it another way, if I were a military-type person and I came across somebody in a flak jacket with CARTOONIST plastered across the front, I'd have them shot or sent back home sooner than I could say 'exercising my right of self-defence'.

Steve Bell is The Guardian's cartoonist. This cartoon and article have been published with his permission. www.guardian.co.uk

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