

# An Empire of Lies: The CIA and the Western Media

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

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Last week the Guardian, Britain's main liberal newspaper, ran an exclusive report on the belated confessions of an Iraqi exile, Rafeed al-Janabi, codenamed "Curveball" by the CIA. Eight years ago, Janabi played a key behind-the-scenes role — if an inadvertent one — in making possible the US invasion of Iraq. His testimony bolstered claims by the Bush administration that Iraq's president, Saddam Hussein, had developed an advanced programme producing weapons of mass destruction.

Curveball's account included the details of mobile biological weapons trucks presented by Colin Powell, the US Secretary of State, to the United Nations in early 2003. Powell's apparently compelling case on WMD was used to justify the US attack on Iraq a few weeks later.

Eight years on, Curveball revealed to the Guardian that he had fabricated the story of Saddam's WMD back in 2000, shortly after his arrival in Germany seeking asylum. He told the paper he had lied to German intelligence in the hope his testimony might help topple Saddam, though it seems more likely he simply wanted to ensure his asylum case was taken more seriously.

For the careful reader — and I stress the word careful — several disturbing facts emerged from the report.

One was that the German authorities had quickly proven his account of Iraq's WMD to be false. Both German and British intelligence had travelled to Dubai to meet Bassil Latif, his former boss at Iraq's Military Industries Commission. Dr Latif had proven that Curveball's claims could not be true. The German authorities quickly lost interest in Janabi and he was not interviewed again until late 2002, when it became more pressing for the US to make a convincing case for an attack on Iraq.

Another interesting disclosure was that, despite the vital need to get straight all the facts about Curveball's testimony — given the stakes involved in launching a pre-emptive strike against another sovereign state — the Americans never bothered to interview Curveball themselves.

A third revelation was that the CIA's head of operations in Europe, Tyler Drumheller, passed on warnings from German intelligence that they considered Curveball's testimony to be highly dubious. The head of the CIA, George Tenet, simply ignored the advice.

With Curveball's admission in mind, as well as these other facts from the story, we can draw some obvious conclusions — conclusions confirmed by subsequent developments.

Lacking both grounds in international law and the backing of major allies, the Bush administration desperately needed Janabi's story about WMD, however discredited it was, to justify its military plans for Iraq. The White House did not interview Curveball because they knew his account of Saddam's WMD programme was made up. His story would unravel under scrutiny; better to leave Washington with the option of "plausible deniability".

Nonetheless, Janabi's falsified account was vitally useful: for much of the American public, it added a veneer of credibility to the implausible case that Saddam was a danger to the world; it helped fortify wavering allies facing their own doubting publics; and it brought on board Colin Powell, a former general seen as the main voice of reason in the administration.

In other words, Bush's White House used Curveball to breathe life into its mythological story about Saddam's threat to world peace.

So how did the Guardian, a bastion of liberal journalism, present its exclusive on the most controversial episode in recent American foreign policy?

Here is its headline: "How US was duped by Iraqi fantasist looking to topple Saddam".

Did the headline-writer misunderstand the story as written by the paper's reporters? No, the headline neatly encapsulated its message. In the text, we are told Powell's presentation to the UN "revealed that the Bush administration's hawkish decisionmakers had swallowed" Curveball's account. At another point, we are told Janabi "pulled off one of the greatest confidence tricks in the history of modern intelligence". And that: "His critics — who are many and powerful — say the cost of his deception is too difficult to estimate."

In other words, the Guardian assumed, despite all the evidence uncovered in its own research, that Curveball misled the Bush administration into making a disastrous miscalculation. On this view, the White House was the real victim of Curveball's lies, not the Iraqi people — more than a million of whom are dead as a result of the invasion, according to the best available figures, and four million of whom have been forced into exile.

There is nothing exceptional about this example. I chose it because it relates to an event of continuing and momentous significance.

Unfortunately, there is something depressingly familiar about this kind of reporting, even in the West's main liberal publications. Contrary to its avowed aim, mainstream journalism invariably diminishes the impact of new events when they threaten powerful elites.

We will examine why in a minute. But first let us consider what, or who, constitutes "empire" today? Certainly, in its most symbolic form, it can be identified as the US government and its army, comprising the world's sole superpower.

Traditionally, empires have been defined narrowly, in terms of a strong nation-state that successfully expands its sphere of influence and power to other territories. Empire's aim is to make those territories dependent, and then either exploit their resources in the case of poorly developed countries, or, with more developed countries, turn them into new markets

for its surplus goods. It is in this latter sense that the American empire has often been able to claim that it is a force for global good, helping to spread freedom and the benefits of consumer culture.

Empire achieves its aims in different ways: through force, such as conquest, when dealing with populations resistant to the theft of their resources; and more subtly through political and economic interference, persuasion and mind-control when it wants to create new markets. However it works, the aim is to create a sense in the dependent territories that their interests and fates are bound to those of empire.

In our globalised world, the question of who is at the centre of empire is much less clear than it once was. The US government is today less the heart of empire than its enabler. What were until recently the arms of empire, especially the financial and military industries, have become a transnational imperial elite whose interests are not bound by borders and whose powers largely evade legislative and moral controls.

Israel's leadership, we should note, as well its elite supporters around the world — including the Zionist lobbies, the arms manufacturers and Western militaries, and to a degree even the crumbling Arab tyrannies of the Middle East — are an integral element in that transnational elite.

The imperial elites' success depends to a large extent on a shared belief among the western public both that "we" need them to secure our livelihoods and security and that at the same time we are really their masters. Some of the necessary illusions perpetuated by the transnational elites include:

- That we elect governments whose job is to restrain the corporations;
- That we, in particular, and the global workforce in general are the chief beneficiaries of the corporations' wealth creation;
- That the corporations and the ideology that underpins them, global capitalism, are the only hope for freedom;
- That consumption is not only an expression of our freedom but also a major source of our happiness;
- That economic growth can be maintained indefinitely and at no long-term cost to the health of the planet;
- And that there are groups, called terrorists, who want to destroy this benevolent system of wealth creation and personal improvement.

These assumptions, however fanciful they may appear when subjected to scrutiny, are the ideological bedrock on which the narratives of our societies in the West are constructed and from which ultimately our sense of identity derives. This ideological system appears to us — and I am using "we" and "us" to refer to western publics only — to describe the natural order.

The job of sanctifying these assumptions — and ensuring they are not scrutinised — falls to our mainstream media. Western corporations own the media, and their advertising makes the industry profitable. In this sense, the media cannot fulfil the function of watchdog of power, because in fact it is power. It is the power of the globalised elite to control and limit the ideological and imaginative horizons of the media's readers and viewers. It does so to ensure that imperial interests, which are synonymous with those of the corporations, are not

threatened.

The Curveball story neatly illustrates the media's role.

His confession has come too late — eight years too late, to be precise — to have any impact on the events that matter. As happens so often with important stories that challenge elite interests, the facts vitally needed to allow western publics to reach informed conclusions were not available when they were needed. In this case, Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld are gone, as are their neoconservative advisers. Curveball's story is now chiefly of interest to historians.

That last point is quite literally true. The Guardian's revelations were of almost no concern to the US media, the supposed watchdog at the heart of the US empire. A search of the Lexis Nexis media database shows that Curveball's admissions featured only in the New York Times, in a brief report on page 7, as well as in a news round-up in the Washington Times. The dozens of other major US newspapers, including the Washington Post, made no mention of it at all.

Instead, the main audience for the story outside the UK was the readers of India's Hindu newspaper and the Khaleej Times.

But even the Guardian, often regarded as fearless in taking on powerful interests, packaged its report in such a way as to deprive Curveball's confession of its true value. The facts were bled of their real significance. The presentation ensured that only the most aware readers would have understood that the US had not been duped by Curveball, but rather that the White House had exploited a "fantasist" — or desperate exile from a brutal regime, depending on how one looks at it — for its own illegal and immoral ends.

Why did the Guardian miss the main point in its own exclusive? The reason is that all our mainstream media, however liberal, take as their starting point the idea both that the West's political culture is inherently benevolent and that it is morally superior to all existing, or conceivable, alternative systems.

In reporting and commentary, this is demonstrated most clearly in the idea that "our" leaders always act in good faith, whereas "their" leaders — those opposed to empire or its interests — are driven by base or evil motives.

It is in this way that official enemies, such as Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosevic, can be singled out as personifying the crazed or evil dictator — while other equally rogue regimes such as Saudi Arabia's are described as "moderate" — opening the way for their countries to become targets of our own imperial strategies.

States selected for the "embrace" of empire are left with a stark choice: accept our terms of surrender and become an ally; or defy empire and face our wrath.

When the corporate elites trample on other peoples and states to advance their own selfish interests, such as in the invasion of Iraq to control its resources, our dominant media cannot allow its reporting to frame the events honestly. The continuing assumption in liberal commentary about the US attack on Iraq, for example, is that, once no WMD were found, the Bush administration remained to pursue a misguided effort to root out the terrorists,

restore law and order, and spread democracy.

For the western media, our leaders make mistakes, they are naïve or even stupid, but they are never bad or evil. Our media do not call for Bush or Blair to be tried at the Hague as war criminals.

This, of course, does not mean that the western media is Pravda, the propaganda mouthpiece of the old Soviet empire. There are differences. Dissent is possible, though it must remain within the relatively narrow confines of “reasonable” debate, a spectrum of possible thought that accepts unreservedly the presumption that we are better, more moral, than them.

Similarly, journalists are rarely told — at least, not directly — what to write. The media have developed careful selection processes and hierarchies among their editorial staff — termed “filters” by media critics Ed Herman and Noam Chomsky — to ensure that dissenting or truly independent journalists do not reach positions of real influence.

There is, in other words, no simple party line. There are competing elites and corporations, and their voices are reflected in the narrow range of what we term commentary and opinion. Rather than being dictated to by party officials, as happened under the Soviet system, our journalists scramble for access, to be admitted into the ante-chambers of power. These privileges make careers but they come at a huge cost to the reporters’ independence.

Nonetheless, the range of what is permissible is slowly expanding — over the opposition of the elites and our mainstream TV and press. The reason is to be found in the new media, which is gradually eroding the monopoly long enjoyed by the corporate media to control the spread of information and popular ideas. Wikileaks is so far the most obvious, and impressive, outcome of that trend.

The consequences are already tangible across the Middle East, which has suffered disproportionately under the oppressive rule of empire. The upheavals as Arab publics struggle to shake off their tyrants are also stripping bare some of the illusions the western media have peddled to us. Empire, we have been told, wants democracy and freedom around the globe. And yet it is caught mute and impassive as the henchmen of empire unleash US-made weapons against their peoples who are demanding western-style freedoms.

An important question is: how will our media respond to this exposure, not just of our politicians’ hypocrisy but also of their own? They are already trying to co-opt the new media, including Wikileaks, but without real success. They are also starting to allow a wider range of debate, though still heavily constrained, than had been possible before.

The West’s version of glasnost is particularly obvious in the coverage of the problem closest to our hearts here in Palestine. What Israel terms a delegitimisation campaign is really the opening up — slightly — of the media landscape, to allow a little light where until recently darkness reigned.

This is an opportunity and one that we must nurture. We must demand of the corporate media more honesty; we must shame them by being better-informed than the hacks who recycle official press releases and clamour for access; and we must desert them, as is

already happening, for better sources of information.

We have a window. And we must force it open before the elites of empire try to slam it shut.

*This is the text of a talk entitled "Media as a Tool of Empire" delivered to Sabeel, the Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre, at its eighth international conference in Bethlehem on Friday February 25.*

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