

Re-Interpreting Iraq: Propaganda Campaign Underway

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To their credit, top US Pentagon officials cautioned journalists and the public, since the Iraq war's early days, that the dissemination of misinformation would be a vital weapon in their war strategy. Needless to say, they have certainly held true to their word.

But what the mainstream media – seemingly little alarmed by the administration's clear intent to supply journalists with false information – is neglecting to convey is the fact that misinformation is still the name of the game for the US government, its well-paid experts and media allies. The fact is that the administration's propaganda machine was hardly turned off following the historic, albeit staged toppling of Saddam's statue near the Palestine Hotel in March 2003. A renowned journalist and a trusted colleague of mine was, among others, a witness to the intricate pre-toppling show. "It was all an act," he declared as we both dined in a Seattle restaurant days upon his return from Iraq, nearly three years ago. His reports however, failed to make mention of that seemingly valuable note. "The End of a Tyrant", was more or less the flashing headline everywhere.

To achieve its objectives, the advancing US military started a makeshift Arabic radio station near Baghdad's airport, made possible with the cooperation of Arab broadcasters seeking a quick buck. Meanwhile, millions of fliers descended upon weary Iraqis throughout the country, urging them to give up the fight if they wanted a better future for their children: that of freedom, democracy and an end to their suffering.

Though access to electricity and clean water are still major challenges facing ordinary Iraqis to this day, over three years later, US media specialists in hushed, yet official cooperation with a Lebanese television station took on the task of converting Iraq's television station from Baath Party propaganda to American propaganda in a matter of weeks. Saddam himself would be shocked to realize that his well-knitted, decades-old media apparatus still had awesome room for improvement.

A military strategist would defend state-sponsored half-truths and misinformation in times of war as a justifiable war tactic; not only did it bring a quick end to the war – or so it seems – but it has also minimized American casualties.

But things have hardly changed since those early days, though the situation on the ground has been fundamentally altered, in favor of no one. The Pentagon's latest figures have put America's dead at 2500, while the number of wounded has passed the 18,000 mark. The post Vietnam war experience can tell us a great deal of the physiological scars that wars inflict, and nothing can heal. Moreover, the negative, even debilitating harms caused by the US army's use of Depleted Uranium in its war and daily combat against Iraqi fighters

requires another article, if not its own volume. Their long-lasting impairments however, are no longer mere speculation.

Considering the devastating outcome of Bush's military adventurism in Iraq, one would imagine that sincerity and transparency are required now more than ever before; after all, there seems to be no particular enemy to baffle: Saddam Hussein is in prison, the so-called insurgency has no central command, thus no central strategy – a fact that renders state propaganda ineffective, if at all necessary. Moreover, the campaign of lies and deceit cannot possibly be targeting the Iraqi people for they were never even taken into consideration since the systematic campaign of sanctions started in 1991, which killed – according to the most modest estimates, nearly one million persons, mostly children. The daily and wholesale murder, organized torture and Haditha-like executions since then are further illustrations.

It's clear that the US state propaganda – which has been achieved with the willing cooperation of the mainstream 'liberal' media – has one prime target: the American public, for without their full acknowledgment and support, military adventurism can be a huge political burden; coupled with a dwindling economy and mounting debt, it could sway the political pendulum to unfavorable directions.

Indeed, the recent announcement of the killing of al-Qaeda's supposed strong-man in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi has unleashed a major PR campaign by the Republican president to reclaim some of his lost credibility among Americans. To save a possible major setback to the Republican Party in the November elections – and considering that his faltering ratings stand at an all time low- President Bush's camp is turning the inconsequential death of al-Zarqawi into a major turning point in Iraq. Though the President insists that al-Zarqawi's death doesn't mean an end to violence in Iraq – a clever attempt to avoid another 'mission accomplished' fallout – the PR campaign led by his administration immediately after the Jordanian militant's death, suggests a desperate, yet determined attempt at political recovery. Otherwise, how else can one explain the timing of the following events: Bush's 'surprise' visit to Iraq, the announcement of a major military 'sweep' meant to parade and present US-trained Iraqi military and police as a strong 'partner' in quelling the insurgency, the Iraqi government's announcement that 'this is the beginning of the end' for al-Qaeda in Iraq, the call for 'national reconciliation' and release of a few hundred Iraqi prisoners, President Bush's two-day retreat in Camp David to consult with his advisors – sold by CNN as the president's way of sharing the war responsibility with the people – and so on and so forth.

The reality on the ground points to the fact that if al-Zarqawi's death was of any value, it freed the Iraqi resistance from its burdensome affiliation with a foreign leadership. Aside from that, nothing has changed: bombs continue to blast throughout the country; tortured and mutilated bodies continue to mysteriously appear in ditches and alleyways, daily gun battles persist, new militant groups with confusing names spring unabashed. Post invasion Iraq has not changed and it is unlikely that it will change any time soon, even if the new Iraqi Prime Minister has finalized his cabinet and has made an impressive speech or two.

What began as a focused campaign of misinformation aimed at defeating Saddam's forces, has turned into a much more intense campaign of deceit and trickery aimed at salvaging Bush's political reputation and that of his Republican Party. Thus, what has really changed in Iraq is that the administration and the media have suddenly decided to re-interpret the

ongoing conflict for political ends. It has little to do with Baghdad and its Green Zone and much to do with Capitol Hill and its discontented politicians. Simply put: it's politics as usual.

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