
I have seen the enemy ...

An Iraqi officer of significant rank approached my translator as I quietly took notes near the banks of the Euphrates River, at a combat observation post named COP Dunlop. He knew I was an embedded American. He had a sense, perhaps, that I was a sympathetic soul, and he wanted to pass along an urgent message.



Franklin Raff

We shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. I learned he was an educated and successful man, an accomplished soldier, and quite knowledgeable about the affairs of the world. He had served under Saddam. He openly spoke about the likelihood of corruption in the new Iraqi Ministry of Defense. We spoke about black-market arms trading, ancient smuggling routes, and the problem of porous borders.

We even discussed personal matters, and the question of his taking a second wife. (I told him the one about a thousand pair of panty-hose hanging from King Solomon's shower-curtain.) We had a reasonably long and genuine conversation about matters of importance to all men. And at a certain moment, he grew a little uneasy and blurted out what he had wanted to say from the beginning:

Why do you people not tell our story? Why do you not say what is going on? Why do you come to our country and see what is happening, you see the schools and the hospitals and you see the markets and you eat with Sunni and Shia soldiers – everybody eats together, everybody works together –you see that Saddam is gone forever and we are free to speak and complain.

You see we are working and eating together and fighting together – Sunni and Shia –you see what we are building here, you see the votes we make as one people. Then you say to the world about a great war and horrible things and how we are all killing each other? We are not animals! We are Iraqis. Look around you! Look!

Non-English speaking Iraqis are distressed and disheartened by American media bias. Many feel personally offended by what they read in translation and hear of in the foreign press. I am not talking about press information and public affairs officers. I am not talking about coalition soldiers (though every one I spoke with on the subject was equally frustrated.) I am talking about Arabic-speaking Iraqis. They see a difference between what we're

I have seen the enemy ...

seeing and what we're saying. What does that tell you about the extent of our problem?

I was truly "downrange" in Iraq, embedded in Baghdad, Sadr City, Fallujah, and a series of remote combat outposts and forward operations bases in the Sunni Triangle. I spent much of my time in areas that were in immediate transition or wholly controlled by Iraqi forces. I wanted to get dirty, and I wanted to see the worst of it.

I was entirely too close to a vehicle-borne IED – intended, possibly, to destroy my party – which tragically killed a U.S. Marine and a young Iraqi boy. I trampled through a mass of depleted uranium, breathed the squalor of a Saddam-era slum, slept uneasily through the bursts of an urban gunfight, and dined on the partially-cooked head of a sheep. But these are not my most disturbing recollections.

Civil unrest is distasteful and at times gruesome, but in much of the Middle East it is an abiding condition. The scenes that flicker in my mind seem graver than the filth, disorder, and sorrow that have been a part of Iraq's dramatic transition. And now that I have returned to Washington, as memories play alongside my daily media intake, they combine to create an increasingly gloomy montage.

It was hilarious at the time. So funny, in fact, I nearly wept. I will never forget the sight of my colleague, a well-known, market-leading radio reporter feverishly clutching his satellite phone as a Chinook transport helicopter flew by, half a mile or so away. He was standing right beside me as he dialed through the time zones to go "live from Iraq":

We're right in the middle of the action! I'm sorry ... I can't hear you! There's a Blackhawk landing right behind me! I can't quite describe what's going on! This is unbelievable!

At the time, you see, we were just outside an Embassy chow hall, quietly discussing the weather. We had just eaten a magnificent lunch. In this combat reporter's trembling right hand was the target of his desperate screams, the satellite phone – his listeners' link to the horror and chaos of war, the sweat and tears, the booming, blood-shod tragedy of it all. And in his left hand – I swear it – a chocolate milkshake.

There is plenty of bombast in the green zone. "On the scene" excitement breeds hyperbole, and many reporters are pretentious and boastful to begin with. There's no need to name names: Most folks can smell manure wrapped in newsprint, no matter who does the wrapping. But I quietly curse when I think of all the self-styled Ernie Pyles in their Baghdad hotel rooms, staring out over the city skyline, giving you news "from the front."

Let me tell you what has become somewhat of a running joke among coalition soldiers. It is evening, and a boom is heard in the distance. Some foreign fighter has blown himself up, and maybe he's taken one of ours with him. Maybe it's an IED. Or it might be an attack on one of our new electrical transformers, engineered to dishearten and confuse Iraqi citizens by depriving them of a night's electricity. Nobody knows yet, but that doesn't really matter.

Our journalist, "on the line" in his cushy suite, scrambles to the balcony. He sees a puff of dust on the horizon, shivers in the cool night air and the intensity of the moment, and turns down CNN on the television. He e-mails his editor about these explosive developments and then, with a cool beer in hand, begins writing about a great and desperate war. Brothers in the crosshairs. A rag-tag insurrection, gaining momentum in dramatic increments. A few historical references. A scribbled, out-of-context comment overheard in the mess hall. A line or two from some radical imam, if a desirable translation can be found. Bingo: It's a front-page story.

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Embedded news-gatherers – even those with military experience, as was the case with me and my immediate company – are essentially expensive luggage. We take up valuable space. We are unarmed, untrained, generally unfit, and we tend to get in the way. We are valuable targets for the border-hopping, media-crazed murderers who seek instability and chaos. But this isn't what irritates our defenders. What bothers them is that when we put pen to paper, we tend to stab them squarely in the back by misrepresenting and over-dramatizing our experiences. It is no wonder a "PRESS" tag will get you a few hairy eyeballs in the field: There's a general consensus that we are liars.

The lies aren't relegated to firsthand reports. I listen to NPR every morning. I read the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, and scan any number of online media. As a lifelong and moderately accomplished student of war history and of the works (and memoranda) of men like Sergei Eisenstein and Josef Goebbels, I have been keenly aware of an increasing use of elemental propaganda techniques and tactics in "mainstream" reporting on the war.

Good news from Iraq, for instance, is systematically, if delicately, prefaced with the indication of a biased source. I am almost certain there is a standing order at outfits like NPR's "Morning Edition" to compromise positive stories with selections from an arsenal of useful poll numbers. For good measure, the stories are often relegated to commentary segments of the program, in order to lend a casual and dismissive air to core information.

Let's use, for example, the fact that Sunni, Shia and Kurdish leaders are organizing innumerable micro-summits to resolve their tribal differences in the name of national unity. Participation is nearly 100 percent, negotiations are largely fruitful, and leaders from local imams on up want to reiterate to the press, just like our Iraqi officer did, that despite

isolated attacks and foreign insurgent activity, there is no "civil war" going on. So the Pentagon releases selections from this tapestry of reassuring stories in the standard manner along with requisite sound-bites, interview opportunities, and raw statistics. The news is verifiable, rich in human interest, and undeniably positive. Here's how it plays on "Morning Edition":

The president has admitted he was wrong about WMD, and now, according to the White House, Shia and Sunni leaders are evidently trying to work together to try and quell the burgeoning civil war. Approval ratings for the Bush administration and the war are at an all-time low, so the question is: What's behind these last-ditch efforts, and can they possibly succeed? Joining me to discuss this is NPR senior news analyst Cokie Roberts ...

In the minds of those who do not recognize the tell-tale signs of subversive delivery, the desired effect is achieved.

This effect – to convince the world that Iraq is a hopeless and violent wasteland, heartbreaking evidence, even, of a trigger-happy cowboy's hubris – is compounded and reaffirmed day after day, as biased and exaggerated reports reverberate through and within thousands of local and syndicated media outlets. As George Orwell explained in his dystopian novel "1984," "If all records told the same tale – then the lie passed into history and became truth."

I wanted to confess to my new friend, the Iraqi officer at COP Dunlop, that we have an autocracy in America that has never been deposed – an imperious corps of convenience-isolationists with short memories and powerful imaginations. I wanted to explain that though there are hardly any soldiers among them, they rule the thoughts and actions of legions of citizens.

I have seen the enemy ...

I wanted to tell him about our media elite, about how “if it bleeds, it leads,” about our 24-hour news cycle, and about the “Journal of Record” and its endless struggle to embarrass and discredit our president. I wanted to tell him that the same folks who tell us they’re giving the world “all the news that’s fit to print” are the same ones who deep-sixed Babi Yar and ignored the Holocaust, the same ones who bury stories about Saddam’s mass graves and “spike” Iraqi efforts to show us the awe-inspiring progress they have made.

I wanted to acknowledge that too many Americans lack the fortitude and patience to stand behind our new Iraqi allies as they forge a new nation. I wanted to explain that certain powerful Americans feel we didn’t find quite enough chemical, nuclear and biological weapons to make our multination worthwhile – no matter what we have, in fact no matter what the Iraqis witnessed, no matter the soldiers’ experiences and testimony, no matter our success thus far.

I wanted to tell him that not all media people are liars. But I knew that my thoughts were too complicated to make it through translation. I knew that when I returned to America, the words “civil war” would be plastered all over the mainstream media, just as they were when I left. So I held my tongue.

I returned to what I expected. All the hotshot analysts and commentators are speculating, with that requisite gravitas, about the “roots” of civil war.

I was there. I was in some miserable places, but I saw a miracle every day. I saw a lot of smiles, a lot of hope, and a lot of pride in that traumatized country. I saw a remarkably fraternal affection between Iraqi and coalition soldiers. I saw bustling markets, busy streets, and peaceful demonstrations. I believe I may have witnessed a pivotal time in the infancy of a vibrant, freedom-loving ally in the Middle East.

I did not see a civil war. I did not see the beginnings of a civil war. But I did learn a thing or two about

the “roots” of this civil war: Iraq’s civil war has been engineered, in no small part, from the comfort of a Baghdad hotel room. It is catalyzed by minor exaggerations, partial facts, and propagandistic suppressions. It will escalate, over time and across media, as minor mistruths beget outright lies, until the truth itself begins to change.

As our new Iraqi allies become discouraged by what they see in the world news, and as they start losing hope, they may abandon their dreams once and for all. Our media’s dark prophecies will then have fulfilled themselves. Then, and tragically, Iraqi and coalition pleas for “truth” may finally be silenced.

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