

Let freedom reign: The big lie

By David Edwards

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The stakes are high for anyone willing to pit their capacity for independent, rational thought against the media's version of the world. All too often, we find ourselves faced with the choice of deciding that either we, or a wide range of celebrity journalists, are mad. It takes a brave soul to affirm, with Thoreau: "Any man more right than his neighbours constitutes a majority of one." It takes a brave female soul, too.

Consider the literally mind-boggling media performance in reporting "the handover of power" to the Iraqi interim government.

Prior to the 'handover', the media never tired of insisting that the "coalition" would "hand over power to the Iraqis" on June 30 (Laura Trevelyan, BBC1, 16:45 News, May 23, 2004), such that "soon the occupation will end" (Orla Guerin, BBC1, 19:00 News, June 16).

The death of a British soldier in Basra was particularly tragic, Middle East correspondent Orla Guerin noted on the BBC, because he was "the last soldier to die under the occupation". (BBC1, 13:00 News, June 28, 2004)

Washington correspondent Matt Frei declared Iraq "sovereign and free" on "an enormously significant day for Iraq", an "historic day", anchor Anna Ford emoted on the same programme.

Even the most indolent viewer must surely have wondered how any of this could be true when hundreds of thousands of US and other troops continue to pack Iraq – how can the occupation end without the occupation ending? And how can an Iraqi government appointed by the invading American superpower, rather than elected by Iraqis, be declared "free"?

On the evening news, Guerin reported how Iraqi troops participating in a ceremony, "have waited all their lives for freedom", noting that Iraqis "feel satisfaction that power will be back in Iraqi hands". (Guerin, BBC1, 18:00 News, June 28, 2004)

The bewildering sense of hidden collisions with reality was heightened by diplomatic correspondent James Robbins, who noted that the big question remained: "Can Iraq

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achieve democracy?” (Ibid)

So power is “back in Iraqi hands”, Iraq is “sovereign and free” but the key question is whether Iraq can achieve democracy!

Over on ITN, senior correspondent James Mates reviled the “determined and brutal terrorists” – he meant the insurgency, not the “coalition” – who were threatening Iraq, which was “now sovereign” (ITN, 18:30 News, June 28, 2004). On Channel 4 News, Jon Snow noted that this was “a dramatic moment in the Bush-Blair war on terror”. (Channel 4 News, 19:00, June 28, 2004) Quite why this was the case, when everyone now knows Iraq had nothing to do with September 11, had no WMD, and no links to al-Qaeda, was not explained.

Channel 4 at least managed to express some scepticism. International editor Lindsey Hilsum noted that “the occupation ended, at least symbolically”, with Snow referring to the “new, supposedly sovereign, government”. Foreign affairs correspondent Jonathan Miller noted “The occupation was over – at least that’s how they [Bush and Blair] presented it to the world.” (Ibid)

Channel 4 Washington correspondent, Jonathan Rugman, however, broke all records for tragi-comic truth-reversal by commenting that unless Iraq managed to “create some semblance of a democratic government”, no one should expect any further unilateral US interventions “anywhere else anytime soon”. Should we laugh or cry? Heaven help any Iraqi government that manages to achieve actual democracy in Iraq - a “rogue state” and prime target for unilateral US intervention will thereby have instantly been created.

On and on, throughout the day, the broadcast media presented the government version of events as common sense truth – there really +had+ been “a transfer of power”, Iraq was “independent”, “sovereign” and “free”.

What was so extraordinary was that a range of journalists right across the spectrum was willing to abandon all common sense, in fact sanity, in promoting this obviously absurd argument. Writing in the hardly radical New York Times, the admirable Paul Krugman wrote:

“The formal occupation of Iraq came to an ignominious end yesterday... In reality, the occupation will continue under another name, most likely until a hostile Iraqi populace demands that we leave.” (Krugman, ‘Who lost Iraq?’, New York Times, June 29, 2004)

This recognition of the obvious truth was unimaginable on the main BBC and ITN news programmes on June 28.

As Robert Fisk wrote in the Independent: “Alice in Wonderland could not have improved on this. The looking-glass reflects all the way from Baghdad to Washington.” He added: “Those of us who put quotation marks around ‘liberation’ in 2003 should now put

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quotation marks around ‘sovereignty’. Doing this has become part of the reporting of the Middle East.” (Fisk, ‘The handover: Restoration of Iraqi sovereignty - or Alice in Wonderland?’ The Independent, June 29, 2004)

Alas, as so often happens, Fisk’s own editors provided an almost comic counterpoint to his honesty on the same day, insisting, “the new ministers must now be left to govern as they see fit. The slightest hint that they are puppets of the former occupying powers will reinforce suspicions that the occupation never ended and fuel resistance”. (Leader, ‘The violence will only end in Iraq if there is a genuine transfer of sovereignty’, The Independent, June 29, 2004)

The “slightest hint”? That will be the quarter of a million foreign troops armed to the teeth and out of the control of a US-selected Iraqi government, itself out of the control of the Iraqi population!

The Independent’s editors talked of “a mismanaged occupation. So many bad judgements were made. The occupation was mounted without the requisite troop strength; priority was given to protecting the oil industry infrastructure before protecting civilians; the US provisional authority took the decision to purge every last Baathist and disband the Iraqi armed forces, so driving millions into penury and opposition.” (*Ibid*)

Again, anyone still capable of rational thought after this flood of brainmashing propaganda, can recognise that the problem is not that the occupation was “mismanaged”, but that it was monstrous, illegal, immoral, murderous – a campaign of mass violence in pursuit of transparently cynical ends. +That+ is the reality - it doesn’t matter that it conflicts with everything important people are saying and need us to believe. If any other imperial power in history had been responsible, it wouldn’t even be a discussion.

In fact the interim Iraqi government has no power even to make laws or to change laws imposed by the “coalition”. This includes a law signed last week giving US and other foreign civilian contractors legal immunity while working in Iraq. If one of the 80,000 foreign mercenaries in Iraq shoots dead an Iraqi, he cannot be taken to an Iraqi court.

Before leaving, coalition head, Paul Bremer, made a series of 5-year appointments – interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi’s choice of national security and intelligence chiefs will remain in post for five years. Allawi has long worked for MI6, the CIA, and 12 other intelligence agencies.

During discussions at the Security Council over the interim administration’s rights, the French insisted on an Iraqi veto over any large scale “coalition” military offensives. Prime Minister Allawi refused to support the French demand, and so “proved his pro-American bona fides to top US officials”, Dilip Hiro notes. (Dilip Hiro, ‘Iraq tipping Point’, June 25, 2004, Znet, www.zmag.org)

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UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi admitted publicly that his own promised authority in building the caretaker government had been “sharply limited” by American officials. Brahimi called Bremer “the dictator” of Iraq. “Whether Dr. Allawi was their choice, whether they manoeuvred to get him in [the Prime Minister’s] position - you better ask them”, Brahimi said. (*Ibid*)

Crucially, the Iraqi government will have no power over the 140,000 US and 200,000 other troops occupying the country.

The power of the budget continues to be largely set and paid for in Washington, and will not be in Iraqi hands – Americans will decide how the \$18 billion set aside for reconstruction is spent.

Journalist and author Adam Hothschild comments: “If the new Iraq-to-be is not a state, what is it? A half century ago one could talk about colonies, protectorates, and spheres of influence, but in our supposedly post-colonial world, the vocabulary is poorer. We lack a word for a country where most real power is in the hands of someone else, whether that be shadowy local militias, other nations’ armies, or both. Pseudostate, perhaps. From Afghanistan to the Palestinian Authority, Bosnia to Congo, pseudostates have now spread around the globe. Some of them will even be exchanging ambassadors with Iraq.” (Adam Hothschild, ‘A pseudostate is born’, June 27, 2004, ZNet)

In short, nothing has changed. The same broadcast media that fooled itself into fooling the public into taking the Bush-Blair case for war seriously – Iraq possessed lethal WMD, had links to al-Qaeda, and therefore posed a “serious and current” threat to the West – is now trying to fool us into taking the Bush-Blair case for Iraqi “sovereignty” seriously. The media are not neutral observers of deception, they are central players. This was brought home to us by one telling event in particular.

The last man to shake hands with Paul Bremer as he left Baghdad, was one (variously spelled) Barham Salih, former Prime Minister of the PUK-ruled Kurdistan, and now deputy Prime Minister in charge of national security. This was the same Salih presented by BBC journalist, John Sweeney, as a credible, independent commentator on Iraqi affairs. In Sweeney’s documentary, *The Mother of all Ironies*, Salih said: “The oil for food programme is a good programme, it must continue. It is the best thing that has happened to Iraq since the foundation of the Iraqi state. By the way, not only for the Kurdish areas but also for the rest of Iraq, because we never had it so good - all Iraqis, not just Kurds.” (Sweeney, ‘*The Mother of all Ironies*’, Correspondent, BBC2, June 23, 2002)

Salih was talking of a UN programme that had brought mass death and untold suffering to the civilian population of Iraq. This was the same Salih referenced in an email to us from Independent columnist Johann Hari when mentioning “a democratic [Kurdish] parliament

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and Prime Minister (who supported the invasion of the South)". (Email to Media Lens, November 20, 2003)

A British-trained civil engineer, Salih has been Kurdistan's regional representative to Washington, and is said to be "close to" both the State Department and the Pentagon. His story is a fine example of the linkage between media and political propaganda. It's how we are fooled and they keep killing.