

Yes, we murder journalists

REMEMBER Fallujah? It's the Iraqi city that we had to destroy in order to save back it in April of 2004. Over 30 Americans died and over 400 American troops were wounded and airlifted away. And at least 1,200 Iraqis were killed. A Red Cross official reported that American forces used cluster bombs and chemical phosphorous weapons inside the city. The target of the U.S. assault, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, along with up to 80 percent of his fighters, managed to slip out of town, leaving the Fallujans to catch the brunt of the American attack. In the end, the city was leveled.

The official Bush administration line, however, was that the assault was a raid to "liberate" the city and free its people. American corporate media pundits celebrated the destruction, explaining that the Fallujah operation would set a new tempo for the Iraq war by pacifying the resistance. In the end, however, the operation didn't pacify the resistance. To the contrary, it exposed us as a rogue outlaw state, executing one of the worst attacks on a civilian population target since Saddam Hussein gassed the Kurds. And for many in the region, it justified the resistance – with recent polls showing increasing numbers of Iraqis supporting violence as a means to oust the occupation forces.

If the Bush administration had its way, the whole criminal siege of Fallujah, with its depraved indifference to human life, would have gone unnoticed. The corporate media's Pentagon-spun propaganda stories about liberation would have gone unchallenged by any unseemly intrusions of reality. Toward that end, the Pentagon declared Fallujah a no-

reporting zone, barring all un-embedded journalists from the city. In short, the Pentagon hoped to control all images coming out of the massacre. And they would have pulled it off, had it not been for one independent freelance journalist from Alaska, Dahr Jamail, and an Al Jazeera TV crew.

At the height of the siege, the Al Jazeera crew did what journalists have an ethical obligation to do – broadcast images of the horror to television audiences around the world. They did this, they claim, at great peril to their own lives. One night, they reported that U.S. tanks targeted the fleeing TV crew on two occasions, causing them to comment that “The U.S. wants us out of Fallujah, but we will stay.” The U.S. responded by bombing the building where the TV crew had slept earlier, killing their host. At one point, whenever the TV crew would attempt to broadcast, U.S. jets would target their signal, even though it was unlike any of the rudimentary communication devices employed by the harried resistance fighters.

Al Jazeera critics wrote off the network’s complaints as sensationalism. By the time the U.S. attacked Fallujah, however, there was already a growing body of damning evidence indicating that the Pentagon was in fact targeting the last remaining unembedded TV network with an effective on-the-ground operation in Iraq. U.S. forces, one year earlier, bombed Al Jazeera’s Baghdad offices, killing reporter Tareq Ayoub, after the network naively gave their GPS coordinates to the Pentagon in order to prevent an accidental attack. A few days earlier, U.S. forces bombed a hotel in Basra that was used exclusively by Al Jazeera. American forces also seized several Al Jazeera reporters, imprisoning them in now infamous gulags including Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, where they claim they were tortured. Two years earlier we bombed Al Jazeera’s Afghanistan studios in Kabul.

Throughout this period of allegedly killing and torturing journalists, the Pentagon has always maintained a stance of plausible deniability. The bombings were accidental. Given the massive civilian carnage in Iraq and the now legendary stupidity of our alleged “smart bombs,” this was plausible – though highly unlikely and embarrassing nonetheless on a whole bunch of other fronts. And the arrests? Well, you know. Shit happens.

We now know, however, that a lot more shit almost happened. Last month, Britain’s Daily Mirror reported that George W. Bush, during the siege of Fallujah, approached British Prime Minister Tony Blair with a plan to silence Al Jazeera once and for all. Having failed to kill their crew on the ground in Fallujah, Bush supposedly wanted to put out a hit on the whole damned network, in effect going to war against Qatar, by bombing Al Jazeera’s global headquarters in Doha, Qatar’s capitol. Did I mention that Qatar is a strategic ally of the U.S. and the Bush administration and is a partner in the so-called “War on Terror?” I know George W. never claimed to be a whiz at foreign relations, but

this one would have been a mega-boner. Luckily, Tony Blair seemed to have talked George out of it.

Bush, for his part, is denying the report, and the British Attorney General, citing his country's Official Secrets Act, oxymoronically declared what has got to be this month's most talked about memo, an official secret. He's now threatening to prosecute any journalist that publishes the memo – and has already levied charges against the officials who leaked the story to The Mirror. Ironically, these whistleblowers may be the only people prosecuted in the whole snuff Al Jazeera affair.

Meanwhile, on this side of the pond, the dung weevils are lining up to defend Bush's alleged desire to openly bomb a media organization into oblivion for the crime of being a media organization. Patricia Williams of The Nation reports that Frank Gaffney, the former Reagan-era Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy and current president of the neo-conservative Center for Security Policy, has been making the rounds on the wonk circuit, recently appearing on the BBC to explain that it was appropriate to talk about "neutralizing" Al Jazeera. Williams reports that Gaffney, writing for Fox News' website, argued that Al Jazeera must be taken off the air "one way or another," and that it was "imperative that enemy media be taken down." Gaffney implored his readers to remember Bush's invective that "you are either with us or with the terrorists."

Put simply, media that reports on the horrific and embarrassing realities associated with a myriad of Bush administration policies, are, in effect, "with the terrorists," since they obviously aren't in line with the Bush administration's propaganda campaign. Most upsetting is the fact that Gaffney's vituperation against a free press was promulgated by Fox News – a self-described "news" organization that should have been more outraged than acquiescent to this call for silencing embarrassing news by murdering journalists.

In the Bush lexicon, speaking unpleasant truths means being "with the terrorists." It is also the responsibility of a free press. Avoiding the threat of such censure by the Bush junta means abdicating one's responsibility as a journalist. Yet, this sort of behavior – the avoidance of reporting on disturbing realities – is what passes for journalism today in the United States.

Seymour Hersh reported in Monday's edition of The New Yorker that U.S. bombing raids are increasing in Iraq. Put simply, we "liberated" them, now we're bombing the hell out of them. Hersh points out that despite this deadly escalation, there is no significant discussion of the growing air war. Media critic Norman Solomon, writing a follow-up to Hersh's piece for Truthout.org, conducted a database search and found out that neither The New York Times nor The Washington Post even printed the phrase "air war" so much as one time so far in 2005.

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Solomon speculates that as the U.S. withdraws ground forces from Iraq, it will replace their efforts with the bloodier but safer (for American forces) specter of bombing campaigns. The U.S. media, so far, has ignored the story and dozens of similar ones. But why should this be surprising? You'd think they'd report on the Bush administration's desires to murder journalists. For journalists, maybe this story would strike close to home. But then, reporting on it wouldn't be "with us," as Bush so eloquently puts it. And if you're not with us, well, you're with the terrorists, and indefinite detention, and all that nasty stuff. On the other hand, if you are "with us," you're not a journalist – you're just a stenographer. But you're alive, sort of ...