

{SEPTEMBER 2 2006}

WHEN NAPOLEON WON AT WATERLOO

Napoleon won the battle of Waterloo. The German Wehrmacht won World War II. The United States won in Vietnam, and the Soviets in Afghanistan. The Zealots won against the Romans, and Ehud Olmert won the Second Lebanon War.

You didn't know that? Well, during the last few days the Israeli media has paraded a long series of experts, who did not leave any room for doubt: the war has brought us huge achievements, Hizbullah was routed, Olmert is the great victor.

The TV talk-show hosts and anchormen put their microphones at the service of professors, publicity experts, "security personnel" and "strategists" (a title not denoting generals, but advisers of politicians). All of them agreed on the outcome: an honest-to-goodness victory.

Yesterday I switched on the TV and saw a person radiating self-assurance and explaining how our victory in Lebanon opens the way for the inevitable war with Iran. The analysis, composed almost entirely of clichés, was worthy of a high-school pupil. I was shocked to learn that the man was a former chief of the Mossad. Anyway, we won this war and we are going to win the next one.

So there is no need at all for a commission of inquiry. What is there to inquire into? All we need is a few committees to clear up the minor slips that occurred here and there.

Resignations are absolutely out. Why, what happened? Victors do not resign! Did Napoleon resign after Waterloo? Did Presidents Johnson and Nixon resign after what happened in Vietnam? Did the Zealots resign after the destruction of the Temple?

Joking aside, the parade of Olmert's stooges on TV, on the radio and in the newspapers tells us something. Not about the achievements of Olmert as a statesman and strategist, but about the integrity of the media.

When the war broke out, the media people fell into line and and marched in step as a propaganda battalion. All the media, without exception, became organs of the war effort, fawning on Olmert, Peretz and Halutz, waxing enthusiastic at the sight of the

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devastation in Lebanon and singing the praises of the “steadfastness of the civilian population” in the north of Israel. The public was exposed to an incessant rain of victory reports, going on (literally) from early in the morning to late at night.

The government and army spokespersons, together with Olmert’s spin team, decided what to publish and when, and, more importantly, what to suppress.

That found its expression in the “word laundry”. Instead of accurate words came misleading expressions: when heavy battles were raging in Lebanon, the media spoke about “exchanges of fire”. The cowardly Hassan Nasrallah was “hiding” in his bunker, while our brave Chief-of-Staff was directing operations from his underground command post (nicknamed “the hole”).

The chicken-hearted “terrorists” of Hizbullah were hiding behind women and children and operating from within villages, quite unlike our Ministry of Defense and General Staff which are located in the heart of the most densely populated area in Israel. Our soldiers were not captured in a military action, but “abducted” like the victims of gangsters, while our army “arrests” the leaders of Hamas. Hizbullah, as is well known, is “financed” by Iran and Syria, quite unlike Israel, which “receives generous support” from our great friend and ally, the United States.

There was, of course, a difference of night and day between Hizbullah and us. How can one compare? After all, Hizbullah launched rockets at us with the express intent of killing civilians, and did indeed kill some thirty of them. While our military, “the most moral army in the world”, took great care not to hurt civilians, and therefore only about 800 Lebanese civilians, half of them children, lost their lives in the bombardments which were all directed at purely military targets.

No general could compare with the military correspondents and commentators, who appeared daily on TV, striking impressive military poses, who reported on the fighting and demanded a deeper advance into Lebanon. Only very observant viewers noticed that they did not accompany the fighters at all and did not share the dangers and pains of battle, something that is essential for honest reporting in war. During the entire war I saw only two correspondent’s reports that really reflected the spirit of the soldiers - one by Itay Angel and the other by Nahum Barnea.

The deaths of soldiers were generally announced only after midnight, when most people were asleep. During the day the media spoke only about soldiers being “hurt”. The official pretext was that the army had first to inform the families. That’s true - but only for announcing the names of the fallen soldiers. It does not apply at all to the number of the dead. (The public quickly caught on and realized that “hurt” meant “killed”.)

Of course,, among the almost one thousand people invited to the TV studios during

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the war to air their views, there were next to no voices criticizing the war itself. Two or three, who were invited for alibi purposes, were shown up as ridiculous weirdos. Two or three Arab citizens were also invited, but the talk-masters fell on them like hounds on their prey.

For weeks, the media suppressed the fact that hundreds of thousands of Israelis had abandoned the bombarded North, leaving only the poorest behind. That would have shaken the legend of the “steadfastness of the rear”.

All the media (except the internet sites) completely suppressed the news about the demonstrations against the war that took place almost daily and that grew rapidly from dozens to hundreds, and from hundreds to thousands. (Channel 1 alone devoted several seconds to the small demonstration of Meretz and Peace Now that took place just before the end of the war. Both had supported the war enthusiastically almost to the finish.)

I don't say these things as a professor for communications or a disgruntled politician. I am a media-person from head to foot. Since the age of 17 I have been a working journalist, reporter, columnist and editor, and I know very well how media with integrity should behave. (The only prize I ever got in my own country was awarded by the Journalists' Association for my “life work in journalism”.)

I do not think, by the way, that the behavior of our media was worse than that of their American colleagues at the start of the Iraq war, or the British media during the ridiculous Falklands/Malvinas war. But the scandals of others are no consolation for our own.

Against the background of this pervasive brainwashing, one has to salute the few - who can be counted on the fingers of both hands - who did not join the general chorus and did indeed voice criticism in the written media, as much as they were allowed to. The names are well-known, and I shall not list them here, for fear of overlooking somebody and committing an unforgivable sin. They can hold their head high. The trouble is that their comments appeared only in the op-ed pages, which have a limited impact, and were completely absent from the news pages and news programs, which shape public opinion on a daily basis.

When the media people now passionately debate the need for all kinds of inquiry commissions and examination committees, perhaps they should set a personal example and establish a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the actions of the media themselves at the time of supreme test.

In Goethe's “Faust”, the devil presents himself as the “force that always strives for the bad and always produces the good.” I do not wish, God forbid, to compare the media to the devil, but the result is the same: by its enthusiastic support for the war,

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the media deepened the feeling of failure that came afterwards and which may in the end have a beneficial impact.

The media called Hizbullah a “terror organization”, evoking the image of a small group of “terrorists” with negligible capabilities. When it became clear that this is an efficient and well-trained military force with brave and determined fighters, effective missiles and other weapons, that could hold out against our huge military machine for 33 days without breaking, the disappointment was even more bitter.

After the media had glorified our military commanders as supermen and treated every one of their boasts with adulation, almost as if they were divine revelations, the disappointment was even greater when severe failures in strategy, tactics, intelligence and logistics showed up in all levels of the senior command.

That contributed to the profound change in public opinion that set in at the end of the war. As elevated as the self-confidence had been, so deep was the sense of failure. The Gods had failed. The intoxication of war was replaced by the hangover of the morning after.

And who is that running in front of the mob clamoring for revenge, all the way to the Place de la Guillotine? The media, of course.

I don't know of a single talk-show host, anchorman, commentator, reporter or editor, who has confessed his guilt and begged for forgiveness for his part in the brainwashing. Everything that was said, written or photographed has been wiped off the slate. It just never happened.

Now, when the damage cannot be repaired anymore, the media are pushing to the head of those who demand the truth and clamor for punishment for all the scandalous decisions that were taken by the government and the general staff: prolonging the war unnecessarily after the first six days, abandoning the rear, neglecting the reserves, not sending the land army into Lebanon on day X and sending them into Lebanon on day Y, not accepting G8's call for a cease-fire, and so on.

But, just a moment ---

During the last few days, the wheel may be turning again. What? We did not lose the war after all? Wait, wait, we did win? Nasrallah has apologized? (By strict orders from above, the full interview of Nasrallah was not broadcast at all, but the one passage in which he admitted to a mistake was broadcast over and over again.)

The sensitive nose of the media people has detected a change of the wind. Some of them have already altered course. If there is a new wave in public opinion, one should ride it, no?

We call this the “Altalena Effect”.

For those who don't know, or who have already forgotten: Altalena was a small ship

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that arrived off the coast of Israel in the middle of the 1948 war, carrying a group of Irgun men and quantities of weapons, it was not clear for whom. David Ben-Gurion was afraid of a putsch and ordered the shelling of the ship, off the coast of Tel-Aviv. Some of the men were killed, Menachem Begin, who had gone aboard, was pushed into the water and saved. The ship sank, the Irgun was dispersed and its members joined the new Israeli army.

29 years later Begin came to power. All the careerists joined him in haste. And then it appeared, retroactively, that practically everybody had been on board the Altalena. The little ship expanded into a huge aircraft carrier - until the Likud lost power and Altalena shrunk back to the size of a fishing boat.

The Second Lebanon War was a mighty Altalena. All the media crowded onto its deck. But the day after the war was over, we learned that this was an optical illusion: absolutely nobody had been there, except Captain Olmert, First Officer Peretz and Helmsman Halutz. However, that can change any minute now, if the trusting public can be convinced that we won the war after all.

As has been said before: in Israel nothing changes, except the past.