

Chuck E. Cheese: On the front line in Iraq

LAST week I wrote about the “intellectual lynching of Jay Bennish.” Bennish is the Colorado high school teacher who dared teach geopolitics in a geopolitics class, bringing his students up to date on some of the unseemly aspects of U.S. propaganda, history and foreign policy. Though there seem to have been no factual transgressions in Bennish’s lesson, he was vilified across the corporate media landscape by an army of bimbo news anchors and angry white radio guys. The message was clear: We shouldn’t teach children about Iraq by bringing facts into a high school classroom.

How then are we supposed to teach children about the world around them? The answer, it seems, is we should contract civics lessons out to large animated rats such as Chuck E. Cheese.

Last fall, Victoria Harper, an alternative press journalist, attended a rather weird cultural ritual – one that’s “normal,” however, for most middle-class parents of small children: the Chuck E. Cheese birthday party. Chuck. E. Cheese is more than just another theme restaurant. It’s corporate America’s host for cookie-cutter children’s birthday party. Each kid gets two slices of pizza, a bag full of Chuck E. Cheese and Disney-branded consumables, a slice of cake and a bubbly caffeine buzz, before being turned loose on a game room with a hand full of pre-paid tokens. A teenager in a rat costume pretending to be the one and only Chuck E. Cheese wanders from party to party, giving out special

bags of cotton candy, royal crowns and branded cups to the birthday boys and girls – no doubt telling them their parents love them.

As cultural rituals go, this has to be one of the most bizarre. Bizarre, but at the same time painfully predictable and sterile. The same rat handing out the same crowns to the same social strata of three- to 11-year-old girls and boys at the same moment in 500 mucus emporiums scattered about 48 states. So Harper thought she knew what to expect when she went to a three-year-old's birthday party.

Writing for Truthout (www.truthout.org), she describes her shock when a series of large-screen televisions popped to life with Big Brother-esque visuals. It wasn't the acid test-like scenes of singing and dancing herons and alligators, nor was it the fishing dog that alarmed Harper. It was what followed that stunned her: a "promotional piece compiled by the Department of Defense." According to Harper, the "five-minute" piece began with photos of American soldiers giving out toys and candy to smiling Iraqi kids, then cut to scenes showing the implements of destruction, tanks and war planes, then more photos of happy, smiling soldiers.

Back on the ground in the real-life Chuck E. Cheese, the big rat danced around and pointed to the monitors, making sure all the kids were watching. And watching they were, according to Harper, their eyes glued to the screen.

Ironically, Harper witnessed this indoctrination a few months after the military ordered convoys to maintain speed when they saw children on the road begging for food – a policy that, according to service personnel on the ground in Iraq, has resulted in the grotesque problem of Iraqi children splattered on the grills of Humvees. And, unlike the images on the Chuck E. Network, today's soldiers in Iraq aren't happy campers at a jamboree. But such is reality. And Chuck E. Cheese is not about reality. It's about fantasy – geopolitical and otherwise.

Harper's story slipped by corporate media because there was nothing "newsworthy" about it. American children are indoctrinated with military recruiting propaganda in most aspects of their lives. Hence, recruiting propaganda beamed into the corporate birthday package was a rather routine aspect of American life under the Bush regime. Nothing out of the ordinary here.

To me, however, this story of roaring an army tank through the most innocent of rituals – a child's birthday party – seemed an outrage, an attempt to steal both kids' innocence and their futures.

So I called up Rat Central – the Chuck E. Cheese corporate offices. Did this really happen? Can it be true? Tell me it's not true. Tell me the Rat hasn't sold out. Tell me I can at least still trust teenagers dressed as rodents. And, oh yeah, can you please send me a

tape of the Chuck E. Cheese TV episode in question?

In a relatively short time I found myself on the phone with Robert Gotcher, the man who produces Chuck E. Cheese TV. I'll give these folks credit. There was no runaround here. And they weren't afraid to speak to the press.

No, I couldn't have a copy of the episode in question. Chuck E's productions are for in-house viewing only and are not available for deconstruction. You just can't have this stuff falling into the hands of rival pizza chains. I can understand that. But Gotcher was open and willing to talk candidly about his work, and about Harper's article, of which he was painfully aware.

Harper, he explained, got it all wrong. The segment in question didn't last five minutes. It lasted two minutes. And it wasn't made by the Department of Defense. It was an in-house Chuck E. Cheese production. Other than that, however, there was no discrepancy between Harper's account of the film and the filmmaker's account.

I can see how Harper, without a stopwatch, could misjudge the length of the segment, even by what Gotcher saw as an unacceptable 150 percent. It must have been a painful and uncomfortable moment for her. What to do? How do we get these kids out of here? Is there a fire alarm to pull?

What I found disturbing was Gotcher's revelation that Harper got it wrong – the Department of Defense did not produce the film. Bizarre as it seems, Chuck E. Cheese Productions shot the footage. Taking Gotcher at his word – and I see no reason to doubt him – this means that Chuck E. Cheese had a film crew on the ground shooting footage in Iraq at a time when independent journalists were getting popped off like targets on a shooting range.

So let's get this straight. Regular readers of this column are aware that journalists are now risking their lives if they try to shoot uncensored news footage in Iraq. Hence images showing the effects of the war are few and far between. Yet, if Gotcher is telling the truth, we have Chuck E. Cheese crews embedded with and escorted safely around by the military, shooting staged images of a happy-go-lucky Iraq, complete with lots of neat stuff to drive around in and kids to play with.

We can't talk truthfully about Iraq in high school geography classes, but the government will aid in the production of propaganda if we agree to lie about Iraq in pizzerias. And this is the only worldview our children are supposed to receive – lies told by rats superimposed upon their corporate-choreographed birthday parties.