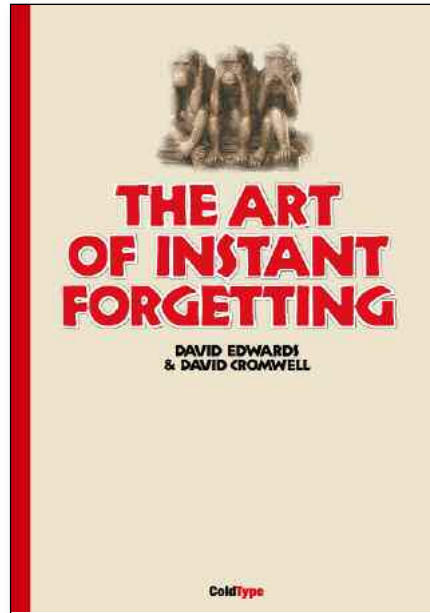


THE ART OF INSTANT FORGETTING

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edia corporations have an awesome ability to fail to learn even the most obvious lessons from the recent past. In discussing allegations made against Iran in 2007, for example, it is often as though Iraq 2002-2003 never happened. The same journalists receiving the same propaganda from the same government sources respond with the same credulity and the same indifference to the human consequences.

On February 16, the US media watchdog, FAIR, recalled how, in the wake of its disastrous pre-war reporting on Iraq, the New York Times had “implemented new rules governing its use of unnamed sources”. How exasperating, then, that the Times’ lead story on February 10 promoting US government charges against Iran trashed these rules completely. FAIR commented:

“Repeatedly citing the likes of ‘administration officials,’ ‘American intelligence’ and ‘Western officials,’ the article used unnamed sources four times as often as named ones. Only one source in... [the] report challenged the official claims: Iranian United Nations ambassador Javad Zarif, who was allowed a one-sentence denial of Iranian government involvement.” (Fair Action Alert, ‘NYT Breaks Own Anonymity Rules,’ February 16, 2007; www.fair.org/index.php?page=3042)

A January 16 leader in the Telegraph – which did not apologise for its own catastrophic pre-war reporting or implement new rules – was bolder still:

"It has been clear for many months that Iran has been actively involved in the Iraqi insurgency: by supplying arms and manpower to the militias who target American and British forces, and inciting sectarian violence, it has helped to maintain the state of chaotic instability which has persisted in spite of all attempts to bring order to the country..." (Leader, ‘The threat from Iran,’ Telegraph, January 16, 2007)

The direct involvement of Iran’s leadership was also not in doubt:

“... as those in charge of our forces on the ground in Basra are clearly aware, Iran is not simply a delinquent state indulging in gratuitously destructive terrorism. However

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absurd and nihilistic the posturing of its president may seem, his country is committed to an orchestrated political plan [in Iraq] which will require systematic opposition". (Ibid)

On BBC's Newsnight (February 12), the Telegraph's Con Coughlin declared that military action was looming now that "diplomacy is almost at an end". Indymedia reported on February 5:

"A report, put together by Campaign Iran and published at the end of 2006, revealed that Daily Telegraph's political editor Con Coughlin, the man who 'broke the story' of Iraq's 45 minute WMD capacity, was behind 16 articles containing unsubstantiated allegations against Iran over the past 12 months.

"The Press Complaints Commission has launched its third investigation into Coughlin in as many months after a number of high level complaints about his latest article on Iran. The investigation is looking at an article by Coughlin on 24 January relying on an unnamed 'European defence official' alleging that North Korea is helping Iran prepare a nuclear weapons test." ('MI6 Iran Disinfo: The Prelude to War?'; www.indymedia.org/fr/2007/02/879774.shtml)

By contrast, a week earlier, The Los Angeles Times cited an ironic comment from a British officer stationed in Iraq:

"'We do have intelligence which suggests that weapons and ammunition are being smuggled in from Iran,' Maj. David Gell, a spokesman for British forces in Basra, said last week. 'We don't always manage to find any.'

"US military officials in Diyala have had the same experience. No munitions or personnel have been seized at the border, officers said." (Alexandra Zavis and Greg Miller, 'Scant evidence found of Iran-Iraq arms link,' Los Angeles Times, January 23, 2007)

Gareth Porter noted on truthout.org:

"The [US] administration suggested that there could be no other explanation for the presence of Iranian-made weapons than official government sponsorship of smuggling them into Iraq. But in doing so, they had to ignore a well-known reality: most weapons, including armor-piercing projectiles, can be purchased by anyone through intermediaries in the Middle East." (Porter, 'US Briefing on Iran Discredits the Official Line,' www.truthout.org/docs_2006/021407D.shtml)

Porter cited Michael Knights, chief of analysis for the Olive Group, a private security

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consulting firm, who presented evidence in Jane's Intelligence Review that Iraqi Shiites have manufactured both the components for "explosively formed penetrators" (EFPs) and the complete EFPs. Knights claims that the equipment required to make EFPs "can easily be found in Iraqi metalworking shops and garages", and that all EFPs exploded so far could have been manufactured in one or at most two simple workshops with one or two specialists in each – one in the Baghdad area and one in southern Iraq. Knights comments of US-UK forces:

"I'm surprised that they haven't found evidence of making EFPs in Iraq. That doesn't ring true for me."

Indeed, since Porter's article appeared, the New York Times included this comment at the end of a February 20 news report:

"An Iraqi unit, aided by American advisers, caught militants in the act of constructing devices known as explosively formed projectiles in a house in Hilla, south of Baghdad, on Saturday, according to the American military." (Marc Santora, 'Iraqi Militants Launch Attack on U.S. Outpost,' New York Times, February 20, 2007)

Knights believes there was a time when whole EFPs were imported from outside, but that now most, if not all, are manufactured by Iraqis.

Certainly the idea that only Iran possesses the necessary lathes and operators trained in the manufacture of EFPs is outlandish. Writer Milan Rai observes that no evidence has been produced that Iraq lacks the means to produce EFPs – there is no shortage of metal tubes or explosives. An independent assessment of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) in Iraq, obtained by Defense News in 2006 and based on British military intelligence, said:

"Based on current usage, there are enough stocks of illegal explosives to continue the same level of attack for 274 years without re-supply." (Milan Rai, 'IED lies,' February 12, 2007; http://www.j-n-v.org/AW_briefings/IED_Lies.htm)

Writing in the Independent, Patrick Cockburn notes the irony:

"The US stance on the military capabilities of Iraqis today is the exact opposite of its position four years ago. Then, President Bush and Tony Blair claimed that Iraqis were technically advanced enough to produce long-range missiles and to be close to producing a nuclear device. Washington is now saying that Iraqis are too backward to produce an effective roadside bomb and must seek Iranian help." (Cockburn, "Washington accus-

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es Tehran, and sets stage for a new confrontation,' The Independent, February 12, 2007)

Anthony Cordesman, a US military analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC, observes that Iraq's insurgents are probably just tapping a pool of common bomb-making technology, none of which requires special expertise: "There's no evidence that these are supplied by Iran. A lot of this is just technology that is leaked into an informal network. What works in one country gets known elsewhere." (Ibid)

Even US Marine General Peter Pace, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, notes that while some of the material used in explosive devices had been made in Iran that "does not translate that the Iranian government per se, for sure, is directly involved in doing this". (Morning Star, 'US officer doubts Iran arms claim,' February 14, 2007)

To their credit, some journalists have failed to toe the propaganda line. On January 23, the Los Angeles Times reported that, despite the aggressive rhetoric, the Bush administration "has provided scant evidence to support these claims. Nor have reporters traveling with US troops seen extensive signs of Iranian involvement". (Alexandra Zavis and Greg Miller, 'Scant evidence found of Iran-Iraq arms link,' Los Angeles Times, January 23, 2007)

The LA Times cited senator John Rockefeller, head of the US Senate Intelligence Committee, who said: "To be quite honest, I'm a little concerned that it's Iraq again," referring to the false claims made on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction ahead of the March 2003 invasion. (Ibid)

The Independent's Patrick Cockburn has also voiced his scepticism:

"The allegations against Iran are similar in tone and credibility to those made four years ago by the US government about Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction in order to justify the invasion of 2003..." (Cockburn, op. cit)

Hard Evidence = Responsible Journalism (Sometimes!)

On February 11, the BBC's flagship News At Ten led with the claims made by anonymous US officials in Baghdad that the Iranian government has supplied advanced roadside bombs in Iraq, killing more than 170 US troops since June 2004.

BBC correspondent Andrew North's headlining boost for these unsubstantiated claims concluded with the briefest of disclaimers: "But given the past history of intelli-

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gence dossiers on Iraq, it may take an uphill struggle convincing people that tougher action should follow this one."

That constituted nine seconds out of a report lasting nearly three minutes.

On February 12, we emailed Helen Boaden, director of BBC news, asking what had become of her earlier firm insistence that the BBC would report controversial claims as news only on the basis of "hard evidence". We asked:

"Why does your approach now differ so markedly from that adopted previously [in 2005] when the BBC failed to report the mounting evidence of white phosphorus weapons, cluster bombs, modified napalm and depleted uranium munitions in Falluja and elsewhere in Iraq?"

Two years ago, the BBC repeatedly rejected numerous credible reports from Iraqi doctors, refugees, humanitarian NGOs and other sources. Boaden responded at the time:

"BBC News will continue to do what we can to find independent verification of these claims. However, it would not be responsible journalism for the BBC to report such claims without having found hard evidence that they are correct." ('Did BBC ignore weapons claim,' BBC NewsWatch, April 14, 2005; http://news.bbc.co.uk/newswatch/ukfs/hi/newsid_4390000/newsid_4396600/4396641.stm)

And yet "hard evidence" is apparently not required when the BBC reports claims made by shadowy US officials, "speaking off camera on condition of anonymity". It is enough that they are official spokespeople.

We asked Boaden:

"What documented, publically available editorial BBC guidelines exist for deciding whether to repeat controversial claims; and, just as significant, how to report them in a balanced, fair and responsible manner?"

"Why have your reports been so credulous and unbalanced? Why did you only show the briefest of interviews with the Iranian ambassador in Baghdad, rejecting the US claims? Where are the sceptical commentators, such as western intelligence and military experts, who have also previously rejected such claims? (Alexandra Zavis and Greg Miller, 'Scant evidence found of Iran-Iraq arms link', Los Angeles Times, January 23, 2007)"

We concluded our email to Boaden:

"What lessons has the BBC learned from its reporting on Iraq back then? On the evi-

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dence of recent BBC reports on these anonymous, warmongering US claims about Iran, very few indeed.” (Email to Helen Boaden, February 12, 2007)

By Way Of Balance – US Bombs In Iran?

Meanwhile, Iran has presented evidence of US involvement in a February 14 bomb blast against Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Zahedan, southeastern Iran, which claimed 13 lives. Agence France Press reported on February 17:

“Local officials said the unrest bore suspicious hallmarks of involvement by the United States and Britain, reiterating previous allegations of Western trouble-making in the southeastern Sistan-Baluchestan province... State television showed footage of a substantial arms cache of bullets, explosives and machine guns seized at a militant hideout. One image showed a packet of 20 bullets with the inscription ‘Made in the USA.’”

“‘It is interesting that the weapons are made by the United States and the United Kingdom,’ said the director of the province’s political affairs office Soltan Ali Mir, according to the Mehr agency.

“‘The terrorists (detained) revealed some meetings in some neighbouring countries for their financial support. They indicate that the United States and the United Kingdom were involved in the recent incidents.’” (Stuart Williams, ‘Iran chases militants behind new bomb blast,’ Agence France Presse, February 17, 2007)

Stratfor, a research institute formed of former US security officials, claims that “this latest attack against IRGC guards was likely carried out by armed Baloch nationalists who have received a boost in support from Western intelligence agencies”. (‘Iran: Bombing in Zahedan,’ Stratfor, February 14, 2007; www.stratfor.com/products/premium/read_article.php?id=284341)

Stratfor added: “the United States has likely ramped up support for Iran’s variety of oppressed minorities in an attempt to push the Iranian regime toward a negotiated settlement over Iraq”. (Ibid)

And yet claims of US involvement in the Zahedan attack have so far been mentioned in a single sentence in a single article in one national UK newspaper (the Times, February 15) – the standard mainstream version of ‘balance’, in other words.

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