

The spinning grounds

By Bill Berkowitz

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“We’re trying to explain how things are going, and they are going as they are going... Some things are going well and some things obviously are not going well. You’re going to have good days and bad days... And this is a moment in Iraq’s path towards a democratic and a free system. And it is one moment, and there will be other moments. And there will be good moments and there will be less good moments.” – Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Pentagon Press Briefing, April 7, 2004

On April 9, 2003, after President Bush’s troops marched triumphantly into Baghdad, one of the war’s most memorable media moments took place; the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Fardus Square. As staged and phony as the event actually was, at the time it appeared to symbolize massive Iraqi support for the U.S.-led invasion.

But as Newsweek reporters Christopher Dickey and John Barry report in the April 12 edition of the magazine, this year’s memorable images are not nearly as triumphant: “Last week a mob in the dusty Iraqi town of Fallujah gave us a new and horrifying image to remember this war by, murdering four American civilian security men, burning them, butchering them, dragging them through the streets, then hanging pieces of them from power lines and the girders of a bridge.”

In response to the horrific incident in Fallujah, the U.S. launched a major military operation aimed at rounding up and routing the city’s resisters – an operation that resulted in a massacre of hundreds of Iraqi civilians, mostly women and children.

The Fallujah incident, combined with the rampaging al-Mahdi Army of Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, has Iraq on the brink of chaos. While U.S. troops were destroying parts of Fallujah, the “Coalition of the Willing” was taking heavy hits: Polish, Bulgarian and Japanese soldiers all came under attack, and Ukrainian troops were forced to withdraw from the eastern city of Kut.

And the U.S. is taking casualties at a daily rate higher than any month since the beginning

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of the invasion (for details, see the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count).

Despite the chaos, bloodshed, death and destruction, the administration's spin-doctors are trying to manage the news. The cable news networks that brought the sanitized invasion into America's living rooms a year ago are still on board, with obligatory banner headlines, keyed-up news anchors, scrolling updates, and rooftop reports from Baghdad. And, of course, the parade of retired military officers continues unabated.

David Miller's description of an unquestioning media during the run-up and early days of the war in the introduction to, "Tell Me Lies: Propaganda and Media Distortion in the Attack on Iraq," **[Read it in The Lying Game at <http://www.coldtype.net>]** ring as true today as it did when it was written in September 2003: "Much of the media continue to assume that the statements of government officials and politicians are characterized by what [author] Mark Curtis calls a 'basic benevolence.' They may lie here or there, or they may act in a foolish or misguided way, but to advance the proposition that they are calculating liars... is beyond the pale."

As the resistance continues to unfold on the streets of a half-dozen major cities in Iraq, it is not "beyond the pale" to question statements from administration spokesperson.

L. Paul Bremer, the beleaguered top US administrator in Iraq, would have you believe that the situation is unfolding about as anticipated: He recently told ABC's "Good Morning America" that "We have problems, there's no hiding that, but basically Iraq is on track to realize the kind of Iraq that Iraqis and Americans want, which is a democratic Iraq."

Bremer declared that "We have got some groups who don't agree with that vision – they are terrorists and former regime guys. ... Instead they think power in Iraq should come out of the barrel of a gun and that is intolerable and we will deal with it." He claimed that U.S. forces were still in control: "There is no question we have control of the country."

Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt, the deputy chief of military operations in Iraq, appeared side-by-side with Dan Senor, the main US spokesman in Iraq, on several news programs on Wednesday, April 7. Looking extremely uncomfortable, Kimmitt talked about the "large casualty toll taken by the enemy," and attacking mosques "when there is a military necessity." A wooden Senor claimed that "Life is improving for Iraqis. Things are getting better for them. The general trend is positive."

The run-up to Bush's war in Iraq was dominated by what Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber called "perception management." In their book, "Weapons of Mass Deception: The Uses of Propaganda in Bush's War on Iraq," a study of the administration's public relations campaign to sell the war, the veteran journalists looked at: lies the administration told about Iraq's stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction; disinformation campaigns designed to sell the American people on the notion that Saddam was responsible for 9/11 and that he and

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Osama bin Laden were tied at the hip; and a steady stream of stories highlighting the failure of UN weapons inspections.

The coverage of the war with Iraq was designed by a media-savvy administration to accommodate hungry news organizations: Embedded reporters were at the beck and call of U.S. military commanders; cable news networks provided the sizzle of a speedy triumph; and a battalion of retired military officers enthusiastically described the video-taped replays of the action.

Team Bush's media game plan has fallen apart during the occupation. When the embedded were dispersed, bad news began to dominate coverage. Millions spent on U.S.-sponsored Iraqi propaganda vehicles went for naught. At home, the administration became so frustrated with the bad news it embarked on a strategy aimed at circumventing the mainstream media by taking its message "directly to the people."

The administration set June 30 as the date for the "handover." No doubt, the handover was conceived of as the occupation's climactic made-for-television moment: staged as a David Wolper production akin to the closing ceremonies of the Atlanta Olympics.

With insurgents rampaging and deaths mounting, handover-pomp looks highly unlikely.

Recently, Iraq's Coalition Provisional Authority awarded a \$5.8 million contract to the British public relations firm, Bell Pottinger Public Affairs, "to promote the establishment of democracy as the country recovers from war," according to the Holmes Report.

A company spokesperson said that it would inform "the Iraqi people about the democratic process that will see sovereignty returned to an interim Iraqi administration, the conduct of democratic elections, and the establishment of a new constitution for Iraq" by employing a multi-media strategy, including television, print, outdoor posters, leaflets.

For the Bush Administration, there may be one media opportunity left. Does "The Trial of Saddam Hussein" sound out of the question?

While Iraq's War Crimes Tribunal process – created by the Coalition Provisional Authority in December – is still in its nascent stages, the U.S. is looking to hasten it along. The main goal of the Iraqi-run tribunals is to put Saddam and his top associates on trial, but according to a Washington Post editorial, the Iraqis still "need rules of procedure and evidence, forensic experts to examine witnesses and mass graves, training for judges and access to Baath Party archives [and] none of these appear to be materializing quickly."

If the trial of Saddam Hussein gets on track before the election, it could be Team Bush's final PR triumph. Cameras in the courtroom, Rather, Brokaw, Jennings and maybe even O'Reilly and Matthews reporting from the scene – it could easily trump the trials of Scott Peterson, Michael Jackson and Kobe Bryant. As the Christian Science Monitor's Godfrey Sperling recently wrote, would serve to "remind voters that Bush was the president

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responsible for his ouster and capture.”

If Baghdad and surrounding areas continue spinning out of control, there will be no show trial of Saddam and his cronies, and there may be no President Bush to kick around come January 2005.