

History or bunkum?

Phillip Knightley

The Pentagon made it clear from the beginning of the war against Iraq that there would be no censorship. What it failed to say was that war correspondents might well find themselves in a situation similar to that in Korea in 1950. This was described by one American correspondent as the military saying: “You can write what you like – but if we don’t like it we’ll shoot you.” The figures in Iraq tell a terrible story. Fifteen media people dead, with two missing, presumed dead. If you consider how short the campaign was, Iraq will be notorious as the most dangerous war for journalists ever. This is bad enough. But – and here we tread on delicate ground – it is a fact that the largest single group of them appear to have been killed by the American military.

We know that the Americans do not target journalists. Brigadier General Vince Brooks, deputy director of operations, has told us so. But some war correspondents do not believe him, and Spanish journalists have demonstrated outside the U.S. embassy in Madrid shouting “murderers”. What is going on? I believe that the traditional relationship between the military and the media – one of restrained hostility – has broken down, and that the U.S. administration, in keeping with its new foreign policy, has decided that its attitude to war correspondents is the same as that set out by President Bush when declaring war on terrorists: “You’re either with us or you’re against us.”

Those journalists prepared to get on side – and that means one 100 per cent on side – will become “embeds” and receive every assistance. Those who try to follow an objective, independent path, the so-called “unilaterals”, will be shunned. And those who report from the enemy side will risk being shot. If you don’t like all this, they won’t give a damn.

Welcome to new and highly dangerous world of the war correspondent in the 21st century.

The media should have seen it coming. Last year the BBC sent one of its top reporters, Nik Gowing, to Washington to try to find out how it was that its correspondent, William Reeve, who had just re-opened the Corporation's studio in Kabul and was giving a live, down-the-line TV interview for BBC World, was suddenly blown out of his seat by an American smart missile. Coincidentally, four hours later, a few blocks away, the office and residential compound of the Arab TV network al-Jazeera was hit by two more American missiles.

The BBC, al-Jazeera, and the U.S. Committee to Protect Journalists thought it prudent to find out from the Pentagon what had gone wrong and what steps they could take to protect their correspondents if war came to Iraq. The Pentagon, in the figure of Rear Admiral Craig Quigley, deputy assistant defense secretary for public affairs, was frank. Nothing had gone wrong. Quigley said that the Pentagon was indifferent to media activity in territory controlled by the enemy, and that the al-Jazeera compound in Kabul was considered a legitimate target because it had "repeatedly been the location of significant al-Qaeda activity". It turned out that this activity was interviews with Taliban officials, something that al-Jazeera had hitherto thought to be normal journalism.

Foolhardy and dangerous

All three organisations concluded that the Pentagon was determined to deter Western correspondents from reporting any war from the "enemy" side, would view such journalism in Iraq as activity of "military significance", and might well bomb the area. This view was reinforced in the early days of the war in Iraq when the Pentagon wrote officially to al-Jazeera asking it to remove its correspondents from Baghdad. Downing Street and made the same request to the BBC. In the United States a Pentagon official called media bosses to a meeting in Washington to tell them how foolhardy and dangerous it was to have correspondents in the Iraqi capital. But no one realised that it might also be dangerous to work outside the system the Pentagon had devised for allowing war correspondents to cover the war – embedding.

Six hundred correspondents, including about 150 from foreign media, and even one from the music network MTV, accepted the Pentagon's offer

to be embedded with military units: to live, eat, sleep and travel with troops in the field, be protected by them, run the same risks as they did, have the honorary rank of major and, apart from military information that might be of use to the enemy, to write what they liked. The idea was copied from the British system in World War I, when six correspondents embedded with the army on the Western front produced the worst reporting of just about any war and were all knighted for their services. One of them, Sir Philip Gibbs, had the honesty, when the war was over, to write: “We identified ourselves absolutely with the armies in the field.” The modern embeds, too, soon lost all distinction between warrior and correspondent and wrote and talked about “we” with boring repetition.

I was able to find only one instance of an embedded correspondent who wrote a story highly critical of the behaviour of U.S. troops and which went against the official account of what had occurred. On 31 March, U.S. soldiers opened fire on a civilian van which had failed to stop at a checkpoint, and killed seven Iraqi women and children. U.S. officials said that the driver of the car failed to stop after warning shots and that troops had fired at the passenger cabin as “a last resort”. But William Branigin, of the *Washington Post*, embedded with the Third Infantry, witnessed the shooting, and reported that no warning shots were fired and that ten people, not seven, were killed. It will be interesting to see what becomes of Branigin’s relations with the U.S. military. For the rest of the embeds, the considered conclusion of that old-fashioned correspondent, Sydney H. Schanberg (the former *New York Times* man whose reporting from Cambodia in the 1970s was featured in the film *The Killing Fields*), sums up their dilemma: “Embedded means you’re there,” he said. “It also means you’re stuck.”

But that is what the Pentagon wanted, and after the death of ITN reporter Terry Lloyd, and the probable deaths of two of his team (they remain “missing”) who had been operating as “unilaterals”, the Coalition Commander, General Tommy Franks, pointed out that no embedded correspondent had been killed. What General Franks did not reveal was exactly how Lloyd died. At the time of writing, more than a month after Lloyd’s death, neither the Ministry of Defence nor the Pentagon has told ITN what the investigation into his death has revealed. He appears to have been killed by American marines who shot at his car, or – the American version – “caught in crossfire”. However unlikely, it may turn out that it was an unfortunate accident, another “friendly fire” incident in a war which

they were common. But what happened at the Palestine Hotel was a different matter.

On 8 April, three war correspondents were killed by Americans at locations that were known to the Pentagon to be housing media. Reuters cameraman Taras Protsyuk was killed when an American tank fired a shell at the Reuters suite on the 15th floor of the Palestine Hotel. Jose Couso, a cameraman for the Spanish TV channel Telecinco, was wounded in the same attack and died later in hospital. And Tarek Ayyoub, a cameraman for al-Jazeera, was killed when a U.S. plane bombed the channel's office in Baghdad. American forces also opened fire on the offices of Abu Dhabi TV, whose identity is spelled out in large blue letters on the roof. There was no love lost between the Coalition forces and al-Jazeera. The Pentagon has never forgiven al-Jazeera for broadcasting Osama bin Laden tapes around the world from its Kabul office during the war in Afghanistan. In this war it has regarded al-Jazeera as an enemy propaganda station, putting out devastating accounts of Iraqi civilian casualties to a vast Arab audience, thus fuelling anti-American sentiments. Al-Jazeera was apprehensive about American reaction and repeatedly informed the U.S. military of the exact co-ordinates of its Baghdad office so that if it were hit, the Pentagon could not offer the excuse that it was an accident. It was a waste of time. The Pentagon has offered neither explanation nor apology.

Contradictory accounts

It might have tried the same "silence" tactic over the Palestine Hotel attack. In fact it did. When the news of the attack first came, the American command said nothing – until it emerged that the French TV channel, France 3, had filmed the tank aiming and firing. Then the Coalition put out a series of contradictory accounts. Colonel David Perkins, commander of the 3rd Infantry Division's 2nd Brigade, said Iraqis in front of the hotel were firing rocket-propelled grenades at the tank. Then the Division's commander, General Bouford Blount, issued a statement saying that the tank had come under sniper fire from the hotel's roof and had fired at the source of the shooting which had then stopped.

Correspondents in the Palestine Hotel insisted that there had been no grenades and no sniper fire. Sky's correspondent David Chater said he had not heard a single shot. The BBC's Rageh Omaar said that none of the other journalists in the hotel heard any sniper fire. But the most telling evidence

that the tank fired without provocation is that France 3's cameraman had started filming some minutes before the tank opened fire, and his camera's sound track records no shots whatsoever.

More puzzling was an official Spanish government statement about the death of Jose Couso. The Defence Minister, Frederico Trillo, announced that the Coalition had actually declared the Palestine Hotel a military objective 48 hours before it was attacked and that the correspondents should have left. This was news to the correspondents, all of whom denied any knowledge of any warning. "Journalists", a watchdog group that defends press freedoms, demanded an investigation and in a letter to the U.S. Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, said it believed that the attacks on correspondents violated the Geneva Conventions.

My own view is that there will be no investigation, no explanation, no apology. I am convinced that in the light of all the foregoing evidence the Pentagon is determined that there will be no more reporting from the enemy side, and that a few deaths among correspondents who do so will deter others. To that end I believe that the occasional shots fired at "media sites" are not accidental and that war correspondents may now be targets, some more than others. And the Pentagon's policy will work. Al-Jazeera seriously considered pulling all of its correspondents out of Iraq because it could not guarantee their safety. Arab TV and British media bosses will think twice in any future war of sending staff reporters to the enemy side – not least because insurers will refuse to underwrite the risk. I think the Pentagon is not concerned in the slightest about public unease over its attacks on journalists because it is convinced that the public, especially the American public, will support its view and its actions.

Consider the difference in the way the war has been reported on the two sides of the Atlantic. It is as if you are looking at two different wars. For the Americans the war has been essentially a military story and a sanitised one at that. With five out of ten Americans believing that most of the terrorists who carried out the attack on 9/11 were Iraqis, the American media decided that its readers and viewers were not interested in the plight of Iraqi victims of the war. *The New York Times* said it aimed to capture the true nature of the war but avoided "the gratuitous use of images simply for shock value". Steve Capus, executive editor of *NBC Nightly News*, complained: "You watch some Arab coverage and you get the sense there is a blood bath at the hand of the U.S. military. That is not my take on it."

The biggest radio group in the United States, Clear Channel, used its

stations to organise pro-war rallies. McVay Media, one of America's largest communications consulting companies, advised its radio clients to play "patriotic music that makes you cry, salute and get cold chills" and under no circumstances cover war protests because they will "hurt your bottom line". When New York magazine writer Michael Wolff broke ranks at the Coalition's daily press conference at Qatar and asked General Brooks: "Why are we here? Why should we stay? What's the value of what we're learning at this million-dollar press centre?" he soon had an answer. Fox TV attacked him for lack of patriotism, and right-wing commentator Rush Limbaugh gave out Wolff's e-mail address – in one day he received 3,000 hate e-mails. Finally, a mysterious civilian in army uniform took him aside and told him: "This is a fucking war, asshole. No more questions for you."

Wolff realised that the press conferences were not for the benefit of the correspondents. How could they be? What correspondent worth his salt would be content with repeating to camera what he had just been told by some general when the question and answer had already been televised? The correspondents were merely extras in a piece of theatre. The system was designed not to illuminate journalists but to play over their heads towards an international TV audience, which soon accorded the briefing officers the status of soap stars. The whole farce could not have taken place if the correspondents had packed up and gone home, but given the competitive nature of war reporting, there was no danger of that. The military did worry about it, though. As Wolff said: "What if they gave a war and the media didn't come?"

£22m extra spend

The main problem with the British coverage was that there was so much of it, more than any brain could absorb. Anyone so inclined could have spent 24 hours a day immersed in war news. British news networks on TV extended their budgets by a combined £22 million. There were more live pictures from the battlefield than has been the case in any previous war. Split screens, feeds from every front, crosses to Washington, then to Coalition headquarters in Qatar, then to Downing Street, then back to a real-time firefight near Basra, some pretty pictures of missiles leaving a warship somewhere in the Gulf (but not of their arrival in a market place in Baghdad), interview after interview (often one journalist interviewing another), back to the expert in the studio, then back to breaking news

which is breaking yet again about a town that has finally fallen – even though it fell two days ago. And over it all, echoing out of the all-pervasive fog of war, a tone of barely-suppressed hysteria. It took a confused *Guardian* reader to sum it up: “Despite scouring two national newspapers every day, listening to the radio, surfing the web and watching the TV news, I have absolutely no clue how the war is going.” Join the club.

It was the recognition that perhaps more was not really better that provoked British news executives into an unseemly race to declare who had had the better war. The headline “Rageh Omaar wins it for BBC in Baghdad” brought David Mannion, editor of ITV news, rushing into print to plug the achievements of ITV correspondents John Irvine, Neil Connery and Julian Manyon: “Expert observers...believe that the ITV News coverage of Baghdad was the finest, boldest and most comprehensive in the world.” A few days later, Richard Sambrook, the BBC’s director of news, quoted a survey showing that “the BBC – uniquely out of the broadcasters analysed – was even-handed in its reporting of the U.S. military action and in reporting of casualties.” This is one battle of the war that will rumble on.

Let’s finish with a look at the image that everyone will still remember when the debate and all these issues are long forgotten. As seen on television and on the front pages of newspapers around the world, cheering Iraqis attach a rope and a chain to Saddam’s neck then call on the services of an American vehicle to haul him down. The statue hesitates, bends at the knees and topples into the dust. In an information war heavy with symbolism, this marked the end of Saddam Hussein and the Coalition’s victory.

But, like Robert Capa’s moment of death, this image was not quite what it seemed. The statue was pulled down by American troops using American equipment – the Iraqis on their own would not have been able to do it. Although there were lots of other statues, the toppling of this one conveniently took place just opposite the Palestine Hotel, where most members of the international media were still staying. Without the media, the event would have meant nothing. Long distance shots show that the Iraqis who helped topple the statue and later celebrated its fall numbered no more than 100 (early BBC reports suggested even fewer and some unkind commentators joked that the correspondents outnumbered the celebrating Iraqis). The square was cordoned off by U.S. tanks and marines but they allowed these Iraqis through.

So who were they? At least one web-site, NYC IndyMedia, says they

were members of the Free Iraqi Forces, headed by Iraqi National Congress founder, Ahmed Chalabi, the Pentagon's favourite to head a new Iraqi government. It produces evidence to support this claim – one of Chalabi's lieutenants, photographed as the Pentagon flew him and his boss into the southern Iraq city of Nasiriyah, is the same man shown on film in Fardus Square dancing on Saddam's statue. So what happened? Was it as portrayed – a spontaneous outpouring of joy by ordinary Iraqis delighted at being liberated and determined to show their contempt for their former leader? Or was it a photo opportunity, a staged event in the theatre of propaganda? Excited TV presenters told their viewers they were witnessing history. But whose history?