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by JEFFREY ST. CLAIR
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How They Sold the Iraq War



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The war on Iraq won't be remembered for how it was waged so much as for how it was sold. It was a propaganda war, a war of perception management, where loaded phrases, such as “weapons of mass destruction” and “rogue state” were hurled like precision weapons at the target audience: us.

To understand the Iraq war you don't need to consult generals, but the spin doctors and PR flacks who stage-managed the countdown to war from the murky corridors of Washington where politics, corporate spin and psy-ops spooks cohabit.

Consider the picaresque journey of Tony Blair's plagiarized dossier on Iraq, from a grad student's website to a cut-and-paste job in the prime minister's bombastic speech to the House of Commons. Blair, stubborn and verbose, paid a price for his grandiose puffery. Bush, who looted whole passages from Blair's speech for his own clumsy presentations, has skated freely through the tempest. Why?

Unlike Blair, the Bush team never wanted to present a legal case for war. They had no interest in making any of their allegations about Iraq hold up to a standard of proof. The real effort was aimed at amping up the mood for war by using the psychology of fear.

Facts were never important to the Bush team. They were disposable nuggets that could be discarded at will and replaced by whatever new rationale that played favorably with their polls and focus groups. The war was about weapons of mass destruction one week, al-Qaeda the next. When neither allegation could be substantiated on the ground, the fall back position became the mass graves (many from the Iran/Iraq war where the U.S.A. backed Iraq) proving that Saddam was an evil thug who deserved to be toppled. The motto of the Bush PR machine was: Move on. Don't explain. Say anything to conceal the perfidy behind the real motives for war. Never look back. Accuse the questioners of harboring unpatriotic sensibilities. Eventually, even the cagey Wolfowitz admitted that the official case for war was made mainly to make the invasion palatable, not to justify it.

The Bush clique of neocon hawks viewed the Iraq war as a product and, just like a new pair of Nikes, it required a roll-out campaign to soften up the consumers. The same techniques (and often the same PR gurus) that have been used to hawk cigarettes, SUVs and nuclear waste dumps were deployed to retail the Iraq war. To peddle the invasion, Donald Rumsfeld and Colin Powell and company recruited public relations gurus into top-level jobs at the Pentagon and the State Department. These spinmeisters soon had more say over how the rationale for war on Iraq should be presented than intelligence agencies and career diplomats. If the intelligence didn't fit the script, it was shaded, retooled or junked.

Take Charlotte Beers whom Powell picked as undersecretary of state in the post-9/11 world. Beers wasn't a diplomat. She wasn't even a politician. She was a grand diva of spin, known on the business and gossip pages as "the queen of Madison Avenue." On the strength of two advertising campaigns, one for Uncle Ben's Rice and another for Head and

Shoulder's dandruff shampoo, Beers rocketed to the top of the heap in the PR world, heading two giant PR houses: Ogilvy and Mathers as well as J. Walter Thompson.

At the State Department Beers, who had met Powell in 1995 when they both served on the board of Gulf Airstream, worked at, in Powell's words, "the branding of U.S. foreign policy." She extracted more than \$500 million from Congress for her Brand America campaign, which largely focused on beaming U.S. propaganda into the Muslim world, much of it directed at teens.

"Public diplomacy is a vital new arm in what will combat terrorism over time," said Beers. "All of a sudden we are in this position of redefining who America is, not only for ourselves, but for the outside world." Note the rapt attention Beers pays to the manipulation of perception, as opposed, say, to alterations of U.S. policy.

Old-fashioned diplomacy involves direct communication between representatives of nations, a conversational give and take, often fraught with deception (see April Glaspie), but an exchange nonetheless. Public diplomacy, as defined by Beers, is something else entirely. It's a one-way street, a unilateral broadcast of American propaganda directly to the public, domestic and international, a kind of informational carpet-bombing.

The themes of her campaigns were as simplistic and flimsy as a Bush press conference. The American incursions into Afghanistan and Iraq were all about bringing the balm of "freedom" to oppressed peoples. Hence, the title of the U.S. war: Operation Iraqi Freedom, where cruise missiles were depicted as instruments of liberation. Bush himself distilled the Beers equation to its bizarre essence: "This war is about peace."

Beers quietly resigned her post a few weeks before the first volley of tomahawk missiles battered Baghdad. From her point of view, the war itself was already won, the fireworks of shock and awe were all after play.

Over at the Pentagon, Donald Rumsfeld drafted Victoria "Torie" Clarke as his director of public affairs. Clarke knew the ropes inside the Beltway. Before becoming Rumsfeld's mouthpiece, she had commanded one of the world's great parlors for powerbrokers: Hill and Knowlton's D.C. office.

Almost immediately upon taking up her new gig, Clarke convened regular meetings with a select group of Washington's top private PR specialists and lobbyists to develop a marketing plan for the Pentagon's forthcoming terror wars. The group was filled with heavy-hitters and was strikingly bipartisan in composition. She called it the Rumsfeld Group and it included PR executive Sheila Tate, columnist Rich Lowry, and Republican political consultant Rich Galen.

The brain trust also boasted top Democratic fixer Tommy Boggs, brother of NPR's Cokie Roberts and son of the late Congressman Hale Boggs of Louisiana. At the very time Boggs was conferring with top Pentagon brass on how to frame the war on terror, he was also working feverishly for the royal family of Saudi Arabia. In 2002 alone, the Saudis paid his Qorvis PR firm \$20.2 million to protect its interests in Washington. In the wake of hostile press coverage following the exposure of Saudi links to the 9/11 hijackers, the royal family needed all the well-placed help it could buy. They seem to have gotten their money's worth. Boggs' felicitous influence-peddling may help to explain why the references to Saudi funding of al-Qaeda were dropped from the recent congressional report on the investigation into intelligence failures and 9/11.

According to the trade publication PR Week, the Rumsfeld Group sent "messaging advice" to the Pentagon. The group told Clarke and Rumsfeld that in order to get the American public to buy into the war on terrorism, they needed to suggest a link to nation states, not just nebulous groups such as al-Qaeda. In other words, there needed to be a fixed target for the military campaigns, some distant place to drop cruise missiles and cluster bombs. They suggested the notion (already embedded in Rumsfeld's mind) of playing up the notion of so-called rogue states as the real masters of terrorism. Thus was born the Axis of Evil, which, of course, wasn't an "axis" at all, since two of the states, Iran and Iraq, hated each other, and neither had anything at all to do with the third, North Korea.

Tens of millions in federal money were poured into private public relations and media firms working to craft and broadcast the Bush dictat that Saddam had to be taken out before the Iraqi dictator blew up the world by dropping chemical and nuclear bombs from long-range drones. Many of these PR executives and image consultants were old friends of the high priests in the Bush inner sanctum. Indeed, they were veterans, like Cheney and Powell, of the previous war against Iraq, another engagement that was more spin than combat .

At the top of the list was John Rendon, head of the D.C. firm, the Rendon Group. Rendon is one of Washington's heaviest hitters, a Beltway fixer who never let political affiliation stand in the way of an assignment. Rendon served as a media consultant for Michael Dukakis and Jimmy Carter, as well as Reagan and George H.W. Bush. Whenever the Pentagon wanted to go to war, he offered his services at a price. During Desert Storm, Rendon pulled in \$100,000 a month from the Kuwaiti royal family. He followed this up

with a \$23 million contract from the CIA to produce anti-Saddam propaganda in the region.

As part of this CIA project, Rendon created and named the Iraqi National Congress and tapped his friend Ahmed Chalabi, the shady financier, to head the organization.

Shortly after 9/11, the Pentagon handed the Rendon Group another big assignment: public relations for the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan. Rendon was also deeply involved in the planning and public relations for the pre-emptive war on Iraq, though both Rendon and the Pentagon refuse to disclose the details of the group's work there.

But it's not hard to detect the manipulative hand of Rendon behind many of the Iraq war's signature events, including the toppling of the Saddam statue (by U.S. troops and Chalabi associates) and videotape of jubilant Iraqis waving American flags as the Third Infantry rolled by them. Rendon had pulled off the same stunt in the first Gulf War, handing out American flags to Kuwaitis and herding the media to the orchestrated demonstration. "Where do you think they got those American flags?" clucked Rendon in 1991. "That was my assignment."

The Rendon Group may also have had played a role in pushing the phony intelligence that has now come back to haunt the Bush administration. In December of 2002, Robert Dreyfuss reported that the inner circle of the Bush White House preferred the intelligence coming from Chalabi and his associates to that being proffered by analysts at the CIA.

So Rendon and his circle represented a new kind of off-the-shelf PSYOPs, the privatization of official propaganda. "I am not a national security strategist or a military tactician," said Rendon. "I am a politician, and a person who uses communication to meet public policy or corporate policy objectives. In fact, I am an information warrior and a perception manager."

What exactly, is perception management? The Pentagon defines it this way: "actions to convey and/or deny selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives and objective reasoning." In other words, lying about the intentions of the U.S. government. In a rare display of public frankness, the Pentagon actually let slip its plan (developed by Rendon) to establish a high-level den inside the Department Defense for perception management. They called it the Office of Strategic Influence and among its many missions was to plant false stories in the press.

Nothing stirs the corporate media into outbursts of pious outrage like an official government memo bragging about how the media are manipulated for political objectives. So the New York Times and Washington Post threw indignant fits about the Office of

Strategic Influence; the Pentagon shut down the operation, and the press gloated with satisfaction on its victory. Yet, Rumsfeld told the Pentagon press corps that while he was killing the office, the same devious work would continue. “You can have the corpse,” said Rumsfeld. “You can have the name. But I’m going to keep doing every single thing that needs to be done. And I have.”

At a diplomatic level, despite the hired guns and the planted stories, this image war was lost. It failed to convince even America’s most fervent allies and dependent client states that Iraq posed much of a threat. It failed to win the blessing of the U.N. and even NATO, a wholly owned subsidiary of Washington. At the end of the day, the vaunted coalition of the willing consisted of Britain, Spain, Italy, Australia, and a cohort of former Soviet bloc nations. Even so, the citizens of the nations that cast their lot with the U.S.A. overwhelmingly opposed the war.

Domestically, it was a different story. A population traumatized by terror threats and shattered economy became easy prey for the saturation bombing of the Bush message that Iraq was a terrorist state linked to al-Qaeda that was only minutes away from launching attacks on America with weapons of mass destruction. Americans were the victims of an elaborate con job, pelted with a daily barrage of threat inflation, distortions, deceptions and lies, not about tactics or strategy or war plans, but about justifications for war. The lies were aimed not at confusing Saddam’s regime, but the American people. By the start of the war, 66 per cent of Americans thought Saddam Hussein was behind 9/11 and 79 per cent thought he was close to having a nuclear weapon.

Of course, the closest Saddam came to possessing a nuke was a rusting gas centrifuge buried for 13 years in the garden of Mahdi Obeidi, a retired Iraqi scientist. Iraq didn’t have any functional chemical or biological weapons. In fact, it didn’t even possess any SCUD missiles, despite erroneous reports fed by Pentagon PR flacks alleging that it had fired SCUDs into Kuwait.

This charade wouldn’t have worked without a gullible or a complicit press corps. Victoria Clarke, who developed the Pentagon plan for embedded reports, put it succinctly a few weeks before the war began: “Media coverage of any future operation will to a large extent shape public perception.”

During the Vietnam War, TV images of maimed GIs and napalmed villages suburbanized opposition to the war and helped hasten the U.S. withdrawal. The Bush gang meant to turn

the Vietnam phenomenon on its head by using TV as a force to propel the U.S.A. into a war that no one really wanted.

What the Pentagon sought was a new kind of living room war, where instead of photos of mangled soldiers and dead Iraqi kids, they could control the images Americans viewed and to a large extent the content of the stories. By embedding reporters inside selected divisions, Clarke believed the Pentagon could count on the reporters to build relationships with the troops and to feel dependent on them for their own safety. It worked, naturally. One reporter for a national network trembled on camera that the U.S. Army functioned as “our protectors.” The late David Bloom of NBC confessed on the air that he was willing to do “anything and everything they can ask of us.”

When the Pentagon needed a heroic story, the press obliged. Jessica Lynch became the war’s first instant celebrity. Here was a neo-gothic tale of a steely young woman wounded in a fierce battle, captured and tortured by ruthless enemies, and dramatically saved from certain death by a team of selfless rescuers, knights in camo and night-vision goggles. Of course, nearly every detail of her heroic adventure proved to be as fictive and maudlin as any made-for-TV-movie. But the ordeal of Private Lynch, which dominated the news for more than a week, served its purpose: to distract attention from a stalled campaign that was beginning to look a lot riskier than the American public had been hoodwinked into believing.

The Lynch story was fed to the eager press by a Pentagon operation called Combat Camera, the Army network of photographers, videographers and editors that sends 800 photos and 25 video clips a day to the media. The editors at Combat Camera carefully culled the footage to present the Pentagon’s montage of the war, eliding such unsettling images as collateral damage, cluster bombs, dead children and U.S. soldiers, napalm strikes and disgruntled troops.

“A lot of our imagery will have a big impact on world opinion,” predicted Lt. Jane Larogue, director of Combat Camera in Iraq. She was right. But as the hot war turned into an even hotter occupation, the Pentagon, despite airy rhetoric from occupation supremo Paul Bremer about installing democratic institutions such as a free press, moved to tighten its monopoly on the flow of images out of Iraq. First, it tried to shut down Al Jazeera, the Arab news channel. Then the Pentagon intimated that it would like to see all foreign TV news crews banished from Baghdad.

Few newspapers fanned the hysteria about the threat posed by Saddam's weapons of mass destruction as sedulously as did the Washington Post. In the months leading up to the war, the Post's pro-war op-eds outnumbered the anti-war columns by a 3-to-1 margin.

Back in 1988, the Post felt much differently about Saddam and his weapons of mass destruction. When reports trickled out about the gassing of Iranian troops, the Washington Post's editorial page shrugged off the massacres, calling the mass poisonings "a quirk of war."

The Bush team displayed a similar amnesia. When Iraq used chemical weapons in grisly attacks on Iran, the U.S. government not only didn't object, it encouraged Saddam. Anything to punish Iran was the message coming from the White House. Donald Rumsfeld himself was sent as President Ronald Reagan's personal envoy to Baghdad. Rumsfeld conveyed the bold message that an Iraq defeat would be viewed as a "strategic setback for the United States." This sleazy alliance was sealed with a handshake caught on videotape. When CNN reporter Jamie McIntyre replayed the footage for Rumsfeld in the spring of 2003, the secretary of defense snapped, "Where'd you get that? Iraqi television?" The current crop of Iraq hawks also saw Saddam much differently then. Take the writer Laura Mylroie, sometime colleague of the New York Times' Judy Miller, who persists in peddling the ludicrous conspiracy that Iraq was behind the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center.

How times have changed! In 1987, Mylroie felt downright cuddly toward Saddam. She wrote an article for the New Republic titled "Back Iraq: Time for a U.S. Tilt in the Mideast," arguing that the U.S. should publicly embrace Saddam's secular regime as a bulwark against the Islamic fundamentalists in Iran. The co-author of this mesmerizing weave of wonkery was none other than Daniel Pipes, perhaps the nation's most bellicose Islamophobe. "The American weapons that Iraq could make good use of include remotely scatterable and anti-personnel mines and counterartillery radar," wrote Mylroie and Pipes. "The United States might also consider upgrading intelligence it is supplying Baghdad."

In the rollout for the war, Mylroie seemed to be everywhere hawking the invasion of Iraq. She would often appear on two or three different networks in the same day. How did the reporter manage this feat? She had help in the form of Eleana Benador, the media placement guru who runs Benador Associates. Born in Peru, Benador parlayed her skills as a linguist into a lucrative career as media relations whiz for the Washington foreign policy elite. She also oversees the Middle East Forum, a fanatically pro-Zionist white paper mill. Her clients include some of the nation's most fervid hawks, including Michael

Ledeen, Charles Krauthammer, Al Haig, Max Boot, Daniel Pipes, Richard Perle, and Judy Miller. During the Iraq war, Benador's assignment was to embed this squadron of pro-war zealots into the national media, on talk shows, and op-ed pages.

Benador not only got them the gigs, she also crafted the theme and made sure they all stayed on message. "There are some things, you just have to state them in a different way, in a slightly different way," said Benador. "If not, people get scared." Scared of intentions of their own government.

It could have been different. All of the holes in the Bush administration's gossamer case for war were right there for the mainstream press to expose. Instead, the U.S. press, just like the oil companies, sought to commercialize the Iraq war and profit from the invasions. They didn't want to deal with uncomfortable facts or present voices of dissent.

Nothing sums up this unctuous approach more brazenly than MSNBC's firing of liberal talk show host Phil Donahue on the eve of the war. The network replaced the Donahue Show with a running segment called Countdown: Iraq, featuring the usual nightly coterie of retired generals, security flacks, and other cheerleaders for invasion. The network's executives blamed the cancellation on sagging ratings. In fact, during its run Donahue's show attracted more viewers than any other program on the network. The real reason for the pre-emptive strike on Donahue was spelled out in an internal memo from anxious executives at NBC. Donahue, the memo said, offered "a difficult face for NBC in a time of war. He seems to delight in presenting guests who are anti-war, anti-Bush and skeptical of the administration's motives."

The memo warned that Donahue's show risked tarring MSNBC as an unpatriotic network, "a home for liberal anti-war agenda at the same time that our competitors are waving the flag at every opportunity." So, with scarcely a second thought, the honchos at MSNBC gave Donahue the boot and hoisted the battle flag.

It's war that sells.

There's a helluva caveat, of course. Once you buy it, the merchants of war accept no returns.

This essay is adapted from Grand Theft Pentagon.