

Eyes Wide Shut on the Iraq War

Exclusive: As the tenth anniversary of the Iraq War approaches, it's worth recalling one moment when the curtain was prematurely lifted on the lies justifying the invasion and how quickly government officials and the complicit mainstream press pulled it back down, as ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern explains.

By Ray McGovern

Ten years ago, as President George W. Bush and his administration were putting the finishing touches on their unprovoked invasion of Iraq, the mainstream U.S. news media had long since capitulated, accepting the conventional wisdom that nothing could or should stop the march to war.

The neocon conquest of the major U.S. news outlets the likes of the New York Times, the Washington Post and the national TV news was so total that the Bush administration could reliably count on them as eager co-conspirators in the Iraq adventure rather than diligent watchdogs for the American people.

By now a decade ago, the New York Times had published Judy Miller's infamous "mushroom cloud" article about Iraq's aluminum tubes, the Washington Post's op-ed page had lined up in lock-step to hail Colin Powell's misleading United Nations speech, MSNBC had dumped Phil Donahue after he allowed on a few anti-war voices, and CNN had assembled a chorus of pro-war ex-military officers as "analysts."

Despite massive worldwide protests against the impending invasion, the U.S. news media only grudgingly covered the spectacle of millions of people in the streets in dozens of cities. The coverage mostly had a tone of bemusement about how deluded such uninformed folks could be.

The U.S. news media's consensus was so overwhelming that it may have freed up a few lesser outlets to publish some undeniable facts, which then could be safely dismissed and ignored.

Such was the case when Newsweek correspondent John Barry was allowed to publish the leaked contents of an interrogation of a senior Iraqi official who inconveniently disclosed that Iraq had destroyed its stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons years earlier.

Barry, usually a reliable voice for Washington's conventional wisdom, may have struggled over what to do with the leaked document, but he ultimately wrote this truthful lede:

"Hussein Kamel, the highest-ranking Iraqi official ever to defect from Saddam Hussein's inner circle, told CIA and British intelligence officers and U.N. inspectors in the summer of 1995 that after the Gulf War, Iraq destroyed all its chemical and biological weapons stocks and the missiles to deliver them. Kamel ... had direct knowledge of what he claimed: for 10 years he had run Iraq's nuclear, chemical, biological and missile programs."

In a classic understatement of about his own report as the White House was on the verge of unleashing the dogs of war in pursuit of Iraq's alleged WMD Barry commented, "The defector's tale raises questions about whether the WMD stockpiles attributed to Iraq still exist."

Barry explained that Kamel had been interrogated in separate sessions by the CIA, British intelligence, and a trio from the U.N. inspection team; that Newsweek had been able to verify the authenticity of the U.N. document containing the text of Kamel's debriefing; and that Kamel had "told the same story to the CIA and the British." Barry added that "The CIA did not respond to a request for comment."

Barry's story was, of course, completely accurate. According to page 13 of the transcript of the debriefing by U.S. and U.N. officials, Hussein Kamel, one of Saddam Hussein's sons-in-law, said bluntly: "All weapons biological, chemical, missile, nuclear, were destroyed."

The story of Kamel's admission was published in the March 3, 2003, issue of Newsweek after appearing on the magazine's Web site on Feb. 24.

No WMD in Iraq?

By then, of course, the Newsweek story really didn't matter. The media "hot shots" had already shifted from covering the excuses for war to preparing for the exciting duty as embedded "war correspondents."

No one wanted to risk being left out of those career-building moments of racing across the Iraqi desert in a Humvee, with your cameraman filming you in green-tinted night-vision video, your body bulked up by body armor, your camouflage outfit matching what the real troops were wearing, and perhaps your hair blowing in the wind.

Back at corporate headquarters, CNN's Wolf Blitzer and other cable-news anchors couldn't wait for the start of "shock and awe." The pyrotechnics would surely mean a big bump in ratings. Over at Fox News and MSNBC, which was then trying to out-Fox Fox from the Right, producers were planning for video montages honoring "the Troops" as super-hero liberators of Iraq.

So there was not much buzz about the Newsweek scoop. The rest of the mainstream media only went through the motions of checking out this strange information about Iraq having no WMD. Reporters called the CIA for clarification.

CIA spokesman Bill Harlow responded by fishing out half of the descriptors from his "Debunking Adjectives File" at CIA's Office of Public Affairs. He warned that the report was "incorrect, bogus, wrong, untrue."

Would the CIA ever tell a lie? Puleeze! And so the mainstream media said, in effect, "Gosh. Thanks for letting us know. Otherwise, we might have run a story on it."

Nor were mainstream media outlets at all interested in coming back to the story two days later, when the complete copy of the Kamel transcript, in the form of an internal U.N. International Atomic Energy Agency document stamped "sensitive," was made public by Cambridge University analyst Glen Rangwala.

Rangwala had already revealed that British Prime Minister Tony Blair's pre-war "intelligence dossier" on Iraq was largely plagiarized from a student thesis.

The conventional wisdom in Official Washington was: Why should anyone place his or her precious career between the innocents who would die in war and the war juggernaut of Bush and his neocon advisers? After all, what good would it do? The war was going to happen anyway and you would just get run over.

And what would happen if the U.S. military did discover some cache of WMD somewhere in Iraq? You'd be forever known as that Saddam Hussein apologist who questioned the wisdom of the Great War President.

So the war juggernaut rolled on. Wolf Blitzer expressed some disappointment that the "shock and awe" bombing of Baghdad wasn't more spectacular. NBC's Tom Brokaw sat among a panel of ex-military officers and blurted out that "in a few days, we're going to own that country." MSNBC and Fox News rushed out Madison Avenue-style tributes to "the Troops" complete with stirring sound tracks and images of thankful Iraqis. Disturbing stories and images of overflowing hospitals and innocent Iraqis being dismembered and incinerated by U.S. bombs were played down.

However, the Bush administration found none of the promised stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons, nor any evidence of an active nuclear program. After eight years of a bloody war and occupation, the big losers were the hundreds of thousands of dead and maimed Iraqis; the nearly 4,500 dead U.S. soldiers and more than 30,000 wounded; and the U.S. taxpayers who got stuck with a bill of around \$1 trillion.

More Harlowtry

Things worked out a lot better for people like CIA spokesman Bill Harlow. He found out that working for CIA Director George Tenet could be quite lucrative, even after they both left the CIA. Harlow convinced Tenet, who resigned in 2004, that an exculpatory memoir could polish up Tenet's tarnished reputation and make money.

Harlow also volunteered to help, since he sensed the boss would need a scribe and since the advance was sizable. Tenet's *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA*, co-written with Harlow, was released in April 2007. By then, however, even some in the mainstream media were able to see the two for the charlatans they were.

Not even Harlow's hired pen could disguise this lame attempt at self-justification. Pro that he is, Harlow simply could not manage to make a silk purse out of the sow's ear of Tenet's career. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[How George Tenet Lied.](#)"]

At the Center of the Storm amounted to an unintentional self-indictment of Tenet for the crimes with which Socrates was charged: making the worse cause appear the better, and corrupting the youth. At the time, I found myself thinking that Tenet wished he had opted to just fade away, as old soldiers and spies used to do.

And I would have been right, I suppose except for the money. A \$4 million advance was nothing at which to sniff, even if Tenet had to share it with Harlow.

Despite what should have been a negative credibility rating, Harlow remained a trusted figure for many old news media friends. He was sent into the breach once more in August 2011 to help Tenet fend off explosive charges from former White House counter-terrorism czar Richard Clarke that Tenet had withheld information from him that could have thwarted the attacks of 9/11. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Did Tenet Hide Key 9/11 Information?](#)"]

In an interview aired on a local PBS affiliate in Colorado, Clarke directly accused Tenet and two other senior CIA officials, Cofer Black and Richard Blee, of sitting on information about two of the hijackers of American Airlines Flight 77, al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar.

The two had entered the United States more than a year before the 9/11 attacks, and CIA knew it. After 9/11, the agency covered up its failure by keeping relevant information away from Congress and the 9/11 Commission, Clarke said.

Withholding intelligence on two of the 9/11 hijackers would have been particularly unconscionable, the epitome of malfeasance, not just misfeasance. That's why Richard Clarke's conclusion that he should have received information from CIA about al-Hazmi and al-Mihdhar "unless somebody intervened to stop the normal automatic distribution" amounts, in my view, to a criminal charge, given the eventual role of the two in hijacking of AA-77, the plane that struck the Pentagon.

Tenet has denied that the information on the two hijackers was "intentionally withheld" from Clarke, and he enlisted the other two former CIA operatives, Cofer Black (more recently a senior official of Blackwater) and Richard Blee (an even more shadowy figure), to concur in saying, Not us; we didn't withhold.

Whom to believe? To me, it's a no-brainer. One would have to have been born yesterday to regard the "George is right" testimony from Black and Blee as corroborative.

Harlow to the Rescue

To dirty up Clarke a bit more, Bill Harlow emerged to empty the remaining half of the descriptors from his old "Debunking Adjectives File." According to Harlow, Clarke's charges were "reckless and profoundly wrong baseless belied by the record unworthy of serious consideration."

And so, naturally, the mainstream media dropped this extraordinary story involving the former White House counterterrorism chief, Richard Clarke, accusing the former CIA head, George Tenet, with suppressing information that could well have prevented 9/11.

Plus, by all indications, Harlow is still able to work his fraudulent magic on the Fawning Corporate Media. If Harlow says it's not true and hurls a bunch of pejorative adjectives to discredit a very serious charge well, I guess we'll have to leave it there, as the mainstream media is so fond of saying.

No matter Clarke's well-deserved reputation for honesty and professionalism, and Tenet's and Harlow's reputations for the opposite.

The versatile Bill Harlow came back again this past January to help Jose Rodriguez, the CIA operations chief who oversaw waterboarding and other torture and then destroyed the videotaped evidence, argue his case in the ever-hospitable, neocon-dominated Washington Post.

Their argument this time was that "enhanced interrogation" or what the rest of us would call "torture" helped locate al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Even the Senate Intelligence Committee has refuted that claim.

Never mind. The Washington Post Sunday Outlook section on Jan. 6, 2013, ran a long article titled, "Sorry, Hollywood. What we did wasn't torture." The Post noted that the Rodriguez piece was "written with former CIA spokesman Bill Harlow," but offered readers no help in gauging Harlow's checkered credibility. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Excusing Torture Again."]

Rodriguez and Harlow disdained the word "torture," but argued, in the context of the "hunt-for-bin-Laden" movie "Zero Dark Thirty," that the rough-them-up tactics really helped. The two resorted to the George W. Bush-era word game that waterboarding, stress positions, sleep deprivation and other calculated pain inflicted on detainees in the CIA's custody weren't really "torture."

A decade after so many falsehoods led the United States into the disastrous Iraq War, it is curious indeed that the mainstream U.S. news media still affords some of the principal liars so much respect and "credibility."

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