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WHEN PATRIOTISM COLORS THE NEWS

Nishan Havandjian

The robe was gray and flowing. The arms outstretched to the unforgiving sun. His face bore a stunned anguish as if imploring the gods for a plausible answer. In front him lay a small, uncovered wooden coffin hugging three small mangled bodies.

This is the photo that the *Jordan Times* sent to its readers across the Arab world. An image of an Iraqi father in the throes of despair over the death of his three children by Coalition Forces. The picture was reproduced in several other Arab media. It was nowhere to be seen in U.S. publications. A quick perusal of the first 10 days of the war in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Christian Science Monitor* revealed that invariably page one photos depicted either coalition troops in action against military targets or rounding up defeated enemy military. Nary a civilian was in sight. The pundits had warned us. As long as the domestic audience does not see too many dead Marines or burnt children, the polls would show steady support for the war effort. The experts warned in their TV pontifications about Johnson's downfall when American conscience was assaulted with pictures of napalm doused Vietnamese children. History was not to repeat itself. As Americans, we are good at coining new words for each war which would match niftily the technological advances since the last war. This time the term "embedded" was coined to depict those journalists, American and foreign, who have agreed to accompany the coalition and thus guarantee in a Faustian bargain their own safety, if not objectivity and unobstructed access to

locales and sources in Iraq. By “embedding” themselves to Coalition forces, the correspondents curtailed their skepticism and transmitted their dispatches as viewed through tainted patriotic lenses. The correspondents’ *modus operandi* degenerated into an odd, detached style of reporting in which they transmitted military advanced and trouncing of the enemy with practically no reference to human beings. War became an exercise that took place in a technological vacuum devoid of humanity.

In a recent interview on Larry King, Queen Noor of Jordan lamented the fact that there was a disparity between European and U.S coverage of the war. She asserted to her host, that just returning back from Europe a few days ago, how struck she was by the daily emphasis of European media on the plight of ordinary Iraqis, especially the women and children among them.

An evaluation of European newspapers and magazines culled during a recent visit to the continent supports the queen’s assertions. Amsterdam’s *Het Parool* published a Reuters photo of an Iraqi mother running for her life with a toddler boy in her arms and a barefoot, barely six year- old daughter by her side. Behind her could be seen the menacing silhouette of a tank. Munich’s *Suddendeutsche Zeitung* had another Reuters photo, this time a father trying frantically to escape another fast-approaching tank with three of his frightened children holding hands. Even the *International Herald-Tribune*, jointly published in Paris by the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, published an Agence France Presse photo of a defiant-looking mother clad in black with one child in her arm and another nearby, waiting for US soldiers to inspect the truck she was riding with other Iraqi women and children. France’s newsweekly, *Le Point*, simply titled its cover: “La Tragedie.” While Germany’s *Stern*, cover depicted a situation that probably evokes uncomfortable memories for many of its citizens: a coalition soldier marking the hands of a prostrate Iraqi. Needless to say most large American metro dailies do subscribe to Reuters and Agence France Presse and have the same access to their photo library as other world media.

But the brunt of the full extent of the tragedy that had befallen the Iraqi civilians was most evident in the Arabic press of the Middle East. From Jordan to Morocco, issue after issue of newspapers, even those published in countries giving tacit support to coalition forces, were replete with photos of maimed children dying in their parents’ arms, women crying in despair in front of demolished homes, masked doctors holding children with severe burns. Countless editorials and opinion pieces were written lamenting the fate of Iraq’s children and civil

population in general. One cartoon showed coalition tanks trampling Iraqi children whose feet had transformed into roses.

A recent Associated Press article surveyed the current mood of the Iraqi civilians. Buried two-thirds through the dispatch was a quote from a 72-year old Iraqi woman whom the author described as a fluent English speaking former executive secretary. The woman kept repeating the words: it was a massacre, it was a massacre.” Nowhere later in the article, was there an attempt to corroborate or expand on her lamentations. No corresponding articles appeared in subsequent days either. But there are inquisitive minds that are gradually raising their voices wanting to know the truth beyond the well-worn jargon of “collateral damage.” The Internet publication, *Slate*, had a list of eight questions it said it wanted to ask Gen. Tommy Franks about Operation Iraqi Freedom. The author said, “The Pentagon never likes to discuss my fifth question, but at some point, somebody is going to have to assess civilian casualties. The author went on to compare this war to Desert Storm over a decade ago. He pointed out that when the U.S hit by mistake the wrong target and killed 300 Iraqi civilians, the Defense Department acknowledged its mistake and apologized for the error. “We haven’t heard much remorse during this war,” he added. When France Presse published an article in mid-April about the killing of over a dozen Iraqis during civil unrest in the northern city of Mosul, the U.S media would not touch the story until the military confessed to the killings. Could American correspondents corroborate on their own, like their French counterparts, the veracity of the event, without waiting for the military to put their stamp of approval on it?

In general, the European media, maybe taking the clue from their governments, were seemingly less obsessed with showcasing a plethora of generals and military experts marveling at satellite guided missiles, precision bombing, and whether Saddam wanted to reenact the battle for Stalingrad. Instead, they spent considerable time and space concentrating on the unsung heroes of this war, the hapless civilians, the women and children of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Late in March, this author got caught in a noisy demonstration in Strasbourg, France’s main square. Hundreds of Frenchmen young and old were carrying anti-war signs. Yet, the most striking were the signs, the posters who appealed to world conscience to spare Iraq’s children. The demonstration was heavy with Arab youth and North African women in gray long robes and white scarves. Haltingly, I approached a visibly upset Moroccan woman in her sixties. “Look nobody cares about these children,” she said. “Nobody knows their names; they look poor;

what difference does it make to anybody in the West if they perish? Have you seen them on TV,” she asked, “Have you seen how frightened their eyes look on those hospital beds?”

There is an unwritten axiom in journalism. The eyes have it. If all the media show are masses of charred tanks and nameless, faceless charred bodies, all these fleeting images are quickly shelved in the public mind as just inevitable occurrences to be dismissed as efficiently and coldly as the words “collateral damage.” Yet, nobody can dispute the compassion that average Americans have shown through numerous natural and manmade calamities in different parts of the world. Now that the war is winding down, the time is ripe for the American media to shed its patriotic garb and show the public what may have happened to Iraq’s children. Show to the public, the Iraqis not as anonymous jostling crowds, but individuals who have endured immeasurable pain and hardship. Individuals with names, aspirations, and eyes bearing the scars of war. 