

HBO film on Gulf War: self-congratulation and banality instead of history

Live from Baghdad, directed by Mick Jackson

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28 December 2002

Live from Baghdad, directed by Mick Jackson, written by Robert Wiener, Richard Chapman, John Patrick Shanley and Timothy J. Sexton, based on the book by Robert Wiener

Live from Baghdad, a miserable effort from television cable network HBO, recounts the experiences of the news team from CNN that broadcast live in Baghdad at the start of the Persian Gulf War in January 1991. The film begins at the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. Ambitious CNN producer Robert Wiener (Michael Keaton) “wants Baghdad.” With some trepidation, because of his past recklessness, CNN officials give him the assignment.

The film does not introduce in any fashion or at any point (except for a single passing comment by an Iraqi official) the history of the region or the background to the Gulf War. The motives of neither the Iraqi nor the US government are probed or even discussed. Nothing is made of the US role in the Middle East or its interest in the region’s oil reserves. No mention is made of the diplomatic green light given by American ambassador April Glaspie in a conversation with Saddam Hussein in July 1990 when she told the Iraqi president, in regard to Iraq’s designs on Kuwait, that “We have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts.”

We now know as well that General Norman Schwarzkopf, on the orders of the then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, drew up plans for a massive US military intervention in the Persian Gulf aimed against Iraq months before the invasion of Kuwait. By June 1990 Schwarzkopf was already conducting war games pitting hundreds of thousands of US troops against Iraqi armored divisions.

In any event, one finishes watching the HBO product as enlightened or as ignorant about the 1990-91 events as one began.

The main concern of Wiener, co-producer Ingrid Formanek (Helena Bonham Carter) and the rest of his crew once in Baghdad turns out to be beating out the competition, the major American television networks. Wiener comes under fire when he broadcasts a segment of Hussein meeting

with a group of British “guests,” including a little boy, who are apparently being held hostage by the Iraqis. The CNN producer is several times criticized by US journalists for being in the “Iraqis’ pocket.”

The depiction of Iraq is worthy of US Cold War films about life behind the “Iron Curtain.” Ominous music plays every time the camera pans down a “Baghdad street” (the film was shot in California and Casablanca). There are cameras, bugging devices and spies everywhere. While a few token “good Iraqis” make an appearance, the overall aim of *Live from Baghdad* is to reinforce the most backward and chauvinist conceptions: democratic, open-minded, fast-talking Yanks take on the sinister, cruel and corrupt Arabs.

The chief prize pursued by Wiener is an interview with the Iraqi president. He spends a great deal of time cultivating the Iraqi Information Minister, Naji Al-Hadithi (David Suchet), only to see his cable network scooped by Dan Rather and CBS News.

Live from Baghdad follows a template. The first moment that we see the ambitious, impetuous Wiener we know that he must be taught a lesson, he must learn that there things in life more important than his ego and résumé. Of course, the film does not want to go too far. It is created, after all, by those for whom career prospects are *nearly* all. *Live from Baghdad* treads a fine line between demonstrating utter indifference to everything and everyone around Wiener and paying occasional lip service to concern over the fate of Iraq and the rest of the world.

The template demands that before the inevitable final triumph, the leading figure must be laid low. The CBS coup is followed by another blow. The CNN team gets permission to travel into Kuwait to investigate the alleged Iraqi atrocities in hospitals (the notorious story, long since exposed as a fraud, that invading soldiers pulled Kuwaiti babies from incubators). After one interview with a doctor their visit is cut short, and the Iraqi information agency subsequently reports that they have debunked the atrocity

claims. A note reading “CNN—Voice of Iraq” is posted on Wiener’s door. Head of CNN President Tom Johnson (Michael Murphy) pointedly asks, “Why were we the ones the Iraqis chose for the Kuwaiti story?”

Wiener is confronted by one moral dilemma after another. He interviews one of the Americans stuck in Baghdad and later learns that the man has been arrested by the Iraqis (this turns out not to be true); Keaton grimaces and looks troubled.

The template also demands that there must be romance or the hint of romance in the midst of the chaos and threats of war. Wiener and Formanek flirt and circle one another. Will they ... ? Or won’t they ... ? The spectator can be forgiven for not caring terribly much.

CNN eventually obtains its interview with Hussein, with Bernard Shaw asking the questions. One crew member says afterward that she has been “looking into the eyes of a murderer.” She must have been looking the other way when she was in the presence of CIA, US military and Bush administration officials. That Hussein was essentially an American ally during the Iran-Iraq war, that the US condoned his use of chemical weapons and provided his government with the necessary ingredients for a biological weapons program, these unpleasanties are avoided.

The film approaches its climax as war draws near. Peter Arnett, veteran war reporter, arrives and Shaw returns. Other news teams are leaving, the CNN crew members, now equipped with a device that allows them to remain in touch with their Atlanta headquarters by telephone, debate whether they will stay or go. It becomes a moot point when the US bombing begins. Despite everything, the scenes of a defenseless city being pounded by the most powerful imperialist military in the world are chilling. CNN remains on the air throughout the night and puts itself on the map.

One moment sums up the film’s essential attitude and spirit. At daybreak Wiener and the others look out of their hotel window at the devastation (there are no corpses here, as opposed to the opening scenes in Kuwait). Again Wiener looks troubled. Momentarily. He turns from the window and, as the thought of his and his network’s triumph dawns on him, he breaks into a smile and begins congratulating his colleagues. Death and mass destruction is one thing, but a career break of this dimension is quite another! (Although he will later say, apparently summing up the lessons he has learned in these trying days, “This is not about me.”) It is difficult, and not only in the face of this fatuous work, to summon up the appropriate contempt for the privileged and ignorant members of the American media.

The film ends on this note. The war begins and Wiener makes his way back to the US. No reference is made to the catastrophic consequences of the Gulf War for the Iraqi

people, the millions dead as a result of sanctions, the destruction of the infrastructure. However, we learn in a title that Ingrid Formanek still works for CNN.

Another war with Iraq looms. In the intervening decade the US media has become even more subservient to the political and military establishment. One of the defining moments in that process was the humiliation and firing of one of the heroes of *Live from Baghdad*, Peter Arnett. Needless to say, HBO (one of AOL Time Warner’s subsidiaries, along with CNN) remains silent on that.

Arnett was pushed out at CNN in April 1999, when the cable news network rejected his request to report on the war against Serbia, but he noted at the time that he had been effectively muzzled since July 1998. The occasion that brought about his downfall was an investigative report aired by CNN on June 7, 1998, entitled “Valley of Death.” The segment, narrated by Arnett, concerned Operation Tailwind, a secret incursion into Laos in September 1970. The report presented compelling evidence that US commandos had used deadly sarin gas—a chemical weapon—in an operation to kill US soldiers who had defected into Laos from Vietnam. The broadcast produced a storm of protest from the military establishment and the ultra-right.

Under the pressure, CNN capitulated completely. Ted Turner and the CNN officialdom made abject apologies and the program’s two producers, April Oliver and Jack Smith, who refused to disavow their own reporting, were fired. That did not satisfy the military. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on July 8, 1998, “Military officials continue to press the network to dismiss Mr. Arnett.” The opportunity came a year later. For the US media, self-censorship and cowardice are the order of the day. All the bravado and self-congratulation of *Live from Baghdad* cannot conceal that.



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