

A rare media exposure of Bush administration lies about Iraq

Television review: PBS's *Frontline*, "Truth, War and Consequences"

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President George W. Bush and his key lieutenants have launched a new propaganda blitz in an attempt to counter mounting popular opposition to the continuing US occupation of Iraq. Bush kicked off the campaign with a radio interview in New Hampshire on October 9. Vice President Richard Cheney followed a day later with a speech before an invited audience of 200 at the conservative Heritage Foundation. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice also made speeches on Iraq last week.

The essence of the public relations campaign is that the aggression against Iraq was part of a "war on terror" and that conditions there are steadily improving, despite "negative" reporting in the media.

Just as this "good news" offensive began, on October 9 PBS stations across the country aired a documentary that brought out two basic truths: the justifications for the invasion were based on the manipulation of intelligence to fit preconceived plans for war; and the US troops represent an occupation army engaged in widespread repression of the Iraqi people.

Written and narrated by co-producer Martin Smith, the 90-minute film interviews former government officials and intelligence analysts, Iraqi exiles, and the current US viceroy in Iraq, Paul Bremer, along with his short-lived predecessor, Jay Garner. It also relies considerably on first-hand footage from Iraq.

One telling scene from Baghdad in mid-April shows US soldiers meting out frontier-style justice to three Iraqis caught stealing some wood. The soldiers inflict instant punishment by utterly demolishing the Iraqis' car, running it over with their tank, which they then put in reverse to run it over a second time. They laugh and brag about being US Army. One of the soldiers says arrogantly, "That's what you get when you loot." The *Frontline* crew was later told that the car's owner was a taxi driver, whose means of making a living had just been destroyed.

The punishment seemed particularly out of proportion, considering that the US forces had stood by and watched for days after taking over Baghdad as looters tore apart buildings all the way down to their wiring, then set the shells on fire. The commander of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, Lieutenant General James Conway, told *Frontline*'s Smith that the looting could have been halted, but that the troops didn't have orders to do so. Weeks later, after most of the damage was done, orders were

issued to shoot looters on sight.

Another scene, this one from mid-summer, captures the joint US Army/CIA Task Force 20, assigned to hunt down Saddam Hussein, conducting a house raid in Baghdad. An impromptu and ineffective-looking street barricade set up by the soldiers out of a few cinder blocks is not recognized as such by two residents driving home. We learn that US soldiers shot and killed the four occupants of the two cars after they started to drive around the cinder blocks. A pedestrian was also killed. The camera shows us the blood-soaked back seat of one of the cars where a woman and child had been riding.

The film also shows how a previous raid by Task Force 20, which produced no trace of Saddam Hussein, stoked angry feelings among the residents of the town of Thaluya. Standing amid the wreckage left behind by the Americans, one householder denies supporting Saddam Hussein, but states bluntly, "Americans are occupiers." In other footage, an angry Iraqi shouts out to a crowd in Fallujah, shortly after US troops gunned down 17 people protesting the US takeover of a local school building, "Is this the freedom they want to bring? The freedom of dogs!"

Early on, the show establishes that a plan to invade Iraq had been drawn up long before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It had been developed nearly a decade earlier by right-wing elements who had wanted to see Baghdad overrun as part of the 1991 Gulf War. The elder President Bush at the time feared the worldwide impact of such action, particularly when the pretext for that war was to defend the sovereignty of Kuwait. He was also not unmindful that the Soviet Union, while on its last legs, still existed, with a nuclear arsenal capable of challenging the United States.

As the documentary states, "Going to war to achieve it [the plan to overthrow Saddam Hussein] was not politically feasible until after September 11, 2001." It reports how prominent hawk and advisor to the Defense Department Richard Perle called White House speechwriter David Fromm on the afternoon of September 11, urging the inclusion of what later became one of the major justifications for war, first on Afghanistan, then on Iraq, in Bush's address to the nation that evening. The speech included the following: "We make no distinction between the terrorists who committed those acts and those who harbor them." Perle confirms his discussion with the speechwriter in an interview with Smith.

The next day, Bush told his cabinet that to justify war on Iraq, they would have to find a link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. A few days later, Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz ordered the establishment of a “Special Intelligence Office” within the Defense Department to look for just such a connection, bypassing the Defense Intelligence Agency and the CIA, neither of which could be relied upon to come to the predetermined conclusion.

Within a month, reports surfaced about a meeting between September 11th hijacker Mohammed Atta and an Iraqi agent in the Czech capital of Prague. The film shows an excerpt from a September 2002 speech in which Cheney repeated this claim, long after it was debunked by Czech intelligence. The FBI had also already confirmed that Atta was in Virginia on the April 1, 2001, date that the meeting supposedly took place.

Describing the Bush administration’s approach as “faith-based intelligence,” former State Department intelligence analyst Greg Thielmann tells *Frontline*, “Instead of our leadership forming conclusions based on a careful reading of the intelligence we provided them, they already had a conclusion to start out with, and they were cherry picking the information we provided to use whatever pieces of it that fit their overall interpretation.” Thielmann continued, “Worse than that, they were dropping qualifiers and distorting some of the information we provided to make it seem more alarmist and dangerous.”

The documentary goes into the bitter feud between the State Department and the Pentagon over various aspects of Iraq policy, including the use of unreliable intelligence reports provided by Iraqi exiles pushing for war, and planning for the post-war occupation.

In one segment, former career State Department official Robert Perito, who helped oversee occupation forces in Bosnia, Kosovo, and East Timor, describes a briefing he had given the Defense Policy Board about the chaos that could be expected when Saddam Hussein fell, pointing also to the widespread looting in Panama after the US invaded in 1989 to overthrow Manuel Noriega. “And those lessons were ignored,” Perito tells the camera. Referring to the administration’s Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance headed by Jay Garner, Perito says, “Their basic approach was that they couldn’t really foresee what was needed, so they were going to wait until they got there, and then they were going to make recommendations.”

Garner himself is interviewed, saying it was a “mistake” to reject the State Department’s “Future of Iraq Project,” which, in the first phase of the occupation, was to involve declaring an interim Iraqi government based on a group of exiles they had been cultivating. The Defense Department, however, favored another group of exiles gathered around Ahmed Chalabi, the former banker and convicted embezzler who left Iraq in 1956.

The interviews with Chalabi leave the viewer with an acute sense of the sleaze surrounding the entire US project in Iraq. In one clip, Smith questions Chalabi’s claim to have documents proving links between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. When pressed to produce the documents, Chalabi defers, saying he does not have them with him, but still insisting they exist. When pressed further, he hesitantly agrees to provide *Frontline* with copies of the

documents. The interview cuts out, and the narrator reports that, months later, after repeated follow-up attempts, *Frontline* has still not seen the purported documents.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Cheney, Rice and Secretary of State Colin Powell all refused *Frontline* requests for interviews. The filmmakers splice in public statements made by each of these officials, as well as by President Bush, that clearly conflict with the facts the program has laid out. Cheney appears saying, “There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has chemical and biological weapons.” Bush’s false claims from his 2003 State of the Union address about Saddam Hussein’s attempt to buy uranium in Africa as well as having stockpiles of sarin gas are replayed effectively, along with several other of his statements.

The program provides a rare media expose of the manipulation and outright lies used to drag the American people into war against Iraq. It stands out against the background of news coverage that parrots the Bush administration line, such as a recent ABC Evening News broadcast emphasizing how life in Iraq is returning to normal—never mind the car bombs, daily killings of US troops and continuing counterinsurgency operations, not to mention mass unemployment as well as widespread hunger and disease.

However, the producers tend to attribute the debacle that has developed in Iraq to mistakes of overzealous policymakers in the Pentagon. The viewer is left to conclude that if only Bush had listened to the State Department and the CIA, the invasion could have been carried out without producing such a mess.

In addition, the underlying causes of the explosion of US imperialism that the Iraq slaughter represents are not addressed. Smith acknowledges in an on-line discussion that he deliberately cut any references to Iraqi oil as a motivating factor. The program portrays the war as the brainchild of conservative ideologues who sincerely, if perhaps mistakenly, believe that US action to overthrow Hussein was the path to bringing true democracy to the Middle East. It also suggests that the US government had become the pawn of a handful of Iraqi exiles, rather than the other way around.

Despite these substantial political shortcomings, the material presented in the program represents a powerful indictment of US militarism. As of this writing, it can be viewed on line at www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/truth/view.



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