

PR blitz to boost Iraq war fizzles

Jessica Lynch criticizes government-backed lies

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Over the last 10 days, the story of Army Private First Class Jessica Lynch has been the focus of a media blitz. On Sunday, November 9, NBC broadcast the made-for-TV film *Saving Jessica Lynch*. The following Tuesday, the book *I Am A Soldier, Too: The Jessica Lynch Story*, by Rick Bragg, was released. That evening, ABC aired its much-hyped interview with the former soldier conducted by Diane Sawyer. Lynch made the rounds on the morning talk shows last week, climaxed by an appearance on “Late Night with David Letterman” Friday night. Her picture graced the cover of *Time* magazine’s November 17 issue.

In the Bush administration’s perfect war propaganda world, Lynch would be the star: a petite, blonde, patriotic 19-year-old army recruit from small-town USA, who fell into enemy territory on a mission in the early days of the war, bravely battled her Iraqi adversaries, was taken prisoner and tortured, and then was freed in a dramatic and dangerous rescue by US troops.

As things have turned out, however, the Private Jessica story has fallen flat from the establishment’s point of view, and the government-media effort to use the events surrounding her capture and release as the ultimate military public relations job has run up against the real facts of the case, and the real facts of life in America.

Instead of passively fulfilling the function of heroine, Jessica herself has rejected the Bush administration’s manipulation of her story. “They used me as a way to symbolize all this stuff,” Lynch told Diane Sawyer in her ABC interview. “It hurt in a way, that people would make up stories that they had no truth about.”

The events surrounding Jessica Lynch’s capture and rescue were seized upon by the Bush administration—and massaged into shape—in an effort to shore up support for the US military campaign at a time when confidence was dropping, both within the population at home and among the troops in Iraq. The exposure of the government’s fabricated version of the Lynch story casts light on another aspect of the tissue of lies that underlies its policy in Iraq.

Last April 1, the cable news networks broadcast stories, based on a briefing by US CENTCOM (Central Command), that the military had that day rescued a “U.S. Army prisoner of war held captive in Iraq.” The following day, the *New York Times* quoted an Army official who said that Lynch “had been shot multiple times” in the confrontation with Iraqi forces. On April 3, the *Washington Post* ran a front-page story—titled “‘She Was Fighting to the Death’: Details Emerging of W. Va. Soldier’s Capture and Rescue”—which cited unnamed US officials, and read in part:

“Lynch, a 19-year-old supply clerk, continued firing at the Iraqis

even after she sustained multiple gunshot wounds and watched several other soldiers in her unit die around her in fighting March 23, one official said. The ambush took place after a 507th convoy, supporting the advancing 3rd Infantry Division, took a wrong turn near the southern city of Nasiriyah.

“‘She was fighting to the death,’ the official said. ‘She did not want to be taken alive.’”

News outlets across the country picked up on the *Post* story and ran with it, depicting Jessica as a kind of Ramboesque figure. But within days, the story began to unravel, with numerous reports questioning whether Lynch had received gunshot wounds or even fired on the Iraqi forces. On May 15, the British *Guardian* published a refutation of the “fighting to the death” version of events, and on May 18, the BBC broadcast a documentary reviewing the incident in depth. The *Washington Post* was forced to run a June 17 piece—again relying heavily on unnamed US officials—refuting most of what appeared in its April 3 story.

In Rick Bragg’s book, he recounts what actually happened that day, as told to him by Jessica. The 507th Maintenance Company convoy, carrying supplies to the 3rd Infantry Division—through a combination of error and faulty information from superiors—made a wrong turn and drove straight into Nasiriyah. Those vehicles unable to make a retreat came under direct fire by Iraqi forces. Eleven members of the 507th died that day, including Lori Piestewa, Jessica’s best friend and the first Native American woman to die in combat.

Jessica Lynch was the only one to survive in the Humvee she was riding in. But Jessica did not take aim at her assailants. In fact, her weapon jammed and she didn’t fire a shot.

“Jessi, crouched in the backseat, her arms around her own shoulders, her forehead on her knees, did not feel the round that finally punctured Lori’s control and sent the Humvee bouncing off the road, straight at the five-ton tractor trailer. The last thing she remembered was praying... ‘Oh god, get us out of here’” (*I Am A Soldier, Too*, p. 78). She sustained multiple injuries in the crash and lost consciousness.

Jessica was hospitalized for nine days following the incident. The official government tale alleged she was terrorized and abused by her captors—allegations again refuted by Lynch in Bragg’s biography. “No one even slapped me... No one asked me anything about our troops. I couldn’t answer anyway” (*I Am A Soldier Too*, p. 115).

(Incidentally, the story of her being slapped by an Iraqi security guard was spread by Iraqi lawyer Mohammed Odeh al-Rehaief, who is alleged to have given information on Lynch’s whereabouts to the US military. Al-Rehaief was flown to the US with his wife and child

and granted political asylum. *Los Angeles Times* reporter Robert Scheer wrote on May 20, “His future was assured, with a job with a lobbying firm run by former Republican Rep. Bob Livingstone that represents the defense industry, and a \$500,000 book contract with HarperCollins, a company owned by Rupert Murdoch, whose Fox network did much to hype Lynch’s story, as it did the rest of the war.”)

In fact, Jessica credits the Iraqi doctors and nurses with saving her life. She arrived at the hospital close to death, with a tremendous loss of blood, and during her stay underwent numerous surgeries to tend to her broken arm and thigh and dislocated ankle. She also remembers the kindness of the hospital staff, and of one nurse who sat for many hours at her bedside and soothed her with lullabies.

The most fantastic aspect of the government operation surrounding Lynch’s ordeal was the staging of her rescue. The military fed reports to the press that she was saved by Special Forces troops who risked their lives coming under hostile fire from Iraqi troops in the hospital. The entire operation was filmed by the military with night-vision cameras, then edited and released to the media as proof of the daring rescue.

Dr. Anmar Uday, who was in the hospital at the time, directly contradicted this rendering of the rescue operation. In an interview for the BBC documentary, he said, “There was no military, there were no soldiers in the hospital. It was like a Hollywood film. [US forces] cried ‘Go, go, go,’ with guns and blanks without bullets, blanks and the sound of explosions. They made a show for the American attack on the hospital—[like] action movies [starring] Sylvester Stallone or Jackie Chan.”

Footage of the Lynch rescue was widely aired on US television as one of the few “good news” stories to come out of war-torn Iraq in the early days of the invasion, in an effort to bolster support at home for the Bush administration’s policies. However, the government was equally intent on utilizing the Jessica Lynch story to boost morale among soldiers in Iraq and promote the killer instinct within their ranks.

Bragg relates that the story had an impact at the time among the troops: “[I]n the streets of Nasiriya[h], the story of the young woman in the hands of the brutal Fedayeen took hold in the minds of the young marines, and it mushroomed: She was being tortured, in the most cruel ways, every day, every hour.

“‘I took it personally,’ said [Seth] Bunke [a Marine from Toledo, Ohio]. ‘I took it right to heart. I have a sister. She’s nineteen. I thought of Jessi, and I thought of her. I thought of the people who would do that. I wanted to kill them. I killed thirty-four of them’” (*I Am a Soldier, Too*, p. 124).

As events would have it, however, Jessi Lynch has not become the poster child for patriotism that the US government and military bargained for. Like many of the young men and women who have been shipped off to fight Bush’s war, she comes from a background where decent-paying jobs are scarce and the future in their hometowns looks bleak.

Jessica grew up in Palestine, W. Va. (Wirt County), a remote town where many young people sign up to join the military. “Staff Sergeant James Grady, who runs the U.S. Army Recruiting Station at the Parkersburg Grand Central Mall, makes a lot of trips to Wirt County. The closest good-paying factory work is almost an hour away, and those jobs are becoming harder and harder to get. The army, for some of them, is their last chance” (*I Am a Soldier, Too*, p. 31).

Both Jessica and her brother, Greg Jr., signed up when the recruiting

officer came around in the summer of 2001. She thought she would see the world and earn some money for college where she would study to become a kindergarten teacher. Just months before the September 11 attacks and the escalation of the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism,” she never dreamed she would be deployed to Iraq, let alone be seriously wounded, captured and ultimately cast as the heroine in a military propaganda video.

To her credit, she has not functioned as the willing patriotic robot her Pentagon handlers had hoped. This is not due to any lack of effort on the part of the military brass, who have given Lynch an 80 percent disability benefit, while seven other soldiers who were held captive have been offered much less.

Army Spec. Shoshana Johnson was shot through both legs and held prisoner for 22 days, but is receiving only a 30 percent disability benefit. Johnson, who is black, has accused the military of racism and applying a double-standard. Lynch commented to *USA Today*, “We were all POWs... It was a horrible thing to go through, so I think we all should’ve been treated equally.”

Throughout the Lynch case, the behavior of the media has been predictable—both in its role as the bearers of the “good news” about Iraq and its distasteful penchant for hyping up a story and milking it for all it’s worth—to boost ratings and the network coffers. Diane Sawyer’s performance during her interview with Lynch, feigning heartfelt compassion for the former prisoner—“How did it feel” to come under attack? “Weren’t you scared?”—was truly a disgusting spectacle.

The operation to package and sell the Jessica Lynch story shows the lengths to which the White House and Pentagon will go to sell its predatory war policies. But despite their best efforts, and the eager support of a pliant media, the story has not achieved the desired outcome.

“We went and did our job,” Lynch told biographer Rick Bragg, “but I wish I hadn’t done it—I wish it had never happened. I wish we hadn’t been there, none of us... I don’t care about the political stuff. But if it had never happened, Lori would be alive and all the rest of the soldiers would be alive. And none of this would have happened.”

The sentiments of this now-20-year-old young woman have much in common with those held by growing numbers of soldiers, their families and the American population at-large as casualties mount in Iraq and the lies and criminal military exploits of the Bush administration are increasingly exposed.



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