

Bush video conference with troops in Iraq: poorly scripted, poorly performed

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No one who has been paying attention to the crude tactics of the Bush administration will be the slightest bit surprised by the revelation that the White House and Pentagon scripted and staged the “live video conference” held this week between George Bush and a group of US and Iraqi soldiers.

This genuinely ridiculous effort played itself out Thursday. Supposedly an opportunity for the president to discuss the situation in Iraq with US troops based in Tikrit, from the Army’s 42nd Infantry Division, the event was stage-managed from beginning to end.

A live feed of the soldiers was beamed from Tikrit in north-central Iraq to the Eisenhower Executive Office Building in Washington, near the White House. Through someone’s lapse, journalists were able to observe Deputy Secretary of Defense for Internal Communications Allison Barber putting the carefully-vetted group of soldiers, which included five officers, through their paces for some minutes prior to the president’s appearance.

(Several minutes of the ‘rehearsal’ are available at “Bush talks to soldiers”)

The Associated Press documented a portion of Barber’s directorial effort:

“‘OK, so let’s just walk through this,’ Barber said. ‘Captain Kennedy, you answer the first question and you hand the mike to whom?’”

“‘Captain Smith,’ Kennedy said.

“‘Captain Smith? You take the mike and you hand it to whom?’ she asked.

“‘Captain Kennedy,’ the soldier replied.

“And so it went.

“‘If the question comes up about partnering, how often do we train with the Iraqi military, who does he go to?’ Barber asked.

“‘That’s going to go to Captain Pratt,’ one of the soldiers said.

“‘And then if we’re going to talk a little bit about the folks in Tikrit, the hometown, and how they’re handling the political process, who are we going to give that to?’ she asked.”

Barber became even more specific, explaining that Bush would ask the group, “In the last 10 months, what kind of progress have we seen?” She then wanted to know which member of the group was to answer that question. “Master Sgt. Lombardo,” someone replied. During the “live teleconference,” Bush asked that precise question and Master Sgt. Corine Lombardo dutifully responded, “Over the past 10 months, the capabilities of the Iraqi security forces are improving.... They continue to develop and grow into a sustainable force.”

Barber concluded her little dress rehearsal with the peppy and astonishingly inappropriate advice to “Try and have a little fun.”

The videoconference itself consisted of Bush asking, without conviction, a series of banal leading questions about progress in the war, the eagerness of the Iraqis to vote for the new constitution and the preparedness of the Iraqi security forces. Here is one selection from the ultimate script:

“THE PRESIDENT: How are they [the Iraqi security forces] doing? Give us an assessment. One of the things, Captain, that people in America want to know is, one, do the Iraqis want to fight, and are they capable of fighting. And maybe somebody can give us an appraisal.

“CAPTAIN KENNEDY: Mr. President, I’m going to field that question to Captain Pratt.

“CAPTAIN PRATT: Good morning, Mr. President. My name is Captain Steven Pratt from Pocatello, Idaho, serving with the 116th Brigade Combat Team as the Iraqi army coordinator. The Iraqi army and police services, along with coalition support, have conducted many and multiple exercises and rehearsals. Recently we’ve conducted a command post exercise in which we brought together these Iraqi security forces with emergency service units, and the joint coordination center, in which we all sat around a model and discussed what each one would do at their specific location and what they would do at the referendum.

“It was impressive to me to see the cooperation and the communication that took place among the Iraqi forces. Along with the coalition’s backing them, we’ll have a very successful and effective referendum vote.”

And so it went.

The Pentagon clearly needs better scriptwriters, but then so does Hollywood, and, anyway, no one could write dialogue that would make this combination of lies and self-delusion terribly convincing.

Master Sgt. Lombardo sounded particularly wooden when she assured the president: “I can tell you over the past 10 months we’ve seen a tremendous increase in the capabilities and the confidences of our Iraqi security force partners. We’ve been working side-by-side, training and equipping 18 Iraqi army battalions. Since we began our partnership, they have improved greatly, and they continue to develop and grow into sustainable forces. Over the next month, we anticipate seeing at least one-third of those Iraqi forces conducting independent operations.”

The only Iraqi soldier present, Sgt. Major Akeel Shaker Nassir, gushed to Bush: “Thank very much for everything. I like you.”

At one point Bush told the soldiers: “You’ve got tremendous support here at home.” To which the Associated Press dryly countered, “Less than 40 percent in an AP-Ipsos poll taken in October said they approved of the way Bush was handling Iraq. Just over half of the public now say the Iraq war was a mistake.”

All the answers had obviously been scripted and memorized. Unfortunately for the Bush administration, the selected group did not include any Marlon Brandos hiding their talents under a bushel basket.

The whole event was simply farcical. The *Guardian* called it “another public relations disaster.”

Even the subservient American media felt obliged to state the obvious. The *Washington Post* noted that the “hand-picked” soldiers “did not disappoint” their Pentagon handlers. “Each one praised the president, the war and the progress in training Iraqi troops. Several spoke in a monotone voice, as if determined to remember and stay on script.”

The *Post* called it “one of the stranger and most awkwardly staged publicity events of the Bush presidency.” As for Bush: “The president’s delivery was choppy, as he gazed frequently at his notes and seemed several times to be groping for the right words.”

The newspaper added: “This isn’t a new technique for Bush; his White House has perfected the public relations strategy of holding scripted events featuring the president’s supporters. Earlier this year, when Bush traveled the country to discuss his Social Security plan, aides stacked the audience with Republicans and tutored participants in town hall events on what to say.”

Other journalists used similar language to describe the exchange: “choreographed,” “carefully rehearsed, relentlessly upbeat,” “carefully scripted and a bit awkward,” etc.

The right-wing Murdoch-owned media was not pleased by the embarrassing episode. An article on FoxNews.com conveyed this displeasure obliquely, reporting that “senior Pentagon officials” were angry “that soldiers were coached at all before the video conference went live.” The piece continued, “Privately, at least one senior military commander told FOX News that he’s outraged by the way the young soldiers were coached.”

The fairly contemptuous (or, in some cases, anxious) tones with which the media discussed the event suggest a growing fear that the wheels are falling off the Bush regime.

The administration, in a rather pathetic fashion, is desperate to convince someone that things are going well in Iraq, when every quasi-honest commentary, including internal Pentagon reports, indicates the dimensions of the disaster.

The clumsiness of the videoconference was only matched by the clumsiness of the denials that the soldiers’ answers had been “drilled through,” in Ms. Barber’s refreshingly frank phrase (also caught on tape).

Pentagon spokesman Lawrence Di Rita declared, “On behalf of these fine young men and women, we certainly regret any perception that they were told what to say. It is not the case.” Di Rita explained that the troops were merely “advised as to the issues they should expect to discuss, and decided among themselves who would speak to each issue as it may arise.” The event posed technological challenges—handing the microphone from one individual to the next?—which required such preparations, he continued.

White House press secretary Scott McClellan told reporters that all Barber and company were doing “was talking to the troops and letting them know what to expect.”

McClellan claimed that the troops “can ask the president whatever they want. They’ve always been free to do that.” The *LA Times* sniped, “Bush did not invite the soldiers to ask any questions, however, and none chose to do so.”

McClellan sidestepped the question as to whether the entire affair had been staged, suggesting that the media were getting caught up in

“side issues.”

The immediate supervisor of this charade, Allison Barber, deserves at least a few remarks. Barber has considerable responsibilities. According to her official biography, “The operational components of Ms. Barber’s organization are the American Forces Radio and Television (AFRTS), the Pentagon Channel, the American Forces Press Service, the Department’s Internet web operations, the Defense Media Center, and Stars and Stripes newspaper.” AFRTS “broadcasts news, information and entertainment programming to more than 800,000 deployed military and their families worldwide.” As of last year, however, the only political commentary permitted was provided by the right-wing demagogue, Rush Limbaugh.

Ms. Barber is a former elementary school teacher from Indiana, who parlayed that position into a lucrative career in public relations and advertising. Not, as they say, a rocket scientist, she is nonetheless an old hand at stage-managing supposedly spontaneous events. One only has to turn to the online exchange she presided over last July 4 to celebrate the Defense Department’s pro-military, “America Supports You” program.

Each question asked reads as though it were written by the redoubtable Ms. Barber herself. For example: “What is the best way an ordinary citizen can show his support for our troops? Also, how is the morale of our troops in Afghanistan and Iraq?” and “I just watched ‘our’ President give an emotional speech at Fort Bragg and I’m so proud to say I’m an American. You could tell at the end of his speech, he was so proud of the men and women who support and defend our country. He mentioned a web site to help support our troops. What was the site and is it up and running yet?”

One of Ms. Barber’s most recent activities was organizing the Pentagon’s 9/11 memorial “Freedom Walk” in September. Some ironies cannot be invented. The *Washington Post* noted that the organizers of the walk (in an article headlined “Tight Constraints on Pentagon’s Freedom Walk”!) were “taking extraordinary measures to control participation in the march and concert, with the route fenced off and the event closed to anyone who does not register online.”

The march, sponsored by the Defense Department, and obviously intended as a preemptive strike against upcoming antiwar protest in Washington, was scheduled to “wend its way from the Pentagon to the Mall along a route that has not been specified but will be lined with four-foot-high snow fencing to keep it closed and ‘sterile,’ said Allison Barber, deputy assistant secretary of defense.”

US Park Police Chief Dwight E. Pettiford noted that the Pentagon had restricted the event in its permit application. Pettiford explained, “That is what their permit called for, so we have those fences to keep the public out.” A “freedom walk,” organized by the military, from which the public is “kept out.” No further comment is really necessary.



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