



NEWS FROM NOWHERE

News Bite

Television news around the world has been showing videotape from Iraqi TV in which President Saddam Hussein appears in a television studio with English children resident in Iraq and Kuwait when Iraq invaded its Gulf neighbour.

Like an American *Tonight Show* host Saddam appears in a suit and tie with a little white handkerchief neatly folded in his left breast pocket. The foreigners are allowed to talk to their families while the rest of the world watches on, like near-paralysed voyeurs. Or they are shown listening as Saddam explains that the Western media have misrepresented the situation. According to Saddam, they are not 'hostages' but 'peacekeepers' and their role is 'preventing war'. While the broadcast appeared on Iraqi television the program seemed entirely aimed at a Western audience. The strange spectacle of the man the English press has dubbed the 'Butcher of Baghdad' stroking the hair of an English child on television was described by the British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd as the "most sickening thing I have seen for some time". The response of the public at large, as the selectively released detainees are shown in emotional reunions at London airport might be another matter. These emotion-packed news bites might just bite back.

Now that the cold war has been declared 'over', the vital centre of world affairs seems not to be the nihilism of deterrence but the unsettled power-plays of the Middle East. Sometimes it seems that if the Middle East didn't exist, the media would have had to invent it. Conveniently, the petrodollar crises and the rise of militant Islam appeared to provide a handy stand-in. Recently the relationship of the Middle East and 'Islam' to the West in the media has become a somewhat more complex issue, even if the media tries valiantly to reduce it to a simple 'us and them' cartoon scenario. Presumably there are good 'Arabs' (who are 'like us' - and like us) and bad 'Arabs' - who aren't and don't, and who are armed to the teeth.

This is in the great tradition of realpolitik, where international rivalries are fuelled by political and economic factors within those societies, pushing them outward in an expansionist grab for power. Beneath the neat morality play plot-lines of the cold war there was always such a level, even if it appeared lost to the power holders as much as the television viewers. As if to underline this point, the Soviet Union is contributing ships to the blockade of Iraq. Ironically, the term 'cold war' was coined by a 14th century Spanish writer to express the power rivalries between Christians and Arabs in Spain, so there is a strong precedent for the construction of a simple-minded morality play here - if only history weren't so messy.

That Saddam has responded to the troop build-up in Saudi Arabia by taking 'hostages' is hardly a novel aspect to this terrible crisis. The cold war was nothing but a permanent hostage crisis. The originality and the danger of this situation lies in its complete asymmetry. The American and Russian military capabilities made each nation's home population a hostage to the wellbeing of the other. Here, a population is being held hostage, not on its own ground, but that of the other. In case the meaning of this was lost on the Western powers, particularly Britain and the United States, the television programs graphically demonstrate this new logic.

Saddam's weapon is the holding close of Western hostages at strategic sites. This weapon is given added force by coupling it with another weapon: television. The message that some of 'our' people are being held close in his domain is inserted as close to home in the West as it is possible to go: right into the living rooms of millions of Americans and Britons. Television is the trigger for yet another weapon - public opinion. Those poor people being held in Iraq are not exactly hostages, although I do not mean to belittle their tragedy by denying them that status. They are prisoners of war, for the TV news bite has eliminated the distance between the battle and the home front as effectively as nuclear missiles have. They are also a stockpile bombs. Saddam is fighting with missives where he has no missiles; fighting on the Western home front with the weapons of public opinion.

Like the weapons of the last cold war, these can backfire. Certainly at the outset, public opinion was horrified by the hostage-taking and rallied behind Bush and Thatcher. The taking of hostages is immediately associated in the Western imaginary with the evil that is the Middle East. Newspaper reports haul out long strings of stories about hostages held by pro-Iranian groups at the time when tension between Iran and the West was at flashpoint. The fact that Iraq received 'our' support at the time; the fact that the US is making overtures to Iran now are blithely ignored as the media attempt to sort out who the bad guys are. As we watch the wheels of television's supple if obtuse imagination turn, we are watching what Edward Said calls orientalism at work. As Said says: "One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Television has forced information into a more and more standardised mould. The stereotypes built up during the Western conquest of the Middle Eastern edge of the Orient in their imperial writings and reports are at one and the same time a powerful knowledge through which Western power is still asserted in the region, and a misleading discourse which gives us demonically simple images

of the complex reality of the Middle East."

Part of the imperial dominance of the Middle East includes the influence of Western media, academia and popular culture there, including our simple-minded stereotype of the 'Arab'. Perhaps Saddam is playing up to the cliched image of the bad, mad and dangerous Arab he has learned from 'us'. The striking thing is how well Saddam seems to be playing this media game. With few weapons to take the conflict to the Western powers, Saddam found a way to lob a bomb directly into Western territory, right into every news-watching home in the Western world. While thousands of third world refugees fight for food in Jordan, a few Western women and children, released with impeccable public relations timing, capture the attention of the world media. A cynical business all round.

Some American commentators have been beating their breasts about the vulnerability of democracies to media manipulation versus the complete media control Saddam and the Ba'ath Party has in Iraq. To some extent this misses the point. States with totalitarian media are vulnerable too, if not in quite the same way. While Iraq states, as a matter of policy, that it wants the Americans out of the Gulf, on an ideological level it needs them there very badly. The legitimacy of the Ba'ath regime, the justification for the terror, the show trials, the militarisation of everyday life, is based on a paranoid ideology which stresses the need for strength against the three great evils of imperialism, zionism and Arab reaction. Imperialism and Arab reaction appear at the moment to be very close indeed.

The bizarre accusations made in Iraqi media that some US troops were really Israelis in disguise is clearly an attempt to make it appear to Iraqi citizens that all of the enemies the state has taught them to fear are massing at the borders together. The Western media dismissed these accusations on the grounds that they weren't true, but that misses the point. In the media enclosure within Iraq, implicating the Israelis is a logical part of the

ideological story, as necessary to the ideological narrative as the attempt in the West to make Saddam a personification of Islamic evil. The fact that Saddam as a mad mullah is as untruthful an image as disguised Israelis is neither here nor there. Both are logical excrescences of paranoid ideologies responding fearfully to events going out of control. The global media have the unfortunate effect of bringing these monstrous myths face to face on TV, blowing them up to grotesque proportions, scattering them like fallout across the globe.

On an ideological level, the military reaction by the US to the invasion of Kuwait could be the best thing that ever happened for Saddam, and makes his belligerent and costly rule seem more, not less, legitimate. In a state where 30% of the workforce is tied up in the police and the army, the appearance of a massive external threat strengthens the position of the repressive state. Saddam ap-

pears on Iraqi television for countless hours a week trying to convince Iraqis that there are enemies both within and without seeking to subjugate Iraq. Carefully stage-managed show trials reinforce this spectacle. The US has unwittingly furnished a reality to back up the spectacle, while the global media vectors have turned a geopolitical conflict into an ideological saga with unprecedented speed.

Whether or not this war is over by Christmas, perhaps we should get used to the speed with which conflicts become implicated in global information wars. Perhaps the hostage here is television itself. No longer an innocent bystander, television is forced onto the frontline, and forces the frontline into our living rooms for nightly salvos. The old cold war might be over, but television is still sharpening its teeth.

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