

Anti-American Biased Collective

Your ABC and the Iraq War

by Tim Blair & James Morrow

Introduction

Biased journalism is an accusation almost as old as journalism itself, and certainly a topic the Australian Broadcasting Corporation is no stranger to. In 1991, during the first Gulf War, then-Prime Minister Bob Hawke lashed out at the national broadcaster's coverage, saying 'I find it difficult to summon the language to describe my contempt for their analysis by so-called experts. They are loaded, biased and disgraceful', and in the decade-plus that has followed, many other politicians and commentators have levied similar charges. Most recently, the ABC's coverage of the Iraq War has come under fire—in May 2003, former Communications Minister Richard Alston issued a dossier citing some 68 instances of anti-American bias by the government broadcaster.

In his complaint, Alston focused on the ABC's morning radio program, *AM*, and found a long list of turns of phrase and word choices that amounted to everything from 'loaded barbs' to inaccurate and unsubstantiated reporting. While Alston's report was a useful start, it does not go far enough towards analysing the full sweep of the ABC's often-loaded coverage of the Iraq War and Australia's involvement in the conflict. Having been written by a professional politician and his staff, Alston failed to catch many of the more subtle (yet at the same time still obvious) examples of the ABC's biased war coverage.

This *Backgrounder*, written by two professional journalists with decades of experience between them, looks at the broader scope of the ABC's coverage. Looking at transcripts freely available on the ABC's Website (and quoting them verbatim and at length), it examines everything from story selection to the billing of guests, and finds that, time and time again, Australia's national broadcaster failed to live up to its duty to present balanced views. (For the basis on which selections were made, see 'A Note on Method' on the back page.) Although it finds examples of fairness in the face of the 'ABC culture' (often times presented by reporters on the ground who found facts at odds with what their presenters were rooting for)—and cites plenty of them—it finds that, in the main, the ABC's coverage of the war was negative, defeatist, anti-American and skewed heavily against the Australian government.

HOSTILE BEFORE THE HOSTILITIES

Pre-war coverage across the ABC was marked by tabloid-level exaggeration of the conflict's likely duration and the total civilian death toll. Relatively minor problems confronting the US, British and Australian governments were characterized as major. Talk of a 'Muslim backlash' was frequent, as was the certainty of a 'humanitarian crisis'.

Anti-war commentators appeared regularly, while supporters of the war—aside from representatives of the pro-war governments—were few. Individuals from the large range of pro-war opinion writers in the US, Europe and Australia were rarely heard on the ABC. Great concern was held for the viability of the United Nations, should war occur without a UN mandate. The legitimacy and worth of the UN seemed to be assumed.

Throughout, the ABC emphasized the negative, as in this question from *The World Today's* Alexandra Kirk to the (then) Australian Attorney-General on February 3:

ALEXANDRA KIRK: Daryl Williams, the Government's terrorism awareness kit is being released today and Australia Post is ready to start the mail-out. The Government's message is presumably to be alert, not to be alarmed. But the package does tell people what to do in case of a biological or chemical attack. So how can it not alarm people?

One day later, and the same programme's Eleanor Hall had overcome any concerns about the government alarming people, and started alarming them herself:

ELEANOR HALL: Well, if Australia does go to war against Iraq, there's little doubt at least some of the men and women now on their way to the Gulf will be injured or killed.

'Fear of the future' was an ABC constant. According to *Lateline's* Tony Jones on February 12, Australia's war strategy could be ruined by the refusal of just eleven sailors to submit to anthrax vaccinations:

TONY JONES: For almost nine months, the Australian Defence Force has been working up detailed plans for a possible war with Iraq. But before any engagement with an enemy, those plans are coming unstuck. Eleven sailors on three ships heading to the Gulf are coming

home, unwilling to accept anthrax vaccinations, and there are more who are considering following them.

Those eleven sailors represent just 0.55 per cent of the troops Australia committed to the war. Reporter Michael Brissenden, in a *World Today* item broadcast on February 14, compressed almost all of the ABC's pre-war talking points into one frantic sentence:

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: The current Iraq crisis has begun to tear at some of the world's most powerful and durable multinational institutions as these institutions struggle to reach a consensus and react at mid-20th century speed to this fast moving 21st century crisis, America impatiently threatens to forge new alliances and act in a so-called 'Coalition of the Willing'.

Lateline's Mark Willacy, in Iraq, struggled to locate Iraqis who might be opposed to Saddam Hussein's reign, but found many prepared to take up arms against 'American, British and possibly Australian ground troops'. This report was filed on the 17th:

MARK WILLACY: It's not just the people of provincial Iraq gearing up for a ground war. Even the middle classes in Baghdad fear the prospect of house-to-house fighting.

SAAD AL-HASANI: I think this is the only chance we have to defend ourselves because I'm sure, as an occupation, the Americans actually would never hesitate to kill anyone. And if they want to kill me, I have to kill them.

MARK WILLACY: Saad al-Hasani's wife is also a lecturer at Baghdad University. She fears for the people of her neighbourhood should the Americans win a war against Saddam Hussein.

LEMIA AL-HASANI, UNIVERSITY LECTURER: What kind of winning, you know? At the expense of the lives of people, innocent people? Because I don't think this is winning.

It wouldn't have hurt for the ABC to indicate more regularly that many in Iraq feared for their lives if they spoke against Saddam's regime, and that opinions given in Iraq may have reflected this. Various accounts were being published worldwide at this time suggesting that some Iraqis at least may welcome an invading force. It would also have been advisable to

indicate the strictures placed upon staff at Baghdad University, and at least to inquire after the possibility that the al-Hasanis were supporters of the Ba'athist party.

The Knight-Ridder news agency reported after war's end that 'for the first time in the 35 years since Saddam Hussein came to power, people on campus could safely put up anti-Saddam posters and display pictures of alumni thought to have been executed under his dictatorship', and also that 'the last university president reportedly was Saddam's personal physician'. In the light of which the al-Hasanis' comments must be seen as something other than disinterested.

One of the ABC's few airings of pro-war sentiment came on February 25 on *Lateline*, in which Zainab Al-Suwaij told host Tony Jones:

Well, I say it's about time to stop the war inside Iraq. Saddam has been killing people, torturing people for more than 30 years and it's about time for them to gain back their freedom and to enjoy and liberate their own country. Iraq has a lot of wealth, a lot of potential and it's about time to stop the war inside Iraq to save thousands and thousands of lives inside the country. So Iraqis right now are eager to gain back their freedom and they want Iraq to be liberated, to be free again. So for all of these people, I understand their concern, but as much as we give more time, more Iraqi innocent people inside Iraq will be killed by their own government.

A more extensive examination of this point of view—covered better in the UK and US than in Australia—would have achieved a better balance for the ABC.

In condemning Saddam Hussein's record of deceit, the ABC sometimes seemed to feel the need to 'balance' this with similar comments about the US. *The World Today*, January 26:

JOHN HIGHFIELD: Iraq has long been adept at manipulating terrible deprivation and health issues to move Western public opinion through a highly sophisticated propaganda campaign globally. The Bush Administration has equally been running a deft line in anti-Saddam tactics even as UN sanctions and bombing campaigns in the 'no fly' zones over Iraq cause misery.

(This analysis, repeated in Highfield's comments the following day—'Well, there's no doubting that in Baghdad life is already extremely tough for ordinary

Iraqis, even without war. After years of international economic sanctions ...'—ignores the fact that Saddam's response to the UN sanctions was actually the major cause of Iraqi misery.)

And from *The World Today* on February 27:

JOHN SHOVELAN: President George W Bush's chief propagandist, Ari Fleischer, had a warning today for American media outlets.

To use such a loaded description as 'propagandist' for the US President's official spokesperson is simply astonishing. In the same programme, Mark Willacy in Iraq was still finding it difficult to locate any Iraqis opposed to Saddam:

IRAQI WOMAN [translated]: We have all the food we need, says this woman. The government is giving us double rations. We will survive because the Iraqi people are very strong, she adds.

MARK WILLACY: Here in New Baghdad there are no eight items or less aisles or express lanes. Women wait in line for hours. But their greatest worry is that there will be nowhere to line up for food should the US decide to strike.

In Iraq on March 8, Mark Willacy was still unable to pin down any anti-Saddam sentiment. He told *AM*:

MARK WILLACY: No, I think the people here think that Saddam Hussein has done all that he can. The people here don't seem to think that there are any weapons of mass destruction being hidden by the regime here. They think that they've opened up the book, so to speak, they've opened up their military installations, their factories, they've done all that they can to let the weapons inspectors do their job. They believe that George W. Bush is out to settle a score no matter what they do.

Willacy's reports are difficult to reconcile with the celebrations seen at the conclusion of major conflict in April, and with the first post-war opinion survey conducted in Baghdad, which found that about half the population of Baghdad supported the US-led invasion (about a quarter opposed). Two days later, Willacy reduced the entire conflict to a battle of egos between George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein:

MARK WILLACY: Across the blackboard, the young girl writes: 'Ambition is a wonderful thing in the human breast, but whatever, we shall never be satisfied'. That quote by the Irish

playwright, Oscar Wilde, could fit Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush and here in the English class at Baghdad's al-Nahdal girls' school, the students feel caught between the ambition of both ... These young women will soon find out just whose ambition will be realized, George W. Bush's or Saddam Hussein's.

During AM's March 11 broadcast, Willacy continued his long search for someone, anyone, who might object to Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in Iraq:

MARK WILLACY: In Baghdad's central market, most people are stocking up on food and water. But this radio seller is also reporting booming sales. 'People are buying radios to keep up with events', the stallholder tells me. 'They want to follow the international news about possible war and Iraqi reaction.' And for the coming days, Iraqis will be keeping their radios tuned on the news, which most fear will be bad for them.

Eleanor Hall characterized an Imam's call for God to 'help [Saddam] achieve victory against the infidels' as an example of 'Iraq's leaders' urging 'the Iraqis to fight for their president'. She added: 'Baghdad's Imams are urging the Muslim faithful to put the spiritual ahead of the material, and fight for Saddam Hussein'. Also on March 11, *The 7.30 Report's* Fran Kelly added to the number of inaccurate predictions. Her call on Howard's political future was made despite poll numbers showing increased support for the war:

FRAN KELLY: ... if it all falls apart in the coming days, Australia could end up going to war against Iraq in a US-led coalition without UN approval. That might be a bad outcome for the future authority of the Security Council. But with popular opinion here running strongly against any involvement in the unilateral strike, it would also be a very bad outcome politically for John Howard.

Note the tone of certainty. Will Mark Willacy ever find anyone in Iraq who wants to get rid of Saddam Hussein? By March 12, he seemed to be getting a little closer:

MARK WILLACY: Well several million Shi'ites live here in Saddam City and most of them wouldn't mourn the passing of the man this sprawling neighbourhood is named after.

But ...

MARK WILLACY: But while these are the poorest of Baghdad's poor, publicly, no one here

is talking about regime change. Kassim Ali al-Shara is one of the leaders of Saddam City's Shi'ites. He's also a big fan of the President. 'Saddam Hussein gives us everything', says Kassim Ali al-Shara. 'The people of Saddam City love him so much', he tells me.

During an interview with an Australian human shield during the March 12 edition of *PM*, host Mark Colvin made a rare (on the ABC) point:

MARK COLVIN: But you have to surely accept that by going into a dictatorship, and there's no other way to describe Saddam Hussein's Iraq, you are putting yourself in the hands of people who will not necessarily have your interests or the interest of peace at heart.

An unqualified assertion from Tony Jones on March 12's *Lateline*:

TONY JONES: Australia faces a greater risk of a terrorist attack once the war against Iraq is under way.

Mark Willacy's eternal pursuit of a Saddam opponent continued during AM's March 13 broadcast:

MARK WILLACY: ... Saddam Hussein is only as strong as his army, so young reservists are being called up to reinforce his existing forces. Year 11 school student cum trench-digger, Saadi, is keen to fight the US and its allies.

SAADI: We will stand up against America.

On March 14, as usual, Mark Willacy couldn't find anybody in Iraq opposed to Saddam's rule:

MARK WILLACY: Colonel Rasheed's small children are too young to understand where their father is going and what he may face. They happily sing national songs about Iraq's flag flying high. A few feet away here at the martyrs' monument is a Koranic inscription. It tells families that their loved ones didn't die in vain, that they'll live forever in paradise because they died for God. If there's another war, Iraqis will again be asked to die, not for God but for Saddam Hussein.

Mark Colvin, on *PM* on the 14th, offered an unusual interpretation of assault:

MARK COLVIN: Protestors against a war in Iraq threw eggs at the Prime Minister in Adelaide

this afternoon. It was another indication of community anger over the prospect of Australian involvement in military action.

Where are those anti-Saddam Iraqis? Still nowhere near Mark Willacy, reporting for *AM* on March 15:

MARK WILLACY: As we're standing there a young man on the chair lift shouts 'down, down Bush, yes, yes Saddam'. It seems even politics has a place at the fun park.

Peter Lloyd, reporting from the US media centre for *The World Today* on March 17, predicted the future:

PETER LLOYD: These media briefings will be selective, self-serving and at times perhaps, even worse ... In the last Gulf War the truths, half-truths and what some say were downright fibs were presented from the podium by 'Storming' Norman Schwartzkopf. This time around the Americans are going for a different, arguably more devious approach.

Like Mark Willacy in an earlier report, Mark Colvin (presenting *PM* on the 17th) anticipated inaccurate, chaotic bombing—and, as Peter Lloyd might say, even worse:

MARK COLVIN: Well, an exodus of foreigners from Baghdad is already beginning. The Iraqi capital's preparing for an onslaught from the sky even more destructive and intense than in the last Gulf War, and for a battle in the streets and alleyways which will make it almost impossible even for neutral parties to find any safe haven.

Colvin's report announced that Mark Willacy had left Baghdad. It was now up to Nick Grimm to track down any Iraqis who might object to Saddam's dictatorship:

NICK GRIMM: 'We love Saddam', chant the Iraqis who've been taking to the streets to protest against war. Old men carry portraits of the Iraqi leader; women wave Kalashnikov rifles in the air in a show of defiance.

At last, in an *AM* interview on March 18, someone was able to indicate to Rafael Epstein that Baghdad would not be razed, nor would the war last for months:

RAFAEL EPSTEIN: Dan Christman [the Pentagon's chief war planner in the 1991 Gulf War] knows better than most predicting the course of a war is innately difficult. He says

they over-estimated casualties in 1991 by thousands, but he says this war will likely last just weeks.

DAN CHRISTMAN: There's no intention to lay waste to the city.

Reviewing George W. Bush's speech to the nation on *The World Today* on the same date, Eleanor Hall was withering:

JOHN SHOVELAN: He laid out a case against Iraq. He talked about 12 years of diplomacy, reckless aggression by the Iraqis and he again linked, attempted to link Saddam Hussein to al-Qaeda, to the terrorist groups and in fact he said once Saddam Hussein was gone, the risk of terrorism would be much less. Now that's a key point in selling this whole idea of going to war in Iraq to the American people.

ELEANOR HALL: Yes, it's an interesting assertion. I understand it's beginning to actually be believed inside the United States.

The same programme's Alexandra Kirk looked into the hearts of the Australian Prime Minister Howard's coalition, and found nought but blackness:

ALEXANDRA KIRK: As they walked through the doors of Parliament House this morning, Federal MPs from all parties, except the Coalition, were filled with a sense of foreboding, voicing trepidation and sadness and the impending formal commitment of Australia's Defence Forces to a war against Iraq.

Eleanor Hall's introduction to this March 19 *World Today* story is misleading:

ELEANOR HALL: Well as the debate continues in Canberra, a small group of Iraqi people in country Victoria have warned of rising levels of violence against their community ...

But in the report, the leader of that group of Iraqis in country Victoria indicated that there was no 'level of violence' to raise:

HAIDER AL HAKIM: I've heard for that in 1991 Muslims people or Arabic people experience sort of abuse, but I think, and I believe this one will be different, nothing happened so far and I hope and I believe nothing will happen. We live in fantastic society compared to the other world. Like I've got friends in Scandinavian countries, I've got friend in USA and I've got friends here

and we live here. So far nothing happened and I believe the wider community understand our situation. We came to Australia because Australia far from trouble. Although we are not happy the way that the Australian Government handling the situation, we wish Australia was part of the international community, but we respect the Government decision and we will work along with the wider community.

On March 19, as war grew near, *PM* host Mark Colvin's predictions remained wide of the mark:

MARK COLVIN: The final hours of waiting are keeping people on edge everywhere, particularly in Iraq, but also in the surrounding countries where worries are focused on the possibility of ethnic civil war breaking out as Saddam falls.

Just as the war was against Saddam rather than Iraqis, the coalitions bombs were not directed at Baghdad but at particular targets within Baghdad (and elsewhere). As was common throughout the media, the ABC was unable to make this distinction. Ross Babbage, head of ANU's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, made exactly this point (and provided a reasonably precise estimate of the war's duration) during an interview on the 20th with *The World Today*:

LOUISE YAXLEY: The head of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Ross Babbage, believes the military planners will have nine key points in mind. The first, what he calls the driving concept, is the plan to overwhelm the opposition.

ROSS BABBAGE: The massive use of firepower in a very precise way and very quickly, to really shock the leadership in particular ... Not just straight bombing, in the way we saw in the last Gulf campaign, followed a long, long way afterwards by ground force operations.

LOUISE YAXLEY: Professor Babbage says the strategists preparing this campaign will hope it can be over within two to three weeks ...

BOMBS ON BAGHDAD

With the war's commencement, John Highfield put the Coalition's military strategy into an historic perspective. This is from *The World Today*, Friday March 21:

JOHN HIGHFIELD: Well the Nazis used to call it 'blitzkrieg' when they did it prior to the Second World War, a softening up process. The Americans are calling it 'shock and awe'.

In the same report, with the war barely hours old, John Shovelan foresaw catastrophe:

JOHN SHOVELAN: But if Baghdad is levelled with heavy civilian casualties, it will be a hollow victory for Washington.

Despite the general promise of civilian misery, *PM* later on the 21st reported civilian casualties at little to none. That evening's *The 7.30 Report* acknowledged that some Iraqis might possibly welcome the overthrow of Saddam:

HEATHER EWART: These members of the largest Iraqi community in regional Victoria know what their loved ones would be suffering because they went through it too during the last Gulf War. This time, they think it will be much, much worse.

Actually, some don't, as Ewart's report eventually indicated:

ABBASS AL ATHEIRY: I will be very sad to see my family dying back in Iraq, but the only choice is to get rid of Saddam, is to sacrifice these people, so we can have peace in Iraq.

The *AM* programme of March 22 casually presented as equal the veracity of the US and Iraqi governments:

LINDA MOTTRAM: In the propaganda war, the Bush Administration is asserting that Saddam Hussein is now losing control of the country, but Iraqi ministers have hit back, claiming that Western television pictures of surrendering Iraqis were faked, and that coalition troops are nowhere near as far inside the country as they are claiming.

It's worth considering if *AM*'s Linda Mottram would ever refer to the number of Iraqi casualties as she did to US casualties in this report, from March 23:

LINDA MOTTRAM: There've been more big anti-war demonstrations in various cities around the world today, not least in New York, at the same time as the US mourns the handful of American deaths in the war so far.

In the same report, Washington correspondent Leigh Sales offered advice that the ABC would have done well to listen to:

LEIGH SALES: Well, shock and awe, people tend to think that it's something which destroys cities, and certainly when you see it on the television it looks very spectacular, but the idea behind that kind of military strategy is to bring about intense pressure on the enemy, while actually doing minimal damage to civilian infrastructure.

For AM's Linda Mottram and Jonathan Harley, early setbacks were 'unexpected', as they reported on March 24. Yet only the previous afternoon, on *The World Today*, Leigh Sales had reported that the US anticipated 'difficulties and challenges':

John Highfield, on March 24's *The World Today*, interviewed little-known peace activist William Blum, in Australia to promote his latest book, *Rogue State—a Guide to the World's Only Superpower*. This exchange was a highlight:

JOHN HIGHFIELD: At what stage do you believe Americans will start to turn against the war?

WILLIAM BLUM: They are against it. If you ask the right questions, if you ask... see, the questions they ask usually in the polls is: do you support the President's attempt to overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein? Well, for that I myself might even answer yes. That implies that the only consequence of a war would be to overthrow one tyrant. But if you ask a question like: do you support the dropping of powerful explosives upon the heads of totally innocent men, women and children, demolishing their homes and their schools and their hospitals, are you in favour of that? That would change the answers, I think, quite a bit. But that question is not asked, they ask a very soft question.

That day's PM talked up Iraqi loyalty to Saddam, and emphasized coalition problems:

MARK COLVIN: America's military commanders have conceded that their troops have faced their toughest day of fighting since the conflict began. Increasingly it appears, Saddam Hussein may have scattered his loyal forces around the country with instructions to lull advancing American, British and Australian forces into a sense of false security before striking.

NICK GRIMM: It's the kind of street-to-street fighting that Saddam Hussein warned coalition forces that they could expect if they invaded

Iraq. Sure enough, forces loyal to the Iraqi dictator have been fulfilling his call to rise up and resist the armies of the coalition of the willing.

In the same programme, John Shovelan again disregarded clear warnings from the US President to expect 'difficulties and challenges':

JOHN SHOVELAN: I think what's happened today is there's been a ... a touch of reality is dawned, because all along the American population has been ill-prepared for this. They've constantly been told by the administration victory is a foregone conclusion. The Pentagon likes to make up names like 'shock and awe'. The Defence Secretary Rumsfeld talks about campaigns, this campaign being like no other, and all of a sudden today they realized the Iraqis aren't just going to fold, there's a war and it's going to take some time. So you had the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard Myers, saying, you know, acknowledging that they aren't a beaten force, the Iraqi Army. The President today, three or four times, talking about this being the early stages of something that could take some time. So a touch of reality dawned, not just on the American people, but also on the administration today. They've got a bit of ground to make up there, because I don't think they've done enough work there.

Shovelan later declared as 'sad' the lack of US opposition to the war:

JOHN SHOVELAN: Look, you'd have to say the saddest thing about this whole issue in America is the lack of political debate, and I think that emanates from the fact that the Democrats haven't been able to put forward an opposition, a coherent opposition.

Many in Iraq would be surprised at the descriptions of Saddam Hussein offered by *Lateline's* Tony Jones and Norman Hermant (this from the programme of March 24):

TONY JONES: Gone were the ungainly spectacles, gone the shaky delivery, and gone now, for most analysts, the doubt over whether he was killed or seriously injured on day one. This was a confident-looking Saddam Hussein, sending a message, not only to the Arab world, but to his enemy.

Saddam would be considered 'the enemy' by much of the Arab world, too—especially those he killed. And from Norman Hermant (another whose reporting is in denial of US statements that an easy war was not expected):

NORMAN HERMANT: No-one is calling this war easy anymore. Just one example—when coalition forces reached the port of Um Qasr, they reported little resistance. There were reports that the Iraqi army was surrendering in large numbers, that the regime's control was crumbling. That was three days ago ... In Baghdad, it was another night of pounding—then, a look at the damage. To the city's residents, this is now part of their daily routine. But for the second time in this war, they have heard from their leader.

Their leader? Linda Mottram, for *AM* on March 25, continued the theme of a war gone wrong:

LINDA MOTTRAM: Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair has also been addressing some of the question marks that currently hover over the Coalition's campaign in Iraq. For the first time since the last deeply divided Parliamentary vote on the Iraq war, Mr Blair has been addressing MPs at Westminster. He is, of course, the chief ally of the US in this conflict and he is also having nothing of suggestions that the Coalition's plans have been thrown off course.

From *The World Today* on March 25, another reminder that the US anticipated no easy war, from a BBC interview with US Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz:

BBC REPORTER: A lot of people have been saying that the resistance has been stronger than expected. Yet officials I've been talking to here insist that that's not the case. Surely we are seeing pockets of resistance that are going to make things very difficult for you in terms of how you rebuild the country?

PAUL WOLFOWITZ: I'm sorry. Nobody with any knowledge of military matters expected there to be no resistance. I mean, if anything is unexpected it's the speed of the advance and the relative absence of organized resistance ... This is a war and one has to expect it and I mean I think to some extent the people who say it's unexpected really did not understand what this was all about.

Mark Willacy, reporting for *PM* on the 25th, confessed to having little idea of what the American military strategy might be, but had complete awareness of Saddam's plans:

MARK WILLACY: Saddam Hussein will definitely be trying to lure this invasion force into Baghdad, into the suburbs, into an urban warfare situation where the casualty rate in other conflicts is up around 40 to 50 per cent; that's what he sees as his best chance. Now, what the Americans do then is anyone's guess because they do not want to get into that situation. So that means we may see a lot more aerial bombardment before those troops do go into the outskirts at least of Baghdad.

The World Today on March 26 was still in the predicting business:

JOHN HIGHFIELD: As allied forces consolidate positions around the perimeter of Baghdad prior to what Saddam Hussein has called 'The Mother of all Battles', it's becoming more and more apparent that the taking of the capital will come at high cost.

In a later segment of the same programme, John Highfield presented the US as subject to military censorship, while Al-Jazeera viewers could be considered enlightened:

JOHN HIGHFIELD: As the US public compares Washington's official spin on the war with the often terrible images they're seeing in their own living rooms, in the Arab world, the picture is quite different. In Britain, *The Guardian* is reporting today that the Arabic-language TV satellite network, Al-Jazeera, has doubled its European subscriber numbers since the start of the war in Iraq, four million new subscribers since last Wednesday alone. Meanwhile, media consumers in the West, of course, watch the war through a prism very much controlled by military authorities, particularly the United States.

Note Mark Colvin's grudging tone in this segment from *PM* on March 26:

MARK COLVIN: It's also fair to say that the opinion polls do show some decrease in the opposition to the war.

Lateline again hailed the Iraqi military on the 26th:

Anti-American Biased Collective: Your ABC and the Iraq War

MARGOT O'NEILL: Too many Iraqis, it seems, are neither in shock nor awe. Washington's war planners under-estimated both the strength and versatility of Iraqi opposition to the invasion.

The war, at this point, was one week old. On the 27th, *AM* suggested that was too long:

LINDA MOTTRAM: Australia's Defence Minister Robert Hill on Monday told this programme that the war would be short as far as wars go. But is that time line now being extended?

On the 27th, *AM* was still accepting the Iraqi information minister's word:

LINDA MOTTRAM: Iraq's Information Minister says that more than 500 Iraqi civilians were wounded and 200 homes destroyed in the US and British bombardment of the southern city of Nasiriyah.

Reporter Peter Cave, who still maintained that there had been a massacre in Jenin even after this was denied by the UN, offered his views to *PM* on March 27:

PETER CAVE: I mean, the Palestinians see great parallels with what they have been suffering under the occupation and incursions that have been going on in the last couple of years during the Intifada. They see great parallels with what is happening to them and what is happening to people in Iraq. They feel that they're victims of America's foreign policy, just as Saddam Hussein is.

The ABC's scepticism seemed to vanish in the face of Iraqi communications minister Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf's bluster, reported on *PM*'s April 3 programme:

HAMISH ROBERTSON: Have Iraq's crack Republican Guard troops suffered major losses, as the Americans claim, or have many of them simply melted away, retreating to the capital, in preparation for urban warfare in the streets of Baghdad? Iraq's Information Minister, Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf, is claiming that Republican Guard forces have surrounded and killed large numbers of Coalition troops south of Baghdad, and Iraq is now deciding on how it will finish off the remaining forces. He says no major towns are actually controlled by Coalition troops, and they'll be kept on the move by Iraqi's forces.

The 7.30 Report on April 3 aired a piece on anti-American bigotry in Australia; bigotry that some may feel the ABC itself contributed to:

HEATHER EWART: There are about 150,000 American citizens living in Australia right now. Some are against the war and some are for it. But either way, they're paying a price. The Australian-American Association claims Americans here are suffering the biggest backlash since the Vietnam War and American kids seem to be bearing the brunt.

TYLER YOKLEY, STUDENT: Push me around and call me loser and all kinds of stuff. Names and stuff about America. You know, they say bad things about America and stuff like that.

ALANA DORSET, STUDENT: A lot of the teachers are talking about it and will bring in newspapers and show the headings and stuff and some of them will be supportive and nice about it, but sometimes the teachers make comments too sometimes about the bloody Americans or something.

How *The 7.30 Report* would have reacted if it had learned of teachers commenting on 'bloody Muslims' does not bear thinking about. April 4's *AM* revealed a new dubiousness towards Mohammed al-Sahhaf:

LINDA MOTTRAM: Well, the developments stand in stark contrast to the continuing insistence of the Iraqi authorities that the Coalition's reported advances are entirely without foundation.

Suddenly the war wasn't turning out as predicted. This is *The World Today*'s Nick Grimm:

NICK GRIMM: It almost seems to have been too easy. Coalition forces are now establishing themselves on the outskirts of Baghdad after seizing control of sections of the city's international airport. The American ABC TV network's reporter, Bob Schmidt, was one of the first journalists to reach the scene.

BOB SCHMIDT: Iraqis were standing out on the streets waving and cheering as the US tanks rolled by.

'Urban warfare' was still on reporter Peter Cave's list of predictions:

PETER CAVE: A young man in a balaclava yells to the crowd, telling them it was the Iraqis who briefly liberated Jenin from the Israelis back then. 'There's a big connection', he says 'between Iraq and Jenin and there is a lot the Iraqis could learn from what we did here a year ago'. He's referring to the booby trapped buildings which claimed the lives of 23 Israeli soldiers in April 2002, as they fought their way into the heart of Jenin in what's become a classic example of the very sort of urban warfare that allied soldiers now face in Baghdad.

PM reporter Geoff Thompson presented the following item live on April 4, and now probably wishes he'd had a chance to edit before going to air:

GEOFF THOMPSON: It seems that they have encountered, at long last I suppose, a well dug-in Republican Guard Unit, an advance party that went forward with the intention of moving, to keep, keeping on moving forward has actually sort of turned back at this point, so that may suggest that some stiff resistance that they have encountered, at last some of that resistance has been encountered.

HAMISH ROBERTSON: So it does sound as though the allies are now finally meeting quite a bit of resistance as they close in on the capital?

'At long last'? 'Finally'? It almost sounds as though they were looking forward to this. *The World Today's* John Highfield introduced on April 8 a piece on insidious American magazine *Maxim*:

ANDREW NORTH, BBC: How many of these magazines have been handed out?

IRAQI MAN: Many, many.

ANDREW NORTH: So this could make the people here...

IRAQI MAN: Hate.

Highfield's conclusion:

JOHN HIGHFIELD: An Iraqi health worker expressing his outrage at the cultural insensitivity of his so-called liberators.

As Iraqis prepared to topple Saddam's statue on April 9, *The World Today* managed to select a story suggesting that the entire US may well itself be toppled:

ELEANOR HALL: It may be the world's supreme military and economic power now, but a respected international analyst predicts that within two decades the United States will have gone the way of the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile Iraq was going the way many people outside of the ABC predicted. *PM's* Mark Colvin on April 9:

MARK COLVIN: [A] Reuters correspondent travelling with the Americans says hundreds of jubilant Iraqis cheered, danced, waved and threw flowers as the Marines advanced through eastern Baghdad.

With the war almost concluded, *Lateline* on April 9 located an Iraqi who supported the coalition's campaign, and blamed Saddam for instigating the conflict:

FEISAL ISTRABADI, LAWYER AND IRAQI ACTIVIST: Well, I think that—obviously I'm aware that the Australians are also playing an important role in this. And I don't want to play semantics games with you but for most of us incidentally, we perceive, for most of the exiled community at least, we perceive Saddam Hussein as having been the one who started this war.

In the same programme, Hermant finally laid to rest the ABC's oft-forecast Baghdad street warfare:

NORMAN HERMANT: Ripped from power, Saddam's reign here is over. This the vast suburb that bears his name, Saddam City. When American marines advanced through eastern Baghdad there was nothing to stop him. No sign of the regime that ruled with an iron fist, no sign of those who vowed to defend it to the death. In the streets, there was nothing to hold back the jubilation.

Linda Mottram initially seemed disinclined to welcome Baghdad's liberation on April 10:

LINDA MOTTRAM: Still, there is no discounting the importance of the jubilation on the streets of Baghdad overnight and what tipped the city from fear-tinged caution to elation was the American military's move out of their positions on the edge of central Baghdad, across the Tigris River onto Sadoun Street and into the core of the ancient Iraqi

capital. It was, in the eyes of the locals, the signal that Saddam Hussein's rule was really over. The signal to finally express what only a few in fear-filled Iraq would ever dare express in whispers, that the leader and his tyranny were hated.

Those same thoughts were also rarely expressed on the ABC. Mottram sounded slightly happier than *The World Today's* John Highfield, reacting grimly mere hours after Saddam Hussein's statue had been pulled down:

JOHN HIGHFIELD: Well, dawn has broken over Baghdad, welcoming day one of the new freedom, but if this is liberty, then it's far from perfect.

The fact that all the worst wartime predictions of the ABC and its guests—massive casualties amongst Iraqi civilians and coalition troops, a refugee camp-filling humanitarian crisis, a violent, anti-Western uprising of the so-called 'Arab street'—failed to occur did not stop the network from being relentlessly negative during the immediate aftermath of the fall of Baghdad. This is clear in a number of ways, from the selection of guests and how their qualifications were cited to the introductions written for ABC presenters, even when post-war reality looked a great deal different from the streets of Baghdad (or western Sydney) then it did from Ultimo headquarters.

LOOKING FOR DOUBTERS

On 9 April 2003, ABC's *The 7.30 Report* ran a story by reporter Mark Bannerman entitled, 'Iraqis Celebrate Saddam's Demise'. With Baghdad ringed by coalition forces, Bannerman's report focused on the deaths being caused not by American, British and Australian soldiers, but by the old guard of the Hussein regime who were putting up a fight and prolonging the misery of the city's citizens. And, in a counterpoint to the long-disproved conventional wisdom that coalition soldiers would be viewed as enemy occupiers by a vast majority of the Iraqi population, Bannerman reported on the sheer glee of those in southern Iraq who were finally free to tell the truth about life under the deposed Ba'athist regime:

MARK BANNERMAN: In Basra, though, the talk is not of reconstruction, but decon-

struction, as Iraqis celebrate the demise of a dictator. Little wonder they're overjoyed. Today media were given a glimpse of life under Saddam's regime. This man had lost his ears for petty theft. Others lost much more.

IRAQI MAN AT SECRET POLICE HEAD-QUARTERS: So many people come here but we don't know about them at all.

MARK BANNERMAN: This is the headquarters of the secret police in Basra. Under Saddam Hussein, come here and you would probably not get out. Here the family of prisoners show how people were tortured using electric shock. Others were suspended from the ceiling and beaten. But this freedom from oppression has created problems. Across Basra, civilians are looting the city. Anything not nailed down is taken. Boats are dragged down the main street and banks are a source of money and delight.

Fair enough—but perhaps a little too positive about the outcome of the war for everyone's taste at the ABC. The next day, as the world watched pictures of jubilant Iraqis hammering toppled statues of Saddam Hussein with the soles of their feet (a particularly grievous insult in Arab and Islamic culture), *The 7.30 Report's* Heather Ewart went out to Sydney's western suburbs to get the verdict from Iraqi-Australians.

To listen to Kerry O'Brien tell it, in introducing the story titled, 'Australian Iraqi community has mixed feelings as statue falls',

KERRY O'BRIEN: Members of Australia's Iraqi community were mesmerized by the images they saw on their television screens last night. For many, those images were a powerful symbol of the end of a regime that had driven them from their homeland. Yet their joy at the prospect of a new freedom in Iraq is tempered by apprehension for friends and family lost in the chaos.

Yet reading a transcript of the report, the only apprehensive local found was an Iraqi doctor, one Nameer Abdullah, who was worried about there being enough medical supplies to treat the wounded. And Dr Abdullah was still just as happy as anyone else interviewed to see the back of Hussein, only adding that, 'We hope next they [the coalition] will pull their own troops and a new Iraqi government will be elected by the people, not by someone else'.

Meanwhile, *The World Today* took things a step further with their report on 10 April 2003, 'Australian Opinion of Iraqi War'. Here's host John Highfield introducing reporter Jo Mazzocchi's report:

JOHN HIGHFIELD: And despite the triumphant scenes on the streets of Baghdad, and in Iraqi exile communities around the world, in the city of Dearborn in Michigan, outside motor town there, the Ford Motor Company, 20,000 Iraqis gathered for a street party that's still going on. But here in Australia, the Iraqi community is reacting more cautiously to the events unfolding in their homeland. Many Australian Iraqis say whilst there's no doubt the regime of Saddam Hussein was evil, there can be never any justification for the way the war has been conducted, and the deaths that have resulted from it.

Are Iraqis living in Australia that different from those living in the United States? It doesn't take much to see that Highfield hopes, or at least, thinks so.

Pity for him that Mazzocchi's report from the field (which certainly saw its share of leading questions) failed to back up this party-line introduction:

JO MAZZOCCHI: Australian Iraqis say they're overjoyed at the scenes of jubilation now taking place on the streets of Baghdad. Dr Mohammed al-Salami is a local community leader, based in Sydney, who summed it up like this.

MOHAMMED AL-SALAMI: You know, this, you know [laughs], myself, I burst in tears really, you know, and something like a long-awaited moment.

Mazzocchi then tries to locate some anti-war sentiment, but here's the best she can do:

JO MAZZOCCHI: But others, such as Ferris Naji, a former army engineer in the 1991 Gulf War conflict, take a more cautious approach.

FERRIS NAJI: There's also a little bit of bitterness for all the heavy price and the casualties of the innocent people who have gone to achieve this goal.

'A little bitterness' hardly rises to the level of 'there can never be any justification', as Highfield promised in his introduction of Mazzocchi's report. Indeed, the sole subject whom Mazzocchi promises claims 'the

war should never have taken place' doesn't seem to have any regrets, either:

JO MAZZOCCHI: Have you been surprised by the sheer numbers of Iraqis on the street now celebrating the end of the Saddam Hussein regime?

KASSIM ABOUD: No actually, I was happy to see them. I was not happy with the numbers. I want more people in the street. But as you can see, Iraqi people very cautious, particularly when it comes to first of all dealing with a foreign force, foreign military in Iraq, and number two, the mistrust of the American.

JO MAZZOCCHI: But many people would argue you can't have it both ways. You can't be against the war and then say isn't it fantastic to see all these people on the streets of Baghdad?

KASSIM ABOUD: Well this is the reality. I think the United States could have provided military support and let the Iraqi people lead the charge. Now, if that happen, then Iraqi people on the other side, in Iraq, even in the military, they will see Iraqi people coming to liberate them, not a fallen military force who they did not trust coming to invade them.

TWENTY-FOUR HOUR GRACE PERIOD

While some ABC reports, mostly filed by correspondents on the ground in Iraq, dealt fairly with the celebrating crowds of joyous Iraqis thrilled at the prospect of a post-Saddam Iraq, it wasn't long before the network began second-guessing the war in retrospect—a natural evolution of its anti-war position before and during the conflict.

In fact, it was less than twenty-four hours before identifiable drumbeats began to be heard from the ABC's radio and television correspondents. Looting was destroying the country where, in just twelve hours of post-war chaos, no chemical or biological weapons had been found—nor would they ever be. And, as a result, the toppling of Saddam Hussein was somehow illegitimate, or a very mixed blessing at best.

Trusting in the sanity and restraint of Saddam Hussein is not a strategy, and it is not an option. The dictator who is assembling the world's most dangerous weapons has already used them on whole villages—leaving thousands of his own citizens dead, blind, or disfigured. Iraqi refugees tell us how forced confessions are obtained—by torturing children while their parents are made to watch. International human rights groups have catalogued other methods used in the torture chambers of Iraq: electric shock, burning with hot irons, dripping acid on the skin, mutilation with electric drills, cutting out tongues, and rape. If this is not evil, then evil has no meaning.

—George W. Bush, State of the Union address, 28 January 2003.

Although Iraq's violations of a laundry list of United Nations Security Council resolutions (and that body's failure to enforce them) was one leg of the case against Saddam Hussein, it is clear from the above address that there were other concerns—including humanitarian ones—driving the coalition's leaders.

Yet it was no sooner than Baghdad fell than a subtle re-writing of history began to occur, thanks in part to the ABC: that WMDs were the sole cause for fighting in Iraq, and that until they were found, the war would be unjustified.

Again, *The 7.30 Report* was among the first to begin this campaign, with the introduction to reporter Jill Colgan's report, 'US yet to find smoking gun':

KERRY O'BRIEN: The United States has clearly stated its reasons for this war ... to rid Iraq of weapons of mass destruction and remove the regime that spawned them. Well, Saddam Hussein no longer rules Iraq, but the US has yet to find the so-called smoking gun to validate its claim that the Iraqi President continued to hoard chemical weapons in defiance of various UN resolutions. The ABC's Washington correspondent Jill Colgan reports on the furious coalition efforts to find significant stores of weapons the US still believes are squirreled away in secret locations.

'Still believes' is a pretty damning construction to use in the first hours after the fall of Baghdad. While to date, few stockpiles of banned weapons have been found, the notion that they were going to be found even as statues of Hussein were still falling is a bit over-heated.

Colgan's entire report operates from the twin assumptions that (a) the entire basis for going to war was illegal weapons of mass destruction and that (b) it would be a matter of hours from the fall of the Ba'athist regime to the discovery of 8,000 litres of anthrax. (To put that in context, a typical oil tanker truck holds more than four times that quantity of liquid).

JILL COLGAN: The US chose to start this war for one overriding reason ... to disarm Iraq. To seize weapons of mass destruction that might otherwise find their way into the hands of terrorists and threaten Americans. Along the way, it has become a crusade to liberate Iraqis. But the US has a promise to fulfil. To find Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

JOURNALIST: What about the rationale for the war? Is it important in that sense that we find them?

DONALD RUMSFELD: Look, um ... We are in the process of trying to liberate that country.

Although the clip was selected to score points at Rumsfeld's expense, the American Defense Secretary made a valid point: the war was still going on, and troops were committed to other projects.

Interestingly, Colgan's report is also notable in that she went to a group that would otherwise be labelled 'right-wing' or 'conservative' to get an opinion backing her position—namely, the Washington-based CATO Institute, a free-market think tank that opposed the war. This time, the group needed no introduction or ideological tagging from the ABC:

CHARLES PENA, ANALYST, CATO INSTITUTE: Mere possession of so-called weapons of mass destruction was enough to justify taking military action. Since the administration itself made that argument and in effect sold that argument to the American people and to some portion of the international community, I think it's incumbent upon them to find these very weapons.

Whether or not Iraq's weapons of mass destruction are ever found, it is worth noting that in a police state such as that run by Saddam Hussein, hiding a few truckloads of materiel is not a problem. After all, officials just discovered caches of airplanes and missiles dating back to the Hitler era hidden in bunkers under the present-day Berlin Airport.

While every single declaration during and after the war by the Pentagon, White House or the Howard government was taken with a stroke-inducing quantity of salt by the ABC, for those willing to talk down the achievements of the coalition, the network was plenty sugary, as was the case with *AM*'s report of 14 April, 'Humanitarian aid agencies warn of humanitarian disaster in Iraq' by Michael Dodd:

MICHAEL DODD: As the wave of lawlessness sweeps across much of Iraq, it's underlining the potential for a seemingly successful military campaign to spiral into a post-war disaster as a result of the collapse of law, order and government services. International aid organizations are expressing exasperation that the lawlessness is preventing them from making deliveries such as badly needed medical supplies and water to hospitals. In Geneva, at the headquarters of the International Red Cross, spokesman Florian Westphal gave me this graphic description of what the anarchic conditions have done to the hospital system in Iraq.

FLORIAN WESTPHAL: Patients have either fled the hospitals or have been left without care. There's hardly any staff. And people are too afraid to even go there. And all that is the case because of this rampant looting and insecurity, which we're seeing in Baghdad at the moment. So before we can even talk about aid getting through, these security problems need to be dealt with.

There are multiple problems with this reporting. For one thing, the implication that what existed in Iraq before the war was somehow lawfulness is, as the ABC itself might put it, 'troubling'. But furthermore, to suggest that the Red Cross and other non-governmental organizations are wholly neutral and disinterested—especially after their performance in Afghanistan the previous year—is hardly accurate. But just to make sure listeners are taking his point—that Iraq is falling apart, thanks to the coalition—Dodd continues his friendly inquisition:

MICHAEL DODD: So is it the military Coalition's responsibility, the Americans, the British and the Australians, to actually provide law and order in Iraq?

FLORIAN WESTPHAL: Well, we would certainly appeal to them to try and do that in

all those areas where they have effective control. They do have this responsibility as part of their function of occupying powers under the Fourth Geneva Convention.

MICHAEL DODD: And it isn't just aid organizations which are calling on the occupying powers to do more to bring law and order to Iraq. In Britain, a Cabinet Minister has done the same thing, effectively condemning her own Government's efforts in the process.

CLARE SHORT: The occupying powers which is the US, UK and Australia have a duty across the country to keep order, to keep basic humanitarianism in place for civilians, and to keep civil administration running. And there must be a much bigger effort to stop all this looting and violence. We had looting in Basra, but it's a lot better in Basra now. What we need, a massively bigger effort. And it should focus on hospitals. I mean, there were lots of injured people, hospitals, the Red Cross can't get through. There isn't water, there isn't power, they're running out of drugs. It's an absolute priority to make the hospitals safe.

Interestingly, the ABC didn't think it necessary to give any qualification to the credentials of that cabinet minister, Clare Short (who is given the second-to-last word, before Dodd himself wraps things up), who was once described by hard-left journalist George Monbiot as 'the cabinet's left-wing conscience'. Nor, as we will see in the next section, has the ABC seen fit to report on what's really gone on in Iraq—and how the harshest predictions of the network's guests have failed to come true.

Meanwhile, another crisis—this time over looting—also received heavy airplay. Here's how *The World Today* (one of several ABC News programmes to cover the story) told the story of the alleged looting of the Baghdad Museum:

ELEANOR HALL: Well, it's not only defenceless people in the hospitals suffering with looters rampaging through Baghdad and other parts of Iraq. One of the world's finest collections of antiquities housed in the National Museum of Iraq has also been raided, with scholars around the world today mourning the loss of irreplaceable jewels, artefacts, scripts and sculptures dating back to the dawn of human civilization. Looters have also targeted extensive

records and manuscripts housed at the Baghdad Library, which has been set ablaze. And those who study ancient civilizations say the impact is so great the study of these cultures will never be the same again.

If events had played out the way the ABC had claimed, it may have been a setback to one subset of archaeology. The only thing is, the story was a complete fabrication—the museum was never systematically looted, and the few items that were taken were stolen by insiders. By 21 May, the UK's *Guardian* (one of the most strident critics of the war) reported that 'the looting of Iraq's museums may not have been as disastrous as it initially appeared', though *The World Today* chose not to report this. And by June when the story had been clearly exposed as a product of the fog of war (to be generous), *The World Today* had moved on to other topics—such as their report of 13 June detailing how the American state of Utah still executes people by firing squad, part of 'a movement in the United States determined to ensure that some of the more brutal means of execution remain part of US law and order'.

BIAS IN THE MORNING: RELENTLESS NEGATIVITY AND THE HUNT FOR WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

Even when the major fighting in Iraq was over in a war that, for both Iraqi civilians and coalition troops, was largely bloodless, the ABC was not content to let up its anti-war tenor. Instead, just as Democrats in Florida sought to win through a 'recount' of the 2000 United States presidential election, since the fall of Baghdad the ABC has been relentless in its efforts to both de-legitimize the war and paint it as a disaster for those who no longer have to live under Saddam Hussein's yoke.

A quick look at the war and America-related headlines of reports run on ABC's AM radio programme (this exercise would show the same results with just about any other of the network's news programmes) in the weeks after the fall of Baghdad is a good introduction to the prism through which editors, reporters and presenters continue to view the situation in Iraq:

- 14 April: Controversy remains over Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Uncertainty hangs over interim Iraqi authority. General Tommy Franks gives update of Iraqi conflict. US remains focused on war despite Iraqi looting. Mark Willacy journeys to Baghdad.
- 15 April: Iraqi political factions meet today. Protest in Baghdad.
- 16 April: (no stories)
- 17 April: Iraq's Shia community tries to come to terms with the impact of war. General Franks visits Baghdad.
- 19 April: First Friday prayer in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein. Australian troops to sweep through Iraqi air force complex. Australian aircraft to deliver medical aid to Iraqi airbase. Leading charity waiting to distribute aid into Iraq.
- 21 April: Shia Muslims push for Islamic government in Baghdad. British Labour Party wants inquiry into motives for war in Iraq.
- 22 April: (no stories)
- 23 April: Debate over lifting UN sanctions. Questions hang over Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Secret cemetery revealed in Baghdad.
- 24 April: Iraq's underground political parties emerge. Iran accused of interfering in Iraq.
- 25 April: Iraq's deputy leader in US custody. Pressure on US to remove depleted uranium in Iraq.
- 26 April: Mohammad Zubeidi the new governor of Baghdad?
- 28 April: US warned against 'force-feeding' Iraq democracy. Dozens of cluster bomb injuries in Iraq. Human Rights Watch says cluster bombs need to be banned.
- 29 April: Iraq's oil ministry says production could double. Defence Minister Robert Hill tours Iraq.
- 30 April: US troops kill 13 Iraqis in Falluja. Stories from Iraqi prisons begin to surface. Summit calls for Iraqi borders to be sealed [to prevent looting of antiquities].

Thus, in this confusing fortnight when the Ba'athist regime in Iraq—a villainous, genocidal tyranny—lost its capital and American, Australian and British troops were still trying to gain control of the country, this one radio programme ran 31 stories related to the war. Of these, the titles of fully 17 of them suggest a tilt against the coalition (reading the transcripts increases this tally substantially), and an effort to take away from the achievement of the liberation of Iraq by raising questions about everything from cluster bombs to depleted uranium to civilian casualties to the supposed 'looting' of Iraq's archaeological treasures.

All of these, in their own ways, are important issues—though many of them deserve to be treated with a good deal more scepticism and a great deal less heavy breathing than the ABC is willing to afford. Simple journalistic exercises like talking to sources with different perspectives would be a great help in this regard, and prevent future embarrassments such as *AM*'s virtual press release for Human Rights Watch's campaign to ban cluster bombs, which aired on 28 April:

LINDA MOTTRAM: Human Rights Watch brands as misleading the Pentagon's claim that only 26 cluster bombs landed near civilian areas in Iraq. Human Rights Watch and others are pushing for a treaty that would specifically ban the use of cluster bombs, similar to the existing treaty that bans anti-personnel landmines. In the latter case, Australia is a signatory, the United States is not. Cluster bombs are not used by Australian forces, but that's a policy decision not a legal ban. Rafael Epstein reports.

RAFAEL EPSTEIN: A cluster bomb is like a massive shotgun: as a shotgun shell sprays hundreds of pellets over a wide area, one cluster bomb opens up and releases hundreds of Coke can sized bomblets over an area roughly one hundred metres square. The military call cluster bombs 'explosive rain'. Some bomblets are designed to destroy vehicles, some to kill people, and others, incendiary bomblets, burst into a large cloud of explosive flame before they hit the ground. The effect is to saturate a large area with explosives and flying shards of steel and because they disperse widely, they're extremely effective on concentrations of people and vehicles. Kenneth Roth, from Human

Rights Watch in New York, says General Richard Myers is not telling the full story.

KENNETH ROTH: What he seems to have deliberately omitted is reference to the use by American and British forces of cluster munitions fired by artillery shells by ground forces. We are just investigating this, but it appears, based on preliminary reports, that in fact there was fairly extensive use of cluster munitions in places like Baghdad, Hilla and Basra and that these probably accounted for substantially more civilian casualties than General Myers was willing to own up to.

RAFAEL EPSTEIN: In Kosovo, six in every 100 bombs were cluster bombs, yet they accounted for a fifth of all civilian deaths. In the year after the Kosovo campaign there were 150 cluster bomb casualties, including 50 deaths. Several RAF officers resigned their commissions in the 1991 Gulf War in protest against the use of cluster bombs. And in the last 12 years 1,600 Kuwaiti and Iraqi civilians have been killed, and 2,500 have been injured by leftover bomblets.

KENNETH ROTH: Because they are very difficult to target, that is, they disperse over a wide area, they in essence are the only dumb weapon that the Pentagon still uses in populated areas and that's an exception that should simply be stopped altogether. A certain percentage of the cluster bomblets do not explode on initial contact with the ground. Instead they sit there and in a sense, function like anti-personnel landmines, that is to say, if somebody stumbles upon them they immediately are killed.

RAFAEL EPSTEIN: Reported deaths from cluster bombs include 27 people killed and 54 injured in a Baghdad suburb on April 9, and on April 23rd a US Army Sergeant was killed and several soldiers were injured when a cluster munition exploded. It had been handed to them after being discovered by an Iraqi child.

LINDA MOTTRAM: Rafael Epstein reporting.

This immediately followed a story on cluster bombs which featured *AM* reporter Mark Willacy in Baghdad

taking testimony of Iraqis about the munitions allegedly landing on or near their houses—which featured this little exchange between the supposedly-objective journalist and a clip of General Richard Myers speaking on the subject:

RICHARD MYERS: Initial review of all cluster munitions used and the targets they were used on, indicate that only 26 of those hit targets within 1,500 feet of civilian neighbourhoods, and there's been only one recorded case of collateral damage from cluster munitions noted so far.

MARK WILLACY: That's a rather offensive way of saying that one person was killed.

This is textbook ABC anti-war and anti-American bias—and an example of a journalist unprofessionally inserting his own editorial comments into a news story, to boot. Here we have not one, but two, stories designed to criticize the Pentagon for using weapons that are not banned by any convention the US is a signatory to, and in a war that was fought with more concern for civilian life than possibly any other conflict in the history of mankind. Yet Linda Mottram can casually toss off the suggestion that 'Washington admits [again, as if it were a secret] using them in this war, despite the immense internationally [sic] sensitivity about the weapons and the claims of some that they are effectively outlawed'.

There are also some—such as the mullahs of Saudi Arabia—who say that women should not be allowed to drive a car. But it's unlikely that that nameless group of 'somes' will ever be quoted anonymously and approvingly by Mottram.

Furthermore, all ABC reporting on civilian deaths in Iraq are compromised by the network's unrelenting lack of context. No matter which sources you use (and the most anti-American ones still only come up with a death toll of about 5,000 Iraqi civilians), the loss of life in Iraq during the war was minuscule compared to that caused by Saddam Hussein during his reign. Yet during this fortnight, *AM* ran just two reports on Hussein's human rights violations: one on the conditions of his prisons, another on the discovery of a mass grave. All this took place while the ABC beat the drum for the notion that the war was fought under a phoney pretext and brought nothing but misery and hardship to Iraq, while ignoring anything that would substantiate the other legs of the case for toppling

Hussein, namely, evidence of human rights atrocities and links between the Ba'athist regime and al-Qaeda terrorists. Not only was the first Australian killed in Iraq during the conflict killed by bin Laden-linked terrorists, but on 27 April, England's *Telegraph* reported:

Iraqi intelligence documents discovered in Baghdad by *The Telegraph* have provided the first evidence of a direct link between Osama bin Laden's al-Qa'eda terrorist network and Saddam Hussein's regime.

Papers found yesterday in the bombed headquarters of the Mukhabarat, Iraq's intelligence service, reveal that an al-Qa'eda envoy was invited clandestinely to Baghdad in March 1998.

The documents show that the purpose of the meeting was to establish a relationship between Baghdad and al-Qa'eda based on their mutual hatred of America and Saudi Arabia. The meeting apparently went so well that it was extended by a week and ended with arrangements being discussed for bin Laden to visit Baghdad.

(The proof that Saddam worked with bin Laden', by Inigo Gilmore)

Yet neither *AM*, nor *PM*, nor other ABC programmes such as *The 7.30 Report* and *The World Today* chose to cover these incidents. Instead, the ABC sought to minimize the nature of the victory in Iraq while at the same time harping on any setback, real or perceived, that could be used to make the anti-war case in retrospect.

Early on, the problem of looting was seized upon by the ABC, and many other news organizations, to illustrate the chaos of post-war Iraq. But for the ABC, the non-story of the pillaging of the Iraqi National Museum, was, as the saying goes, too good to be true. Not only did the supposed looting show that American troops had already lost control of the city they had just conquered, but it also helped confirm other ABC assumptions about the philistine nature of the United States. Indeed, even as it was becoming clear that the museum ultimately lost only a few items, *The World Today* chose to run this report on 30 April, suggesting for a start that the United States is responsible not only for the actions of the purported thieves, but for dealing a major blow to world culture:

ELEANOR HALL: The United States and its allies might express satisfaction with the outcome of the war in Iraq, but the looting of Iraq's cultural treasures which many critics say could have been prevented had US troops acted promptly, has marred the victory. It's seen by experts as a catastrophe not just for Iraq, but for the cultural heritage of the world. And in London overnight, officials from some of the world's leading cultural institutions have been holding a crisis summit at the British Museum to agree on ways of helping their Iraqi colleagues.

Given the scale of the looting and destruction, though, Hamish Robertson asks is it all a bit too late?

HAMISH ROBERTSON: When the Director of Research at the Iraqi National Museum, Dr Donny George, addressed the British Museum's press conference, he bitterly attacked the lack of security checks on Iraq's borders and described how American troops failed to protect his country's priceless heritage.

DONNY GEORGE: One of our employees who lives in the premises of the museum went to one of the tanks that were very close to the museum and begged them to come and stand in front of the museum while the looters were outside, just to protect the museum. They told him that they don't have orders for that.

To hear the ABC tell it, this was just another shunning of responsibility by American troops. Of course, this ignores the fact that much of the city was in chaos at the time, and soldiers understandably had more important things on their mind (like staying alive) than guarding a museum. The report continued, with Hamish Robertson contradicting himself as he told a story that was unravelling as he spoke:

HAMISH ROBERTSON: Well, in the three weeks since Iraq's museums were ransacked and the National Library burnt, it's become clear that almost all of the library's contents, including irreplaceable documents dating from the early years of the Ottoman Empire, were destroyed. But it may be that the losses sustained by the museums, although devastating, aren't quite as catastrophic as was

first feared. The writer and broadcaster on heritage issues, Malcolm Billings, was at the British Museum press conference and he believes there are at least some grounds for hope:

MALCOLM BILLINGS: Strangely enough they don't know exactly the extent of the damage. They know that a whole lot of important stuff has gone. But they can't say what proportion of the 170,000 objects that there are in the museum that are missing.

Of course, as Robertson begins to imply, the story of a ransacked museum turned out not to be true. In the end, ABC fans would have to turn to the BBC (an organization that has come under intense fire for anti-war and anti-Blair bias) to find out what really happened:

US customs agents working in Iraq say they have recovered thousands of items looted from the national museum in Baghdad following the fall of Saddam Hussein.

They report that about 40,000 manuscripts and 700 other artefacts have been retrieved after being stolen from the museum, which housed one of the Middle East's most comprehensive archaeological collections.

And many 'missing' items were secretly stored in hidden vaults for safety shortly before the war began, the US Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) said in a statement.

US-led forces were widely criticized for failing to halt the widespread looting of Iraqi treasures during the recent conflict, despite warnings from historical experts that such thefts would occur.

(‘Looted Iraqi artefacts ‘returned’’, BBC, 8 May, emphasis in the original).

The World Today, meanwhile, chose not to report this development.

But it has been the search for Iraq's hidden weapons of mass destruction that has truly been the ABC's *bête noire* since the end of the war. Like a loanshark hassling a borrower for his interest

payments, the network has followed no post-war story as closely as this one—because until chemical or biological agents are found, the war which they campaigned so actively against can still be discredited in the history books. Indeed, barely any time had elapsed after the fall of Baghdad before the ABC started asking, snarkily, ‘where are the weapons?’ With coalition forces still battling it out with pro-Saddam loyalists, *AM* raised the issue on 23 April with their report, ‘Questions hang over Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction’:

RAFAEL EPSTEIN: In his State of the Union address, President George W Bush described a vast Iraqi weapons programme: 30,000 munitions, 500 tonnes of chemical weapons, 25,000 litres of anthrax and 38,000 litres of botulinum toxin. But now one of the chief neo-conservative proponents of the war, Under Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith, says much of the information about Iraq’s weapons may have been stolen or destroyed during the lawlessness that followed the war. And the US is shifting attention to a long list of thousands of suspected sites, because those at the top of the list failed to reveal any weapons. For the same reason, two of the four Pentagon teams with special equipment to deal with dangerous materials have nothing to do. Instead they’re sifting through thousands of files looking for clues. Former weapons inspector, Dr Ray Zilinskas.

RAY ZILINSKAS: The Iraqis essentially had gotten rid of their programmes, or their weapons, because they were mostly involved with regime maintenance at that point. They didn’t want anything on the shelf waiting to be discovered. There might be some chemical weapons agents hidden somewhere in reservoirs or in barrels out in the desert, but they’re not going to find any active biological or chemical weapons waiting to be used. I just don’t believe that.

Well, that’s one man’s opinion—and Zilinskas is certainly entitled to it. The only problem is, he was also the ABC’s sole source for the story—and he’s hardly objective. Indeed, reporter Rafael Epstein cites Zilinskas’ affiliation with something called the Monterey Institute, which he calls the world’s ‘pre-eminent non-proliferation research group’.

But a little further digging shows that Zilinskas is hardly an unbiased source: A brief Internet search on the professor reveals that he has spoken on the record about America’s ‘unhealthy phobia of Iraq’, comparing the US’s relationship to that nation to its relationship with Cuba. Still, despite Epstein’s attempts to damn the American search as fruitless before it even got underway in earnest, even Zilinskas held out the possibility that weapons (or the capability to produce them, which, to potential targets, is just as important) might be found.

Not everyone at the ABC has gleefully joined the pile-on; *The 7.30 Report*, for example, ran a report on 2 June entitled, ‘Doubts grow as WMD evidence fails to appear’ which, although choosing primarily to interview naysayers such as former intelligence officer Andrew Wilkie and ex-UN weapons inspector Richard Butler, managed to present a more-or-less balanced assessment of the situation. And *Lateline* was quite gracious in running a long interview between Tony Jones and American journalist William Kristol, who firmly believes that illegal weapons will be found, on 17 July. But other programmes, such as *AM* and *The World Today* have featured stories pegged to the elusive nature of the weapons on almost a daily basis—in a sense, keeping the story alive even when there was no news driving it, while ignoring the constant stream of news about Hussein’s human rights atrocities such as mass graves and ‘children’s prisons’ that flow out of Iraq nearly every day.

CONCLUSION

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation is quite fond of tagging itself as ‘your ABC’ to its captive audience of taxpayers who, collectively, fund the state-owned media conglomerate to the tune of \$750 million a year. But when it comes to news and public affairs programming—what would seemingly be a mainstay of a national broadcaster devoted to bringing information to a widely-scattered populace—taxpayers are not getting their money’s worth. If the ABC wants Australians to embrace it with the warm feelings that its marketing department so actively seeks to develop, then a long, hard look at the sort of journalism practised during the Iraq War would be a very good place for them to start.

A NOTE ON METHOD

This report was compiled following examination of transcripts from the ABC radio and television programs *AM*, *The World Today*, *PM*, *The 7.30 Report*, and *Lateline*, from the weeks preceding the war in Iraq until some weeks following the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime.

All programs were broadcast nation-wide. Examples of bias were simply noted as transcripts were examined, and placed in chronological order. Only examples involving bias as evidenced by text were included, rather than any that may have indicated by more subjective measures, such as tone or presentation.

Rather than an exercise in cherry-picking, as some have categorized earlier studies of ABC war coverage, this became, such was the amount of bias detected, more an exercise in cherry-harvesting. In order to reduce this study to a publishable size, many dozens of examples of perceived anti-US and anti-Coalition bias were removed. The complete, unreduced study will be made available online at the IPA's Website: www.ipa.org.au

Many of the examples of bias included are self-evident. Others form anti-US or anti-war themes, such as the ABC's tendency throughout its wartime coverage to predict events unfavourable to the Coalition. These events invariably did not take place. As such, this was not war reporting by the ABC, as it did not describe or review past events; it sought negatives in events yet to occur.

Among other themes were the ABC's failure to locate in pre-war Iraq any significant number of citizens opposed to the regime of Saddam Hussein (and a general failure to indicate why people living in a dictatorship might be disinclined to speak against a dictator) and a reluctance to detail the horrors of Iraq under Saddam.

Viewing the ABC's reporting in totality, as this report does, is to view an organization more concerned with the potential dangers of liberating a nation than with the certain dangers of leaving a nation to perish under tyranny.

Those interested are invited to check the report's findings against the original transcripts, which remain online at www.abc.net.au.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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James Morrow is a freelance journalist with over a decade's experience in the media world. After studying international politics at Georgetown University, he went on to work for a variety of publications, including business monthly *Success*, the award-winning multimedia content site *Ironminds.com*, and *US News & World Report*, where he covered the national political scene and regularly travelled with then-president Bill Clinton. Since becoming a full-time freelancer, his work has appeared in a wide range of outlets, including MSNBC.com, *The Australian*, and *New York Press*. Co-founder of the *New York Metropolis*, James has also appeared on a variety of television programmes, including NBC's *Today* in New York, CNBC's *Hot Stuff*, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's *7:30 Report*. He currently lives in Sydney.