

Frontline's "Bush's War" on PBS: Too Timid, Too Little, Too Late

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Frontline's "Bush's War" on PBS Monday and Tuesday evening was a nicely put-together rehash of the top players' trickery that led to the attack on Iraq, together with the power-grabbing, back-stabbing, and limitless incompetence of the occupation.

Except for an inside-the-beltway tidbit here and there—for example, about how the pitiable secretary of state Colin Powell had to suffer so many indignities at the hands of other type-A hard chargers, Frontline added little to the discussion. Notably missing was any allusion to the unconscionable role the Fourth Estate adopted as indiscriminate cheerleader for the home team; nor was there any mention that the invasion was a serious violation of international law. But those omissions, I suppose, should have come as no surprise.

Nor was it a surprise that any viewer hoping for insight into why Cheney and Bush were so eager to attack Iraq was left with very thin gruel. It was more infotainment, bereft of substantive discussion of the whys and wherefores of what in my view is the most disastrous foreign policy move in our nation's history.

Despite recent acknowledgements from the likes of Alan Greenspan, Gen. John Abizaid, and others that oil and permanent (or, if you prefer, "enduring") military bases were among the main objectives, Frontline avoided any real discussion of such delicate factors. Someone not already aware of how our media has become a tool of the Bush administration might have been shocked at how Frontline could have missed one of President George W. Bush's most telling "signing statements." Underneath the recent Defense Authorization Act, he wrote that he did not feel bound by the law's explicit prohibition against using the funding:

"(1) To establish any military installation or base for the purpose of providing for the permanent stationing of United States Armed Forces in Iraq," or

"(2) To exercise United States control of the oil resources of Iraq."

So the Frontline show was largely pap.

At one point, however, the garrulous former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage did allude to one of the largest elephants in the living room—Israel's far-right Likudniks—and their close alliance with the so-called neo-conservatives running our policy toward the Middle East. But Armitage did so only tangentially, referring to the welcome (if totally unrealistic) promise by Ahmed Chalabi that, upon being put in power in Baghdad, he would recognize Israel. Not surprisingly, the interviewer did not pick up on that comment; indeed, I'm surprised the remark avoided the cutting room floor.

Courage No Longer a Frontline Hallmark

Frontline has done no timely reportage that might be looked upon as disparaging the George W. Bush administration—I mean, for example, the real aims behind the war, not simply the gross incompetence characterizing its conduct. Like so many others, Frontline has been, let's just say it, cowardly in real time—no doubt intimidated partly by attacks on its funding that were inspired by the White House.

And now? Well the retrospective criticism of incompetence comes as polling shows two-thirds of the country against the Iraq occupation (and the number is surely higher among PBS viewers). So, Frontline is repositioning itself as a mild ex-post-facto critic of the war, but still unwilling to go very far out on a limb. Explaining the aims behind war crimes can, of course, be risky. It is as though an invisible Joseph Goebbels holds sway.

Too Late

On Monday evening I found myself initially applauding Frontline's matter-of-fact, who-shot-who chronology of how our country got lied into attacking and occupying Iraq. Then I got to thinking—have I not seen this picture before? Many times?

It took a Hollywood producer to recognize and act promptly on the con games that sober observers could not miss as the war progressed. Where were the celebrated “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD)? Robert Greenwald simply could not abide the president's switch to “weapons of mass destruction programs,” which presumably might be easier to find than the much-ballyhooed WMD so heavily advertised before the attack on Iraq. You remember—those remarkable WMD about which UN chief inspector Hans Blix quipped that the U.S. had one hundred percent certainty of their existence in Iraq, but zero percent certainty as to where they were.

Robert Greenwald called me in May 2003. He had read a few of the memoranda published by Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) exposing the various charades being acted out by the administration and wanted to know what we thought of the president's new circumlocution on WMD.

I complimented him on smelling a rat and gave him names of my VIPS colleagues and other experienced folks who could fill him in on the details. Wasting no time, he arrived here in Washington in June, armed simply with copious notes and a cameraman. Greenwald conducted the interviews, flew back to his eager young crew in Hollywood and, poof, the DVD “Uncovered: The War on Iraq” was released at the beginning of November 2003.”

So Frontline is four and a half years behind a Hollywood producer with appropriate interest and skepticism. (Full disclosure: I appear in “Uncovered,” as do many of the interviewees appearing in Frontline's “Bush's War.”)

Actually, the interviewing by Frontline occurred just a few months later. I know because I was among those interviewed for that as well, as was my good friend and former colleague at the CIA, Mel Goodman. I was struck that Mel looked four years younger on this week's Frontline. It only then dawned on me that he was four years younger when interviewed.

Have a look at “Uncovered,” [<http://www.truthuncovered.com/index.php>] and see how you think it compares to Frontline's “Bush's War.”

Safety in Retrospectives

It also struck me that producing a Frontline-style retrospective going back several years is a much less risky genre to work with. Chalk it up to my perspective as an intelligence analyst, but ducking the incredibly important issues at stake over the next several months is, in my opinion, unconscionable. The troop “surge” in Iraq, for example.

Only toward the very end of the program does Frontline allow a bit of relevant candor on a point that has been self-evident since Cheney and Bush, against strong opposition from Generals Abizaid and Casey (and apparently even Rumsfeld), decided to double down by sending 30,000 more troops into Iraq. A malleable new secretary of defense would deal with the recalcitrant generals and pick a Petreus ex Machina of equal malleability and political astuteness to implement this stop-gap plan.

Pulitzer Prize winning journalist/author Steve Coll, with typical candor, put the “surge” into perspective:

“The decision at a minimum guaranteed that his [Bush’s] presidency would not end with a defeat in history’s eyes; that by committing to the surge, he was certain to at least achieve a stalemate.”

Given this week’s fresh surge of violence as the U.S. surge is scheduled to wind down, even a stalemate may be in some doubt. But, okay, small kudos to Frontline for including that bit of truth—however obvious—and for adding the grim background music to its final comment: “Soon Bush’s war will be handed to someone else.”

Rather Not, Thank You

Intimidation of the media is what has happened all around, including with Frontline, which not so many years ago was able to do some gutsy reporting. Let me give you another example about which few are aware.

Do you remember when Dan Rather made his Apologia Pro Vita Sua, admitting that the American media, including him, was failing to reveal the truth about things like Iraq? Speaking to the BBC on May 16, 2002, Rather compared the situation to the fear of “necklacing” in South Africa:

“It’s an obscene comparison,” Rather said, “but there was a time in South Africa when people would put flaming tires around peoples’ necks if they dissented. In some ways, the fear is that you will be neck-laced here, you will have a flaming tire of lack of patriotism put around your neck.”

Talking to another reporter, Dan told it straight about the careerism that keeps US journalists in line. “It’s that fear that keeps [American] journalists from asking the toughest of the tough questions and to continue to bore-in on the tough questions so often.”

The comparison to “necklacing” may be “obscene” but, sadly, it is not far off the mark. So what happened to the newly outspoken Dan Rather with the newly found courage, when he ran afoul of Vice President Dick Cheney and the immense pressure he exerts on the corporate media?

We know about the lies and the cheerleading for attacking Iraq. But there is much more

most of us do not know and remain unable to learn if Rather and other one-time journalists keep acting like Bert Lahr's cowardly lion in the Wizard of Oz before he gets "the nerve" and courage.

For Dan Rather, the fear would simply not go away...even after leaving CBS for HDNet and promising that, on his new "Dan Rather Reports" show, viewers would see hard-hitting and courageous reporting that he said he couldn't do at CBS.

Will it surprise you that Dan Rather cannot shake the necklace? I refer specifically to a program for "Dan Rather Reports," meticulously prepared by award-winning producer, Kristina Borjesson. The special included interviews with an impressive string of first-hand witnesses to neocon machinations prior to the US attack on Iraq, and provides real insights into motivations—the kind of insights Frontline did not even attempt.

Nipped in the Bud by the "Dark Side"

Last year Borjesson's taping was finished and the editing had begun. Borjesson's requests to interview people working for the vice president had been denied. But, following standard journalistic practice (not to mention common courtesy), she sent an email to John Hannah in Cheney's office in order to give Hannah a chance to react to what others—including several of the same senior folks on Frontline last evening— had said about him for her forthcoming report.

At that point all hell broke loose. Borjesson was abruptly told by Rather's executive producer that by sending the email, Borjesson could have "brought down the whole ('Dan Rather Reports') operation."

The show was killed and Borjesson sacked. For good measure, she was also accused of "coaching" interview subjects and taking their words out of context. Since neither Rather nor his executive producer would provide proof to substantiate that allegation, Borjesson took the unprecedented step of sending her script and transcripts to all her interview subjects, asking them to confirm or deny that she had coached them or taken their words out of context. Not one of them found her script inaccurate or said they were coached. She has the emails to prove this.

This sorry episode and Frontline's careful avoidance of basic issues like the strategic aims of the Bush administration in invading and occupying Iraq are proof, if further proof were needed, that the White House, and especially Cheney's swollen office, exert enormous pressure over what we are allowed to see and hear. The fear they instill in the corporate press, and in what once was serious investigative reporting of programs like Frontline, translates into programs getting neutered or killed outright—and massive public ignorance.

Some consolation is to be found in the good news that, in this particular case, Kristina Borjesson is made of stronger stuff; she has not given up, and was greatly encouraged by how many of the very senior officials and former officials she had already interviewed consented to be re-interviewed (since the tapes belonged to the "Rather Not" folks).

Now who looks forward to being re-interviewed?

Borjesson's original interviewees took into account her problems with the cowards and the censors—and her atypical, gutsy refusal to self-censor—and went the extra mile. A tribute to them as well, and their interest in getting the truth out.

Borjesson is now completing the program on her own. Look for an announcement in the coming months, if you're interested in real sustenance rather than the pabulum served up, no doubt under duress, by Frontline.

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