

Sinister Events in a Cynical War

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Here are questions that are not being asked about the latest twist of a cynical war. Were explosives and a remote-control detonator found in the car of the two SAS special forces men “rescued” from prison in Basra on 19 September? If true, what were they planning to do with them? Why did the British military authorities in Iraq put out an unbelievable version of the circumstances that led up to armoured vehicles smashing down the wall of a prison?

According to the head of Basra’s Governing Council, which has co-operated with the British, five civilians were killed by British soldiers. A judge says nine. How much is an Iraqi life worth? Is there to be no honest accounting in Britain for this sinister event, or do we simply accept Defence Secretary John Reid’s customary arrogance? “Iraqi law is very clear,” he said. “British personnel are immune from Iraqi legal process.” He omitted to say that this fake immunity was invented by Iraq’s occupiers.

Watching “embedded” journalists in Iraq and London, attempting to protect the British line was like watching a satire of the whole atrocity in Iraq. First, there was feigned shock that the Iraqi regime’s “writ” did not run outside its American fortifications in Baghdad and the “British trained” police in Basra might be “infiltrated”. An outraged Jeremy Paxman wanted to know how two of our boys – in fact, highly suspicious foreigners dressed as Arabs and carrying a small armoury – could possibly be arrested by police in a “democratic” society. “Aren’t they supposed to be on our side?” he demanded.

Although reported initially by the Times and the Mail, all mention of the explosives allegedly found in the SAS men’s unmarked Cressida vanished from the news. Instead, the story was the danger the men faced if they were handed over to the militia run by the “radical” cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. “Radical” is a gratuitous embedded term; al-Sadr has actually co-operated with the British. What did he have to say about the “rescue”? Quite a lot, none of which was reported in this country. His spokesman, Sheikh Hassan al-Zarqani, said the SAS men, disguised as al-Sadr’s followers, were planning an attack on Basra ahead of an important religious festival. “When the police tried to stop them,” he said, “[they] opened fire on the police and passers-by. After a car chase, they were arrested. What our police found in the car was very disturbing – weapons, explosives and a remote control detonator. These are the weapons of terrorists.”

The episode illuminates the most enduring lie of the Anglo-American adventure. This says the “coalition” is not to blame for the bloodbath in Iraq – which it is, overwhelmingly – and that foreign terrorists orchestrated by al-Qaeda are the real culprits. The conductor of the orchestra, goes this line, is Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian. The demonry of Al-Zarqawi is central to the Pentagon’s “Strategic Information Program” set up to shape news coverage of the occupation. It has been the Americans’ single unqualified success. Turn on any news in

the US and Britain, and the embedded reporter standing inside an American (or British) fortress will repeat unsubstantiated claims about al-Zarqawi.

Two impressions are the result: that Iraqis' right to resist an illegal invasion – a right enshrined in international law – has been usurped and de-legitimised by callous foreign terrorists, and that a civil war is under way between the Shi'ites and the Sunni. A member of the Iraqi National Assembly, Fatah al-Sheikh said this week, "There is a huge campaign for the agents of the foreign occupiers to enter and plant hatred between the sons of the Iraqi people and spread rumours in order to scare the one from the other... The occupiers are trying to start religious incitement and if it does not happen, then they will start an internal Shi'ite incitement."

The Anglo-American goal of "federalism" for Iraq is part of an imperial strategy of provoking divisions in a country where traditionally the communities have overlapped, even inter-married. The Osama-like promotion of al-Zarqawi is integral to this. Like the Scarlet Pimpernel, he is everywhere but nowhere. When the Americans crushed the city of Fallujah last year, the justification for their atrocious behaviour was "getting those guys loyal to al-Zarqawi". But the city's civil and religious authorities denied he was ever there or had anything to do with the resistance.

"He is simply an invention." said the Imam of Baghdad's al-Kazimeya mosque. "Al-Zarqawi was killed in the beginning of the war in the Kurdish north. His family even held a ceremony after his death." Whether or not this is true, al-Zarqawi's "foreign invasion" serves as Bush's and Blair's last veil for their "war on terror" and botched attempt to control the world's second biggest source of oil.

On 23 September, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, an establishment body, published a report that accused the US of "feeding the myth" of foreign fighters in Iraq who account for less than 10 per cent of a resistance estimated at 30,000. Of the eight comprehensive studies into the number of Iraqi civilians killed by the "coalition", four put the figure at more than 100,000. Until the British army is withdrawn from where it has no right to be, and those responsible for this monumental act of terrorism are indicted by the International Criminal Court, Britain is shamed.

John Pilger is an internationally renowned investigative journalist and documentary filmmaker. He is currently a visiting professor at Cornell University, New York. His film, *Stealing a Nation*, about the expulsion of the people of Diego Garcia, has won the Royal Television Society's award for the best documentary on British television in 2004-5. His latest book is *Tell Me No Lies: Investigative Journalism and its Triumphs* (Jonathan Cape, 2004). Visit John Pilger's website: www.johnpilger.com

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