

CHAPTER 15

Allies Down Under? The *Australian* at War and the Big Lie

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In the United States, Rupert Murdoch's Fox cable television network led the charge for patriotic journalism during the 2003 Gulf War.

Murdoch does not own a television station in Australia, but he does control two thirds of the metropolitan daily newspaper market and over 75% of the lucrative Sunday market (ABC, 2000). With the two most popular papers — Melbourne's *Herald Sun* and Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* — and the only nationally circulating daily newspaper — the *Australian* — in his stable, Murdoch is without doubt the "Prince of Press" in Australia. Therefore, understanding how Murdoch's antipodean media empire tackled the war in Iraq is central to understanding how the conflict was framed for the Australian public.

This chapter takes a look at how his flagship masthead — the *Australian* — covered Iraq in the context of terrorism and the invasion hysteria surrounding refugees.

MURDOCH COMMITTED TO COALITION

From the start, the *Australian* was firmly committed to the coalition of the

willing and the “war on terror,” providing a well-orchestrated cheer squad for Prime Minister John Howard and the invasion of Iraq. This was obvious from the tone and content of both its editorials (*Australian*, 2002, October 12) and “straight news” pieces.

On one level this is not surprising given the global nature of Murdoch’s \$42 billion News Corporation empire and the likely economic benefits to big business from the Iraq war. Yet economic self-interest must be ruled out if we are to hold Murdoch to the public service rhetoric that marked the beginning of his rise to media power.

In 1961, shortly after acquiring his first Sydney newspaper he said: “What rights have we to speak in the public interest when, too often, we are motivated by personal gain?” (Mayer, 1968, p. 51). Forty years later, the dichotomy between public and private interests somehow collapsed as Murdoch’s *Australian* chief executive, Ken Cowley, told parliament:

We take the view, as simple as it is and as corny as it sounds, that what is good for your country is good for your business and what is good for your business is good for your paper, its readers and our employees. (cited in Schultz, 1998, p. 102)

This argument underpins the “national interest” frame that the Murdoch press places over almost everything it does. Editorial writers have become particularly adept in framing economic liberalism, deregulation, privatization, tight budgets and the user-pays principle as being not only good for the nation as a whole, but good for individual citizens.

So perhaps there was more than just economic self-interest underpinning the *Australian*’s support for the Iraq war. Certainly the rhetoric employed by the paper invoked nationalist discourses that exploited the threat of global terrorism and historical fears of invasion to sell one of the most unpopular public policies in Australian history the commitment of Australian troops to war.

TERRORISM, FEAR AND THE POST-COLD WAR NEWS FRAME

Since September 11, 2001, the national interest frame has been subsumed by the new terrorism frame in the mainstream media.

In its moral simplicity, the terrorism frame is reminiscent of the old “Cold War news frame,” which dramatized superpower rivalries and pitted East against West, or capitalism against communism (Giffard, 2000, p. 389). Within the terror frame, bomb-wielding Islamic fundamentalists have replaced the “reds under the bed” as the West’s public enemy No. 1. While geography is not so clear — there is no Iron Curtain — the dichotomies are equally stark, as Christopher Kremmer (2002) noted:

Media reporting on the war on terror is riddled with the simplistic notion that this is a battle between innately good, wise, Western, liberal, democratic paragons and dark-skinned, bearded, fanatical, evil-doers.

In this post-Cold War terrorism news frame, the battle lines are drawn between good and evil, us and them, with a jingoistic reassertion of nationalist pride. The *Australian's* hawkish foreign editor embodied this perfectly in his response to the October 2002 Bali bombings:

Just as we love Australia, the evil men who murdered our people and others in Bali, they surely hate Australia. And why do they hate us. They hate us not for our wickedness, which is occasional and undeniable. They hate us for our oddly persistent goodness. (Sheridan, 2002, October 17)

Murdoch's flagship newspaper might have taken the terror frame too far in early 2003 when it reported on a spate of bush fires in the eastern states under the banner, "Summer Terror." But otherwise, the selective articulation of facts and skewed perspectives that characterize writing within the terror news frame goes largely undetected. Yet the effect is palpable.

Passing official versions of reality off as common sense, it helps to sell "the big lie." In this case, "the big lie" is the notion that there is a war on terror that can be fought and won by invading Iraq.

"THE BIG LIE"

The notion that the war on terror can be fought and won by invading Iraq, a constant theme in the Murdoch press, has helped naturalize a piece of official spin and an otherwise problematic concept that — there is a tangible conflict, which needs to be resolved, or at least approached, militarily.

The *Australian* began uncritically using this concept of waging war against an unspecified enemy soon after the terror attacks in the United States and has been feting Australia's need to fight in it ever since. Essentially it supported Prime Minister Howard's justification for sending troops into Afghanistan because everyone is susceptible to terrorism and what happens in the rest of the world affects "us." As the *Australian's* own media columnist, Errol Simper (2002) notes: "The media has, more or less, tended to let the politicians run with the terrorism story."

But the Australian media, and the Murdoch press in particular, was pedaling fear long before the January 2003 summer of terror. Ironically for a nation founded by European invasion just over 200 years ago, invasion anxiety has been a strong and recurring theme in white Australian history. The notion of an amorphous external threat goes back to the influx of Chinese workers during the

19th Century gold rushes, and later spawned the White Australia policy.

As Simon Philpott notes (2001, p. 376), fear of an imagined "Other," which for Australia has traditionally been Asia, helps galvanize political unity by locating threats to the national well-being beyond our borders. Fear of "being swamped by Asians" turned fish-and-chips shop owner Pauline Hanson into a runaway political success late in the 1990s and more recently, the institutionalized fear of invasion has manifested as hysteria over refugees, or "boatpeople" as they are referred to in the mainstream press, a level of public insecurity that Ghassan Hage calls "paramoid nationalism" (2003, p. 1).

BALI: AUSTRALIA'S SEPTEMBER 11?

Public terrorism fears were dramatically realized when two huge explosions ripped through Bali's tourist haven of Kuta in October 2002. The *Australian's* first headline screamed, "TERROR HITS HOME," and the phrase stuck as the banner heading for all subsequent coverage.

Framing the bombings as an attack on Australia provided the key emotional link to September 11, and seemed to justify Australia's role in the "war on terror." As Errol Simper (2002) pointed out, amidst the grief and outrage that ran through the Bali coverage, there was an element of wish-fulfillment:

To deny that segments of Australia appeared to crave at least a share of the adrenaline and global media attention that accompanied September 11 is to deny the nose on your face.

This was being played out, at least subconsciously, as Australia's September 11. As opposition leader Simon Crean told Parliament, "I think we get something of a better understanding as to what Americans must have felt on September 11" (Shanahan, 2002, October 18).

The link was also borne out in the rash conclusion from Day 1 that the Bali bombings were an attack on Australians, just as September 11 was an attack on Americans. As foreign editor Greg Sheridan proclaimed on the first day of coverage, "There can be little doubt that Australians were specifically targeted." (Sheridan, 2002, October 14).

The conclusion is both hasty and vain. It highlights the perverse cultural imperialism that has transformed a part of Indonesia into an Australian territory. Perverse because Australia has persistently denied its geography and nurtured cultural links to Europe and North America rather than Asia. As the latest white paper on foreign affairs and trade states, "Australia is a Western country located in the Asia-Pacific region with close ties and affinities with North America and Europe" (*Advancing the National Interest*, 2003, p. 8). Asia, particularly

Indonesia, has been the imagined "Other" in true Orientalist fashion. So to call this small part of Indonesia our "home away from home," as Murdoch's national daily did in its first editorial after the bombing (*Australian*, 2002, October 14), is a paradox.

When the nationalist discourses in Murdoch's *Australian* are examined, the framing of Bali as an attack on Australia is hardly surprising. Many of the Australian victims were football players who celebrated the end of the season was especially painful to a nation where "sport is the most universal of activities" (Fraser, 1971, p. 241). Old national character stereotypes of mateship, larrikinism, working class perseverance and sporting prowess pervaded the coverage, helping to frame the bombing as an attack on Australian values. Eulogies of the victims were perfect examples:

He was a quintessential working-class boy. He loved his footy, his mates and betting on horses. But most of all, Adam Howard, a 27-year-old professional punter from Double Bay in Sydney, loved to party. (Bryden-Brown, 2002)

But from the barrage of emotive journalism sprang a more serious and sinister message in the *Australian* — that this was war, and a decisive campaign was called for. Greg Sheridan proclaimed, "The terrorist empire has struck back" (Sheridan, 2002, October 14), and said the "war on terror" had moved decisively into Stage 2.

A first-day editorial said Bali was a "wake-up call" to the civilized world that terrorism must be defeated. In language all but transcribed from a Bush or Howard speech, the Murdoch paper proclaimed, "Bali proves that all freedom-loving peoples are at risk from terrorism, at home and abroad" (*Australian*, 2002, October 14). This was a decisive moment for the saber-rattlers. Howard's central premise justifying action in Afghanistan and later Iraq was endorsed — namely, that terrorism affected everyone, so it was in the national interest to fight terrorism throughout the world, Iraq included.

The *Australian* roundly quashed the anti-war arguments that saw Bali as a payback for Australia's support for America in Afghanistan and Iraq. But when Greens leader Bob Brown was pressed for his opinion on Iraq in light of the Bali bombing, his anti-war position was labeled "opportunistic" by political editor Dennis Shanahan (2002a) and sparked a wave of angry letters. The *Australian's* bias was unmistakable the following day, when Shanahan (2002b) reserved judgment in reporting John Anderson's pro-war blather in light of the Bali attacks.

Instances of the newspaper's overt support for the "war on terror" and particularly for invading Iraq after the Bali episode are too numerous to list. Certainly, with the foreign editor (Sheridan, 2002, October 14) and editor-at-large (Kelly, 2002, October 19-20) talking up Australian involvement in Iraq, the pro-

war lobby got a huge free kick.

But on a more insidious level, the *Australian* helped sell Howard's war by re-inventing him as a sensitive, trustworthy statesman in the aftermath of the Kuta attacks. In pictures, the usually wooden prime minister was shown hugging distraught mourners; in headlines he was given the heart to "weep" (Martin, 2002); and in stories he validated the nation's anger by saying, "We'll get the bastards" (Kelly, 2002, October 26-27). As Paul Kelly notes, "having divided the nation so bitterly for so much of his prime ministership, Howard is now a figure of unity. It is bizarre" (ibid).

Helped by the Murdoch press, Howard scored a major political boost after the Bali bombings — his approval rating soared seven points to 61% a week after the attacks (Shanahan, 2002, October 22). Even though intelligence reports and arguments for invading Iraq didn't add up, Howard's popularity and "track record" on security insulated him from an anti-war backlash. Even the vitriol of Bali victims and their families was muted when Howard explicitly linked his pro-war stance to the Bali bombings during a visit to New Zealand.

The anti-war *Canberra Times* led its March 11 edition with the backlash story, proclaiming, "Outrage at Bali linkage" (Peake, 2003). In stark contrast, Murdoch's paper picked up a wire story and tucked the embarrassing episode away on Page 5 (AAP, 2003). What this shows is that on both the op-ed and the news pages, the *Australian* manipulated the Bali bombings to plead the case for war in Iraq. Meanwhile, up to 75% of Australians opposed the war before the start of combat operations (Shanahan, 2003, August 5).

ALLIES UNDER PRESSURE

Despite its overt support for the war, there were plenty of divergent views in the *Australian*. This created the appearance of balance and objectivity, which underscores the values of a liberal-pluralist "fourth estate" defenses of the media.

Just a week before combat began, the *Australian* was reporting the frantic attempts by President Bush and Prime Minister Blair to pull something out of the public relations disaster that was occurring in the UN. Blair was described as "bleeding politically" while the White House was claiming that any vote by the Security Council to support war would be a "moral victory," with or without a veto from China, Russia or France.

A report from *USA Today* that the United States was threatening aid to recalcitrant Latin American nations unless they supported the war was buried in the last of 16 paragraphs (Lusetich, 2003a). Prime Minister Howard's 20-minute phone conversation was the second lead on March, 13, 2003, saying Australian diplomats were "frantically lobbying" at the UN on the coalition's behalf (Shanahan, 2003, March 13). This story was reinforced by a UN "scorecard" on

Page 8, outlining how former European colonies were being pressured for their crucial Security Council votes (Sutherland 2003a).

The *Australian* also reported the remarkable and dramatic resignation of Andrew Wilkie, a senior officer with the spy agency, the Office of National Assessments (ONA), a week before the fighting started. Wilkie cited his disagreements with ONA over their threat assessment of Iraq. He appeared all over the media for a couple of days and spoke at an anti-war rally in Canberra. Despite official attempts to discredit him, Wilkie stuck to his guns and denounced the government's decision to join the war:

I have been following the flow of intelligence very closely and, as far as I am concerned, I have seen nothing that justifies a war against them (quoted in McIlveen, 2003a).

Yet despite the appearance of these divergent views on the news pages, the leader pages apparently "set the record straight" and put the founder's position in a loyal and succinct kind of way. The editorial, "French toast irrelevant UN" (*Australian*, 2003, March 13), makes it clear that the *Australian* regarded Chirac as a faded power living an "impossible dream" and whose arguments at the UN were "less weak than feeble." France, the editorial warned, could be accused of reducing "global politics to a competition between great powers in which a nationalist France cannot compete."

As usual, the *Australian's* chorus of support for the Australian government was led by the very conservative and pro-Howard foreign editor Greg Sheridan. On March 13, 2003, Sheridan resolutely defended the morality of the war in the face of an "unreasonable veto" by one of the non-permanent Security Council members (Sheridan, 2003, March 13). Sheridan described the debate as "emotional and irrational," "hysterical," and then he restated all the well-rehearsed lines defending the morality of an attack on Iraq. Sheridan went on to cheer the psychological operations of the Americans, in particular "Shock and Awe," which he described as a "dislocation operation directed at the Iraqi leadership" (Sheridan, 2003, March 22-23).

To be fair, Sheridan's support for the war is tempered by two other opinion pieces on March 22. Washington-based commentator Harlan Ullman argued that U.S. unilateralism might have profound implications for the world geopolitical situation well into the future (Ullman, 2003). On the same page, Professor Paul Dibb (2003), a respected Australian commentator on defense issues, suggested that a likely outcome of the war is "a world divided and a return to the essentially tragic history of international affairs."

AN AUSTRALIAN INTEREST?

Australian public opinion is sensitive to perceptions that its government might be accused of being a junior partner in America's imperial ambition. This has deep historic and cultural roots in Australia's colonial past and post-war reliance on America. There is still a memory of Australia's participation in Vietnam, summed up by the famous phrase of an otherwise forgettable Prime Minister, Harold Holt. During President Lyndon Johnson's Australian visit in 1966, Holt told the U.S. leader that Australia would go "all the way with LBJ."

Holt's political successor, John Howard, did not want to be seen in this unflattering light. It was therefore important that his government establish an independent rationale for supporting GWB's war against Iraq. Rather than merely being America's "loyal deputy," there needed to be some "national interest" in going to war.

The trump card was terrorism. Particularly in the aftermath of the Bali bombing, the successful argument was that terrorism could touch anyone, so threats to national security were global and required global solutions. This was reflected in the government's foreign policy white paper, released in early 2003: The terrorist attacks ... in the United States and ... Bali have been defining events. They have changed Australia's security environment in significant ways. They starkly demonstrated that threats to Australia's security can be global as well as regional. (*Advancing the National Interest*, 2003, p. 9)

The *Australian* firmly embraced this sentiment and linked the all-pervasive threat of terrorism after Bali to Saddam Hussein's fabled weapons of mass destruction:

Gruesome as these terrorist outrages are, imagine what they would be like if they involved weapons of mass destruction. Iraq remains the most likely source of WMDs for al Qaeda (Sheridan, 2002, October 14).

National affairs editor Mike Steketee bolstered the *Australian's* pro-war stance by trying to dismiss the "loyal deputy" label on the first weekend of war:

Don't accept for one moment the propaganda that Australia is a lickspittle of the United States. Sometimes we get quite upset with the Americans. (Steketee, 2003)

The "propaganda" Steketee referred to here was the false argument that the anti-war movement was "anti-American" and believed that John Howard was merely following Washington's line. By highlighting Australia's mildly critical comments at the time of America's refusal to join international efforts to enforce an international ban on biological weapons in 2001, Steketee suggested that

Australia was truly independent and by implication that support for the war against Iraq was good policy.

FIRST STRIKE: SHOCK & AWE

In the first few days of the war there was plenty of patriotic footage and novelty stuff from the front of tanks.

The *Weekend Australian* (March 22) blared "PUNCH INTO IRAQ" over front-page stories about the military action (Eccleston, 2003) and published an opinion poll showing "support for war growing" (Shanahan, 2003, March 22-23). The key element of the *Australian's* front page was the carefully staged photograph of an Iraqi soldier being given water while an assault rifle is aimed at his head and his hands are bound. This image was also on the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* the same day (Saturday March 22). While the Australian media's appetite for the "our troops in action" type of stories was satisfied by an easing of restrictions, the main game was still the coalition's confidence and apparent lack of resistance by Iraqi forces.

On the second day of coverage, the *Weekend Australian* reported American concerns that Iraqis would begin setting fire to oil wells, sparking "Fears of a new scorched earth" (Browne 2003). It was another opportunity to quote from the briefing by Donald Rumsfeld. This time to the effect that by setting fire to oil wells Saddam Hussein was "destroying the riches of the Iraqi people" (quoted in Browne, 2003). On the same page, Hussein is labeled a "master of propaganda" (Kerin, 2003a, March 22-23) and a White House briefing paper, "Apparatus of Lies," is summarized without criticism. This piece repeats the standard line from Washington: that Hussein is responsible for diverting food aid into "weapons programs and luxuries for himself" and lying to the Arab world. Throughout the military campaign, the *Australian* repeated these justifications almost daily.

It is worth noting here how commercial television in Australia approached the war. Immediately after the fighting actually got under way (as opposed to 12 years of bombing raids on soft Iraqi targets), broadcast network news presenters set a poor tone for the coverage that followed. On the first Saturday (March 22) some news anchors were smiling and almost cheering "our first strike" on Iraqi targets: a bombing mission by an Australian FA18 and some ship-to-shore fire at the Al-Faw peninsula.

The Nine Network framed its coverage with a graphic rendering of the words "War on Iraq" that showed an uncanny resemblance to the title screen of George Lucas' science fiction classic *Star Wars*. Perhaps unwittingly, Greg Sheridan struck a similar chord when, after the Bali bombings, he wrote in the *Australian*: "The terrorist empire has struck back" (Sheridan, 2002, October 14). Episode 5 in the Lucas epic is called *The Empire Strikes Back*, a fitting allegory

for the “war on terror.”

OPERATION MUSHROOM: WE CAN FINALLY TELL YOU ABOUT IT

On that first weekend, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s correspondent in Qatar, Peter Lloyd, unwittingly let the cat out of the bag about media control: The coalition forces were also conducting “Operation Mushroom” against the media. In a frank exchange with *Insiders* host Barry Cassidy, Lloyd told of his frustration and that of the hundreds of reporters at the alliance military command center in Qatar. They were not getting any information, the briefings were sporadic and most of the stuff they were sending out in hourly “crosses” had actually been fed to them via fax, email and Internet links from their home bases.

Early in the conflict, Australian reporters complained about the lack of information from their own national military sources. The *Australian*’s staffer in Qatar, Rory Callinan complained in print about being “cocooned from reality by the coalition’s public relations machine” (*Australian*, 2003, March 22-23). Callinan said he was “locked into the multimillion dollar press center,” he called “press conference central.” Callinan said the press corps is unhappy: “We are a bit like mushrooms here, being drip-fed information.”

The appearance of this brief piece signaled the emergence of a new genre of war stories, news and commentary on the media’s broader role. Further attention was drawn to the media’s role by Ashleigh Wilson’s story about war coverage and comment on the Internet, “Conflict comes to a PC near you” (Wilson, 2003).

Complaints from Qatar and Canberra about the dearth of Australian information was not the harbinger of nascent anti-war sentiment among news reporters. It was really a plea for more color and background material to fill out the coverage and encourage a sense of Australian public ownership of the conflict. This was key to making the case for war in terms of the “national interest.” Without a local angle, Iraq looked like someone else’s war. Therefore, from very early on there was coverage of what Australian forces were doing, including frigates “in hunt for fleeing cronies” (Kerin, 2003b, March 22-23).

To the media’s relief, the Australian military PR operation allowed reporters to visit ships on search missions and mine clearing in the Gulf in the second week. And one ABC news crew was embedded with Marines as they entered Baghdad. On the other side, Australian journalists operating behind Iraqi lines were confined to Baghdad and some were expelled. Ian McPhedran and other News Limited reporters were confined to a Baghdad hotel. McPhedran was also briefly accused of spying for the allies. “Operation Mushroom” was not only going on close to the war-zone.

On the home front too, the fog of war descended quickly on that first

weekend. Australians watching the war unfold on television seemed like being carpet-bombed with expert opinion. Most commentators were pro-war, and very few anti-war or pro-peace voices were seen or heard.

PEACENIKS AND DEVIANTS: COVERING THE ANTI-WAR RALLIES

After the massive international rallies in February and March 2003, public sentiment in Australia was overwhelmingly against the war with up to 75% opposing it months earlier (Shanahan, 2003, August 5). The anti-war marches were the biggest Australian mobilizations since Vietnam. Some estimate they were the largest political demonstrations ever in Australia — more people on the streets over a sustained period than during the anti-conscription mobilizations of World War I and certainly bigger than the moratorium.

The marchers were a cross-section of ordinary Australians from every ethnic and religious background. There was a sense of purpose and strength in the crowds and sentiment way to the left of the official Labor opposition. In Brisbane, Labor leader Simon Crean was booed when he addressed the crowd of about 80,000. His right-wing position of support for a "legitimate" UN-backed attack on Iraq was very unpopular.

High school students were mobilizing in impressive numbers in all major cities. Spontaneous walkouts, some supported by parents and the teachers' unions, saw several large student actions. Church groups, green and peace groups worked with the various left groups and the unions to build the anti-war rallies.

As the war got closer the news media's attitude to the peace movement changed. The NSW police signaled a tough stand against student demonstrations and warned parents not to let their children get involved with anarchists and violent young men of a certain ethnic background. This policing action also sent a strong signal to the media that the gloves were off and the peace movement was no longer a "good" news story.

There is a formula for covering political demonstrations and if there is no strong violence — usually from the police — then it does not rate much of a mention. This approach was typified by a small piece in the Murdoch-owned Courier-Mail in Brisbane about an anti-war rally in Adelaide on 14 March. The story, headlined "Eggs, tomatoes fly in Adelaide protest" (Courier-Mail, 2003), was only eight paragraphs and the "missiles" are mentioned in four of them:

- 1st par: "demonstrators threw eggs and tomatoes at Howard's car";
- 2nd par: "one protester was taken into custody after charging at a Commonwealth vehicle containing Mr. Howard";
- 3rd par: "Earlier protesters pelted Mr. Howard's car with eggs and tomatoes";
- 4th par: "One egg hit the rear window of the vehicle containing Mr. Howard";

- 5th par: "Demonstrators chanting anti-war slogans and carrying placards were kept about 15m from Mr. Howard by South Australian police";
- 6th par: "despite the police barrier, protesters pelted three Commonwealth vehicles with eggs and tomatoes";
- 7th par: "The protesters then left [the scene]";
- 8th par: "When he left, one protester broke police ranks, charged at the vehicle containing Mr. Howard, and appeared to throw something. No charge was laid."

Apart from one mention of "anti-war slogans," this item did not say anything about the nature of the rally or the ideas behind it. Instead we got pointless repetition of two basic incidents: the "eggs and tomatoes" thrown at the car and one person running at "the vehicle containing Mr. Howard." This is a typical "news" report of the anti-war protests. The "deviant" nature of the smaller actions, such as confronting John Howard in Adelaide, is then applied to the movement as a whole.

This effect was also multiplied by the television coverage of the demonstrations. On the main television bulletins on the first Saturday of the war (March 22), the peace rallies held around the nation and globally got short shrift. At most in a 90-minute bulletin the peace activists got a couple of short vox-pops. But they were bracketed with the violence of some protest actions in the Middle East. In Brisbane, the Channel 7 reporter sounded disappointed that there had been "scuffles, but no arrests" at that morning's rally and sit-in.

On the other commercial stations the same thing happened. The local peace rallies were always covered by long-distance camera, a few anonymous shots of the crowds, a couple of colorful banners perhaps and, on a slow news day, a grab from one of the speakers. The rallies overseas were most often covered with a reader voice-over that gave bare facts and where possible focused the shots on "disturbances." Overall, the anti-war movement was reduced to inarticulate thuggery. Perhaps it is testament to the power of this and other elements of the pro-war coverage that by April, Australia's 75% opposition to the war had turned to 57% support (Shanahan, 2003, August 5).

SOME JOURNALISTS OPPOSE THE WAR

It would be unfair to characterize the Australian news media as solidly pro-war. Some, like *Canberra Times* editor in chief Jack Waterford, made their opposition clear and so did *Sydney Morning Herald* online political editor Margo Kingston. Others took a similar stand and some held to a diminishing middle ground of critical distance and vague support for something to be done about Saddam Hussein. *Australian* columnist Matt Price (2003) typified this latter position:

Millions of Australians are despairing at this war. We want it to end quickly, even if this elevates Howard to short-term heroism and makes his slavish media cheer squad even more unbearable than usual.

Lies, propaganda and deliberate misinformation should be expected in war. As British journalist and author Phillip Knightley (1989) says, the use of public information as a weapon of war is an honored tactic of presidents and generals. Only rarely do working journalists, particularly senior ones, acknowledge this openly; though many will say so quietly at dinner parties or in the bar after hours.

One rare editor in this category is Jack Waterford of the *Canberra Times*. He wrote a leader on April 5, 2003, detailing the countless lies we were told by "our own" side. He noted how Western journalists had been lied to about some events — the outcome of battles, the numbers of POWs, how civilian deaths had occurred at checkpoints. Waterford pointed out the deceptions in the Jessica Lynch incident, but pessimistically added that, in propaganda terms, when the truth finally emerged some time later it didn't really matter.

Surely the fact that the truth will usually emerge, often only in a day or so, might make some soldiers and politicians less willing to lie? Not necessarily, it would seem, if it serves some immediate purpose.

A direct propaganda hit on the news media won on the day in the Private Lynch affair and by the next day there was a new outrage, atrocity or allied victory to take its place.

The Australian news media shared the pleasure of the allied victory in Iraq and carried most of the same packaged material seen everywhere — the toppling of the statue, the waving and smiling crowds and the seeming celebration of Saddam's overthrow. However, it was interesting to note how quickly this soured and how quickly we began to see cracks appearing in the coalition rhetoric.

CONCLUSIONS

It is not surprising Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* led the patriotic media brigades in Australia during 2003 Gulf War. On the other side of the ledger the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Canberra Times* both editorialized against Australian involvement in the anti-Saddam coalition. Cutting through what the popular press took to calling the "fog of war" was very difficult. As in the 1991 Gulf War, American military controlled not only the air above Iraq and of airwaves as well.

The Doha briefings produced more enhanced images of smart bombs, trucks exploding under bridges and cruise missiles launched dramatically from the safety

of the U.S. fleet. But television viewers saw much more intensive footage of the fighting, and this impacted the language of the war. Like the Australian television news readers who excitedly reported that “our” fighters had had a “productive” day in the battlefield. Or the one who smiled when announcing the RAAF had dropped its first bomb — like it was a birth or something to celebrate.

The embedded media also showed us some horrible stuff: dead and wounded prisoners of war, bombed homes, a firestorm over Baghdad, and civilians dying in hospitals. British journalist John Simpson and his party were strafed by U.S. warplanes. His Iraqi translator was killed and viewers saw human blood dripping on the camera lens as it was carried by a wounded journalist. We saw three civilians in Baghdad shot as their car tried to overtake an army truck in which an ABC crew was embedded. One of the few left-wing voices heard in the Murdoch press, Phillip Adams, described the barrage of gore as “pornographic violence” (Adams, 2003). Everything, it seems, was more bloody and extreme in the 2003 Gulf War.

In the new language of this war, extreme violence was commonplace. It shocked us momentarily, but then the relentless, more subtle language of war took over: “friendly fire,” “smart bombs,” “unfortunate” civilian deaths, the callous disregard for basic human rights and outright lies. It is easy to target and get angry about these obvious linguistic tricks of war; not so easy to undecipher the more embedded language.

In the *Australian*, this amounted to a more purposeful, yet less obvious form of propaganda, known as “the big lie.” It was the ideological appeal to nationalism, patriotism and the myth of free markets and democracy. It is a lie because what it offered — so-called “Western liberal democracy” as the solution for Iraq and as the moral force behind the “war on terror” — was itself a deception. The *Australian* and other Murdoch papers churned and spun this lie for all it was worth. They used it to link the Bali bombings with the invasion of Iraq by raising the specter of Armageddon: “Gruesome as these terrorist outrages are, imagine what they would be like if they involved weapons of mass destruction” (Sheridan, 2002, October 14). Then the spurious link between Iraq and terrorism is passed off as common sense:

This week John Anderson told the Australian parliament what we all really know but try not to face, that there is a connection between terrorism and rogue nations with weapons of mass destruction. (Sheridan, 2002b. Italics added)

The alternative is never mentioned and so the lie appears to be the only possible version of the truth. This is an ideological swindle.

In the scramble to make sense out of complex and rapidly moving world events, journalists and editors fall back on simplistic generalizations and

stereotypes. During the Iraq war, the "enemy" was demonized and opponents made deviant in terms of the "common sense" approach. This helped legitimize the use of force. In the case of the military enemy — Iraq — Saddam Hussein's followers were constantly referred to as the fedayeen. They were "thugs", they were vicious and criminal. This approach from the opinion writers and columnists justified the attacks and the killing, even though, according to these same apologists, any death in war is "regrettable."

At home, the effect was similar. Peace activists were derided as the "loony-left," the "peaceniks," or worse, manipulating communist cells operating clandestinely. Young working class students and teenagers from Sydney's southwest, angry about the war and clearly against it, were stereotyped as "hot heads," thugs, and "un-Australian." Their Arabness, not their Australian identity was what the pro-war press emphasized. In both cases — the Iraqi regime and Australian protesters — the media tended to fall back onto racist stereotypes, creating moral binaries.

This is exactly what the post-Cold War terrorism news frame is about — reducing complex geopolitical and cultural issues to simple questions of right and wrong, us and them. Within this frame, the 2003 Gulf War and the so-called "war on terror" are represented as battles between good and evil. George W. Bush talks about "freedom-loving people" and "evil men" and the Murdoch press regurgitates it as if this moral dichotomy was a natural category (*Australian*, 2002, October 14). This essentializes the "terrorist problem" in the same way that biological essentialism is used to justify sexism.

If the terrorists are defined as innately evil, then there is no need to look at how policies and practices in the Western world might contribute to the conflict, because innately "evil men" are beyond redemption. It's nature. Fighting the "war on terror" then becomes a matter of rounding up the evil men more than anything else.

In Australia, the agenda-setting Murdoch press employs this terror news frame and it sells newspapers. It sells because the frame is easy to understand. And it sells because it appeals to a sense of patriotic nationalism and an endemic insecurity based on the historical fear of invasion. In a multicultural country struggling to define its post-colonial identity, the moral certitude of the "war on terror" has obvious mainstream appeal, even if it somehow does not answer all the lingering questions.

During hostilities, support for war increased in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia, which was to be expected in part because the news media popularized the war and dulled some senses to the violence they portrayed. No doubt the Murdoch press played an important role in cohering what support for Australia's involvement in 2003 Gulf War.

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