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### The Bush Administration's Big Lies: A Case Study of Media Manipulation and Disinformation<sup>1</sup>

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After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, interest in "the crisis in the Gulf" increased when the U.S. claimed that Iraq might also invade Saudi Arabia, which was said to control 20 percent of the world's known oil reserves and an investment portfolio even larger than Kuwait's.<sup>2</sup> George Bush, who had initially attacked the invasion as "naked aggression," heated up his rhetoric and declared on August 5 that the invasion "would not stand." Two days later, he sent thousands of troops to Saudi Arabia. The Bush administration had thus set the stage for the Gulf war by failing to warn Iraq of the consequences of invading Kuwait and then by quickly sending troops to Saudi Arabia while, as I argue in *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Kellner 1992, pp. 30ff), undercutting diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis.

Although the United States constantly accused Iraq and Saddam Hussein of lying and compared the Iraqi leader to Hitler, the Bush administration itself systematically disseminated Big Lies to promote its war policy. Suspicious claims by the administration began with reports that the Iraqis had positioned an offensive force on the Saudi Arabian border, poised to invade that country. On August 3, for instance, Forrest Sawyer reported on ABC's *Nightline* that: "tens of thousands of Iraqi troops are reportedly massed along the Saudi Arabian border, and there is still fear that Saddam Hussein will carry his blitzkrieg across Saudi territory. It would not be much of a fight. Iraq's million-man battle-seasoned army against the nearly 66,000 Saudi troops, 5,500 Iraqi tanks, 10 times as many as Saudi Arabia."

There is no compelling evidence that Iraq did have large numbers of troops on the Saudi border and the same day ABC news reported the Iraqi ambassador's claim that Iraq had no intention whatsoever of invading Saudi Arabia and that it was "just a big lie" that there were Iraqi troops preparing to invade Saudi Arabia. Moreover, as I shall show, there are indications that from the beginning the Pentagon and Bush administration consistently exaggerated the Iraqi threat to Saudi Arabia, or even manufactured it, to justify their intervention. There is also reason to believe that the Bush administration deliberately overestimated the size and competency of the Iraqi army in Kuwait and that the mainstream media uncritically reproduced the Administration's (dubious) figures repeatedly. On August 4, the *New York Times* headline read: "Iraqis Mass on Saudi Frontier" and the story indicated that: "Pentagon officials said that more than 60,000 Iraqi troops were massing in the southern part of Kuwait, not far from

a major oilfield in Saudi Arabia. A State Department spokesman, Richard A. Boucher, said Iraqi troops were within five to ten miles of the frontier. The British foreign secretary, Douglas Hurd, said that Iraqi troops were massing on the border....There were conflicting reports about the size of the Iraqi military force in Kuwait, but one Pentagon official estimated late today that it was approaching 100,000 troops, or more than Iraq needs to pacify and occupy Kuwait" (p. A4).

The television networks dutifully repeated these figures day after day without a modicum of skepticism. There is no reason, however, why one should have accepted these figures or the claim that the Iraqis were gathering on the Saudi Arabia border as if to invade. On the contrary, compelling evidence suggested that U.S. claims concerning the imminent Iraqi threat to Saudi Arabia were pure disinformation designed to legitimate a U.S. military intervention in the Gulf. In particular, the claim that Iraqis were ready to invade Saudi Arabia served to scare the Saudis into allowing a major U.S. troop deployment on their soil and to convince the U.S. and world public that serious interests (i.e., the flow of oil) were being threatened. The Iraqis claimed repeatedly that they had no designs on Saudi Arabia, no intention of invading, and because there were no independent sources of information in Kuwait, it was impossible to verify if the United States was or was not telling the truth concerning the Iraqi troop formations on the Saudi border that were allegedly poised for invasion.

On August 5, the Pentagon continued to claim that Iraq was threatening Saudi Arabia. The *New York Times* stated: "Iraqi troops were reported to have gone into what is called the Neutral Zone, an area from which Kuwait and Saudi Arabia share oil earnings. Baghdad denied those reports as 'false news'" (p. A1). In addition, the *Times* disclosed:

A Pentagon official said that any quick Iraqi attack on Saudi Arabia would have to be without the logistical support usual for a major operation.

"They have not brought a lot down to Kuwait for a large scale drive into Saudi Arabia," said an official.

"A long-term drive would require more of a logistical tail — more water, gas, fuel, ammunition, spare parts and all of that," the official said. (p. A10)

Despite this disclaimer, buried in a story on page 10, the Bush administration and mainstream media were sending out signals that an Iraqi invasion of Saudi Arabia was an imminent and dangerous threat.<sup>3</sup> On August 6, the message of the Bush administration was that the Arab countries were "not serious enough" concerning the Iraqi threat and were prepared to capitulate to Iraqi demands and accept its takeover of Kuwait. The *New York Times* com-



mented:

Administration officials are increasingly concerned about the unwillingness of Saudi Arabia and the other leading Arab countries to stand up against Mr. Hussein. Officials say they detect a strong tendency in the Arab world to try to appease Baghdad by letting it swallow Kuwait in hopes that this will spare Iraq's neighbors from a similar fate. Privately, American officials are expressing contempt and disgust with most of the Arab leaders.

"The habits of centuries die hard," said a senior Administration official about the seeming instinct of Iraq's oil-rich neighbors to try to buy Baghdad off rather than forcefully confront it." (August 6, 1991, p. A6)

Note how the sources for every sentence of this story are "Administration officials" who are obviously using the media to put out a propaganda line. Journalists are dependent on official sources to get leads, leaks, and background information that will help them in the highly competitive business of journalism. The system of news production and competition thus forces journalists to rely on official sources who reward journalists who convey the information and line that they wish promoted with further inside information, while punishing journalists who question their positions. Thus, in a crisis situation, without independent sources of information, mainstream journalists tend to rely on official sources who are able to manipulate them.

Precisely such a process of manipulation was evident in the crisis in the Gulf as the Bush administration used the mainstream media to conjure up an Iraqi threat to Saudi Arabia and to legitimate the deployment of U.S. troops in the region. The *New York Times* headline on August 6 read: "Bush, Hinting Force, Declares Gulf Impasse 'Will Not Stand'" and the sub-headline pointed to a mission by Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney to Saudi Arabia to try to persuade the Saudis to let the United States use military installations in their country. There is evidence that, early on, the Bush administration decided on the use of military force to resolve the crisis and chose the road to war. Henceforth, there would be no serious talk within the administration of a negotiated settlement; instead, the administration planned step by step its relentless march to war.<sup>4</sup>

The media helped the Bush administration by beating the war drums and producing an atmosphere where it was all too likely that military force would be used to resolve the crisis in the Gulf. In particular, the *Washington Post* not only privileged the Bush administration line during the crucial early days of the crisis, but itself promoted a military option. On August 3, Patrick Tyler, who had previously written an article on Saddam Hussein as a "pragmatic" Arab leader (May 13, 1989, p. A13) suddenly discovered that Hussein was a "brash

and brutal leader, whose tactics have terrorized his neighbors, incited the Israelis with threats of chemical retaliation and made the superpowers look like helpless giants" (p. A25). Also on August 3, George Will attacked the "Wolf of Babylon" while two *Post* Op-Ed (opinion-editorial) page writers discovered Iraq's "Nuclear Specter"; neoconservative Charles Krauthammer deplored the "festival of appeasement" and a *Post* editorial attacked the "Aggression in the Gulf" and the "dictator Saddam Hussein." A business article noted that Hussein is now "OPEC's Most Important Member," claiming that he now controlled world oil prices.<sup>5</sup>

The August 7 edition of the *Washington Post* aggressively promoted a military solution, while demonizing the Iraqi leader. Before Bush even announced his decision to send U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia, the *Post* was calling for a U.S. military response to Iraq's invasion. On p. A2, Mary McGrory, in a column titled "Bush and the Beast of Baghdad," urged Bush to bomb Iraq. She assured Bush that "Americans, faced with the specter of high oil prices and new hostage-grabs, are emotionally involved in getting rid of the beast" and that the "best thing Bush has going for him is the just about unanimous approval to do whatever is necessary." Note that McGrory referred to Saddam Hussein as a "beast"—perhaps the ultimate dehumanizing epithet. Not only did she demonize the Iraqi leader, but she suggested—falsely—that Bush had a mandate from the public to bomb Baghdad and to do "whatever is necessary," thus urging and legitimating ruthless military action. After producing a litany of Hussein's bestial acts, McGrory evoked the Munich analogy, recalling the appeasement of Hitler in the 1930s at the Munich conference, implicitly warning against similar treatment of the Iraqis.<sup>6</sup>

Note, however, the reasons, such as they are, that McGrory recommended bombing "the beast" and how she identifies Iraq with its president as if bombing Iraq were equivalent to bombing Hussein. She claimed that "Saudi Arabia is in imminent danger of being invaded by Saddam" and then asked rhetorically if bombing Baghdad will "move up his timetable on the invasion of Saudi Arabia?" McGrory assumed that Saddam Hussein *will* invade Saudi Arabia and that therefore he should be bombed to punish him for his transgressions. This absolutely irresponsible call for violent military action disregarded all of the good reasons why it was unlikely that Iraq would invade Saudi Arabia. Indeed, had that been the Iraqi plan, the only rational way to carry it through would have been to do so immediately, although there is not a shred of evidence that Iraq ever had this in mind.

This was supplemented in the *Washington Post's* August 7 edition by both an opinion piece and a front-page article which suggest that the *Post* was being used in a disinformation campaign to legitimate a U.S. intervention in Saudi Arabia and was engaging in "yellow journalism" to promote a military solution.<sup>7</sup> On that day, the *Post's* associate editor and chief foreign correspondent Jim Hoagland kicked in with a column: "Force Hussein to Withdraw" (p. A19).



As certain as McGrory of Iraq's imminent invasion of Saudi Arabia, Hoagland opened by proclaiming that "Saddam Hussein has gone to war to gain control of the oil fields of Kuwait and ultimately of Saudi Arabia. The United States must now use convincing military force against the Iraqi dictator to save the oil fields and to preserve American influence in the Middle East." According to Hoagland, Saddam Hussein "respects only force and will respond to nothing else."

The rest of the article consisted of false analysis, questionable analogies, and bellicose banality. Hoagland claimed that the "Iraqi dictator's base of support is too narrow and too shaky to withstand a sharp, telling blow." Yet some six weeks of the most vicious bombing in history were unable to dislodge Hussein whose support, or staying power, was obviously much stronger than Hoagland could imagine. Hoagland also believed that "he [Hussein] is so hated at home that his defeat, even by foreign forces, will be greeted as deliverance by his own nation and by much of the Arab world." As it turned out, both Iraq and the Arab world were deeply divided over Hussein and the sweeping generalities that Hoagland employed were totally off the mark.

Hoagland bordered on overt racism when he claimed that the Arab nations were too weak to "deliver that blow themselves" (one wonders what blow the hot-penned warrior at the *Post* had in mind). He also claimed that Ronald Reagan's decision to bomb Libya was the right model for Bush to follow. This example was revealing because Moammar Gadhafi preceded Saddam Hussein as a symbolically constructed Arab enemy upon which national hatred could be projected and thus served as an object lesson for Third World countries that refused to submit to domination by the neo-imperialist superpowers.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, it is far from certain that the terrorist incident for which Gadhafi was "punished" (i.e., the bombing of a Berlin disco) was carried out by groups affiliated with Libya.<sup>9</sup> But facts have little relevance to an ideologue's brief for bombing.

In his opinion piece, Hoagland lectured George Bush on why he must take urgent and forceful action to save his presidency and, like McGrory, urged military action against Iraq. Hoagland assumed both that Iraq planned to invade Saudi Arabia and that only a military blow from George Bush could save the day. In fact, as I shall soon discuss, there were important Arab diplomatic initiatives underway, blocked by the United States, but these efforts were ignored by the war-mongering Hoagland. Letting his reactionary beliefs slip through, Hoagland interpreted Iraq's invasion of Kuwait as a challenge to "the legitimacy of all remaining monarchies in the Arabian Peninsula, where Britain established most existing boundaries and political systems in the colonial era." Hoagland thus defined the principles at stake as the legitimacy of some of the most reactionary monarchies in the world, with borders arbitrarily drawn by British colonialists who deprived Iraq of a viable seaport and robbed national groups like the Palestinians and the Kurds of their homelands.

Indeed, Hoagland's whole article manifests what Edward Said (1978) described as an "Orientalist" mentality in which white Westerners establish their superiority by vacuous generalizations about people in the Arab world. Hoagland characterized Arabs as understanding only force, too weak to respond to aggression, and incapable of defending themselves and solving their own problems. For him, the Gulf crisis is thus the locus of "a rare case where the United States would be unwise not to use force." Analyzing such intellectually bankrupt pleas for a military strike against Iraq would not be worth the time and energy except that administration officials paid close attention to Hoagland's columns. Further, his poorly written, badly argued, and banal punditry was highly acclaimed in political circles; indeed, he was awarded a Pulitzer prize "for searching and prescient columns on events leading up to the Gulf War." In addition, his and McGrory's columns are significant because they were published in the *Washington Post*, supposedly a bastion of liberal enlightenment, and read by U.S. policymakers and the mainstream media. Further, McGrory's demonization of Hussein was retooled and republished in *Newsweek* (Sept. 3, 1990), a part of the Washington Post Company.

In fact, the *Washington Post* in its August 7 edition almost seemed to be prodding Bush to send troops to Saudi Arabia and to use force to resolve the crisis. *The Post's* banner headline across the top of page 1 stated: "Saddam says Seizure of Kuwait Is Permanent" and a lead story by Patrick Tyler<sup>10</sup> claimed:

Saddam called in the ranking U.S. diplomat in Baghdad, and told him categorically that Kuwait now belongs to Iraq and there was no going back, according to Administration officials. "It's a done deal," one U.S. official said, characterizing Saddam's message.

Another official said Saddam appended a specific warning that if Saudi Arabia shuts down the Iraqi crude oil pipelines that cross the Saudi desert to the Red Sea, Iraq will attack the kingdom. The warning further stated that if American forces intervene in the region, Iraq will "embarrass" the United States, the official said.

In retrospect, this story is sheer disinformation and the *Washington Post* reported once again merely what Bush administration officials told them as if it were fact, making Hussein sound as belligerent and threatening as possible. And although Iraq did in fact keep hold of Kuwait, according to other sources (Salinger and Laurent 1991 and Emery 1991), it was seeking to cut a deal to resolve the crisis, but from the beginning the Bush administration simply refused to negotiate. Other accounts of the meeting of Saddam Hussein with the U.S. *charge d'affaires* in Baghdad, Joe Wilson, provide a quite different story. According to Karsh and Rautsi (1991):

During the [August 6] meeting [with Joe Wilson], Hussein was far



more affable than in his bellicose encounter with Ms. Glaspie a fortnight earlier. "Iraq is firmly willing to respect the United States' legitimate international interests in the Middle East," he told Mr. Wilson, "and is interested in establishing normal relations with the United States on the basis of mutual respect." Dismissing the reports on Iraqi military deployments along the Saudi border as fabrications, aimed at providing "pretexts to interfere in the region's affairs and to justify an aggression against Iraq," he reassured his interlocutor that Iraq harbored no evil intentions whatsoever against Saudi Arabia, with which it was tied in a bilateral treaty of non-aggression. (P. 220)<sup>11</sup>

The authors claim that such conciliatory gestures under duress are typical of Hussein and that he was making every effort possible to assure the world that he had no intention of invading Saudi Arabia:

Even a cursory examination of Saddam's political record would reveal that his instinctive inclination, whenever faced with overwhelming opposition, was to appease rather than to confront, to try to defuse tensions, rather than to escalate.

His initial response to the buildup of international pressures following the invasion of Kuwait was no exception. While threatening to turn the Gulf into "a graveyard for those who think of committing aggression," he took great care to emphasize the temporary nature of the Iraqi intervention, reiterating his pledge to withdraw the Iraqi forces "as soon as the situation settles down and the evil grip is loosened on Arab Kuwait."

Moreover, within less than 36 hours of the invasion, the Iraqi public learned, through a special announcement of the RCC [Revolutionary Command Council], that their valiant armed forces had completed "their honest national and pan-Arab duties" of defending Kuwait, and were to begin withdrawing from the principality on August 5, "unless something emerges that threatens the security of Kuwait and Iraq." ...A special emphasis in Saddam's conciliating campaign was placed on denying any possibility of an impending Iraq act of aggression against Saudi Arabia. "Some news agencies have reported fabricated news about what they called the approach of Iraqi forces toward the Saudi border," read an official Iraqi statement. "Iraq categorically denies these fabricated reports. Causing confusion between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is a fraternal country with which we have normal cordial relations, and Kuwait's case is tendentious." This message was quickly conveyed to the heads of Arab states, Egypt and Saudi Arabia in particular, by high-ranking officials. More importantly, it was directly relayed to President Bush in an oral message from Saddam Hussein, transmitted at a meeting with the U.S. *charge d'affaires* in Baghdad, Joseph Wilson. (Karsh and Rautsi 1991, pp. 219-220).

The transcript of the conversation on August 6 between Wilson and

Hussein (published in Salinger and Laurent 1991, pp. 137-147 and Sciolino 1991, pp. 284-293) supports the Iraqi version and suggests that the *Washington Post* version was fabricated by the Bush administration and dutifully transmitted by the *Post*. The key issues concern: (1) whether Iraq was really planning to invade Saudi Arabia, as it was the threat of such an invasion that Bush used to justify sending U.S. troops to the Gulf on August 7; and (2) whether Iraq was or was not prepared to negotiate a settlement to the crisis. The transcript of the Wilson meeting with Hussein suggests that rather than being aggressive and intransigent, Hussein made it clear from the beginning that he was willing to negotiate a solution to the Gulf crisis and had no intention whatsoever of invading Saudi Arabia. The *Post* story, by contrast, indicated that Hussein was not prepared to negotiate a settlement. Furthermore, two *Post* columnists on August 7 insinuated that an Iraqi invasion of Saudi Arabia was imminent and that only bombing Iraq could deter Iraqi aggression. In a summary article on the invasion, one of the *Washington Post's* top reporters, Patrick Tyler, wrote: "The initial move to seize Kuwait was relatively painless. But the next step that Saddam reportedly threatened yesterday—a possible invasion of Saudi Arabia—would pose immense difficulties for the Iraqi leader, forcing his army to operate far from home, at the end of long supply lines, in the intense summer heat of the desert" (p. A9).

This passage repeats the claim that Saddam Hussein threatened to invade Saudi Arabia, despite the lack of any compelling evidence. Moreover, Tyler's own text indicated the extreme unlikelihood that Iraq would invade Saudi Arabia right after taking Kuwait because of the logistical difficulties that such an invasion would entail (to say nothing of the political response of the West that obviously would not tolerate such a move). Indeed, during this period, the American Friends Service Committee put out a report that concluded:

Prior to the deployment of the multinational forces to Saudi Arabia many informed analysts believed that Iraq would not continue past Kuwait to the Saudi oil fields, for at least five reasons: (1) Whereas Kuwait had angered Iraq by exceeding its OPEC oil quota, Iraq and Saudi Arabia had been coordinating their oil pricing policies before the invasion, in opposition to Kuwait; (2) It will take some time for Iraq to absorb Kuwait and assess the situation; (3) Saudi Arabia's military forces, while still small compared to Iraq's, are much larger and more capable than Kuwait's were; (4) Supply lines for Iraqi forces would become overstretched and vulnerable to Saudi air attack; and (5) An attack on Saudi Arabia would almost certainly prompt military intervention by the United States and other countries. (August 8, 1990; in *PeaceNet mideast.gulf archive*)<sup>12</sup>

Other informed observers also doubted that Iraq ever had any intention of invading Saudi Arabia. Bulloch and Morris (1991) argue that: "For all the talk of Saddam's plans to attack the kingdom, it never seemed likely. The Iraqi



deployment, once Kuwait was taken, was entirely defensive, and the much-cited move towards the Saudi border was merely the pushing out of frontlines and tripwires which any prudent commander would undertake when setting up a defensive line. All the evidence was that suggestions of possible moves into Saudi Arabia by the Iraqis were merely propaganda designed to support the huge build-up of forces by America and its allies" (pp. 169-170). Martin Yant concluded that, "many analysts now question whether Iraqi tanks were ever poised to roll into Saudi Arabia. Historians may someday compare this claim to the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident, in which a clash between U.S. destroyers and Vietnamese torpedo boats was apparently blown out of proportion by President Johnson in order to gain congressional authority to expand the Vietnam War" (1991, p. 90).

Thus the Bush administration and *Washington Post* disinformation concerning the Iraqis' readiness to invade Saudi Arabia worked effectively to shape media discourse and public perception of the crisis and to legitimate U.S. policy, as did Tyler's front-page story concerning Hussein's meeting with Joe Wilson and Iraq's alleged refusal to negotiate a solution or leave Kuwait. The same day as the *Washington Post* article, the Iraqi news service denied the report that Iraq was massing troops on the Saudi/Kuwaiti border and claimed that it had no intention of invading Saudi Arabia; this report was cited in the *Japan Economic Newswire*, the *Xinhua General Overseas News Service*, and some *Reuters* reports on August 7, but was generally disregarded by the U.S. mainstream media. Also, on August 7, State Department spokesperson Margaret Tutweiler described the Iraqi troops massing on the border and presented Joseph Wilson's meeting with Saddam Hussein negatively, building on the *Washington Post* disinformation campaign to produce an image on the very day that the U.S. was sending troops to Saudi Arabia that Iraq was not going to leave Kuwait, would not negotiate, and was about to invade Saudi Arabia.

This discourse dominated the news coverage for the day. On an August 7, PBS discussion of the proper U.S. response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, co-anchor Judy Woodruff stated: "Iraq's leader Saddam Hussein was quoted today [in the *Post* story — D.K.] as saying the invasion of Kuwait was irreversible and permanent." Later on the same show, former national security adviser (and Iran/Contra criminal) Robert McFarlane quoted the story as evidence that Hussein was not going to leave Kuwait and that therefore a U.S. military intervention in Saudi Arabia was necessary. And in a discussion with Arab-American leaders as to whether a U.S. military intervention was justified, Woodruff interjected: the U.S. *charge* in Baghdad did have a two hour meeting with Saddam Hussein yesterday which by all accounts was very unsatisfactory as Saddam Hussein insisted that he was going to stay in Kuwait and made what were reported to be veiled threats against other nations in the area" — all lies which Bush administration officials fed to the *Post* which were then disseminated by other mainstream media.<sup>13</sup>

On the morning of August 8, presidential press secretary Marlin Fitzwater told reporters that in a tense, two-hour session between Hussein and the highest-ranking American official in Iraq, *charge d'affaires* Joseph Wilson, the Iraqi president "indicated he had no intention of leaving Kuwait and had every indication of staying and claiming it as his own." This false account of the conversation with Wilson was printed in the *Boston Globe*, *Newsday*, the *Jerusalem Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Toronto Star*, *The Times* (of London), and the *Washington Times*. Summaries of the first week of the crisis in the *Los Angeles Times* (Aug. 9, 1990) and the *Sunday Times* of London (Aug. 12, 1990) presented the false Bush administration version of the Hussein/Wilson meeting as the turning point in the crisis which seemingly indicated that Iraq was not going to pull out of Kuwait or negotiate a solution to the crisis.

The U.S. was thus able to produce the impression that Iraq had no intention of leaving Kuwait and negotiating a solution to the crisis by distorting the discussion between Iraq and Joseph Wilson and the mainstream media served as a compliant conduit for the U.S. disinformation campaign. In his early morning television speech on August 8, which announced and defended sending U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia, Bush claimed that "the Saudi government requested our help, and I responded to that request by ordering U.S. air and ground forces to deploy to the kingdom of Saudi Arabia." This was a lie as accounts of the Saudi-U.S. negotiations later indicated that the United States pressured the Saudis to allow the U.S. military intervention into their country (Woodward 1991, pp. 241ff. and Salinger and Laurent 1991, pp. 110ff.).<sup>14</sup> Bush repeated the dubious claim that "Iraq has massed an enormous war machine on the Saudi border," and his administration emphasized this theme in discussion with the media, which obediently reproduced the argument. At 9:24 a.m. on August 8, for instance, Bob Zelnick, ABC's Pentagon correspondent, dutifully reported that the Pentagon informed him that Iraqi troop presence had doubled since the invasion of Kuwait, that there were now more than 200,000 Iraqi troops in Kuwait with a large force poised to invade Saudi Arabia.

Yet it is not at all certain how many troops Iraq actually deployed in Kuwait during the first six weeks of the crisis. All preinvasion reports produced by the Bush administration indicated that Iraq had amassed about 100,000 troops on the border of Kuwait. Initial reports during the first few days after the invasion suggested that Iraq actually had between 80,000 and 100,000 troops in Kuwait, more than enough for an occupation, as the Bush administration liked to point out and as the mainstream media diligently reported; once the U.S. forces were on their way to Saudi Arabia, the Iraqi forces suddenly doubled. But these figures invariably came from Bush administration or Pentagon sources, and it was later claimed that Iraqi troops were actually being withdrawn from Kuwait at the very moment when the Bush administration and Pentagon asserted that they were doubling their forces. After the war, Pentagon officials told *U.S. News and World Report* writers that the divisions positioned furthest south in Kuwait were not the elite Republican Guard forces, which were moved back to Iraq



during the first week of the invasion (1992, pp. 97-98). A senior Central Command officer conceded after the war ended that: "We still have no hard evidence that he ever intended to invade Saudi Arabia. We believe that he did. But none of the captured documents or prisoner debriefs has come up with anything hard [indicating an attack on the Saudi oil fields]" (U.S. News and World Report 1992, p. 98).

After the war, it was evident that the U.S. had vastly overestimated the number of Iraqi troops in Kuwait, and there is reason to believe that the U.S. estimates were highly flawed from the beginning. *St. Petersburg Times* reporter Jean Heller published two stories (Nov. 30 and Jan. 6) suggesting that satellite photos indicated far fewer Iraqi troops in Saudi Arabia than the Bush administration claimed (the Jan. 6 story was republished in *In These Times*, Feb. 27, 1991, pp. 1-2). Heller's suspicions were roused when she saw a December 3, 1990 *Newsweek* "Periscope" item that ABC News had never used several satellite photos of Saudi Arabia and southern Kuwait taken in early September. Purchased by ABC from the Soviet commercial satellite agency Soyuz-Karta, the photos were expected to reveal the presence of a massive Iraqi troop deployment in Kuwait, but failed to disclose anything near the number of troops claimed by the Bush administration. ABC declined to use them and Heller got her newspaper to purchase the satellite photos of Kuwait from August 8 and September 13 and of Saudi Arabia from September 11. Two satellite experts who had formerly worked for the U.S. government failed to find evidence of the alleged buildup. "'The Pentagon kept saying the bad guys were there, but we don't see anything to indicate an Iraqi force in Kuwait of even 20 percent the size the administration claimed,' said Peter Zimmerman, who served with the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency during the Reagan administration" (Heller, *In These Times*, Feb. 27, p. 2).

Both satellite photos taken on August 8 and September 13 showed a sand cover on the roads, suggesting that there were few Iraqi troops on the Saudi border where the Bush administration claimed that they were massed, threatening to invade Saudi Arabia. Pictures of the main Kuwaiti airport showed no Iraqi planes in sight, though large numbers of U.S. planes were visible in Saudi Arabia. The Pentagon refused to comment on the satellite photos, but to suggestions advanced by ABC (which refused to show the photos) that the pictures were not high enough quality to detect the Iraqi troops, Heller responded that the photograph of the north of Saudi Arabia showed all the roads swept clean of sand and clearly depicted the U.S. troop buildup in the area. By September, the Pentagon was claiming that there were 265,000 Iraqi troops and 2,200 tanks, which posed a threat to Saudi Arabia, deployed in Kuwait, but the photographs reveal nowhere near this number and, so far, the U.S. government has refused to release its satellite photographs.

Indeed, Woodward (1991) noted that the Saudis had sent scouts across the border into Kuwait after the Iraqi invasion to see if they could detect the Iraqi

troops that the United States claimed were massed for a possible invasion of their country. "The scouts had come back reporting nothing. There was no trace of the Iraqi troops heading toward the kingdom" (Woodward 1991, pp. 258-259). Soon after, the U.S. team arrived with photos of the Iraqi troops allegedly massed on the Saudi border and General Norman Schwarzkopf explained to the Saudis that the Iraqis had sent small command-and-control units ahead of the mass of troops, which would explain why the Saudi scouts failed to see them (Woodward 1991, p. 268).<sup>15</sup> Former CIA officer Ralph McGehee told journalist Joel Bleifuss: "There has been no hesitation in the past to use doctored satellite photographs to support the policy position that the U.S. wants supported" (*In These Times*, Sept. 19, 1990, p. 5). Indeed, Emery (1991) reported that King Hussein of Jordan was sent similar pictures of tanks moving along roads near the Saudi/Kuwaiti border and that King Hussein claimed that the Saudis "pressed the panic button" when they saw the photographs (p. 15). King Hussein was skeptical and "argued that if Saddam Hussein had wanted to invade the Saudis, he would have moved immediately, when the only thing between him and the Saudi capital was a tiny and untested—if expensively equipped—Saudi army" (Emery 1991).

This account is supported by Dunnigan and Bay's diagram of Iraqi defenses in August 1990 when U.S. forces arrived in Saudi Arabia (1991, p. 248). Iraqi troops are presented in a defensive posture around Kuwait City and not poised on the border ready to invade. Later diagrams by the authors (1991, pp. 256-257) show Iraqi troops located in defensive positions on the border but there is no evidence that they were ever set to invade Saudi Arabia. Thus, there are reasons to believe that the Bush administration exaggerated the number of Iraqi troops in Kuwait and the threat to Saudi Arabia to scare the Saudis into accepting the U.S. troops and to justify its own troop buildup in the region and eventual military action. The mainstream media reproduced the U.S. claims and figures as facts with newspapers like the *Washington Post* and the television networks serving as conduits for Bush administration disinformation campaign.

Moreover, the *Washington Post* followed the tradition of yellow journalism by urging Bush to military action on the basis of disinformation. The difference, however, between classical yellow journalism and the promotion by the *Post* of military action against Iraq was that William Randolph Hearst's papers had produced the lies themselves to help sell papers and to push a policy line desired by the newspaper publisher, but during the Gulf crisis and war the mainstream media simply reproduced the lies and disinformation of the Bush administration and Pentagon.<sup>16</sup> Yet *Post* editorial writers and columnists actively promoted a military solution, urging an attack on Baghdad even before Bush announced that he was sending troops to Saudi Arabia.

Crucially, the major newspapers, news magazines, and television networks did not criticize Bush's deployment or debate whether it was wise to



send so many U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia in the first place. The alternative press argued against the deployment and for a UN peace-keeping force to be sent to the area, rather than a massive U.S. military force, but this position got almost no hearing in the mainstream media. Furthermore, the leaders of the Democratic party also failed to criticize the U.S. military deployment, which points again to the crisis of liberalism. Yet there were many oppositional voices to the Bush administration's policies that were simply excluded from the mainstream media, thus precluding serious debate over the proper U.S. response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. But the mainstream media only draw on an extremely limited repertoire of voices and privilege the same administration officials and top Democratic Party leaders, thus freezing significant views out of public policy debates and intensifying the crisis of democracy in the United States.

#### Notes

1. This text is extracted from my forthcoming book *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Kellner 1992).
2. See *The Economist* which claimed that with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait it controlled twenty percent of the "world's known oil reserves" and would rival Saudi Arabia as OPEC's "swing" producer (Aug. 4, 1990, p. 13). *Time* magazine asserted that Iraq doubled the oil under its control to some twenty percent of the world's known reserve and that only Saudi Arabia, with twenty-five percent, had more (Aug. 13, 1990, p. 16). In fact, there were arguments that the claims concerning the amount of oil controlled by Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq were greatly exaggerated and that the phrase "known oil reserves" was misleading because there are vast oil resources that have not been developed in the United States, Soviet Union, and off the Falkland islands. Vialls (1911) claimed that the undeveloped oil reserves off the Falkland Islands are much larger than the Saudi Arabia oil reserves, but the cost of developing the off-shore oil resources, far from refineries and distribution, would require a much higher per-barrel oil price than the market is current yielding. He suggested that the Gulf war might have been in part a cynical ploy to help exhaust Saudi, Kuwaiti, and Iraqi oil supplies so that oil prices could go up enough to make it pay to develop the Falkland off-shore oil resources, thus producing a bonanza for the U.S. and Britain which would control these oil resources.
3. The *Washington Post* also reported on August 4, 1990, that "U.S. intelligence yesterday monitored a new buildup of 100,000 Iraqi troops in Kuwait south of the capital and near the border with Saudi Arabia." On August 5, the *Post* published a story by Charles Babcock on the possibility of an Iraqi invasion of Saudi Arabia and the inability of the Saudis to defend themselves; editorial writer Jim Hoagland contributed an article on "Stopping Saddam's Drive for Dominance," arguing against "appeasement" of Iraq. Thus, the *Post* consistently disseminated the disinformation of an imminent Iraqi

invasion of Saudi Arabia.

4. A *New York Times* summary of the genesis of the war by Thomas Friedman and Patrick Tyler on March 3, 1991, claimed that the Bush administration had decided on the path to war in September; the *Times's* analysis, however, suggested that Bush and Scowcroft were pushing the military option from the beginning (p. A12). Emery (1991, p. 19) wrote that King Hussein told him that Margaret Thatcher blurted out on August 3 that "troops were halfway to their destination" before the official request came for them to go to the Middle East. In addition, I met a soldier on an airplane in December 1990 who told me that he had been sent to the Gulf some days before the official U.S. deployment had been announced.
5. The *New York Times* also began attacking Iraq and Saddam Hussein, publishing stories and columns on August 5, 1990, with headlines: "Arab of Vast Ambition—Saddam Hussein," "Iraq Makes Its Bid to Run the Show in the Middle East," "Stopping Saddam's Drive for Dominance," and "Stop Hussein with Force if Necessary." For a comparative analysis of *New York Times* and *Washington Post* coverage of the crisis in the Gulf, see Malek and Leidig 1991.
6. On the "Saddam-as-Hitler" theme, see Chapter 2 Kellner 1992.
7. "Yellow journalism" is a term associated with the sensation-mongering journalism that began in the late 19th century with Joseph Pulitzer's *World* and William Randolph Hearst's *San Francisco Examiner* and *New York Journal*. Hearst and other "yellow journalists" produced a war hysteria and campaigned for a war against Spain in Cuba, often trumping up false threats against the United States. See the chapter on "The Age of Yellow Journalism" in Emery and Emery 1992, pp. 226ff.
8. On August 6, 1954, the *New York Times* published an editorial celebrating the overthrow of the Mossadegh government in Iran and the restoration of the shah, accompanied by a takeover of 40% of the Iranian oil by U.S. corporations, breaking a British monopoly. The editors wrote: "Underdeveloped countries with rich resources now have an object lesson in the heavy cost that must be paid by one of their number which goes berserk with fanatical nationalism. It is perhaps too much to hope that Iran's experience will prevent the rise of Mossadeghs in other countries, but that experience may at least strengthen the hands of more reasonable and more far-seeing leaders." Namely, those who will have a clear-eyed understanding of the U.S.'s overriding priorities (thanks to Noam Chomsky for this reference). In this context, the U.S. military intervention and Gulf war was an object lesson to Third World leaders who do not follow U.S. priorities and policies.
9. Some West German government reports indicated that it was really Syrian



connections and not Libyan ones who were responsible for the bombing. On Oct. 29, 1986, John Laurence on ABC News quoted top German officials as attributing the disco bombing to Syria. See also the article by Elaine Sciolino, *New York Times*, Nov. 20, 1986, who reported that a number of administration officials said privately that the disco bombing was carried out by the same organization responsible for the bombing of an Arab social club in West Berlin, and that pretrial testimony linked Syria, not Libya, to that attack. A few days later, *Der Spiegel* reported suspicions that the perpetrators were actually double agents working for the Israeli secret services (Dec. 1, 1986), a story reproduced in the *Boston Globe*, Dec. 1, 1986; see the discussion in Chomsky 1987, pp. 113ff. A report, broadcast Sept. 14, 1990, on Radio Deutsche Welle, suggested that the CIA knew that a terrorist bombing of the disco was in the works, but failed to maintain proper security, perhaps to give the Reagan administration a pretext for bombing Libya; see the discussion in Joel Bleifuss, "The First Stone," *In These Times*, Sept. 26, 1990, p. 5.

10. This same Patrick Tyler in the same *Washington Post* had published a puff piece on Saddam Hussein on May 13, 1989 (p. A13) describing how Hussein was pursuing the "politics of pragmatism," moderating Iraq's previous radical tradition "in favor of friendly overtures to Arab moderates and the West." Christopher Hitchens noted that the *New York Times* also characterized Iraq as "pragmatic" and "cooperative," attributing these virtues to Hussein's "personal strength" (*Harper's*, Jan. 1991, p. 72). Yet the same Hussein had suddenly become the Post's "beast of Baghdad" and the previously bestial Hafez al-Assad of Syria had become "pragmatic." Obviously, bestiality is in the eyes of the beholder and the policies of the current administration, which opportunistic journalists are only too eager to serve.
11. Karsh and Rautsi (1991) has been received in the scholarly community as the most reliable book on Saddam Hussein and Iraq yet to appear; see the review in *Middle East International*, August 30, 1991, p. 22.
12. James Atkins, Nixon's former ambassador to Saudi Arabia and a career diplomat, told *In These Times*: "The U.S. deployment is totally unnecessary. There is going to be no invasion. Saddam Hussein is a rational person; an invasion of Saudi Arabia would have been an irrational act." Atkins explained that since the Carter Doctrine was a major tenet of U.S. foreign policy, Hussein would know that any attack on Saudi Arabia would have brought a swift U.S. military response (Aug. 29, 1991, p. 5). In addition, after the war, *Los Angeles Times* reporter Jack Nelson stated in a symposium sponsored by the Gannett Foundation: "The reports of Iraqi troops massed at the Saudi border were certainly intended to tell the American people that there was a threat of invasion, when in fact there weren't that many [Iraqi] troops at all. I think today most government people will tell you that nobody really thought that Saddam Hussein was going to go into Saudi Arabia; but

the story helped marshal public opinion behind the war effort" (in LaMay et al. 1991, pp. 73-74). In fact, the mainstream media were saying that there was a threat that Iraq was going to invade Saudi Arabia and that the U.S. military deployment was thus necessary; see the clips from editorials from the major U.S. newspaper in LaMay, et al., 1991, pp. 54-55. 13. Reuters transmitted the *Washington Post* version of the Hussein/Wilson meeting and it was published in newspapers such as the *Toronto Star*, *USA Today*, and *Newsday*. ABC and the other TV networks also bought into the *Washington Post* version of the meeting between Saddam Hussein and Joe Wilson. In explaining why the Bush administration was sending troops to Saudi Arabia, ABC White House correspondent Brit Hume noted on the August 7 edition of *ABC World News Tonight*: "of course, there was a meeting yesterday in Baghdad in which the United States charge d'affaires was told in no uncertain terms by Saddam Hussein that not only did he not intend to leave Kuwait, he intended to claim it as his own. Finally, intelligence reports overnight indicated what the White House is calling an 'imminent threat to Saudi Arabia' from the very positioning of the Iraqi forces in Kuwait." That evening on ABC's *Nightline*, host Ted Koppel informed the audience that he'd just received information "from my colleague Bob Zelnick over at the Pentagon, who quotes sources over there as saying that there is strong evidence that the Iraqis are now massing along the border with Saudi Arabia and that there is some fear that they may launch an invasion even before U.S. troops get there." This disinformation was obviously to legitimate the U.S. deployment and to create anxiety that could be utilized to mobilize consent to the Bush administration policy.

13. The *Washington Post* cheerleader for the war, Jim Hoagland, dutifully attacked "Saddam's Big Lie" (that dispossessed Arabs would supposedly profit from his seizure of Kuwait's oil) in the August 9 edition, failing to note that it was Bush who was producing a really Big Lie concerning Iraq's alleged threat to Saudi Arabia—a lie reproduced by Hoagland. Hoagland also attacked CBS for interviewing Jordanians who were sympathetic towards Saddam Hussein and who opposed the U.S. military intervention and war, as if it was the duty of journalists simply to parrot the line of the administration rather than providing a range of viewpoints on controversial and important issues.
14. Interestingly, there was a report that the Soviets launched a new photo reconnaissance spy satellite within 48 hours of the invasion of Kuwait whose orbit was identical to the U.S. satellite (*PeaceNet, mideast.gulf*, Aug. 15, 1990). But there have been no release of pictures or information from the Soviet government, so we have only the visual evidence of the Soviet commercial satellite pictures against the claims of the U.S. government.
15. For the record, I might note that the *New York Times* slavishly followed the Bush administration line through the early days of the crisis rather than



actively promoting the military solution a la the *Washington Post*. When, on the day of the invasion of Kuwait, Bush attacked Iraq's "naked aggression" of Kuwait but did not call for a military intervention, the *Times* R.W. Apple, titled his front-page story "Naked Aggression" and the *Times's* editorialist opined: "The U.S. has no treaty obligation to come to Kuwait's aid. But the gulf states and most nations still look to Washington for leadership and help in organizing action. President Bush has responded with the right lead—a strong national stand and a strong push for collective diplomacy" (Aug. 3, 1990). When, shortly thereafter, Bush sent U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia, the *Times* quickly got on board, writing in an August 9 editorial appropriately titled "The U.S. Stands Up. Who Else?": "President Bush has drawn a line in the sand, committing U.S. forces to face down Saddam Hussein....On balance, he has made the right choice in the right way."

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