



## **Pardoning the Pentagon**

### **Molly Ivins - Creators Syndicate**

03.28.06 - AUSTIN -- The Pentagon has once again investigated itself! And -- have a seat, get the smelling salts, hold all hats -- the Pentagon has once again concluded the Pentagon did absolutely nothing wrong and will continue to do so.

In this particularly fascinating case, the Pentagon investigated its own habit of paying people to make up lies about how well the war in Iraq is going, and then paying other people to put those lies in the Iraqi media, thus fooling the Iraqis into thinking everything in their country is tickety-boo. Well, if we can't fool them, whom can we fool?

The case revolves around a contract worth several million dollars given by the U.S. military command in Baghdad to the Lincoln Group, a public relations outfit started by two young entrepreneurs, one British, one American, in 2003 in Iraq. Articles were written by American military personnel from the American point of view about the war, to wit, it's going well. Lincoln Group in turn paid Iraqi journalists, some "on retainer," to print the articles without revealing the source.

Amusingly enough, through other programs, the U.S. government is also spending money trying to teach Iraqis about the importance of a free press in a democracy. According to the Pentagon's investigation of itself, none of the Lincoln Group's actions violate military policies because the Pentagon is just trying to counter the vast amount of anti-American propaganda carried in Middle Eastern papers.

While I think this is the best Pentagon-investigating-itself case of the week, I have to admit it's like the Oscars -- these investigations are so hard to compare to comedy and tragedy, documentary and animated shorts. Also featured this week is the case of the Abu Ghraib dog handler, a 24-year-old sergeant who was convicted for tormenting detainees. The dog was not convicted, on the theory that it was just acting on orders.

Despite the huge international outcry over torture, so far

the heavy-hitters in the plot receiving real red, white and blue justice are Lynndie England, a 5-foot-tall, 23-year-old woman with learning disabilities and other non-commissioned officers. They were clearly the mastermind behind the entire international stink fest, from Gitmo to Afghanistan. England was put in prison for three years. Her baby boy will be walking and talking by the time Ms. England finishes doing her time, but no one in the upper ranks is responsible for anything that's happened.

In the unfortunate case of the Black Room reported in The New York Times, we taxpayers seem to have been charged with the cost of refurbishing one of Saddam Hussein's military bases into "a top secret detention center." One former torture chamber is now an "interrogation cell" used by Special Operations forces. "In the windowless, jet-black garage-sized room, some soldiers beat prisoners with rifle butts, yelled and spit in their faces and, in a nearby area, used detainees for target practice in a game of jailer paintball." I say, this time, let's indict the dogs.

Of course, there is always the same depressing coda to new accounts of torture and mistreatment of prisoners by American troops -- no useful information was acquired.

With all these horrifying details surfacing ("No Blood, No Foul" was the slogan at the Special Operations forces' Camp Nama), you may wonder why I return to the case of the chipper newspaper articles. I find them deeply symbolic, certainly paradigmatic and possibly even plangent, a word that's hard to work into a newspaper column. Quite some time after we had invaded Iraq, our government informed us we had done so in order to bring democracy to their nation. Originally, we were told we had to invade their country because there were tons of weapons of mass destruction therein, but they turned out not to be there. So, through a process of masterly media manipulation, we went from Saddam's nuclear program to democracy. It seems to me this is how George W. Bush and Co. govern, period. It's a Karl Rove thing. When reality is unsatisfactory, just manipulate the media.

You can't deny that the process has excellent results. It wins elections, for one thing. It confuses our critics and turns debate away from what we might loosely call "the truth" and into pointless fistfights about whether Iraq has descended, is descending or might descend into civil war.

"HOW DARE YOU CALL IT A CIVIL WAR -- YOU'RE JUST LENDING COMFORT TO OUR ENEMIES."

"LOOKS LIKE A CIVIL WAR TO ME."

"DOES NOT -- WHERE'S LEE, WHERE'S GRANT?"

"DOES SO!"

This is not helpful dialogue -- remember the fight over whether there was an "insurgency" in Iraq or the Mission was still Accomplished, it was just "remnant Baathists and foreign terrorists"? That was a mirror of the arguments we had at home over whether President Bush could be described as a "friend" of Ken Lay's or whether he is "close" to Tom DeLay or "knows" Jack Abramoff. Likewise, entire policy discussions would get subsumed by furious debate over whether Bush's proposals meant "privatization" of Social Security or were merely "personal accounts."

Grabbing reality by the throat and forcing it into a form you find more pleasing than reality itself is not only a great election strategy, it works for a lot of people on a lot of levels in life -- denial is a good game while it lasts.

But as we can all attest, if you ignore reality, sooner or later it will bite you in the ass. I suspect the "tough-minded" (they pride themselves on being tough-minded) members of the Bush administration think they are not ignoring reality, but just persuading other people to ignore it long enough to allow them to change it. This is not an original thought. Many of the great thumb-suckers of D.C. have come to the same conclusion and pondered deeply on the "fatal hubris" of this administration. Fatal jackasses are what we have.

Faced with the unappetizing reality of Iraq, Bush and Rove are relying on that grand old reliable strategy -- attack the media. It doesn't play as well as it used to. Everyone who wants an alternative reality is already watching Fox News. The rest of the country is worried.

Let me hasten to admit that I have no solution -- I have tried to be constructive over the course of this war, but I'm flat out of ideas. I haven't an earthly clue whether it would be better if we up and left or if we sat and stayed. What I am sure of is that none of us will figure that out until we stop pretending, until we take a long, cold hard look at the reality on the ground. Then someone needs to level with us about what it will cost to stay, in lives and dollars and, God help us, goodwill.

In a Washington Monthly book review, I found a suggestion that we copy Cold War tactics on terrorism and practice "containment" rather than this War of Good vs. Evil, Battlestar Galactica bull. But that requires someone

who will level with the people. And the more this administration plays games with definitions of democracy and weasel wording about torture, the less they can be believed about anything. Like the boy who cried wolf, someday they're going to tell the truth, and no one will believe them.

Meantime, let us all enjoy the game of Pentagon-investigates-itself.

Just remember, sooner or later, we'll have to indict the dogs.

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