

Tell me lies: Propaganda and Media Distortion in the Attack on Iraq

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Tell me lies: Propaganda and Media Distortion in the Attack on Iraq

Edited by David Miller

Forward by Mark Thomas

BOOK REVIEW

by Michael Austin, St Andrews

The Anglo-American attack on Iraq in March 2003 was based on lies and illusions. An unprecedented propaganda effort by the US and UK governments sought to impose the official view of the war and its justification. The media and public opinion were manipulated in many ways, including the production of various dossiers before the war, and the systematic use of 'embedded' journalists during the invasion. Yet at the same time the governments were unable to establish an exclusive grip on information. The official version was repeatedly challenged by sources outside their control, notably the Arab satellite television channels and the Internet with its ability to transmit independent information and images instantly around the world. From the start the war simply refused to go according to plan.

This book was written in response to the war and all the media disinformation which accompanied it. It has been produced with remarkable speed under very tight deadlines (David Miller's introduction bears the telling anniversary date of 11 September 2003): to have co-ordinated a team of no less than 37 contributors in such a short period is no mean feat. The book is a most welcome contribution to the public scrutiny of events that have destabilised the entire Middle East, and it deserves to be widely read. It has a relevance that goes well beyond the war itself. For example, the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq has repeatedly invited comparison with Israel's occupation of Palestine, though the role of Israel in the war is only slowly being revealed. Attention may be drawn here to Tim Llewellyn's excellent chapter on the BBC's slanted presentation of the Palestinian question (pp. 222-31). In the same context Greg Philo and Maureen Gilmour summarise (pp. 232-40) the results of the Glasgow University Media Group's study of the role of TV news programmes in spreading

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misleading conceptions of the Palestine–Israel conflict. This fundamental study, which puts the issue on a quantified and objective basis, has now appeared: Greg Philo and Mike Berry, *Bad News from Israel* (Pluto Press, 2004).

On a more general level one evident lesson to be drawn is that truth is not just the victim of particular wars such as the war on Iraq, but rather a permanent casualty, the victim of deceitful governments and pliant media that are too often prepared to sacrifice professional standards whenever the 'national interest' or the need for 'consensus' are invoked. One might add that truth is also indirectly the victim of public ignorance, indifference, or self-induced amnesia – a constant worry for the politically committed, which deserves investigation in its own right (the problem is only indirectly addressed in this book, pp. 164–75).

The war had at least one positive effect: like perhaps no previous conflict it exposed in a very short time the gap between official pretence and reality. As Mark Thomas says (Foreword, p. X), 'It is not often that the rift between the world's people and their leaders is so thoroughly exposed'. The result was world-wide demonstrations against the war on an unprecedented scale.

Given the number of contributions and the range of subjects covered in the 32 chapters of this book it is not possible to do full justice to its contents. The book is divided into 4 parts (the division is not altogether neat and some chapters could well have been placed in a different section). Part I, *The Media War*, consists of 5 chapters by one single author – articles by John Pilger written during the run up to and immediate outbreak of the war. Part II, *Propaganda Wars* (chapters 6–13), deals with the apparatus and techniques of government propaganda and the themes they seek to propagate, with chapters on the US (pp. 41–62, 100–7) and the UK (pp. 70–99). Part III, *Misreporting War* (chapters 14–26), considers the varied responses of the media to the war itself, and more generally their reporting of other related events, in the Middle East and elsewhere. The BBC emerges as too respectful of government views, while Channel 4 displays greater independence (pp. 132–43, 204–9, 222–31); since '9/11' the US media have been the most subservient of all (pp. 144–63, 176–84, 195–203). Part IV, *Alternatives* (chapters 27–32), considers rival sources of information, notably Al Jazeera (pp. 243–50) and the Internet (pp. 277–85; a listing of important URLs would have been welcome here). It also highlights the increased dangers faced by independent journalists, several of whom fell victims to (probably deliberate) US attack during the war (pp. 251–61).

The Iraq war is of course an unfinished story; it continues to unfold week by week with unpredictable consequences. 'Mission accomplished' proclaimed President Bush on May 1st 2003, a pretence that has looked increasingly absurd with every passing month. Little did the promoters of the war realise how little control they had over events, even

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before the explosion of April–May 2004 and the scandal over the torture of Iraqi prisoners by US and UK personnel in Abu Ghraib prison and elsewhere. Who could have foreseen in spring 2003 that a year later major US newspapers would indulge in a very public bout of self-criticism, asking themselves how they could have been so easily deceived by their own government? But the manipulation of information continues unabated, and history is regularly rewritten to fit the changing situation. The original rationale for the war, the 'threat' posed by Iraq through its alleged 'weapons of mass destruction', and the claimed link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, have been exposed as fraudulent and replaced by new justifications. This book is therefore part of a still evolving story and deserves to be given a sequel in the future. In the meantime one can do no better than endorse David Miller's words (p. 10): 'If this book enables people to understand propaganda and misreporting and encourages them to seek out alternative information as a kind of intellectual self-defence, that is good. But the more important thing is the moment when people decide that opposition also requires action.'

Michel Austin was Lecturer, then Senior Lecturer in Ancient History at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, from 1968 to 2000, and is now Honorary Lecturer. His field of study is ancient Greek history on which he has published several books and articles, including *The Hellenistic World from Alexander to the Roman Conquest* (Cambridge University Press, 1981; a revised and enlarged edition is nearing completion).

http://www.aqsa.org.uk/page_detail.aspx?id=17