



On journalism and national security

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Douglas J. Feith , THE JERUSALEM POST

There are very few people I've admired as much as I did David Bar-Illan, so I feel honored to speak to you at this conference in his memory.

First of all, I want to acknowledge that there are some exemplary journalists out there. I just reviewed a book by *New York Times* war correspondent Dexter Filkins. The book, called *The Forever War*, deals with 9/11, Afghanistan and Iraq. It is, in my opinion, first-rate journalism: full of insight, compassion and good writing. I note that Filkins' book shows self-awareness, is modest in tone, and appreciates moral complexity. There's none of the all-knowing certitude of the self-righteous. At one point, Filkins wonders: "Why do the insurgents [in Iraq] let us [journalists] stay in Baghdad?... I assumed they had decided that we were useful to them. That was not a comforting thought, even if it meant they would let us survive."

Though Filkins' book is full of telling details, as he rises above Baghdad in a helicopter, he contemplates whether his pessimism is valid and how limited his own ground-based understanding of the situation is. He writes: "Under the spell of the whirring motor I felt suddenly hopeful for the country below.... It was useful to fly in helicopters for this reason, I thought to myself, useful to think this way, to take a wider view of the world. Too much detail, too much death, clouded the mind."

But Filkins's excellent book - and his reporting overall - are exceptional.

In the United States, press coverage about foreign affairs generally lacks complexity. And it tends to scrimp on historical context. Also, it's often ideologically biased when not outright inaccurate.

Why is this? The short answer is that news editors generally don't believe there's much of a market for foreign news. In most local newspapers in America, it's rare to find a foreign news story on the front page. The occasional foreign crisis gets reported in bare bones fashion. And foreign stories that command press attention for years - like the Arab-Israeli conflict - have to be converted into melodramas - soap operas - that a general audience can follow with minimal intellectual exertion.

The key traits of a melodrama of this kind are the simplicity of the story line and the flatness of the

characters. Players are thoroughly sympathetic, good and gentle or they're thoroughly unsympathetic, ill-motivated and harsh. When I was growing up in the early 1960s, Israel benefited from the soap-opera-style of press coverage. Israel was commonly portrayed as the good guy in the Arab-Israeli conflict. I remember when the American press celebrated Israel's victory in the Six Days' War with lyrical prose and adoring photographs. After the Yom Kippur War and the oil embargo, however, American journalists increasingly assigned Israel the villain's role in the soap opera. The basic story line ceased to be plucky little Israel working to defend itself against large, uncompromising Arab states committed to its destruction. Rather, the line became the yearning for national rights of the stateless Palestinians against an uncompromising Israel committed to territorial aggrandizement at the Arabs' expense.

To keep the new story line simple, journalists effectively pretended that the conflict began in 1967. The problem was described as a fight over the "occupied territories," not a war to eliminate Israel. When Rabin shook Arafat's hand in 1993, the story line was adapted: The conflict was depicted as not so much between Israel and the Arabs - or Palestinians - as between the peace-loving advocates of compromise on both sides and the ideological extremists of both sides.

I emphasize the simple story line because it has enormous practical importance. If journalists adhere to the line, their editors will run their reports. Each report becomes an easy-to-follow episode in a long-duration soap opera. The story line signals to the audience which side to root for in the conflict. To preserve the line's clarity, journalists steer away from reporting that shows the designated good guys in a bad light or the villains as sympathetic. That helps explain why there was so little coverage during the Oslo Process of the PLO's corruption and the anti-Israel hatred taught in Palestinian Authority schools and even less coverage of any benign activity by Israeli settlers. Journalists often proclaim their commitment to seek "truth," but the fact is that they have powerful incentives to avoid complexity, an especially big problem in reporting on foreign affairs.

IN HIS important Middle East speech of June 24, 2002, President Bush did damage to the prevailing story line on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The speech built on key facts from the previous couple of years: Arafat had rejected Prime Minister Barak's peace offer at Camp David in 2000. On September 11, 2001, Americans got a bitter taste of Arab terrorism at home. The Palestinian Authority was secretly buying Iranian arms and promoting rather than fighting anti-Israel terrorism.

President Bush said that Israel and the United States are on the same side in the global war against terrorist extremism. He effectively repudiated the premises of the Oslo Process: that one achieves peace with a murderous enemy through a process of negotiation. He declared that the keys to Palestinian-Israeli peace are new, non-corrupt political institutions and a new Palestinian leadership sincerely devoted to peace and "untainted by terror." In other words, he injected some large contrarian thoughts about the Arab-Israeli conflict into the public debate.

As a result, it became more difficult for American reporters to depict the conflict as a fight between the good peace processors, including Arafat, and the bad skeptics. Press coverage of Israel in the United States became, for a while, more sympathetic. There ceased to be a predominant simple story line for reports on the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Road Map negotiations were not able to revive the standard story line of the Oslo era. We'll have to wait to see if it will be revived when the

Obama administration comes into office.

NOW, SO far, I've been making critical comments about US press coverage of foreign affairs without even mentioning the issue of ideological bias...

I want to state my conviction that American journalism suffers from the common political bias of most of the prestigious news outlets. Most big-city newspapers, like the broadcast news organizations, are decidedly liberal. What is a problem, as I see it, is not that so many journalists have liberal views, but that many don't seem to understand the idea of journalistic objectivity. They show their misunderstanding by thinking they have to deny that they are biased. The point of objectivity, however, is not that you as a reporter have no biases. Every thoughtful person has lots of biases. The point is that, recognizing your biases, you seek out contrary views and report on them accurately and fairly so your readers or viewers have a sound basis for making up their minds - and are not being manipulated toward your position.

Another point should be made about a journalist's bias. Philosophical bias, of which (I repeat) no thoughtful person is free, affects more than the way you think about the subject matter of a story. It affects your decisions on which issues you think should be covered in the first place. A reporter, for example, who views the detainees at Guantanamo as victims may decide to write about how their families are suffering. Another reporter, unsympathetic to the detainees, may chose to report a story about the misery and loss they've caused. Each story can be done well and objectively, with proper presentation of all major viewpoints on the subject. But, even if done well, each reflects a judgment about what's newsworthy and that judgment arises from a political outlook or bias.

So if a news organization wants balance, it is not enough to ensure that each of its stories is properly presented. It must ensure that it maintains a staff with diverse views...

I THINK it's right to direct some criticism also to my own government - to the Bush administration in which I served - for having contributed to the public's confusion about US strategy in Iraq... The United States went to war in Iraq to remove the range of threats to our national interest that were posed by the Saddam Hussein regime: the threat of aggression, of support for terrorists and of development and use of weapons of mass destruction. President Bush and his National Security Council understood that if we removed Saddam from power, we'd have to help the Iraqis put another government in place. We could promote democratic institutions and, if the Iraqis succeeded in creating them, that could bring benefits to them and perhaps encourage political reform throughout the Middle East and Muslim world...

We did not go to war in Iraq in order to promote democracy there, but it was an opportunity that Saddam's overthrow would open up. President Bush was clear on this point in the speeches he gave before the war. But six months or so after Saddam's overthrow - when it became clear that we were not going to find the chemical and biological weapons stockpiles that the CIA had said we'd find in Iraq - the President changed his rhetoric drastically.

Whichever officials were in charge of strategic communications seem to have been traumatized by the CIA's errors on Iraqi WMD. They decided that the President should no longer talk about the threats from the Saddam Hussein regime - should no longer talk about the history that gave rise to the US decision to go to war. Rather, the president should talk from this point forward only about

the future and about the promotion of democracy in Iraq. There were three main consequences of the president's shift in rhetoric:

1. He undermined his own credibility, for he appeared to be changing the rationale for the war in the middle of it all.
2. By deciding that he would talk only about the future, he ensured that his critics would talk almost exclusively about the past. The critics understood that if they attacked the administration about the run up to the war - focusing on pre-war intelligence and pre-war planning and asserting that "Bush lied" - they would not be contradicted.
3. Most importantly, the president's change in rhetoric changed the definition of success in Iraq. It was no longer removing the threat of the Saddam Hussein regime. Rather, it became achieving stable democracy.

The president had, in effect, move the goal line farther away to a place that most Americans came to believe could not be reached. In the summer of 2007, this almost cost us the war, when the Congress came extremely close to cutting off funding.

This shows the importance of strategic communications. A government in a democracy can lose a war by what it's leaders say just as surely as it can lose it by failures of its generals in the field. Strategic communications are not just politics or public relations; they are the essence of strategy in a democracy.

Douglas J. Feith is a former US under secretary of defense for policy. This article is extracted from the speech he delivered, by video address, to the Seventh Annual David Bar-Illan Conference on the Media & the Middle East at the Ariel University Center of Samaria on November 18.

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