American Idol

The press finds the war's true meaning

by Christopher Hanson

According to prewar news coverage, Gulf War II was about smashing an at Qaeda stronghold, capturing weapons of mass destruction, and liberating a subjugated people. Judging by what re ceived the greatest media attention, however, the war turned out to be as much as anything about the rescue of POW Jessica Lynch, the spunky but delicate, God-fearing West Virginian who braved bullets to be able to afford her dreams of college and kindergarten teaching.

Central casting could hardly have contrived a better symbol of wholesome smalltown values and American purity. "For many Americans ... the face of Gulf War II will forever be the smiling young woman under the camo-colored Army cap against the background of an American flag," the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* reported, without evident irony, in the lead sentence of an April 13 front-page news article.

Providing reporters with colorful details and dramatic night-scope footage, Central Command in Qatar helped turn Private Lynch's fate into a blockbuster suspense story with a happy ending. Other informants added juicy details, many first reported in *The Washington Post.* According to that paper's widely quoted narrative, Lynch, nineteen, fought desperately, shot enemy soldiers, and was badly wounded when the Iraqis captured her on March 23. In a prison hospital, she was beaten sadistically by an Iraqi goon - then snatched from her bed in a daring April I commando raid.

As the Lynch rescue story broke, the press was preoccupied with such questions as, Where is Saddam? Where are his weapons of mass destruction? And why didn't our generals anticipate guerrilla-style Iraqi attacks? But Jessica, the plucky supply clerk, drew attention away from those disturbing matters as news media instantly elevated her to the status of cultural icon. Lynch was so much in demand that CBS News raised the prospect of book, movie, and TV deals with other Viacom divisions if only she would talk on camera. There was even a semiotic analysis on *The New York Times* op-ed page by an American studies professor, arguing that Lynch's saga descends in part from an account by Hannah Dunston - a Haverhill, Massachusetts, captive who scalped ten Abenaki Indians in 1697.

In the fourteen days after her rescue, Lynch drew 919 references in major papers, according to a Nexis search. In that same period, General Tommy Franks, who ran the war, got 639 references, Vice President Dick Cheney 549, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz 389. She stood with the giants.

Now that we have some distance, it's worth considering why her emotional saga drew so much ink and air and what its impact was. The Jessica legend made troubling times more encompassable at the expense of skeptical reporting and clear thinking. It also reinforced some antiquated ideas about military women.

Understanding the Jessica frenzy inevitably sends us back to September11, 2001. Since that day's terrorist attacks, the public, the press, and our national leadership have struggled mightily to make sense of a very disquieting world. The Bush administration wasted no time after 9/11 in publicly linking the terror threat with Saddam Hussein's Iraq. By one theory, the White House's impulse - perhaps unconscious - was to provide the public, the press, and even itself with a simpler, less disturbing, more emotionally satisfying reality in which evil-doers can be vanquished. The Iraq army, after all, would not be hard to find or to wipe out.

But when the United States finally launched its invasion, that story line did not unfold neatly. Neither a link between Saddam and Osama bin Laden nor Iraqi weapons of mass destruction materialized. Although the Pentagon drummed the idea that our mission was to liberate the Iraqi people, many Iraqis saw our troops as unwelcome.

But before doubts could fester, the Lynch rescue story broke. It was a p.r. windfall for the military, the first successful rescue of a U.S. POW behind enemy lines since World War 11. The announcement was a godsend to the press corps, which loves "firsts," lives for "people" stories, and goes crazy over any rescue. Reporters at last could deliver the straightforward, emotionally fulfilling saga of good beating evil that America expects.

Never mind that Lynch was unavailable for comment (and reported to have amnesia). Never mind that reporters would have to paper over big holes to deliver a coherent narrative.

Lynch's capture. *The Washington Post* reported that Lynch was shot during the ambush but dealt death in return, fighting to the last bullet in her M-16 (April 3, page Al). Headlined **SHE WAS FIGHTING TO THE DEATH**, the anonymously sourced story read like a Hollywood script and in fact bore an uncanny resemblance to a climactic scene in the Gulf War I film, *Courage Under Fire.* Unable to confirm the story, major news outlets nonetheless picked it up as a crucial piece of the narrative. But ten weeks later, the *Post* acknowledged that the "waiflike" Lynch did not fight to the death and might not even have fired her M-16, which jammed. Her "bone crushing" injuries were from a Humvee crash, and Iraqi doctors saved her life. The June 17 A1 article begins as a feature updating Lynch's condition. Only after the jump does it reveal itself to be the journalistic equivalent of Napoleon's retreat from Moscow.

Lynch's mistreatment. In a separate April 4, page-one article, *The Washington Post* took at face value the account of a self-promoting Iraqi lawyer named Mohammed, who "risked all" to help rescue Lynch after seeing a security thug dressed in black slapping and backhanding her as she lay helpless in her hospital bed. The lawyer and his wife, a nurse at the hospital, helped U.S. forces plan the rescue. Again, other news outlets picked up the story. And again, the *Post* developed late-breaking doubts. In its tune17 piece, the paper quoted Iraqi doctors as denying Lynch had been slapped or that Mohammed's wife had worked at the hospital. By then, the Samaritan had political asylum and a fat book contract.

Lynch's liberation. Relying on military sources, the press reported a dangerous operation involving a diversionary firefight as Task Force 20 swooped down, kicked in doors, set off stun grenades, and shackled Iraqis.The unit's mission had been to seize weapons of mass destruction. At least they seized Jessica.

But on May 15, a revisionist BBC report aired interviews with Iraqi doctors who said no Iraqi troops had been in the hospital during the raid and they had been trying for days to release Lynch to U.S. Marines. N13C News, *Time,* the *Chicago Tribune,* and other American outlets began raising questions as well.

Like the *Post,* they certainly took their time. Journalists are disinclined to puncture "feel good" stories, especially those that they themselves have sent aloft.

Beyond questions of accuracy, the press's Lynch binge created two problems. First, it helped emotionalize and confuse the question of why we are in Iraq. Given the torrent of celebratory coverage when she was rescued, and the patriotic rejoicing this inspired at home, her liberation almost seemed to affirm the intervention itself. Yes, she needed her freedom only because Americans were in Iraq in the first place. And yes, the original rationales for this adventure were increasingly open to doubt. But why rain on the homecoming parade?

Second, this coverage Lynched the image of the American woman in uniform, perpetuating a pattern of distorted reporting set out in these pages last year (See "Women Warriors," *CJR*, May/June 2002). As in Gulf War I, when two female America POWs drew massive, disproportionate coverage, news media bombarded the audience with a tale of female vulnerability in 2003. Lynch was described hiding under the sheets as her rescuers burst in, clinging to a military doctor's hand and pleading, "Don't let anybody leave me."

Such a heavy focus on one vulnerable woman can only have warped the overall picture. Male U.S. soldiers also were captured, but their plight and liberation got much less attention. Meanwhile, thousands of other American women were making history performing bravely under fire in jobs that were once off limits. The public heard less about them than about the broken bones of Jessica Lynch, damsel in distress. Her dramatic rescue was very likely the one memory most Americans had carried away from the war with Iraq. How awkward to have to tell them she was a truck crash victim saved by the enemy and not actually rescued by the same commando unit that did not actually find those elusive weapons of mass destruction. But that's what happens when you write first and ask questions later.

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