

## **Iraq Around the Clock**

By Frank Rich

And so it turned out that "Shock and Awe" -- or "shockinaw," in cable parlance -- didn't have legs. Less than a week after it pumped up the stock market and gave the country a presentiment of a quick and tidy war, it was all but forgotten. Even before Time and Newsweek could hit the stands with their cover displays of the fireworks, we were fixated on images we could not readily see: the Al Jazeera video of American troops who had been butchered or taken prisoner by Iraqi forces. These pictures, declared contraband by the Pentagon after their initial showing on CBS's "Face the Nation" last Sunday, contained one element that the antiseptic, depopulated Baghdad pyrotechnics could not deliver: the human face of people visibly mauled by war. For the first time we could smell blood, American blood, and while that was shocking, it was far from awesome.

For those of us trying to juggle these polar mood swings while watching the war on television, there are two conflicts raging -- the fight between the antagonists themselves and the pitched battle between journalism and the imperatives of show business. The conflicts are intertwined, and the second determines how we view the first. If we are to penetrate the fog of the real war, journalism must be the clear victor over the inherent need of TV to impose its surefire entertainment formulas, its proven arsenal of slick storytelling and rousing characterization, on a reality that may not be nearly so neat.

In this war, American TV news has an unusually tough job. It must not only compete with other TV storytellers with fierce agendas, starting with Iraqi TV, but it must maneuver around the manipulations of an administration so television savvy it doesn't leave a single backdrop to chance. Not for nothing was a designer who has worked for Disney, MGM, "Good Morning America" and the illusionist David Blaine hired to build Gen. Tommy Franks a \$250,000 set for the briefings in Qatar. The master of the Pentagon media operation, including the program embedding more than 500 journalists among our troops, is Victoria Clarke, whose resume features a stint directing public affairs for the National Cable Television Association. In that job, according to *The Wall Street Journal*, she helped persuade the public that cable's "terrible reputation for customer service" was unjustified. In other words, she's a p.r. genius.

We now know, of course, that the short-lived rush of "Shock and Awe" was contrived, a victory of TV's show business instincts over news. It was the irresistible cliched climax to the first 72 hours of TV war coverage, with its triumphal story line bereft of gore and starring enthusiastic embeedes in mufti cruising through the desert like the youthful participants in a second-tier Olympic sport. "If you hired actors, you could not have gotten better coverage," observed Kenneth Bacon, a former Pentagon spokesman, before the mood of the war and its coverage began to turn.

One person on the scene who didn't buy the initial story line was the correspondent Peter Arnett. He recognized a mindless TV rerun when he saw it. "It's deja vu all over again, the idea that this would be a walkover, the idea that the people of Basra would throw flowers at the Marines," he said from Baghdad when I spoke with him by phone last week. Unlike many of his peers, he had been there to see the early burst of optimism in Persian Gulf War I, which he covered for CNN. "This is going to be tough," he said just before it became tough. "When I interviewed Tariq Aziz two weeks ago -- it was not put on the network -- he said: 'You'll have a hard time tearing us down. We're ready to be martyrs.' Whatever you think about Saddam

Hussein, there is a sense of nationalism here. The Iraqis like American culture – American movies and pop songs. But are they really going to like American tanks?"

TV news can never be utterly innocent of showbiz, Mr. Arnett included. His exploits in the last war were fictionalized in last year's HBO movie "Live From Baghdad," in which the attack-simulating special effects were, in his view, "absolutely ridiculous." Commercial networks are not C-Span. There is branding at stake, not to mention careers and ratings. Yes, it's important that we find out if Saddam actually has weapons of mass destruction, but we also want to know if Mr. Arnett will make a comeback moonlighting for NBC and MSNBC, after having been let go by CNN only to hitch his star to, of all unlikely outfits, "National Geographic Explorer." NBC must also attend to the continuing cliffhanger of anchor succession: will Brian Williams, dressing down for the desert, at last prove himself a worthy heir to Tom Brokaw? In the overnight stardom sweepstakes, will MSNBC's Rob Morrison, until recently a local weekend anchor, or ABC's Richard Engel, a freelance radio reporter, emerge as the new scud stud? When even weathermen on the Eyewitness News team are predicting rain in Kirkuk, it's clear everyone must get into the act.

So far the biggest inside-TV drama has starred Peter Jennings. On the night the war began, he was AWOL by anchor standards, arriving at the studio a half-hour later than his peers. For a while, while Baghdad burned on CBS and NBC, "The Bachelor: Where Are They Now?" continued purring on ABC. "The war has already claimed its first victim: ABC News," concluded *The Washington Post's* TV columnist, Lisa de Moraes, soon after.

But it's exactly here that showbiz's standards of success and failure part from those of journalism. By the measure of its industry, ABC had flopped, losing ratings and irritating its affiliates with its opening-night fiasco. But as a news operation ABC has succeeded since, by bucking the initial consensus story line. After Donald Rumsfeld spoke in a post-"Shock and Awe" press conference of "the humanity" of American weaponry pinpointing noncivilian targets, Mr. Jennings said, "No offense to the secretary, but at this moment we simply do not know whether that is the case." Later the network would feature a John Donvan report from the liberated town of Safwan in which we learned that the citizens who had famously cheered the tearing down of a massive portrait of Saddam the day before were now angry at Americans because of the lack of humanitarian aid.

Inevitably *The New York Post* spanked ABC News, and Mr. Jennings in particular, for "America-bashing, pessimism and antiwar agitation." Hardly. His real sin was to violate the unspoken rule that in the early stages of a war journalists should junk the tools of skepticism and irony on camera. But as Michael J. Arlen, then television critic for *The New Yorker*, wrote in the mid-1960's while observing cheerleading coverage of the first TV war, Vietnam, "Trying to report a war without irony is a bit like trying to keep sex out of a discussion of the relations between men and women."

For those who want their war without irony or ambiguity or anything other than good news, there is *The Post's* TV sibling, Fox News. On Fox an anchor can say that "objectively speaking" it is "hard to believe things could go much more successfully." Last weekend another of its anchors announced, "This is extraordinary news --- the city of Basra under control!" Which was extraordinary indeed, given that Basra was unsecured and teetering into guerrilla warfare. On Fox, an anchor can (without irony) call Newt Gingrich "an estimable scholar" of military affairs and bring on Donald Trump to declare, "I think the market's going to go up like a rocket!"

We will always be winning on Fox, and Fox continues to win its ratings battle with CNN. We must pray that its happy talk becomes self-fulfilling prophecy. But as I write on the run-up to the siege of Baghdad, P.O.W. families are telling a story so compelling that even the Oscars took a huge ratings hit as viewers surfed for the latest. While media critics debate how much or little we should see of American and Iraqi corpses, the images are bleeding into the media mix by satellite and Internet anyway. The TV story line has turned as dark as only yesterday it was light -- provoking Fox's Fred Barnes to call his competitors "weenies" for dwelling on casualties. That's ludicrous, but as the pendulum swings, it's fair to ask: could the new quagmire narrative be just as transitory and misleading as the discarded celebratory cakewalk of "Shock and Awe"?

What is all but forgotten in every TV news narrative of this war so far, upbeat or down, is Al Qaeda and the event that is said to have necessitated this war in the first place, the attack of Sept. 11. Instead it turns up tonight in the USA Network's scheduled premiere of "Rudy," a movie in which actors fictionalizing the former mayor's love life are blithely intercut with horrific actual news video of the collapse of the World Trade Center. At the last minute one shot -- of a body falling from the north tower -- was edited from the film because of "the potential distress that could be caused." Perhaps the unedited version will turn up on Al Jazeera, but meanwhile it's distressing enough for some of us to see the shots that remain, including those of office workers at the windows preparing to make the leap.

Apparently the makers of "Rudy" believe that those memories are now safely consigned to history. But in a week when military airplanes and Black Hawk helicopters have resumed their air patrol of New York, it isn't easy to repress the sinking feeling that a cheesy soap opera may be more on top of the news than the prime-time competition of "War in Iraq."

The New York Times  
March 30, 2003