

“Briefing Bush: Seeing is Believing”

By William A. Cook

General Myers: “Good morning, Mr. President!”

President: “Hi, General, how’s it going?”

GM: “Well, to be frank, Sir, Rummy and I were thinking that you should get a more detailed briefing today than the usual stats and PR, the progress report we ordinarily give you. It’ll take a bit more time, I’m afraid. But we’re more than two weeks into the war now, and we feel you should get a full look at what is happening.”

P: “Why’s that, General? I don’t want to spend a whole lot-a-time on this. I’ve got the talk before the AEI today and I haven’t read what I am to say yet; I’ve got the photo op in the Rose garden with the visiting CEO’s, and that could prevent me getting to the gym; and, then, I’ve got the state dinner tonight with the Israeli delegation. Why do I need this?”

GM: “Sir, the papers are running op pieces asking what you see about the war. Do you see pieces written by journalists from other countries? Do you see TV news from Al-Jazeera or any Arab countries? Do you see pictures of Baghdad being bombed, or of the buildings destroyed, or of the people? In short, there’s growing interest in what you really know about the war, how intimate you are with the details, how you respond to what happens to the people in particular, the people over there, I mean.”

P: “Listen, General, I know what happens in war, for Chris-sake I was in the Guard, you know. I don’t need to see pictures. We’re bringing these people freedom, what more do they want? Sure, some are going to be hurt, that can’t be helped. But I don’t need to see this stuff.”

GM: “But, Mr. President, you’re going to have a press conference next week, and there are sure to be questions about this. ‘Have you seen pictures of the Iraqis in the bombed cities?’ I can guarantee it.”

P: “OK, OK. Let’s get it over with. But I want to see it all if I’ve got to do this. Show me the pictures of the people cheering on our soldiers, and the shots of the goodies being unloaded for the people in Basra, and the care we’re taking with the oil wells we’re going to give back to the Iraqis. Don’t just show people dying or dead, got it?”

GM: “Yes, Sir, I got it. But I have to tell you that the only pictures we have of Iraqis cheering our boys are in Kurdish areas that we already control and have for these past 12 years. We have a couple of shots from the Brits on unloading at the docks, but they are of the locals we paid to come out to unload. All the other shots show a mad grab for anything in the trucks. No one is smiling. But I do have some pics of the Halliburton officials who got the contracts to put out the fires at the wells. Unfortunately, most of them have Dick standing with the group and we don’t want those out there. But I have to show you some of the dead and dying, that’s what the press will want to know. How close have you been to this and how do you deal with it other than the photo ops with the dog out back that shows how serene you are with the decision to invade, I mean to go to war.”

P: “Look, General, I got an idea. What if you don’t show me the actual pictures; you keep them over on that side of the table, don’t put them on the screen or anywhere. Just describe them in words. That’ll be easier. OK, what do you think?”

GM: “Well, I guess that would cover our bases. You would be able to say you saw the pictures, ‘word pictures,’ but the press wouldn’t have to know that. OK, let’s give it a shot.”

GM: “Here’s the first one, Sir. It’s that incident where our soldiers gunned down seven civilians in a van at a checkpoint. They’re sure to ask about that.”

P: “Yea, I heard something about that when I was surfing for the Ranger game. What happened?”

GM: “Depends on where you get your info. FOX news carried it the way we wanted it carried.”

P: “You can always count on FOX; they know people don’t want to be scared at dinner time.”

GM: “Gibson, the anchor, put it this way: ‘We warn these cars to stop. If they don’t stop, fire warning shots. If they don’t stop then, fire into the engine. If they don’t

stop then, fire into the cab. And today some guys killed some civilians after going through those steps.”

P: “Well, that sounds good. We didn’t do anything wrong, did we?”

GM: “Unfortunately, Mr. President, there was an eyewitness. Yeah, Bill Branigin of the Post. He said it didn’t happen that way. It turns out it was a family escaping to the American side to be safe. The father, an old guy, even got dressed in a pin stripe to look American. And the mother kept saying over and over, ‘I saw my girl’s head shot off,’ ‘I saw her head shot off.’ It was a terrible scene, Sir.”

P: “Jesus, and we did that? But that’s not what happens all the time, right?”

GM: “Oh, no, Sir. But I’ve got to describe some of these pictures. Here’s one, Sir; it’s a young boy screaming in pain. He’s a beautiful kid with bronze skin showing on his arm and forehead. But his lower face -- cheeks, chin, neck and all of his chest-- glow red like seared steak on a grill as though he stood near intense heat that caused his skin to blister and peel.”

P: “For Christ sake, General, you don’t have to be that graphic, do you?”

GM: “I’m sorry, Sir, but I know what you’ll be asked and you have to respond in some detail so they know you’ve seen these pictures. Let’s try another one. This one has a boy, a teenager, on a cot, both arms gone, stubs wrapped in bandages, chest scarred with bandages taped on portions of it.”

P: “That’s a little easier to take, but, Jesus, General, what’s this kid going to do after this is over? Maybe that’s a stupid question. Keep going.”

GM: “This one, Mr. President, is quite different. It shows a gray ash covered corpse of a small boy, maybe three years old, with his head jammed against a cement wall, one arm stretched out as though reaching for the light, but the rubble of the bombed house lies strewn over his entire body except for the arm and head, and a small portion of his chest. He lies there like a ghost, silent, even serene in death.”

P: “Come on, General, you’re the strong military guy. This seems to get to you. Maybe I better describe the pictures to you! Just kidding. Give me some more.”

GM: “Well, here’s another of dead children. This is really gruesome though. There are three children in a coffin, with a man at its foot, possibly the father, hands held aloft, eyes shut in anguish, weeping at the sight. Strangely, there’s a shadow of the photographer over the corner of the coffin, the guy taking the picture, like an angel of death hovering over the scene. The smallest body is wrapped in swaddling clothes, but it looks like its legs are gone and the wrappings are tied just at the thighs; the second smallest has a smashed in skull, the third, covered in an orange dress, has curled into a fetal position, a weird resting pose for the dead. Here’s another with a father. He’s lying on a cot with his child, a girl, pulled tightly into his chest as though protecting her. But her head is bandaged and bloody, her eyes closed. I can’t tell whether she’s dead or alive. He’s weeping.”

P: “How old is the girl? I couldn’t help thinking of my own daughters. Thank God, they live here in America where they’re safe. I’d hate for them to see this stuff. We don’t let this get on the networks, do we? Americans should see what we are doing for these people, not see this. We’re there to liberate them. And I know that when this is over, they’ll be happy we knocked off that ruthless Saddam.”

GM: “OK, let’s look at the next one. This shows a girl, maybe the age of your kids, Mr. President. She seems to be standing directly in front of a bulldozer, yeah, she has a megaphone in her hand. But wait, here’s another shot. She’s shown here on the ground covered in dirt and blood. Oh, I’m sorry, Sir, this is in the wrong pile. This is from Israel where that American girl was run down by the bulldozer when she protested the IDF’s demolition of Palestinian homes.”

P: “What are you talking about? I never heard about this. Some guy drove over an unarmed girl? An American? What kind of shit is that? Has Ariel gone mad? Doesn’t he know we’re at war with an Arab country? Doesn’t he know I’m doing this for him? What is he thinking?”

GM: “I’m sorry, Mr. President, I’ll make sure we send a message about this to Sharon and the family of the girl. But let’s not get distracted. That picture was out of place. We’ve got to finish here. Now I’ve got one of a girl, maybe ten years old, dressed in a purple paisley gown lying on a mattress with a dark blue sheet over it. God, she looks so forlorn, starring right at the camera. Her left leg is bandaged up to her thigh, her right leg is gone, only a stump left, wrapped in white bandages, her right hand shattered. Such pitiless eyes of absolute despair!”

P: “Don’t you have any that show people happy to see us? Has Rummy seen these pictures? He’s the one, and Wolfy and Pearle, who told us everyone would throw flowers at our tanks as we liberated them. These pictures don’t come close. I think I’ve had enough. Can we stop now?”

GM: “Just one more, Sir. It’s the last one I’ve got, but it’s touching enough that you may be asked about it. It shows a father with the turban on his head, peppered beard, blue shirt, carrying his daughter; impossible to tell if she is alive or not, her small and fragile body limp in his arms, hair tousled, her purple bath robe smeared with blood, her green pajama bottoms bloody and torn, her right foot hanging by skin from its bloody stump, the father gently lifting his child as though all sorrow is in his arms.”

P: “Thanks, General. That’s enough. Besides, here comes Rummy. Don’t tell him I didn’t look at the pictures. I’ll remember some details and he won’t ever know.”

Rummy: “Good morning, Mr. President. Did you have a good briefing? Little different from the usual, right?”

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