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Russian military TV to beat patriotic drum

'Hits of the Soviet Union' to be shown

By Steven Lee Myers

MOSCOW: Television in Russia these days is already compared to Soviet-like agitprop. So what to make of the country's newest network?

On Feb. 20 the Defense Ministry plans to begin broadcasting its own national television channel called Zvezda, or Star, offering a blend of pride and patriotism, made in Russia.

"The ideology of the channel is simple," Sergei Savushkin, its general director, said at a news conference on Thursday. "In order to defend, one has to love."

The Russian state already owns or controls the country's three main television networks — as well as smaller sports, music and cultural channels — and their programs, especially news and talk shows, tread ever more softly so as not to offend the Kremlin.

But Zvezda aims to be something else altogether. Not a Russian version of the Pentagon's Armed Forces Network, broadcast to service members on bases abroad, but rather a domestic commercial enterprise with the ideological mission of winning hearts and minds.

The defense minister, Sergei Ivanov, recently said its purpose was to provide "effective informational and ideological influences," not least, he made clear, among those draft-age young men who now go to great lengths to avoid military service.

In the absence of much private competition on the airwaves, a result of President Vladimir Putin's tightening of the reins over broadcast media, the launching of Zvezda means the state is effectively taking on the state in the ratings war.

"We are not claiming a monopoly on patriotism," Savushkin said, careful not to offend any patriotically minded programs offered by the main networks, First Channel, Rossiya and NTV. "They do exist on the other channels — the more the better — but we think there should be more."

Ivanov, a close associate of Putin's, could afford to be less diplomatic. In televised remarks during a cabinet meeting late last year, Ivanov deplored the state of Russian television, which features an abundance of sex and still more violence, even during the day and early evening. "The moronization of the people must be stopped," he said.

Whatever the network's ideological mission, the Defense Ministry is betting

on commercial success, which is not as odd as it seems in a country where government agencies operate all manner of businesses.

Savushkin said the channel would operate like any other, selling ads, seeking sponsorships and selling its own programming, made by the ministry's Central Television and Radio Broadcasting Service, which already produces programs for other networks.

"Ideology is ideology, but the market is the market," he said.

Hoping to target what the channel's directors consider a still underexploited niche, Zvezda will show Soviet-era war movies and documentaries, what Savushkin called "the hits of the Soviet Union."

Zvezda's arrival comes as Russia's

'The moronization of the people must be stopped.'

preparations to celebrate the 60th anniversary of victory over Nazi Germany have already washed the country with nostalgia.

Still, he emphasized, "It is not going to be a retro channel."

Zvezda plans to produce original programs, tapping the ministry's own archives of historical film, for example, which he described as "huge and unknown."

The channel will also offer children's shows and family fare that would, as he put it, provide "a link between generations." It plans to feature only Russian-made programs, an alternative to the obscure old American movies that appear frequently on other Russian channels.

Zvezda will be something "kind and gentle" that Savushkin would happily allow his 5-year-old son, Ivan, to watch, he said, adding, "I want him to be proud of Russia the way I was proud of the Soviet Union."

Zvezda's operating budget is not clear, but it will rely on support from the ministry's budget, as well as communication and other facilities located in naval and army headquarters across the country.

Like any new channel, it has obstacles to overcome, including establishing a nationwide network.

It also has some unique ones. Technicians have labored to figure out how to keep its frequency, Channel 57, from causing interference on neighboring ones, including one used by the air force, according to Captain Aleksandr Lebedev, director of the ministry's broadcast service.

Zvezda's imminent arrival has already stirred criticism of another lurch toward a Soviet-like past.

Vladimir Pozner, a prominent television host of one of the last remaining political talk shows, "Vremena" on First Channel, ridiculed the idea as a waste of money. He said the country should be privatizing television networks, or at least creating independent public systems like the BBC or PBS, rather than giving the Defense Ministry a medium for propaganda.

"It is supposed to build pride in a country that badly needs it," he said. "It is a very clumsy way to do it."

The New York Times

An example of the way the US media shapes (and limits) public opinion:

1. As you read this article, be aware of your emotional reaction to the announcement that the Russian military is now producing and broadcasting programmes with (as the article says) "... the ideological mission of winning hearts and minds". Do you get the impression from the article that it is trying to describe this as a propaganda campaign?
2. For those people who don't read the entire article, the pull-quote "**The moronization of the people must be stopped**" clearly and vividly warns of the danger to society of giving the military a television channel
3. The only reference (in paragraph 5) in this article to the US equivalent, is to the ARMED FORCES NETWORK (described in the article as broadcast "to service members on bases abroad") but makes no mention of the fact that the US military has launched a similar service for domestic American viewers: THE PENTAGON CHANNEL (see attached essay, *When real news debunks fake news* by columnist Frank Rich in the New York Times)
4. While you might think that the news that the Pentagon has launched an identical television channel would be important information for US citizens, the New York Times ran only three articles that mentioned it (one of which is the essay by Frank Rich); while neither the Washington Post nor the Los Angeles Times reported it at all (*refer to the results of a search on the next page*)
5. The New York Times (February 19, 2002) reported that the Pentagon was "developing plans to provide news items, possibly even false ones, to media organisations. In a (November 18, 2002) Pentagon briefing, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld told reporters that he is redesigning the U.S. military to make "information warfare" central to its functions.
6. If the "moronization" of the Russian people is a bad thing and should be stopped, why do you think the US media are not warning of the danger to American society posed by THE PENTAGON CHANNEL?

Unless of course...

When real news debunks fake news

By Frank Rich

NEW YORK
The prayers of those hoping that real television news might take its cues from Jon Stewart were finally answered on Feb. 9, 2005. A real newsman borrowed a technique from fake news to deliver real news about fake news in prime time.

Let me explain. On "Countdown," a nightly news hour on MSNBC, the anchor, Keith Olbermann, led off with a bit in the classic style of Stewart's classic "Daily Show": a rapid-fire montage of sharply edited video bites illustrating the apparent idiocy of those in Washington. In this case, the eight clips stretched over a year in the White House briefing room — from February 2004 to late last month — and all featured a reporter named "Jeff." In most of them, the White House press secretary, Scott McClellan, says "Go ahead, Jeff," and "Jeff" responds with a softball question intended not to elicit information but to boost President George W. Bush and smear his political opponents. In the last clip, "Jeff" is quizzing the president himself, in his first post-inaugural press conference of Jan. 26. Referring to Harry Reid and Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Jeff" asks, "How are you going to work with people who seem to have divorced themselves from reality?"

If we did not live in a time when the news culture itself is divorced from reality, the story might end there: "Jeff," you'd assume, was a lapdog reporter from a legitimate, if right-wing, news organization like Fox, and you'd get some predictable yuks from watching a compressed video anthology of his kissing up to power. But as Olbermann explained, "Jeff Gannon," the star of the montage, was a newsman no more real than a "Senior White House Correspondent" like Stephen Colbert on "The Daily Show." Yet the video broadcast by Olbermann was not fake. "Jeff" was in the real White House, and he did have those exchanges with the real McClellan and the real Bush.

"Jeff Gannon's" real name is James Guckert. His employer was a Web site called Talon News, staffed mostly by volunteer Republican activists. Media Matters for America, the liberal press monitor that has done the most exhaustive research into the case, discovered that Talon's "news" often consists of recycled Republican National Committee and White House press releases, and its content frequently overlaps with another partisan site, GOPUSA, with which it shares its owner, a Texas delegate to the 2000 Republican convention. Nonetheless, for nearly two years the White House press office had credentialed Guck-



James Guckert, left, was outed as a fake journalist on an MSNBC program with Keith Olbermann as host.



Courtesy of CNN, MSNBC

ert, even though, as Dana Milbank of The Washington Post explained on Olbermann's show, he "was representing a phony media company that doesn't really have any such thing as circulation or readership."

How this happened is a mystery that has yet to be solved. "Jeff" has now quit Talon News not because he and it have been exposed as fakes but because of other embarrassing blogosphere revelations linking him to sites like hotmilitarystud9.com and to an apparently promising career as an X-rated \$200-per-hour "escort." But it shouldn't distract from the real question — that is, the real news — of how this fake newsman might be connected to a White House propaganda machine that grows curiously by the day. Though McClellan told Editor & Publisher magazine that he didn't know until recently that Guckert was using an alias, Bruce Bartlett, a White House veteran of the Reagan-Bush I era, wrote on the nonpartisan journalism Web site Romanesko that "if Gannon was using an alias, the White House staff had to be involved in maintaining his cover." (Otherwise, it would be a rather amazing post-9/11 security breach.)

By my count, "Jeff Gannon" is now at least the sixth "journalist" to have been a propagandist on the payroll of either the Bush administration or a barely arms-length ally like Talon News while simultaneously appearing in print or broadcast forums that purport to be real news. Of these six, two have been syndicated newspaper columnists paid by the Department of Health and Human Services to promote the administration's "marriage" initiatives.

The other four have played real newsmen on TV. Before Guckert and Armstrong-Williams, the talking head paid \$240,000 by the Department of Education, there were Karen Ryan and Alberto Garcia. Let us not forget these pioneers — the Woodward and Bernstein of fake news. They started in bogus reports pretending to "sort through the details" of the administration's Medicare prescription-drug plan in 2004. Such "reports," some of which found their way into news packages distributed to local stations by CNN, appeared in more than 50 news broadcasts around the country and have now been deemed illegal "covert propaganda" by the Government Accountability Office.

The money that paid for both the Ryan-Garcia news packages and the Armstrong-Williams contract was siphoned through the same huge public relations firm, Ketchum Communications, which itself filtered the funds through subcontractors. A new report by Congressional Democrats finds that Ketchum has received \$97 million of the administration's total \$250 million PR kitty, of which the Williams and Ryan-Garcia scams would account for only a fraction. We have yet to learn precisely where the rest of it ended up.

Even now, we know that the fake news generated by the six known shills is only a small piece of the administration's overall propaganda effort. Bush wasn't entirely joking when he called the notoriously meek March 6, 2003, White House press conference on the eve of the Iraq invasion "scripted" while it was still going on. Ev-

erything is scripted.

There were the pre-fab "Ask President Bush" town hall-style meetings during last year's campaign. A Pentagon Office of Strategic Influence, intended to provide propagandistic news items, some of them possibly false, to foreign news media was shut down in 2002 when it became a political liability. But much more quietly, another Pentagon propaganda arm, the Pentagon Channel, has recently been added as a free channel for American viewers of the Dish Network.

It is a brilliant strategy. When the Bush administration isn't using taxpayers' money to buy its own fake news, it does everything it can to shut out and pillory real reporters who might tell Americans what is happening in what is, at least in theory, their own government.

Conservatives, who supposedly deplore postmodernism, are now welcoming in a brave new world in which it's a given that there can be no empirical reality in news, only the reality you want to hear (or they want you to hear). For a case in point, you needed only switch to

CNN on the day after Olbermann did his fake-news-style story on the fake reporter in the White House press corps.

"Jeff Gannon" had decided to give an exclusive TV interview to a sober practitioner of real news, Wolf Blitzer. Given this journalistic opportunity, the anchor asked questions almost as soft as those "Jeff" himself had asked in the White House. Blitzer didn't question Guckert's outrageous assertion that he adopted a fake name because "Jeff Gannon" is easier to pronounce and easier to remember. (Is "Jeff" easier to pronounce than his real first name, Jim?) Blitzer never questioned Gannon/Guckert's assertion that Talon News "is a separate, independent news division" of GOPUSA.

The "real" news from CNN was no news at all, but it's not as if any of its competitors did much better. The "Jeff Gannon" story got less attention than another media frenzy — that set off by the veteran news executive Eason Jordan, who resigned from CNN after speaking recklessly at a panel discussion at Davos, where he apparently implied, at least in passing, that American troops deliberately targeted reporters. Is the banishment of a real newsman for behaving foolishly at a bloviation conference in Switzerland a more pressing story than that of a fake newsman gaining years of access to the White House (and network TV cameras) under mysterious circumstances? As Olbermann demonstrated when he borrowed a sharp "Daily Show" tool to puncture the "Jeff Gannon" case, the only road back to reality may be to fight fake with fake.

The New York Times

Results of a search on the sites of the three main US newspapers (conducted 04 March 2005):

The New York Times published three articles that referred to the Pentagon Channel (one of which was the essay by Frank Rich):

The screenshot shows the New York Times website with a search bar containing 'pentagon channel'. The search results display a link to an article in the Business/Financial Desk section from January 24, 2005. The article title is 'DISPLAYING FIRST 50 OF 517 WORDS ... Luig Is Expected To Leave Prada ... another shock to the luxury industry's multibrand strategy, the Prada group is expected to announce on Monday the departure of Helmut Luig from the house that bears his name, a person close to the company ... The Austrian-born designer, who is based...'. A text box on the right side of the screenshot states: 'The first article in the NYT that mentioned the Pentagon Channel was in the Business section (24 Jan. 2005) buried inside an article about a resignation in the fashion industry'.

The screenshot shows the New York Times website with a search bar containing 'pentagon channel'. The search results display a link to an article in the Business/Financial Desk section from January 24, 2005. The article title is 'MEDIA; Military Channels Are Competing on Cable TV'. The author is listed as MARE GLASSMAN (NYT) 641 words. A text box on the right side of the screenshot states: 'The second was in an article about the media (also in the Business section on the same day) Readers who didn't buy the NYT that Monday, didn't hear about it'.

Neither the Washington Post nor the Los Angeles Times published even a single reference

The screenshot shows the Washington Post website with a search bar containing 'pentagon channel'. The search results display 'No results found for "pentagon channel". Please try another search term below:'. A text box on the right side of the screenshot states: 'Neither the Washington Post nor the Los Angeles Times published even a single reference'.

The screenshot shows the Los Angeles Times website with a search bar containing 'pentagon channel'. The search results display 'No results found on search for "pentagon channel". Try broadening your search criteria.'. A text box on the right side of the screenshot states: 'Neither the Washington Post nor the Los Angeles Times published even a single reference'.

MEDIA ADVISORY:

The Office of Strategic Influence Is Gone, But Are Its Programs In Place?

November 27, 2002

The Federation of American Scientists has pointed to a startling revelation by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld that mainstream media have missed: In remarks during a recent press briefing, Rumsfeld suggested that though the controversial Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) no longer exists in name, its programs are still being carried out (FAS **Secrecy News**, 11/27/02, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/news/secrecy/2002/11/112702.html>).

The OSI came under scrutiny last February, when the **New York Times** reported (2/19/02) that the new Pentagon group was "developing plans to provide news items, possibly even false ones, to foreign media organizations." The news was met with outrage, and within a week the Pentagon had closed down the OSI, saying that negative attention had damaged the office's reputation so much "that it could not operate effectively" (AP, 2/26/02).

The plan was troubling for many reasons: It was profoundly undemocratic; it would have put journalists' lives at risk by involving them in Pentagon disinformation; and it's almost certain that any large-scale disinformation campaign directed at the foreign press would have led, sooner or later, to a falsified story being picked up by U.S. media. (See **Extra! Update 4/02**, "[Behind the Pentagon's Propaganda Plan](#).")

At the time, Rumsfeld claimed that he had "never even seen the charter for the office," but Thomas Timmes, the OSI's assistant for operations, said that Rumsfeld had been briefed on its goals "at least twice" and had "given his general support" (**New York Times**, 2/25/02).

Now, in remarks made at a November 18 media briefing, Rumsfeld has suggested that though the exposure of OSI's plans forced the Pentagon to close the office, they certainly haven't given up on its work. According to a transcript on the Department of Defense website, Rumsfeld told reporters:

"And then there was the Office of Strategic Influence. You may recall that. And 'oh my goodness gracious isn't that terrible, Henny Penny the sky is going to fall.' I went down that next day and said fine, if you want to savage this thing fine I'll give you the corpse. There's the name. You can have the name, but I'm gonna keep doing every single thing that needs to be done and I have."

A search of the Nexis database indicates that no major U.S. media outlets-- no national broadcast television news shows, no major U.S. newspapers, no wire services or major magazines-- have reported Rumsfeld's remarks.

Rumsfeld's comments seem all the more alarming in light of analysis presented by William Arkin in a recent **Los Angeles Times** opinion column (11/24/02), in which he argues that Rumsfeld is redesigning the U.S. military to make "information warfare" central to its functions.

This new policy, says Arkin, increasingly "blurs or even erases the boundaries between factual information and news, on the one hand, and public relations, propaganda and psychological warfare, on the other." Arkin adds that "while the policy ostensibly targets foreign enemies, its most likely victim will be the American electorate."

It is essential that media follow up this story, particularly now, as the country faces a possible war with Iraq and reporters rely even more heavily than usual on Pentagon information.

To read the full transcript of Rumsfeld's remarks, see:
http://www.dod.gov/news/Nov2002/t11212002_t1118sd2.html

Private Lynch ■ By Nicholas D. Kristof

How a soldier fell into the propaganda machine

IN NASIRIYAH, Iraq I've been roaming Iraq, turning over rocks in my unceasing effort to help the Bush administration find those weapons of mass destruction. No luck yet.

But I did find something related, here in the city where it seems (contrary to early Pentagon leaks) Private Jessica Lynch did not mow down Iraqis until her ammo ran out, was not shot and apparently was not plucked from behind enemy lines by U.S. commandos braving a firefight. It looks as if the first accounts of the rescue were embellished, like the imminent threat from weapons of mass destruction, and like wartime pronouncements about an uprising in Basra and imminent defections of generals. There's a pattern: We were misled.

None of this is to put down Lynch, whom her Iraqi doctors described as courageous and funny in the face of unrelenting pain; they said that she told Abdul Hadi, a hospital worker who had befriended her, not to take risks for her because he was needed by his 17 children. Lynch is still a hero in my book, and it was unnecessary for officials to try to turn her into a Hollywood caricature. As a citizen, I deeply resent my government trying to spin me like a Ping-Pong ball.

Staff members of An Nasiriyah's main hospital told me, as they have told other reporters, how surprised they were when military officers brought an American woman by ambulance. Lynch was unconscious, with broken legs, a head wound and other injuries, apparently sustained in a vehicle accident during a firefight.

"She was nearly dead," recalled Saad Abdulrazak, the deputy hospital director, who received her.

The Iraqi doctors were enchanted by this blonde warrior, who as she recovered spent her time alternately crying and joking. I don't know how much to credit the Iraqis' claims that they gave her the best room in the hospital, that they went to the market to buy orange juice for her with their own money, that they brought clothes so that she would have something to wear. But they didn't minimize Iraqi brutality. Indeed, they told of an execution of a handcuffed American male (I've put a fuller account of this execution and of Lynch's saga at nytimes.com/kristofresponds).

**Facts were subordinated to politics,
and truth was treated as an
endlessly stretchable fabric.**

The hospital staff also said that on the night of March 27, military officials prepared to kill Lynch by putting her in an ambulance and blowing it up with its occupants — blaming the atrocity on the Americans. The ambulance drivers balked at that idea. Eventually, the plan was changed so that a military officer would shoot Lynch and burn the ambulance. So Sabah Khazal, an ambulance driver, loaded her in the vehicle and drove off with a military officer assigned to execute her.

"I asked him not to shoot Jessica," Khazal said, "and he was afraid of God and didn't kill her." Instead, the executioner ran away and deserted the army, and Khazal said that he then thought about delivering Lynch to an American checkpoint. But there

were firefights on the streets, so he returned to the hospital. (Lynch apparently never knew how close she came to execution.)

By the morning of March 31, all of the Iraqi military at the hospital had fled. The hospital staff members said that they then told Lynch they would take her to the Americans the next day. That same night, the American Special Forces arrived.

"I met the Americans at the hospital entrance," said Dr. Hussein Salih, adding that Abdulrazak then led the Americans to Lynch. The staff members all said there was no resistance, and that they welcomed the Americans.

Is this account the truth? I don't know, but every time I voiced skepticism, the doctors and staff all insisted: "Go ask Jessica! She'll tell you."

The U.S. military has refused to make Lynch available, although that may be out of respect for her privacy, and in any case she is said to have no memory of her capture.

My guess is that "Saving Private Lynch" was a complex tale vastly oversimplified by officials, partly because of genuine ambiguities and partly because they wanted a good story to build political support for the war — a repetition of the exaggerations over weapons of mass destruction. We weren't quite lied to, but facts were subordinated to politics, and truth was treated as an endlessly stretchable fabric.

The Iraqis misused American prisoners for their propaganda purposes, and it hurts to find out that some American officials were misusing Jessica Lynch the same way.

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Lynch, grateful to supporters, returns home



By Brett McMillan, U.S. Army

Washington ceremony: Lt. Gen. James Peake presents Pfc. Jessica Lynch with the Bronze Star, Purple Heart and POW medals.

The Associated Press

Former POW Jessica Lynch returned home aboard an Army helicopter Tuesday for a hero's welcome, nearly four months after she was ambushed by Iraqi forces and later rescued from a hospital.

The helicopter landed in Elizabeth at about 1:56 p.m. after flying over Lynch's residence in nearby Palestine, a tiny town in the rolling green hills of West Virginia. The 20-year-old Army supply clerk, severely injured in an ambush in Iraq in March, left Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington at about 10:30 a.m.

Lynch made brief public remarks from a wheelchair in a park minutes after the arrival — her first public words since

her ordeal. "I had no idea so many people knew I was missing," Lynch said. "I'd like to say thank you to everyone who helped and prayed for my return."

Earlier, the hospital issued a statement by Lynch in which she thanked the medical team who cared for her.

Suffering from multiple broken bones and other injuries, Lynch had arrived at Walter Reed, the Defense Department's largest medical facility, on April 12.

She was accompanied by her parents and a unit from the Parkersburg National Guard, which includes Lynch's cousin, Dan Little.

Lynch's 507th Maintenance Company convoy was ambushed March 23 near the Iraqi

city of Nasiriyah. Eleven soldiers were killed. U.S. forces rescued Lynch at a Nasiriyah hospital April 1. Five other captured 507th soldiers, held apart from Lynch, were released April 13.

Lynch's rescue made an American hero out of the petite blonde who joined the Army to get an education and become a kindergarten teacher.

Using 1,600 yards of donated lawn chair material, town workers hung hundreds of yellow bows along the motorcade route from Elizabeth to Palestine, about 5 miles away. By midmorning, seven dozen people gathered along the route to welcome Lynch home.

"We're here to see history," said Mary Elder, 52, of St. Marys.

Note that this article was published more than a month after the story of Pte. Lynch's 'rescue' from an Iraqi hospital was exposed as Pentagon propaganda (see the essay, *How a soldier fell into the propaganda machine* by Nicholas Kristof in the IHT/New York Times). Note also that the article does not remind the reader that this story was exposed as a lie, but repeats the story as fact (paragraphs 3, 7 and 8) and then concludes with a quote that stirs the patriotic heart (paragraph 10).

Soldiers' letters questioned

By BARRIE McKENNA
From Tuesday's Globe and Mail

Tuesday, Oct. 14, 2003

UPDATED AT 2:14 AM EDT

Washington — It reads like a heartfelt letter from the front by a U.S. soldier eager to let folks back home know how well the mission in Iraq is going.

"The quality of life and security for the citizens has been largely restored, and we are a large part of why it has happened," Sergeant Christopher Shelton bragged in a letter from Kirkuk that was published in his hometown newspaper in Washington state, the Snohomish County Tribune. "The majority of the city has welcomed our presence with open arms."

The sentiments seemed genuine until identical letters signed by Sergeant Shawn Grueser of Poca, W.Va., Private Nick Deaconson of Beckley, W.Va., and at least eight other soldiers began appearing in newspapers across the United States, according to a report by Gannett News Service.

Some of the soldiers apparently didn't even know the letter was being sent under their names. Timothy Deaconson, a surgeon, was so impressed when he read his son's eloquent letter in his local paper that he called him in Iraq to offer congratulations.

"When I told him he wrote such a good letter, he said 'What letter?'" Dr. Deaconson told Gannett.

Other soldiers acknowledged signing a form letter, but said they had no idea who wrote it.

In all, Gannett found identical letters in 11 local newspapers signed by members of the 503rd Airborne Infantry Regiment.

U.S. Pentagon officials denied any knowledge of an orchestrated campaign to spread good news stories about the bloody and widely criticized military campaign in Iraq.

But the letter-writing controversy has occurred as U.S. President George W. Bush and top members of his administration are stepping up efforts to counter what they say has been unfair media coverage of Iraq.

As part of the media blitz, Mr. Bush granted interviews yesterday to a series of regional broadcasting groups that own local television stations across the United States. Speaking to the Hearst Argyle Group Inc. of New York, for example, Mr. Bush complained that while U.S. forces have made "good progress" in improving the lives of Iraqis, "there's a sense in America that people aren't getting the truth" about the war.

"I'm mindful of the filter through which news travels," he said in an interview distributed to 24 Hearst-owned stations. "Sometimes you just have to go over the heads of the filter and go directly to the people." *

In addition to Mr. Bush, Vice-President Dick Cheney, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice have made multiple media appearances in recent days defending the administration's Iraq campaign.

*

Part of the success of the neo-conservative strategy is the constantly repeated charge that the bias ("filter") shaping public perception of events is the work of the (so-called) Liberal media; the implication is that the political Right never indulges in such tactics.

The unraveling of U.S. propaganda

By Frank Rich

NEW YORK

It's almost too perfect. Two young working-class women from opposite ends of West Virginia go to war. One is blond and has aspirations to be a schoolteacher; the other is dark, divorced and now carrying an out-of-wedlock baby. One becomes the poster child for Operation Iraqi Freedom, the subject of a hagiographic TV movie; the other becomes the hideous, leering face of American wartime criminality, Exhibit A in the indictment of its descent into the gulag. In the words of *Time* magazine, Private First Class Lynndie England is "a Jessica Lynch gone wrong."

Maybe that's true — people are just starting to hear England speak for herself — but there's a more revealing story. America's 13-month journey from Lynch's profile in courage to England's in sadism is less the tale of two women at the bottom of the chain of command than a gauge of the hubris by which those at the top have lost the war in the international and domestic courts of public opinion. And the supposedly uplifting Lynch half of the double bill is as revealing of what's gone wrong in Iraq — and gone wrong from the start — as is her doppelganger's denouement at Abu Ghraib.

Flash back to the creation of Jessica Lynch Superstar, a story regurgitated without question by much of the press. It was in early April 2003 that the stories first surfaced about the Rambo who had shot her way out of an ambush. Later we learned that this story was almost entirely fiction. Meanwhile, Lynch herself was reduced to a pawn, a bystander to her own big-budget biopic. When she emerged six months later, Diane Sawyer asked if it bothered her that she had been showcased by the military. "Yeah, it does," she answered. "It does that they used me as a way to symbolize all this stuff. Yeah, it's wrong."

This wrong was committed not by accident but by design. In "Control Room," the revelatory documentary about the Arab satellite news station Al Jazeera, the audience is taken into the Central Command's media center in Doha, Qatar, in early April 2003 to see American mythmaking in action. The Lynch episode came at a troubling moment in the war; the troops were being stretched thin, the coalition had mistakenly shot up a van full of Iraqi women and children, and three Marines had just been killed in the latest helicopter crash. But as we see in "Control Room," the CentCom press operation was determined to drown out such bad



A tale of two U.S. Army privates: Jessica Lynch, left, and Lynndie England.

news by disseminating the triumphant prepackaged saga of its manufactured heroine no matter what.

The documentary captures some of the briefing at which the dramatic Lynch story was first laid out. An American journalist on hand, the CNN correspondent Tom Mintier, grumbles afterward about how the "minute by minute" account of the rescue has superseded the major news he and his colleagues had been waiting for: the fate of troops just entering Baghdad. His cavils were useless; the legend was moving too fast to be derailed. Soon the U.S. military would buttress it with a complementary video, shot and edited by its own movie crew: an action-packed montage of the guns-blazing Special Operations rescue raid. The marketing of this video was itself an exercise in hype, meant to blur and inflate the Lynch episode further.

The true control room in "Control Room" is not so much Al Jazeera HQ as the coalition media center. It is there, from a costly Hollywood set, that the military commanded its propaganda effort, which was aided and abetted by a media sometimes as eager to slant the news as its Arab counterpart. The attractively forthright American press officer we follow throughout the documentary, Lieutenant Josh Rushing of the Marines, doesn't deny the symmetry: "When I watch Al Jazeera, I can

tell what they are showing and then I can tell what they are not showing — by choice. Same thing when I watch Fox on the other end of the spectrum."

In "Control Room," one can see how much the administration of George Bush was seduced into complacency early on, not just by the relative ease with which it took Iraq, but also by its success at news management. The Lynch triumph was followed within days by the toppling of the Saddam Hussein statue. Next up was "Top Gun."

Yet America was very good at feigning ignorance about its own propaganda while decrying Al Jazeera's. In one particularly embarrassing illustration of American hypocrisy, we're reminded of how Donald Rumsfeld berated the channel for violating the Geneva conventions by broadcasting pictures of American prisoners of war. By the time of his outburst — March 2003 — we were very likely already violating the conventions ourselves. The confidential Red Cross report uncovered this week by *The Wall Street Journal* reveals that complaints about American abuse of Iraqis had already started by then, 10 months before the Pentagon launched the investigation.

In retrospect, much of what we saw during Operation Iraqi Freedom was as fictionalized as CentCom's version of "Saving Private Jessica." When we

weren't staging the news, we were covering it up. "A war with hundreds of coalition and tens of thousands of Iraqi casualties" was transformed "into something closer to a defense contractor's training video: a lot of action, but no consequences, as if shells simply disappeared into the air and an invisible enemy magically ceased to exist."

That was the conclusion reached by one of the leaders of a research project at George Washington University's School of Media and Public Affairs, which examined 600 hours of war coverage on CNN, Fox and ABC from the war's March 20, 2003, start to the April 9 fall of Baghdad, "to see how 'real' the war looked on TV." Of the 1,710 stories they surveyed, "only 13.5 percent included any shots of dead or wounded coalition soldiers, Iraqi soldiers or civilians."

That brief war, since renamed "major combat operations," seems like a century ago. As "Saving Private Jessica" symbolizes how effectively the U.S. military and administration controlled the news during Operation Iraqi Freedom, so the photos of England and her cohorts symbolize their utter loss of that control now. More scoops are on the way, and not just those of torture.

It has taken a while for Rumsfeld and General Richard Myers to figure out just how much their power to enforce their own narrative of this war has waned. Their many successes in news management have been their undoing, leaving them besotted by their own invincibility and ill-equipped for failure. Clearly they still believed they could control the pictures. According to Rumsfeld's own testimony to Congress, he was "surprised" that lowly enlisted men could be "running around with digital cameras" e-mailing grotesque snapshots all over the world.

When Bush traveled to the Pentagon on Monday, it was an odd moment to congratulate the secretary of defense — who has thrown the reputation of the United States and its the honorable military to the dogs — for doing a "superb job." But to understand where Bush is coming from, recall the interview he gave last autumn to Brit Hume of Fox News, in which he griped about the press's challenging administration propaganda. "The best way to get the news is from objective sources," he said, "and the most objective sources I have are people on my staff who tell me what's happening in the world."

Perhaps someone on that staff might tell him that, according to the latest polls, most of the United States has changed the channel.

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