

Sugar-Coating U.S. Motives in Iraq

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The Toronto Star
Nov. 2, 2003

When Genseric, king of the Vandals, invaded northern Africa in 428 A.D., he probably didn't declare that his intention was to plunder and pillage. It's no accident that the name of his people has ended up, some 16 centuries later, as an enduring word in our vocabulary, synonymous with thuggery and hooliganism.

Invading armies are often coy when it comes to admitting their true motives. Certainly a desire to seize territory and resources are rarely among the motives modern invading armies tend to highlight.

One can understand the preference for looking like a liberator rather than a pillaging bully.

What's harder to understand is how willingly members of the media step forward to make the invaders' case for them. Iraq pops to mind.

As post-war Iraq plunged into deeper levels of violence last week, media pundits were out in force freshly celebrating the U.S. invasion as an act of liberation and vigorously fighting off any suggestion that the violence could be part of an Iraqi resistance movement.

I've always wondered what makes these pundits so sure the U.S. has nothing but good intentions in Iraq. Is it just because George Bush says so?

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman enthused last week that "this is the most radical-liberal revolutionary war the U.S. has ever launched — a war of choice to install some democracy in the heart of the Arab-Muslim world."

How does he know that? What's his evidence?

Is he unaware of the public statements made by the "Project for a New American Century"—a group started in 1997 by people who are now top Bush administration officials, including Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz. The group openly urged Washington to take advantage of the decline of Soviet power by asserting American military power more forcefully around the world. Sounds a bit like imperialism.

Globe and Mail columnist Margaret Wente suggested last week that the Americans went to Iraq "genuinely believing that they could win this war with peace, love and understanding" and that they're "just too darned nice for the nastiness they have stumbled into."

Stumbled into? What, they just happened to be in the area — 140,000 of them, armed to the teeth with tanks and B52s — when they inadvertently stumbled into Iraq? Sort of like the way the Soviets "stumbled into" Hungary in 1956 and into Czechoslovakia in 1968?

As to the Americans being "too darned nice." Certainly, we all know lots of nice individual Americans.

(Some individual Vandals were probably nice too, back in the 5th century.)

But that doesn't mean the U.S. military hasn't done horrific things to the Iraqi people. Americans might not seem that "darned nice" to the thousands of Iraqis who've been killed or wounded by them. (Washington doesn't bother to keep count.)

It was more than "peace, love and understanding" that left that 12-year-old boy badly burned, orphaned and without both arms, as well as transforming a 20-year-old woman into a disconnected head and torso last April (along with eight other dead civilians) when an American plane dropped a 900-kilogram bomb on a Baghdad neighbourhood, hoping to hit Saddam.

Of course, last week's bombing of the Red Cross in Baghdad was a horrific act of terrorism.

My guess is that the terrorists were trying to destabilize the American occupation, rather than particularly targeting humanitarian workers.

But the action of the terrorists shows they are cold-blooded murderers willing to kill innocent people to advance their political goals.

Yet, is that really much different than what goes on in Washington, where political goals (i.e. eliminating Saddam) are considered sufficient grounds to justify killing people who happen to be in the way, and where Pentagon officials even celebrate the ferocity of such attacks with cute slogans like "shock and awe?"

It's interesting to note that some well-connected U.S. corporations are getting rich due to the occupation of Iraq.

According to a report released last week by the Washington-based Centre for Public Integrity, more than \$8 billion in contracts for rebuilding Iraq and Afghanistan have been awarded — many without competitive bids — to companies that were major donors to the Bush campaign.

The biggest recipient, with \$2.3 billion in contracts, is a subsidiary of Halliburton, the company formerly headed by Vice-President Dick Cheney. And all this is just for reconstruction. The oil will be dealt with later.

Pundits like Friedman and Wente still see here something more than the run-of-the-mill plundering and imperialism that motivates other invaders.

Perhaps, 16 centuries from now, the word "Bush" will endure in the vocabulary, synonymous with bringing liberty to a people.

But somehow I doubt it.