"The U.S. has a new credibility. What we say goes."

- President George Bush,

In October, 1990, a 15-year-old Kuwaiti girl, identified only as Nayirah, appeared in Washington before the House of Representatives' Human Rights Caucus. She testified that Iraqi soldiers who had invaded Kuwait on August 2nd tore hundreds of babies from hospital incubators and killed them.

Television flashed her testimony around the world. It electrified opposition to Iraq's president, Saddam Hussein, who was now portrayed by U.S. president George Bush not only as "the Butcher of Baghdad" but -- so much for old friends -- "a tyrant worse than Hitler."

Bush quoted Nayirah at every opportunity. Six times in one month he referred to "312 premature babies at Kuwait City's maternity hospital who died after Iraqi soldiers stole their incubators and left the infants on the floor,"(1) and of "babies pulled from incubators and scattered like firewood across the floor." Bush used Nayirah's testimony to lambaste Senate Democrats still supporting "only" sanctions against Iraq -- the blockade of trade which alone would cause hundreds of thousands of Iraqis to die of hunger and disease -- but who waffled on endorsing the policy Bush wanted to implement: outright bombardment. Republicans and pro-war Democrats used Nayirah's tale to hammer their fellow politicians into line behind Bush's war in the Persian Gulf.(2)

Nayirah, though, was no impartial eyewitness, a fact carefully concealed by her handlers. She was the daughter of one Saud Nasir Al-Sabah, Kuwait's ambassador to the United States. A few key Congressional leaders and reporters knew who Nayirah was, but none of them thought of sharing that minor detail with Congress, let alone the American people.

Everything Nayirah said, as it turned out, was a lie. There were, in actuality, only a handful of incubators in all of Kuwait, certainly not the "hundreds" she claimed. According to Dr. Mohammed Matar, director of Kuwait's primary care system, and his wife, Dr. Fayeza Youssef, who ran the obstetrics unit at the maternity hospital, there were few if any babies in the incubators at the time of the Iraqi invasion. Nayirah's charges, they said, were totally false. "I think it was just something for propaganda," Dr. Matar said. In an ABC-TV News account after the war, John Martin reported that although "patients, including premature babies, did die," this occurred "when many of Kuwait's nurses and doctors stopped working or fled the country" -- a far cry from Bush's original assertion that hundreds of babies were murdered by Iraqi troops.(3)

Subsequent investigations, including one by Amnesty International, found no evidence for the incubator claims.

It is likely that Nayirah was not even in Kuwait, let alone at the hospital, at that time; the Kuwaiti aristocracy and their families had fled the country weeks before the anticipated invasion. Some defended their country at the gaming tables in Monte Carlo, where at least one member of the ruling family was reported to have gambled away more than $10 million as his fellow rulers called for economic and military assistance from abroad.

As invasions go, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was relatively -- I stress the word "relatively" -- bloodless. Despite the heart-rending testimonies TV viewers in the U.S. were subjected to night after night, fewer than 200
Kuwaitis were killed. Compare that to such "peaceful" ventures as the U.S. invasion of Panama the year before, which killed an estimated 7,500 Panamanians; or, a year after the Gulf War, the 10,000 Somalis killed by U.S./U.N. troops in what was portrayed as a "peace mission" to bring food aid to the allegedly starving region.\(^4\)

How did Nayirah first come to the attention of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, which put her before the world’s cameras? It was arranged by Hill & Knowlton, a public relations firm hired to rally the U.S. populace behind Bush’s policy of going to war. And it worked!

Hill & Knowlton's yellow ribbon campaign to whip up support for "our" troops, which followed their orchestration of Nayirah's phony "incubator" testimony, was a public relations masterpiece. The claim that satellite photos revealed that Iraq had troops poised to strike Saudi Arabia was also fabricated by the PR firm. Hill & Knowlton was paid between $12 million (as reported two years later on "60 Minutes") and $20 million (as reported on "20/20") for "services rendered." The group fronting the money? Citizens for a Free Kuwait, a phony "human rights agency" set up and funded entirely by Kuwait's emirocracy to promote its interests in the U.S.

"When Hill & Knowlton masterminded the Kuwaiti campaign to sell the Gulf War to the American public, the owners of this highly effective propaganda machine were residing in another country" – the United Kingdom – writes Sharon Beder and Richard Gosden in PR Watch. "Should this give pause for thought? Does it demonstrate a certain potential for the future exercise of global political power – the power to manipulate democratic political processes through managing public opinion," which Hill and Knowlton demonstrated 10 years ago?\(^5\)

All of this is concealed in a new HBO "behind-the-scenes true story" of the Gulf War, which is being released at this crucial political moment. As Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting writes, "HBO's version of history never makes clear that the incubator story was fraudulent, and in fact had been managed by an American PR firm, not Iraq. Curiously, however, the truth seems to have been clear to Robert Wiener, the former CNN producer who co-wrote 'Live from Baghdad.' As he explained to CNN's Wolf Blitzer (11/21/02), 'that story turned out to be false because those accusations were made by the daughter of the Kuwaiti minister of information and were never proven.' Unfortunately, HBO viewers won't know that when they see the film."\(^6\)

NOTES


2. The use of the Big Lie to manipulate public opinion and neutralize opposition to a particular war was not invented by Bush. See, for instance, James Laxer, "Iraq: US has match, seeks kindle: American leaders have often falsified reasons to attack other countries," (ActionGreens, Mar. 31, 2001). Laxer is a Political Science Professor at York University, Toronto.


4. In actuality, people in only certain areas of Somalia were starving – those that had been subjected to IMF structural adjustment programs. See, Mitchel Cohen, "Somalia & the Cynical Manipulation of Hunger," Red Balloon Collective, 1994.

5. Sharon Beder and Richard Gosden, "PR Watch," Volume 8, No. 2, 2nd Quarter 2001. The PR firm has since been working at the behest of the pharmaceutical industry to ban over-the-counter vitamin and nutritional supplement sales in Europe.

Mitchel Cohen is the co-editor of Green Politix, the national newspaper of the Greens/Green Party USA.