

***The Hyper-Real Enemy &
Spectator-Sport Warfare in the West:
The U.S.-Iraq War Paradox***

Atossa Movahedi

American University

atossam@hotmail.com

Our present society has failed to give people sufficient ego satisfaction; so they have turned to escapist activities such as fast driving, jitterbugging, or cocktail parties or derive vicarious satisfaction from war excitement, spectator sports, etc. Our depersonalized machine economy detracts from ego strength. Other means must be found to re-enforce the ego if we are to become a real democrat, a united people, instead of resentful regiments of goose-steppers blindly following a Fuehrer. (Ephron, 1940: 458—italics mine).

The first day of my international relations theory class was humbling to say the least for one main reason. My professor posed a question to the class that resulted in several minutes of dumbfounded silence. The question was: what historical event in your lifetime other than September 11th has affected you most? The reality is that for those born after the 1970s growing up in the United States, life has been secure to an unprecedented degree. Even I must confess as a little girl, I thought it would be fun to go to war, to be able to play hide and seek with the “bad guys.” Little did I know that war was not a game of hide and seek, but of life and death. In his book *Spectator-Sport War: The West and Contemporary Conflict*, Colin McInnes (2002) writes about this very phenomena. The Western experience of war has been one through a protective bubble, and I argue that it has desensitized individuals to the actual horror and destruction of war. This paper will show how the current U.S.-Iraq war demonstrates this notion of spectator-sport warfare.

The result of the two World Wars has been a Western paranoia of a third World War, and thus regimes have done everything in their power to prevent such an event to take place. McInnes (2002) has argued that “total” war has been replaced by “modern war,” which is less encompassing, less destructive, and thus requires less direct Western involvement. The previous characterizations of ‘total war’ being escalation and participation, have been pushed aside by five new elements listed by McInnes as: the localization of war, the new tendency to perceive the leader of the regime as the enemy rather than the state, minimization of collateral damage, minimization of exposure for Western society and military forces, and the novel concept of ‘cyber war.’ Each of these features of modern war has its individual implications for spreading the war as a sport perspective. For purposes of this paper, the changes in participation and escalation, and justifications for war will be exemplified through the current situation in Iraq. Additionally, it will be argued that one of the effects of western sanitization of war has been an automatic social categorization of the world into good vs. evil (McInnes, 2002).

Modern war has evolved, forcing states to recognize a new set of characters, i.e. terrorists. Perhaps the events of September 11th and the threats that have shaken the security of the U.S. may be considered the expansion of war. For the first time, the U.S. is directly experiencing destruction and death on its home turf. The results of the current war

will consist of a losing side whose hatred for the West will be fueled, possibly setting off a new chain of terrorist attacks.

The other main feature of war that has changed is the idea of participation. There no longer exists the overwhelming sense of nationalistic patriotism or of responsibility to serve one's country in war. McInnes shows how war is now seen as a profession involving only a small segment of the society. The majority is released of the burden of fighting the war, and because of this it has become easier to support decisions of going to war. Iraq is certainly one case that exemplifies McInnes' arguments. The majority of American public approved President Bush's decision to go to war based on a mere suspicion of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (CBS News Polls: 2004). Apparently, the majority of citizens no longer require proof of actual threat in order to declare war on the enemy (McInnes, 2002).

Enemy is not some "objective" group entity to be there simply for fighting. We paint the "other" and "the otherness" with aspects of ourselves (Stein, 1986). The images of our enemies speak more about us than about them. They represent the part of the self that we try to disown. We used to say about the Soviets that force is the only language they understand. We said the same about North Vietnamese, recently about Saddam and now about North Koreans and Arabs, while we can hardly hide our joy for being the superpower and using our force in any international encounter. Jerome Frank (1988) portraying the pervasive image of the enemy, writes: "This image is remarkably similar no matter who the conflicting parties are. Enemy images mirror each other—that is, each side attributes the same virtues to itself and the same vice to the enemy. 'We' are trustworthy, peace-loving, honorable and humanitarian; 'they' are treacherous, warlike and cruel" (1980: 951). Doesn't this ring a familiar bell? Invading Iraq, killing tens of thousands of Iraqis and turning the country into rubble; don't we say "why do they hate us so much?"

The war-prone policies of President Bush and the administration's inability to consider alternative routes toward conflict resolution other than coercion and military force is an example of the overly "political realism" mentality of the current incumbents of power. Fighting a war out of choice rather than out of a need for survival is McInnes' point of how justifications for war have changed. Going to war in Iraq were justified by the Bush administration based on a fear of supposedly "weapons of mass destruction." In reality, the world is aware of the current international structure consisting of the U.S. hegemonic power which opposes no tangible threats to its destruction. In fact, the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) outwardly suggested this neo-conservative plan of action years before the war and said, "[a]t the present the United States faces no global rival. America's grand strategy should aim to preserve and extend this advantageous position as far into the future as possible" (globalissues.org). The war in Iraq has been a political strategy to further *increase* the U.S. position of power. Iraq did not represent a situation of war as means of survival, but as a means of meeting a particular geopolitical agenda. A quote taken from "Media Lens" lends support to the conclusion of McInnes concerning war as a choice: "This intervention has been driven, not by humanitarian motives, but by corporate greed, by the need to secure and protect resources and markets abroad—needs that require compliant, iron-fisted, pro-Western governments subordinated their populations to the interests of Western business" (www.globalissues.org). This notion reminds us of Dwight D. Eisenhower's word of caution about the operation of the military industrial complex, a coalition of the military and industrialists who in pursuit of arms sale profit try to push for wars, i.e. for a market for their deadly commodities. This is what he said in his farewell address to the nation on January 17, 1961:

... we have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions. Added to this, three and a half million men and women are directly engaged in the defense establishment. We annually spend on military security more than the net income of all United States corporations.

This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence—economic, political, even spiritual—is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society.

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.

We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should

take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.

As has been argued by David H. Freedman and Matthew Maier in the March 2003 issue of *Business*, the new military-industrial complex is very much alive and functional as can be seen by the \$30 billion dollar yearly Pentagon contracts given to the Big Three weapons makers: Lockheed Martin Corporation, Boeing, and Raytheon. However, it seems that print and television media have joined the new military industrial complex by neutralizing and sanitizing the war which constitute their major share of their commodity market.

The separation of the world into an “us” versus “them” categories helps the cause of a spectator-warfare mentality. According to McInnes, “The West’s identification with the heroes—the defenders of liberal values, the villains being authoritarian leaders—serves to reinforce Western identity and to educate publics about who “we” are in relation to “them.” Video games and movies alike portray American soldiers as the “good guys” and foreigners as the “bad guys,” often being the common attitude toward non-Western societies. In addition to viewing the world in a narrow two-sided outlook, differentiating between good and bad characters often resembles a game-like schema.

In his “State of the Union Address” of January 2002, President Bush used the term “axis of evil” in reference to various Middle Eastern countries. Labeling any regime as “evil” is to introduce moralistic and religious self-righteousness into politics. Regardless of whether the actions of Saddam Hussein were evil or not, to cast a whole set of countries in the role of “evil” would only hamper any constructive communication with such “evil” countries.

The recent transference of targets from states to leaders by Western politicians is a method of distancing themselves from the people of the country in question. The United States’ claim of going to war against Saddam rather than against Iraqis is a good example of this paradoxical ritual. The U.S. wants the world to believe that it is fighting a war with benevolent intentions—another interesting paradox of Western politics.

To Noam Chomsky (2003), the American tendency to “rid the world of evil” through violence is simply about destroying any regime along its path that may interfere with its agenda. Chomsky realizes the narcissism embedded in personalities of these types of leaders who are attempting to role play God by enforcing certain personal ideologies. Using war to pursue world peace is the contradictory rhetoric of the current administration. The new plan of the Bush administration to spread democracy around the world is analogous to a crusade of Western values that is based on a misunderstanding of the realities of war (Chomsky, 2003).

In an interesting study on the changing image of the entertainment television technology, Keightley (2003) has argued that with the introduction of high fidelity sound technology, the television developed a negative “feminine” image. Hi Fi technology came to represent the masculine bastion of high culture. Should we accept Keightley’s thesis, we may hypothesize that the television industry’s most effective method for rehabilitating its negative “feminine” image has been to saturate the airways by games of war and violence. It is in this sense that similar to arms industries, the television industry has a vested interest in perpetuation of war and violence. The best way to achieve this market goal for the industry is to turn the war into spectator sport that can compete with football, baseball, basketball and boxing for the viewers’ attention.

War and sports have always been close bed fellows. In Olympic Games, people come to believe that the prestige of their country depends on the performance of their athletes. Athletes play a role similar to gladiators who represent a country in battle. Winning is valued so highly in American sport culture, argues Ian Robertson (1997), that playing of a game has taken a secondary role. “Winning is not everything, it is the only thing,” is a slogan which has captured every aspect of sportsmanship. One may argue that in Olympic Games, nations engage in nothing but a symbolic war.

Changing the actual war into television sport has many social and psychological functions. It makes it easy for people to identify with their home team. It makes people feel good about themselves as a fan of a winning team. It converts the violent nature of war into some health driven sport activity. It robs the war of its reality of death and destruction by casting it in into a TV fantasy narrative in which actors die in one scene only to be resurrected to play a different role in the next scene.

In his book, *News: Politics of Illusion*, Bennett (1988) writes about the media’s role in the construction of political reality. According to him, “Mass mediated images of reality set the limits on who in the world we think we are as a people; and what in the world we think we are doing” (p. 236).

Shaffer (2002) brilliantly offers the concept of “Statism” in relation to the “herd-oriented” societal tendency to be preoccupied by images and representations rather than with “reality.” This framework of thinking is a cause and effect

of the cultural obsession with entertainment which in turn can lead to a lazy and passive stand on politics. It seems as though people's attention spans have become fixated upon exciting and attractive images, rather than on the intellectual reflection of actual current events. Thus, politicians are able to manipulate their messages to the public, portraying their agenda through patriotic and universal interests in the name of justice. Propaganda is able to deliver these sentiments, pushing the reality of the political game aside (Shaffer, 2002).

"Politics and entertainment each feed upon—and help to foster—public appetites for illusions and fantastic thinking," writes Shaffer, 2002. He points out that the majority of the so called fantasies that the public vicariously experiences through the media are those of conflict, violence, and death—rather than peace, cooperation, and life. People have become infatuated by dark images through the television screen of places far away, and are able to feel some sort of adrenaline rush from experiencing them indirectly while in the comforts of their homes. In the end, if the images are too vivid or disturbing, we always have the option of changing the channel. The war in Iraq is not the daily concern of the public. The more pressing problem is how to grant thirty minutes of the day to the audience to convince its involvement in the exciting events. In the Saturday April 17 News conference in Baghdad, in response to a foreign journalist's complaint about the disturbing TV images of the death and destruction inflicted by the coalition on civilians, General Abizaid, said: "I have a very easy solution for you: just change the channel!" (CNN News)

Recognizing the role that the media plays in contributing to the spectatorship of individuals, McInnes is more optimistic than I am about people's autonomous judgments. He feels that people aren't "absorbent sponges" and can think for themselves. Print media and TV tend to reflect people's conscious or subconscious fantasies and desires. The following remark by Rosenberg (1959) captures the nature of our interaction with media:

The enemy of this decade does not come from below. His is neither the face of the ogre over the edge, nor of the ghost behind the window pane. In the muted melodrama of the current sociology, the inhumane does not invade. It sits in the living room twisting the TV dial or takes the family for a ride in the two tone hard-top. It is you.

As long as society is experiencing war from a protected environment, and the majority of the public does not feel the responsibility of fighting in combat, war remains a choice rather than means of survival for the West. In this sense, as part of the strategies of conflict resolution, military force must be considered a last option, and a greater emphasis must be placed on cultural dialogue. Viewing the world in a war-solves-all perspective will further separate different countries and cultures. Continued labeling of peoples from different origins will facilitate the notion of war as a sport context for young and old minds alike—making way for a future of war-prone leaders in the West. Consequently, acting in overly hegemonic policies may bring forth violence and destruction to western turf.

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