

## **Silencing the Prophets: The Media's Truth-Telling Failure Before the US Invasion of Iraq**

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The failure of the mainstream U.S. media to heed the prophetic and truth-telling voices in the months leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq has had, and will continue to have, devastating consequences for the people of Iraq, the U.S., and the world. It is critical to understand that the prophets in this situation were not silent. On the contrary, their voices were virtually silenced by the failure of news media to recognize and mediate them. My paper will approach this chilling censorship and attempt to speak a prophetic word to those who have brought condemnation on themselves by their failure to heed the prophets' voices.

### **The prophets and their messages**

It is possible to recognize at least four types of prophetic voices struggling to proclaim their truth before the U.S. invasion of Iraq began on March 19, 2003. There were those who had been called from within the governmental system as prophets, and those who called others to acknowledgement of the truth. There were those prophets who spoke, or didn't, from "the belly of the media beast," if you like, and those who shouted in desperation from the margins of society. Each prophetic type carried the responsibility for a different kind of message. Here is a sampling of their stories.

**The called.** Mohammed el-Baradei, director of the International Atomic Energy Agency was perhaps in the best position to speak to the question of whether the Iraqi government had complied with the UN resolution calling for the dismantling of the Iraqi nuclear weapons program. On numerous occasions el-Baradei and other IAEA spokespersons repeated the conclusion that when they left Iraq in 1998 they did so with confidence that Iraq's nuclear weapons capabilities had been effectively dismantled. The IAEA had no reason to believe that it had been reconstituted. Nonetheless, when the Bush Administration made several spurious claims to the contrary, no major media outlet challenged the claim. On the contrary, in the fall of 2003 the media left virtually unchallenged an outright lie from the Bush Administration that a new IAEA report said Iraq was six months away from creating a nuclear weapon. When the IAEA released a statement refuting the claims of the White House the mainstream media failed to report it (MacArthur, 62-63). In a similar fashion, the cautions of chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix about the lack of evidence that the Iraqi government was cooking up tons of chemical and biological weapons were shunted aside, buried at the end of news stories or in the back pages of newspapers in favor of hysterical headlines about the hazards of these agents in a potential war in Iraq (Bennis).

**The Callers.** On February 15, 2003, 10 million people marched and stood vigil in cities and towns all over the world, carrying homemade protest signs in a symbolic, prophetic action that one commentator called "the people's answer to September 11" (Schell). Yet, the news media was reticent to give too much attention to the protests or protesters for one predictable reason: it's bad for business. Television news managers were particularly sensitive to the counter protests of their viewers who wrote angry letters in response to protest coverage. One television consulting company advised its client that continuing protest coverage would be "an issue" for the companies' bottom line. (Carr).

**From the Belly of the Beast.** Perhaps the most damaging prophetic failure of the pre-invasion media coverage was the false prophecy of some of the most prominent media outlets. Journalists from 13 of the most influential news organizations in the U.S. regurgitated information, mostly suspect, that was supplied to them by a contact who represented the Pentagon's favorite Iraqi ex-pat and government-in-waiting, Ahmed Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress.<sup>1</sup> Using funds provided to them by the U.S. State Department under the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, the INC created its "Information Collection Program" for the purpose of feeding "intelligence" to the U.S. media and its contacts in Washington in an effort to put Iraq at the top of the Administration's hit list after the September 11 attacks. This "misinformation" appeared in at least 108 news stories that ran over a nine-month period in 2002-2003. This undoubtedly contributed to creation of the national agenda that eventually led to the invasion (McCollam).

**From the margins.** The most damning prophetic "voice" comes from those without one. In January 2003, just weeks before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, a courageous Iraqi Dominican Sister spoke before an audience at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, where 120,000 people had gathered to discuss alternatives to the neoconservative cause. In the presence of some of the world's most celebrated social activists, before an audience of 7,000 world citizens, Sister Sherine Yacu gave voice to the cries of Iraq's 26 million people who had suffered for 12 years in the vise-grip of economic sanctions. She spoke for the 500,000 Iraqi children who died as a result of economic sanctions. She pleaded for the 750,000 citizens of Basra who received a virtual sentence of death-by-cancer when the United States choose to use depleted uranium anti-tank ordinance during the 1991 Gulf War. She gave voice to the cries of Iraq's people: "What have we done to deserve all this? Is this fair and acceptable?" ([www.domlife.org](http://www.domlife.org)). A dozen journalists sought out Sister Sherine for interviews during the days following her cry for justice at Porto Alegre. They represented countries in Latin America, Europe, and Asia. None was from the United States.

From the perspective of media studies, the reasons for these failures are largely structural and systemic. But an ethical evaluation reveals deeper, simpler human causes: fear, greed, and power. It is these I will explore through the lens of one of ancient Israel's mediators, the prophet Amos.

### **"Gatekeepers"**

In the journalist's lexicon, reporters and the news outlets for which they work are frequently referred to as "gatekeepers." They are the people with the power to make decisions, great and small, which determine where, how, and whether a story is told. The gatekeeping image is a perfect segue in to the world of the Old Testament prophets. Gates in ancient city walls served an important function. It was at the town and city gates (the word can mean either entrance or street) that business was conducted (2 Kg 7:1), public deliberation took place (Ex 32:26), and legal decisions were made (Ru 4:11).

The prophets often spoke their piece at the gates of the cities and incorporated the gates into their symbolic actions. So, it is at the intersection of these two sets of prophetic gates – ancient and modern, historical and metaphorical – that I find the most fruitful

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<sup>1</sup> *The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The New Yorker, Vanity Fair, Time, Newsweek, The Atlantic Monthly, 60 Minutes, USA Today, The New York Daily News, UPI, and Fox News.*

exploration of the failure of today's gatekeepers to speak truth to power in the months leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Freelance journalist Chris Mooney names three major failures of the mainstream print media in the run up to the invasion: accepting dubious factual claims as truth; failing to question the authority of the president to launch a pre-emptive war; and failing to push the Bush Administration on its post-war plans (CJR, 30). To his list I would add a fourth, which may trump all the others: failing to consider the consequences of the war for those who would have to pay the cost, the people of Iraqi and the United States.

Truth and justice in civil society are dominant themes in the prophetic literature, so the prophets have some damning words for people like the U.S. media, perhaps Amos most of all. His "beat" was to tell the story from the point of view of the downtrodden and neglected (Anderson, Freedman; 20) at a time when Judah and Israel were experiencing relative peace and prosperity. Historically, the period in which the implied prophet composed his book roughly parallels the socio-economic situation in the contemporary United States: The Cold War was over, the scars of Vietnam had begun to fade, and for about 15 years the U.S. enjoyed relative peace and economic prosperity. In Amos, the dramatic backdrop for his prophecy is a pending earthquake (Am 1:1). Early in second millennium America, it is the tragic terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a potent symbolic condemnation of U.S. economic and military might. The rumbling collapse of the World Trade Center towers was still echoing in the ears of the gatekeepers as the Bush Administration began its push toward a pre-emptive war against Iraq. The neoconservatives in Bush's inner circle were looking for any reason to link Saddam Hussein with the terrorist attacks, and, as many Americans are now aware, they successfully enlisted the assistance of the U.S. media, which largely failed as the gatekeepers of the prophetic voices that, as we have seen, might have made a difference in the outcome of the conflict.

They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth....For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins— you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate. Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate.

– Amos 5:10, 12-15a

These verses at the exact center of the book of Amos are the focus of his prophetic ministry (Anderson, 53). They also reach the heart of the issue with the U.S. media. Verse 10 exposes the evil intentionality of those who hate the reprover and abhor the truth-speaker. The injustice is not just a matter of unwilling ignorance or lazy sins of omission. Amos makes a judgment about the "attitude and intention" of the act (Anderson, 470). In Amos' world, those who hated the reprover and abhorred the truth-speaker were those in a position to mete out justice at the gate. This included leaders in the civic, religious, and commercial sectors of society (47). The ones who reprove and speak truth are, for Amos, the poor, the oppressed, and those who defend them. But in our contemporary reality, the poor receive no hearing at the gate. Their voices are mediated away in the profit margins of the fourth estate which, unlike the patron's of the

ancient world, does not see itself even remotely responsible for the lives of its “clients” when it fails to represent them with justice.

Rather than advocating for the voiceless, today’s for-profit news businesses are the epicenter of Walter Brueggemann’s “royal consciousness” – that power structure supplemented by an economics of affluence, a politics of oppression, and a religion of immanence which immunizes those in its thrall from the justice of God (41).

This is nicely illustrated by the news-trade magazine *Columbia Journalism Review*, which published a surprisingly candid self-evaluation by U.S. journalists a year after the terrorist attacks but before the U.S. military’s “shock and awe” campaign began in Baghdad. In this special report some of the big names in print journalism admitted that they were perhaps a little too willing to give the Bush administration an easy pass after 9/11 because they were unwilling to appear unpatriotic (25); they were afraid for their own lives (27), and, more obliquely, that the company’s bottom line depended on it (25). “...how great are your sins— you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.”

It makes one want to cry out in grief like Amos over the media’s failure to understand the consequences of their cowardice and greed. These high priests of popular culture, at least in this instance, were too thoroughly compromised by their place in the constellation of the powerful to tell the story from the vantage point of the oppressed, as Amos does. To hear their voices, it is necessary to turn to those who have been silenced.

## The True Prophets Speak

### The Called

September 11 did not do as much damage to the fabric of American society as we seem determined to do to ourselves.

Have we indeed become blind, as Russia is blind in Chechnya, as Israel is blind in the Occupied Territories, to our own advice, that overwhelming military power is not the answer to terrorism?

When our friends are afraid of us rather than for us, it is time to worry. And now they are afraid.

Who will tell them convincingly that the United States is as it was, a beacon of liberty, security, and justice for the planet?<sup>2</sup>

### From the Belly of the Beast

When it came time for American editors, reporters, studio anchors and producers to stand up to the establishment...their feet turned to clay.

Western satellite media dehumanized Arab men, women and children, which is why we do not feel heavier stabs of pain as rockets, cruise missiles and laser-guided bombs explode in inhabited cities.

American public relations generals talk down to reporters so submissive that it reminds one of the government press in tin pot dictatorships.

Fear of being labeled unpatriotic forces US reporters to toe the line, the same way it happens in, say, Nepal, India, Pakistan, Kenya, Thailand...or Iraq.<sup>3</sup>

### The Callers

“George – Peace is a faith-based initiative”

“Jewish single seeks peace:

Looking to reform the conservative agenda in an un-orthodox way.”

“George W. Bush: al-Qaeda Recruiter of the Year”<sup>4</sup>

### From the margins

“Bush would not bomb Iraq if he could see our tears.”<sup>5</sup>

“You are deceived and we are captured by your mass media, which is the biggest liar.

“President Bush defends the rights of animals. Have we less value than animals? Is he throwing flowers on people? He is going to use mass destructive weapons, which are going to result in great damage to our culture, our land, and history, and cause the death of thousands of our innocent people of all ages.

“Is it fair to be going through all this? Is it acceptable? Is our crime that we are floating on a huge sea of black gold?

What is the use of it, except to pay for our death?”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> From the resignation letter of career diplomat John Brady Kiesling to Secretary of State Colin L. Powell. Feb. 27, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Kanak Mani Dixit is editor of *Himal*, a South Asian monthly magazine published in Katmandu.

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<sup>4</sup> Protest signs, New York City, Feb. 15, 2003

<sup>5</sup> Sister Bushra, at al-Hayatt Maternity Hospital, Baghdad, December 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to the people of the world, from the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Sienna, Mosul, Iraq. 14 March 2003.

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