

IT1-- "BRIEFING FOR A DESCENT INTO HELL: A WIDE-EYED EXTRATERRESTRIAL IS INSTRUCTED ABOUT HOW A MAN NAMED BUSH BECAME THE MOST POWERFUL LEADER ON EARTH -- AND HOW HE LED THE PLANET INTO CHAOS", SALON, 4/2/03

April 2, 2003 | Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the Bush administration's war against Iraq is that so many otherwise sensible observers discuss it as if it were a rational decision about which reasonable people can disagree. To gain some needed perspective, it is useful to recall Doris Lessing's classic science fiction novel, "Briefing for a Descent Into Hell."

The book revolves around a group of beings from another planet who are sent to save Earth, known for its "aggressiveness and irrationality." They must save our beleaguered planet because they have learned what we have not: that everything is interconnected. They must save us to save themselves. During the "briefing," the beings are told about their mission, and then memories of their own home are erased from their consciousness -- because remembering the sane place they came from while living on Earth would drive them mad.

The following is what might occur if the Briefer from Lessing's novel were compelled to explain our planet's current crisis to one of the beings who has volunteered to help save it. The discussion begins after the being has spent several hours watching the war on satellite television. The innocent, sad-eyed extraterrestrial creature is filled with queries about this troubled place called Earth, so we will call him the Questioner.

The Questioner: Excuse me, I've just watched several hours of TV coverage of the war in the nation called Iraq. I saw howling mobs in something called the "Arab world" chanting "Death to America!" and live coverage of buildings being blown up by this America's bombing and shelling, civilians screaming and sobbing over dead relatives after these attacks, captured American soldiers with bewildered

expressions, and reports of whole cities going without food or water and fears of epidemics.

Apparently thousands of people have died in just the first few weeks of the war, and many more thousands will die in coming weeks and months. What is responsible for all this human suffering and mayhem?

The Briefer: Well, the planet Earth is divided into nation-states. The mightiest nation, the United States of America, with 280 million people, a \$400 billion defense budget, and a GDP of \$10 trillion -- has attacked Iraq, a nation of 25 million people, with a defense budget of \$1.4 billion, and a GDP of \$80 billion.

Q: How do American leaders justify initiating this war?

B: Their fundamental rationale is that Iraq poses a threat to American lives.

Q: I'm confused. I thought you said the United States, the giant nation, initiated the war.

B: It did.

Q: But how could Iraq, outspent 350 times militarily, pose so great a threat to the U.S. as to justify all this suffering?

B: U.S. leaders fundamentally justified their attack by claiming that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction that threatened U.S. citizens. In a March 6, 2003, press conference, the U.S. president, a man named Bush, declared, "My job is to protect the American people ... I put my hand on the Bible and took that oath. And that's exactly what I am going to do." By "Bible" he referred to a book he believes is inspired by an all-powerful God who guides his actions against enemies who believe their very different God guides their activities against him.

Q: What evidence did he present that Iraq intended to use these weapons against the U.S.?

B: None. While most people believed Iraq possessed such weapons, the main U.S. intelligence agency -- the CIA -- said it was unlikely to use them unless attacked by the U.S.

Q: So the giant country attacked the tiny country to prevent them from using the weapons that its own CIA said Iraq would not use unless attacked?

B: Yes.

Q: But that's insane! Are you seriously suggesting that all this killing that I just saw on Earth's TV is entirely unnecessary? It would mean that America's leaders are entirely irrational!

B: Yes. They are irrational, if we define "rational" as engaging in behavior that logically connects means and ends. The U.S. president's stated goal is to reduce threats to Americans. But his actions are endangering Americans, increasing the probability that thousands -- maybe even tens or hundreds of thousands -- will die in coming years.

Q: But why are Americans endangered? You just said the U.S. is not seriously threatened by Iraq.

B: It isn't, but it is threatened by a separate, more serious enemy upon which the president is not focusing. The more serious enemy is a loose confederation of thousands of anti-American religious fanatics spread throughout dozens of nations that practice a religion known as Islam. The best-known such organization, though it is only one of many, is called al-Qaida, which launched a catastrophic attack on important American buildings on Sept. 11, 2001.

Q: Is there no link between Iraq and al-Qaida?

B: Virtually none. The ruler of Iraq, a secularist named Saddam Hussein, opposes the religious fanatics who compose al-Qaida and would depose him if they could. He also did not wish to give the United States a pretext for attacking him. U.S. leaders presented no credible

evidence that Iraq and al-Qaida were linked. Two former U.S. intelligence analysts concluded in a book called "The Age of Sacred Terror" that "there is little evidence that state sponsors like Iraq and Iran provide Al Qaeda with meaningful assistance. Bin Laden [its leader] ... was preparing to destroy the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the White House, while state sponsors of terrorism were drawing relatively little American blood."

Q: So the U.S. president attacked the smaller country that posed no immediate threat, while giving far less attention to the enemy which really threatened the U.S.? Do you really mean he has attacked the wrong enemy?

B: Yes, and even more troubling for American citizens, the real enemy has been strengthened by their country's misdirected attack against Iraq. U.S. warmaking in Iraq has alienated the vast majority of public opinion in virtually every country on Earth, destabilized friendly governments, and reduced the likelihood that more neutral governments will cooperate in the intelligence and police work needed to attack the anti-American extremists.

He has also particularly enraged more than a billion Muslims, making almost certain the rise of Islamic violence against American targets and U.S. citizens all over the world. The president of Egypt, a U.S. ally, declared on March 31 that "if there is one [Osama] bin Laden now, there will be 100 bin Ladens afterward" as a result of a prolonged U.S. war against Iraq. Religious terrorists had previously even tried to bomb American tourists in Bali, one of the most peaceful and remote parts of the world. No American will ever be able to feel entirely safe anywhere in the world again.

Q: Didn't U.S. leaders realize that attacking Iraq would increase terrorist threats against Americans?

B: They did. U.S. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge, and many other responsible officials stated publicly that attacking Iraq would increase the likelihood of these

attacks. Official warnings of terrorist attacks have dramatically increased since the Iraq war began.

Q: So the giant country attacked the smaller country that posed no immediate threat, knowing that this would increase the more immediate danger from religious extremists it did not attack?

B: Yes.

Q: But that means the American president's bungling would make him partly responsible for any future American deaths from terrorist attacks!

B: Yes, especially since he started the war before ensuring homeland security.

Q: What? You can't be serious!

B: I am. Experts say, for example, that the biggest domestic threat to the United States comes from the possibility of a nuclear weapon being smuggled onto one of 7 million containers a year coming into U.S. ports. It would cost \$2 billion to protect U.S. ports, but only some \$300 million -- much of it misdirected -- has been allocated. Similar or larger gaps exist in many other areas. For example the president has refused to support a program to defend U.S. civilian airliners against shoulder-fired missiles that have already been used to shoot down similar airplanes.

Q: But that amounts to criminal negligence! How could he fail to protect his own citizens before provoking more attacks against them?

B: Good question.

Q: But wait, I see a rational argument. If Iraq possessed these weapons of mass destruction, didn't it make sense to go after them now while Saddam's regime is weaker rather than wait until it has grown stronger?

B: No. A former CIA analyst named Kenneth Pollack wrote an influential book advocating an invasion of Iraq -- but he said that before attacking, the U.S. first needed to build domestic and international support, decapitate al-Qaida, fulfill its broken promises to rebuild another country it had invaded named Afghanistan, and resolve a major territorial dispute in a nation called Israel. By attacking Iraq before taking such actions, and inflaming world and Muslim opinion, it is the U.S. that is weakened, not Iraq.

U.S. leaders would have been far stronger had they waited a year and taken the actions recommended by Pollack, particularly since foreign inspectors roaming Iraq made it unlikely that the Iraqi government would develop, let alone use, these dangerous weapons during this period.

Q: Well why didn't U.S. leaders wait a year so as to accomplish those goals? To attack now sounds absolutely crazy!

B: It is indeed crazy. Even those who made the best case for overthrowing Saddam for the sake of the Iraqi people could not make a reasonable case for doing so prematurely in 2003 rather than properly in 2004.

Q: But why would U.S. leaders behave so irrationally?

B: That's a matter of speculation. Some suggest present U.S. leaders are ideologically and emotionally committed to a doctrine of world supremacy called the Bush Doctrine and felt it would be easier to implement it this year rather than during the coming presidential election year. Others believe they have no understanding of the region they are attacking and were overly optimistic about the prospects for a clean victory. Others think they themselves were so terrorized and panicked by the Sept. 11 attacks -- which made U.S. leaders believe that they themselves could be killed -- that they are incapable of thinking logically or behaving rationally.

Q: What do you think?

B: All of the above. Their ignorance of realities on the ground is particularly obvious. It was predictable, for example, that Muslims would be enraged by the humanitarian disasters that would likely ensue from U.S. intervention. By launching war first – and without international support -- the United States was certain to be blamed for the whole mess. It was unlikely to be greeted as liberators by the people whose relatives it had killed and whose homes it had bombed.

But U.S. leaders deluded themselves that they would speed to Baghdad with a small force, be welcomed as liberators, and achieve victory with minimal civilian damage. U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney, for example, said three days before the war began, "I really do believe that we will be greeted as liberators."

Q: They certainly appear to be incompetent, even on their own terms. It sounds as if they are dangerously detached from reality.

B: Yes, well, irrationality has actually been quite common among leaders of powerful nations for most of human history. A historian named Barbara Tuchman wrote a book called "The March of Folly," in which she defined "folly" as the propensity of leaders since the fall of Troy 2,400 years ago to act against their own interests because of fixed notions divorced from reality. What is frightening about our time is not that powerful leaders still behave irrationally, but that they -- and the even more insane people who oppose them -- now possess an unprecedented technological capacity to kill, and also to destroy the biosphere upon which people on Earth depend for life itself.

Q: But how could such a leader, this President Bush, have come to power in America? How is he qualified to be leader of what is called the free world?

B: He isn't. He was only considered for president because his father had held the office before him. He did not win the majority vote of his people; an anachronistic quirk in the American election system allowed him to be installed in office by partisan high court judges aligned with his family and party. His previous experience included failing at business, being given a share in a baseball team by men who

wanted favors from his father, and serving as the leader of a state where his only known interest was education.

He does not even claim any expertise in foreign affairs or in the Middle East, where he has never set foot. He is actually proud of relying on his "instincts" -- rather than understanding -- for his major decisions. He has chosen narrow ideological zealots as his closest advisors, people who seek to establish U.S. military hegemony over the world.

Q: But surely his military specialists realize that's impossible.

B: The U.S. properly places civilians in charge of the military. The problem is that the president's present choice for secretary of defense is a turf-minded and ideological egomaniac who thinks he knows better than his own military how to wage war on Iraq, despite his total lack of experience in waging such a war. He gave the military far fewer troops than they requested, rushed them into Iraq too far and too fast, and miscalculated his opponents' reactions. He is so incompetent that his own soldiers are now going hungry and many of his officers have turned on him just two weeks into the war. The doctrine of seeking military hegemony over the world is coming from ideologically motivated but irrational civilians, known in previous times as "crackpot realists." The military itself is deeply reluctant to undertake such an impossible task.

Q: Doesn't anyone close to him know better?

B: He does have a secretary of state, Colin Powell, who clearly knows better. But such people rise to such positions because of their willingness to play the "good soldier," that is, display unquestioning loyalty to the person who appointed them. By his own admission President Bush, as revealed in an adoring memoir of him by a kind of royal court journalist named Bob Woodward, runs a top-down administration and demands absolute personal loyalty from his subordinates. Powell's only honorable option would thus have been to resign -- an action that would have meant reversing a lifetime habit of service to superiors. He may also believe he is doing more good by staying and fighting from within, although this belief seems

unwarranted since his superiors simply exploited his credibility to gain domestic approval for their ill-considered war -- a war that Powell failed to prevent and then failed to win world support for.

Q: But surely the U.S. is not a one-man dictatorship. What about the American public?

B: Most Americans don't feel they know very much about foreign affairs and tend to give the president the benefit of the doubt. This tendency was strengthened by Sept. 11, the first major attack on American soil by people whose goal was to kill Americans purely because they were Americans.

The public was terrified, and naturally turned to the president for protection. The president experienced an immediate boost in popularity, which has remained high ever since. His popularity cowed the legislature, media and many members of the intelligentsia. After the war started, most Americans rallied behind the president, even though public opinion in virtually every other country on Earth was opposed to it by huge margins.

Q: You mention a legislature. Doesn't the U.S. have a deliberative body that might have introduced some sanity to the situation?

B: Yes, but unfortunately its members' highest priority is their own political survival, which they felt would be threatened if they opposed the war. So the legislators gave the president a blank check to wage war and then turned their backs on it. One noble legislator, Sen. Robert Byrd, questioned his colleagues' honor for refusing to have a serious debate about the war. They proved his point by not even bothering to respond.

Q: Do critics have a voice through the American mass media?

B: The media, reliant upon the administration for information and official interviews, and dependent upon the public for revenues and therefore worried about offending the popular mood, allowed the president to set the terms of the debate. Although some criticism was

provided, the vast majority of the coverage -- particularly on the powerful TV medium -- favored the president's position. At no point did the media powerhouses raise loud alarms, accusing the administration of behaving irresponsibly and irrationally. It does not help that the American media is owned by a few large corporations that are constantly seeking further wealth and power by appealing to the government to remove the regulatory obstacles in their way.

Even the most eminent journalists are loath to stand up against the administration. A prominent TV newsman named Tim Russert, for example, questioned Mr. Rumsfeld about his 1982 visit to Iraq without asking why the U.S. had supplied its dictator Saddam with the components needed to make chemical weapons and continued to support him even after he had used them against his own people and his neighbors. Russert routinely bullies the few critics of U.S. power that he allows on his TV programs, while coddling the administration officials upon whom he depends for ratings and revenues.

An influential newspaper columnist named Thomas Friedman disingenuously supported the war on the grounds that we needed to bring democracy to Iraq, without ever seriously making the case that the Bush team would actually do so. This clever positioning allowed him to avoid being perceived as a dove, while giving him room to oppose the war if the aftermath didn't work out.

Q: But as the war started going badly, did these political leaders and media people not recognize the errors in their thinking?

B: No. Once the war began, they were silenced by the charge that critics of the war did not support the U.S. soldiers who were fighting and dying on the field. A nation's flag can make a very effective gag.

Q: So where does Earth go from here? Is there any hope of changing American policies?

B: Well, they have a saying on their planet: "Hope springs eternal in the human breast," oops, I mean "breast." It is important to remember that a majority of Americans did not vote for President Bush. This

majority includes millions of Americans who have refused to be blinded by war fever and have taken to the streets to protest the war. A similar peace movement thwarted two American presidents during an earlier war in Indochina and may eventually grow strong enough to keep President Bush from damaging U.S. interests any further. After all, he faces election again next year.

Q: What do you mean "damaging U.S. interests any further"? Does President Bush have military designs beyond Iraq?

B: Yes, Iraq is but the beginning. The president's "doctrine" was created by the Project for a New American Century, a group of hawks inside and outside his administration. It calls for extending U.S. military supremacy over the world for decades to come. The Washington Post has reported that administration officials are already talking about attacking Iraq's neighbor, Iran, next.

Their irrationality is conveyed by the absurd title they chose for their group. It is obvious to all but this narrow band of zealots that the 21st century is not "the American century" -- a term originally coined by the founder of Time magazine to describe the 20th.

This is the world century, in which the human species will preserve the biosphere it needs to survive, and avoid mass murder on a scale yet undreamed of, only if it learns to build a new, cooperative, multilateral world order. President Bush is presently committed to policies that will destroy the very cooperative world order we need to survive.

Q: Are you saying he must be stopped or the human race's very survival as a species could be threatened?

B: President's Bush's irrational war-making is not even the planet's biggest problem. The more serious threat he poses to Earth's survival is his inexcusable refusal to seriously address the ongoing destruction of the biosphere from global warming, biodiversity loss, water aquifer depletion and a host of other systemic problems. The man in charge of monitoring Iraq's weapons programs, Hans Blix, properly declared on

March 15 that "the question of the environment is more ominous than that of peace and war. We will have regional conflicts and use of force. But the environment, that is a creeping danger. I'm more worried about global warming than I am of any major military conflict."

Q: Can I be of any help?

B: Yes, we are counting on you, friend. If you thought Earth was hell before, you might not have seen anything yet.

About the writer

Fred Branfman formerly directed the Indochina Resource Center and more recently consulted for the Vietnam Veterans of American Foundation on conflict prevention. His Web site is www.forgenerationstocome.com.