

# War Games: Game, Sports, and Entertainment Language in American Television Reporting of the 2003 Iraq War

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## Abstract

The way language is used in news reporting, especially television, effects public perception of events. The repeated use of certain terms in television news, whether conscious or unconscious on the part of the media, can change the way the public understands or frames the actual events.

This paper will document repeated use of game, sports and entertainment language by US television network news presenters and reporters and by government officials during the first month of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The author contends that frequent use of such terms in the reporting of the Iraq war, whether intentional or not, tended to minimize the seriousness of the war and its human casualties and to discourage the public from careful consideration of the political and moral issues created by the war. The effect of the use of this kind of terminology in war reporting combined with new technology used to report the war for the twenty-four hour news cycle sometimes created the atmosphere of a video game or reality TV show. This reflects a general trend in the US news media toward "Infotainment," in which distinctions between objective news reporting and emotional content and opinion have become blurred.

After a discussion of Iraq war news coverage in general and the Infotainment trend in US television, the paper will present a selective list of examples of game, sports and entertainment language actually used by Pentagon officials and by news presenters, reporters, and analysts on the networks CNN, PBS, and ABC during the first month of the 2003 Iraq war.

## Introduction

I arrived back in the USA from Japan on March 20, 2003, the day after the first U.S. air strikes on Baghdad. I had heard the news of the official start of the Iraq war while in a taxi to Osaka airport. In my California hotel, I followed events on the evening and morning news programs. Immediately, during that first week of the conflict, I was struck by the tone of the reporting of the war on US television networks and cable channels.

What particularly made an impression on me was not only the informal tone of many of the live, unscripted TV reports of breaking news, but also the repeated use of game, sports and entertainment language and metaphor by TV presenters on several networks, by network news analysts and reporters in the field, and by US government officials in briefings and interviews with the press. The frequent use of such game, sports and entertainment terminology made me feel as if these reporters and officials were describing the progress of a team sporting event or a reality TV show rather than real events of world importance which were causing physical destruction, human suffering and loss of life, and major geopolitical consequences which are likely to shape our world for some time to come.

Was this use of game, sports and entertainment language an attempt to dehumanize war and make it more acceptable to the public by turning it into an abstraction? Was it an unconscious psychological defense by reporters and officials against the emotional impact of the inhumanities of war? Or did it simply exemplify the continuing trend in US media toward "Infotainment," a blend of news and entertain-

ment content with heightened emphasis on first person narrative, feelings and personal opinion, and high impact visuals?

It is an axiom of linguistics that “language creates our perceptions” and shapes our understanding of the world around us.<sup>1</sup> It should come as no surprise that TV has power to shape our thinking about war and conflict as well as other events. Linguists contend that the way news stories and political issues are reported on TV and the rhetoric used, particularly during wartime, effect the way people cognitively deal with these events and issues.<sup>2</sup> Linguist Sandra Silberstein asserts, “But increasingly the media produce an immersion in carefully crafted rhetoric and imagery.”<sup>3</sup>

What are the logical extensions of the idea that the language of television news influences our thinking about war? If a war is reported as a game, it may cause the television viewing public to minimize consideration of the geopolitical issues and the human suffering which is unavoidable in any war. Furthermore, a game, like a war, involves one side against the other side, “us” versus “them.” When the language used to report war reduces that kind of conflict to the level of a game, the public is encouraged to think only in terms of winners and losers, “our side,” and to see issues in black and white, thus ignoring the larger political issues, the humanitarian context and consequences for everyone involved, and the moral gray areas. Phillip Neisser uses the expression “morally neutralizing terms” to describe the way journalists and government officials “fool themselves, a spell cast by discourse.”<sup>4</sup> Glover and Collins cite the use of euphemism in war reporting as part of the process of “manufacturing consent.”<sup>5</sup> “The military language that is so widely reported in the media softens the visceral impact of the violence on ordinary citizens . . . both making the already committed violence more palatable and softening up the public so that future military actions will seem more like video games and less like what they are—acts of violence that result in death, injury and destruction.”<sup>6</sup>

Reporters and TV commentators themselves were quick to pick up on the way the Iraq war was being presented to the public on tele-

vision and by government spokespersons. As early as March 21, on a special edition of PBS' *WASHINGTON WEEK*, Tom Gjelten of National Public Radio commented, “. . . when Donald Rumsfeld came out to talk about it [the war], he didn't talk about the buildings that were being destroyed. He didn't talk about the targets that were being hit; he talked about it as though it were a kind of *game*, as though it were a psychological exercise.”<sup>7</sup> (In this case and all further quotes, the italics used are mine.) When Gjelten critiques the way that the Iraq war was being reported, he refers to the same game language and game atmosphere that had perturbed this writer.

Another example of that language comes later in the same program. Host Gwen Ifill asked if the Pentagon was “operating on a *best-case scenario*,” (“scenario” is an entertainment/drama term also used for strategizing). Doyle McManus of the *Los Angeles Times* replied with a combination of a golf metaphor and a repeat of the term *scenario*: “That shot against Saddam Hussein's residence . . . was the *best case scenario*. You can call that *the hole-in-one scenario* if you like—*one shot* and the thing is over.”<sup>8</sup> (A further note on the quotations used in this paper: I will not add “sic” to indicate grammatical errors in quotes from TV news but rather will quote exactly from the written transcripts.)

Numerous writers and commentators have remarked that media coverage of the 2003 Iraq War was different from that of the 1991 Gulf War and perhaps all previous wars. In spring 2003, the latest in portable satellite communications and videophone technology allowed instantaneous and frequent communication of good quality live video transmission by news correspondents in the region and those directly “embedded” with troops in battle. Technology was also employed in trying to get the enemy to surrender. Doyle McManus said, “This is a war that—if you want to extend that metaphor, this is a telecommunications age war. It's a war with email and cell phone conversations that are aimed at getting as many of those [Iraqi] officers to flip, to lay down their arms, with firing as few shots as possible.”<sup>9</sup> PBS' Terence Smith described his impression of the graphics, satellite, and

video technology used on US television: “. . . virtual view technology makes the battlefield look like a videogame, and point of view ‘tank-cam’ video gives viewers a sense of being aboard those armored units . . . .”<sup>10</sup> CBS new correspondent Dan Rather said, “And never before in any war has there been anything close to the real time coverage, up-close, live television coverage in time, war presented as it happens . . . Was it perfect? Of course it wasn’t perfect. But in terms of coverage of war, this was about the most important development I can think of certainly since the Vietnam War.”<sup>11</sup>

Because TV networks were dealing with live video and audio feed from breaking news on a twenty-four hour a day cycle, especially at the onset of the war, there was little opportunity to edit what viewers were seeing or hearing, and the presenters as well as the reporters in the field were often speaking off the cuff, without scripts. This situation must have had an effect on the way they expressed themselves.

The result of the use of the new, real time news technology in the reporting of the Iraq invasion was like nothing we had ever seen before, and yet at the same time that we were getting very personal and instant live reports from correspondents and soldiers on the front lines, there was the feeling that we the viewers couldn’t see the bigger picture, the overall plan or progress of the war. Professor Robert Wilkinson remarked March 22 on PBS’ *The News Hour*, “Well, it’s like watching sports everyday, because the content never goes away. I mean, you turn on the television and you can always find it [the war] . . . we’re watching it with much smaller bites than we’ve ever been able to do before.”<sup>12</sup> On *WASHINGTON WEEK*, Jeffrey Birnbaum described the war news coverage as “. . . something like the old story of the blind man and the elephant, where . . . they don’t get a sense of the real picture.”<sup>13</sup> George Will commented, “The problem is seeing the trees but missing the forest; seeing the battle, but not the war.”<sup>14</sup>

Diane Kunz, former Yale professor, called it “the first worldwide web war”<sup>15</sup> because access to a variety of news sources was also possible via the Internet. Real time news footage of the war was available to many US troops in the war zone. Some of those troops may have

felt at times as if they were participating in a reality TV show; CNN's Frank Buckley on the USS Constellation mentioned he had seen some sailors videoing combat operations with their own cameras.<sup>16</sup>

Before considering specific examples of game language and sports and entertainment metaphor in official briefings and network reporting on the invasion of Iraq, I would like to look at some recent trends in US TV news in particular and television programming in general so that the reporting of the news during the invasion of Iraq can be seen in the larger context of the trend toward "Infotainment" and the blurring of the line between objective news reporting and subjective entertainment programming.

The second part of this paper will present some examples of game, sports and entertainment language used in actual US television news and official US government news briefings and interviews during the first weeks of the war (roughly from March 19- April 11). This is not by any means an exhaustive compilation of examples. Since I did not have access to written transcripts for all major networks, and was able to procure only a few video recordings of live network news, I have depended on those sources which make written transcripts of news broadcasts available on their websites, chiefly CNN (especially the morning news programs *Daybreak* and *American Morning*, and *Larry King Live*), PBS' *The News Hour* and *WASHINGTON WEEK*, and some news from ABC. The US Department of Defense website provided transcripts of the daily briefings from CENTCOM (US Central Command) in Qatar and from interviews and news conferences by government officials such as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Defense Secretary General Wolfowitz, among others. These official government sources provided the raw material for many of the TV news broadcasts, along with the reports of each network's embedded reporters and correspondents.

While the examples of language cited in this paper do not by any means constitute a comprehensive, exhaustive, or scientific sample of the entire body of network news programming for the period in question, I believe these examples are indicative of the general tone which

often prevailed on network news reporting during that period, particularly on “soft news” programs such as morning news, which tend to be more casual in tone. If it were possible to examine transcripts from all news networks, I believe that numerous additional examples of game, sports and entertainment language would be identified to confirm my assertion that these terms were characteristic of rhetoric in the American TV reporting of the first month of the 2003 Iraq war.

### News and “Infotainment” on American TV

Perhaps the need to attract more viewers to news programming is the reason for the change in recent years toward “soft” news programming on US TV. Take, for example, the current format of the typical American TV morning news show. The presenters’ attitude is friendly and casual, sometimes like a chat show. During most of the program, presenters sit together in an open, carpeted room on sofas, behind coffee tables rather than at podiums, and speak in friendly, colloquial ways, as if it were from their living room to ours. Guests frequently join the main presenters, although these “guests” are often reporters or analysts from the same network.

This type of news program allows the presenter to inject much more of his/her (or the network’s) personal opinion into the content, which sounds unscripted even though much of it is not. Presenters tend to emphasize the emotional content of stories, as well as first person narrative. Another feature of “Infotainment” news programs is interaction with the viewers in the form of call in or Internet spot polls on timely issues (the questions are often grievously slanted). Mixed in with serious news is plenty of trivia and human interest, such as stories about strange pets, two-headed frogs, etc. A final characteristic of “Infotainment” is its use of high impact visual images, which are often repeated again and again throughout the day.

On some networks, the “Infotainment” approach of the morning news show has spilled over into other news programming. Reports often emphasize feelings as well as, or over, information (“How did

you feel when . . . ?” “What was that experience like for you?”) and “reporters provide entertainment through emotion laden commentary.”<sup>17</sup> There are numerous “person on the scene” or “behind the scenes” live interviews; if members of the public cannot be found to fill this “newsmaker” role, the reporters on site are often asked to comment on their own emotional response to the story, thus casting off their objectiveness.<sup>18</sup>

Both of these approaches were featured in the Iraq war news on US television. Early in the conflict, embedded reporters had little or no access to the Iraqi populace, and the only other live interviews they could provide were with US soldiers or other reporters, so they were often asked by studio news anchors to give their own emotional commentary and first person narrative in addition to reporting the facts. This changes the reporter’s role, which traditionally is to be an objective observer.

Many media critics bemoan the “Infotainment” trend because of the way it blurs the line between factual news reporting and entertainment content, and because of the emphasis on emotion, opinion, and first person narrative. In other words, when news becomes Infotainment, any pretense at objectivity flies out the window. In an article about news reporting after the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, Jane Rodgers claims, “. . . the news we receive suffers from a range of biases which render any claims of to objectivity, neutrality, or impartiality virtually meaningless.”<sup>19</sup>

Some commentators argue that this type of subjective reporting is being put to the service of a particular political agenda. Harold Meyerson in *The Washington Post* criticizes Fox network’s reporting of the Iraq war as “fact-free Iraq news” and claims that “the guys at Fox have long demonstrated a clearer commitment to changing public policy than to reporting it, and an even clearer commitment to reporting it in such a way as to change it.”<sup>20</sup> Meyerson cites research by the Program on International Policy attitudes which showed that Fox viewers came away with an inaccurate impression of the facts of the Iraq conflict, much more so than viewers of other networks’ news.



Other media watchers concede that the time honored policy of objective reporting has, in reality, been little more than a myth for quite some time. In *War and the Media*, Burston refers to “militainment and the end of the information/entertainment binary” and asserts, “Today, when nothing remains of mainstream US news media that is worth fighting for, Americans learn about how their government works more or less exclusively from *The West Wing*.”<sup>21</sup> And yet some reporters still hold up objectivity as an ideal to strive for. Asked by Larry King why he exposes himself to danger in a war zone, correspondent Nic Robertson replied, “Pursuit of the truth, Larry. It’s really simple.”<sup>22</sup>

In my opinion, the frequent use of game, sports and entertainment language and metaphor in the 2003 Iraq war news reporting, like the “reality TV” atmosphere on many news networks, is a symptom of the “Infotainment” trend. Furthermore, during the opening weeks of the war in Iraq, this language contributed to a minimizing of the seriousness of the situation (especially of the issue of so called “collateral damage,” unintended civilian casualties) and distracted the American public from the complex political, legal, and moral issues involved in the US initiation of the war. James Dawes, author of *The Language of War*, is quoted in the *San Francisco Chronicle* as saying:

. . . the military’s traditional use of gaming metaphors—entering the red zone, rolling the dice—can be troubling. The retired generals serving as television analysts seem “for all the world like NFL [National Football League] commentators,” he says. Discussing real life warfare as if it were a game deflects attention from fundamental philosophical questions, Dawes says, such as “Why are we here [in Iraq]?” “When a game ends, it ends,” he says. “There’s no blowback. Victory is glorious . . . ”<sup>23</sup>

Thus the war as entertainment distracted and continues to distract the American people from critical domestic political issues such as the condition of the US economy, underfunding of schools, law enforcement, and healthcare, and curtailment of time honored civil liber-

ties in the name of another war, “the War on Terror.” Using a war to distract citizens from domestic issues is not a new political gambit.

Most of the war news I watched during the first three or four weeks after the US invasion of Iraq, from March 19 to the US occupation of Baghdad on April 9, and most of the news transcripts which I later read devoted very little time to the casualties or damage on the ground in Iraq. (The fact that the war got “messier” after the first two weeks made it more and more difficult for reporters to minimize its real cost as time went by, and also as US casualties mounted.) From the beginning of the war, some international commentators noted the difference between US news coverage of the early days of the war, which portrayed the US as “a force for good that was going in to disarm Iraq of WMD’s [weapons of mass destruction] and bring the [Iraqi] people freedom” (“Operation Iraqi Freedom”) and the pictures of death and destruction seen on Arab news broadcasts.<sup>24</sup> Middle Eastern Scholar Fawaz Gerges claimed on CNN, “The Arab audience got a dramatically different *narrative* from that of its American counterpart. That is what I call the clash of *narratives*. While the American media focused on the technologically advanced military apparatus . . . the Arab media focused on the destruction that this apparatus visited on Iraq.”<sup>25</sup> CBS News correspondent Ben Simon also noted that the war he saw on TV after his return to the US was quite different from the more “skeptical” reporting on British and European TV and on Middle East channels. He goes on to say that American news coverage devoted a lot of time to the “advancing American troops” and retired US generals as TV analysts. There was also a lot of US TV air time spent on descriptions of US weapons and advanced technology, what I will refer to as “tech talk.”<sup>26</sup> On the same Larry King show, *Newsweek* reporter Martha Brant agreed with Ben Simon: “When I talk to my friends at home about what they’re seeing on TV, it’s very different from what we’re seeing here [in Qatar], lots of images of civilians dead.”<sup>27</sup>

## War as Reality TV

Alexis Simendinger of the *National Journal* mentioned on *The News Hour* “. . . the sense of watching it [the Iraq invasion]—voyeurism—even among the President and his top war council folks.” Tom Gjelten then says, “This war is not like a *sporting event* where you can sort of watch this—your—your team proceed down the field. Now . . . the voyeuristic aspect of it that is so suspenseful from a kind of . . . *dramatic* fashion is to see what is happening behind the scenes and the intrigue and the conspiracy . . . makes it a really fascinating war to follow, right?”<sup>28</sup>

His observation brings me to a consideration of reality TV in the US as part of the trend toward “Infotainment.” Also there is the flip side of reality TV, where actual live events like the OJ Simpson L.A. freeway chase, and Simpson’s subsequent trial, mesmerize millions of TV viewers as much or more than any TV drama series could. Life becomes drama on many TV networks whenever there is a celebrity scandal, dramatic kidnapping or murder case, such as the Lacey Peterson case which began in Dec. 2002 and is still getting almost daily airplay as I write, or the Kobe Bryant case.

For many television viewers in the US, the first few weeks of the 2003 Iraq war became “. . . the ultimate reality show, actual reality . . .” to borrow the words of the NBC sitcom character Dr. Frasier Crane.<sup>29</sup> We knew the war was real, but sometimes the way it was reported made it seem like fiction or entertainment. On March 19, as the conflict began, CNN’s anchor Aaron Brown commented, “We seem to be in a kind of odd moment, where we know that something has started . . . but the full impact of it really has not started . . . It is like a brief intermission in some terrible but real *movie*.”<sup>30</sup> Jeff Greenfield, in a retrospective on CNN April 11, referred the previous three weeks’ action in the invasion of Iraq as “The Living Room War,” and questioned whether Americans would be as interested in watching news coverage of the occupation and reconstruction phases.<sup>31</sup>

Reality television started in the Netherlands in 1999 with the show *Big Brother*, named after the fictional political leader in Orwell's novel *1984*. The idea was quickly picked up by US network CBS, which in addition to its own version of *Big Brother*, aired the first *Survivor* program in the summer of 2000. This started a hot competition among the US networks to create new "reality" programming (I use quotation marks around the word reality because many of these shows are in fact rehearsed and/or partially scripted). A website for reality TV fans in the US listed 47 different reality shows in Oct. 2003.<sup>32</sup>

The war on Iraq took its place on TV amongst a horde of reality shows crowding the networks: *The Newlyweds*, *American Idol 2*, the latest version of *Survivor*, *The Amazing Race 4*, *Temptation Island*, *The Bachelor 3*, *Bachelorette Reunion*, *Who Wants to Marry My Dad?* and ABC's *The Family* and *Are You Hot?* Some of these reality shows were supplanted by news programming during the first days of the war. However, more viewers watched *American Idol 2* and *Survivor: Amazon* on March 21 than watched early war coverage. "When the war coverage went directly against reality programming, it fell particularly short," CBS Market Watch reported.<sup>33</sup>

### War as a Video Game

A search of video game titles on Amazon.com at the end of May 2003 elicited over 270 listings for "war." These games such as "Top Gun" and "Medieval Total War" and "War Games Defcon 1: Gulf War" attempt to simulate or recreate the war experience as realistically as possible.

Video game makers and fans were quick to translate the real Iraq war into a video game. On April 11, Sony announced that it would soon be distributing its "Shock and Awe" video game, named after the US strategy in the early days of the 2003 Iraq war. On April 14, KGO TV news, a local affiliate of ABC, reported,

Computer video game fans are retooling a popular new software title so they can fight it out with Saddam Hussein's troops from the comfort of home. Redwood City-based Electronic Arts began developing "Command and Conquer Generals" months before the US-led war against Iraq . . .but built in options let players change nearly anything about the game's Iraq based level . . . .<sup>34</sup>

This includes changing the landscape and uniforms.

John Burks of San Francisco State University said on KGO TV March 24 that reporting of the first Gulf War in 1991 resembled a video game. In the case of the 2003 war, Burks said the reporting has too many explosions and live shots (often of reporter's heads, author). "You don't get as clear an overall sense as you do a mosaic of individual reporters."<sup>35</sup> Terence Smith's characterization of the 2003 Iraq war TV graphics and war zone camera shots as making "the battlefield look like a videogame" was quoted in an earlier section of this paper.<sup>36</sup> On CNN's *International Correspondents* aired April 4 (no transcript available), British reporter Marvin Bell also compared the reporting of the war to a videogame.

I personally felt the use of maps, graphics with "zoom in" capability, and archive satellite images made the progress of the war look and feel like a video game or a low tech equivalent, a giant board game. This visual approach tends to minimize the human reality of the war. An ABC program on March 25 commented that, "The initial images of the war, while disturbing, were not personal. Early coverage included missiles and explosions in a far-off land, nothing too different from scenes featured in popular war *movies*."<sup>38</sup> American casualties initially were few and minimized; in fact, at the beginning of the war, the Pentagon did not release complete information on American losses. Iraqi civilian casualties due to bombing and "collateral damage" were also minimized, and to this date there has been no official count of civilian casualties in Iraq.

## Examples of Game, Sports and Entertainment Language in Actual News Broadcasts during the 2003 Iraq War

### Game Language

#### General Game Terms

The use of game terminology and game metaphor to discuss warfare and other forms of conflict is nothing new. The parallels between game strategy and strategies used in other human conflicts including war are many and obvious; in fact, the game of chess was devised as a means of practicing strategic thinking for warfare. However, the use of game metaphor in English to discuss not only warfare and conflict but also economics, politics and human relations, grew after the 1944 publication of Von Neumann and Morgenstern's *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, the seminal work on modern game theory.<sup>39</sup> This work has had an important impact on modern strategic thinking and on the language used in that field.

This section of the paper will first present some general game language which was used in television news or government briefings in the first month of the 2003 Iraq War, followed by examples of game terminology from specific games.

#### a. war game

Many countries regularly conduct "war games," mock war exercises with real forces, or more and more these days, with computerized simulations, to test their military readiness and to try to predict outcomes of various battle strategies in various situations (often referred to using the film term "scenarios"). For example, General Wesley Clark, Ret., CNN military analyst, speaking of the mismatch between US and Iraqi forces, said, "The defenders should have had the advantage in any *war game* you'd ever run. In this case the defender was obliterated."<sup>40</sup>

On March 19 on CNN, Gen. Clark used the term as a verb: "But the timing and the sequence of all this is something that has been no

doubt extensively *war gamed* by the commanders on the ground.”<sup>41</sup> In a March interview, Lt. Gen. William Wallace also used the term as a verb: “. . . the enemy we are fighting is a bit different from the one we had *war gamed* against.”<sup>42</sup> The same usage was picked up by Gwen Ifill, moderator of PBS’ *WASHINGTON WEEK*, when she reported on the Wallace interview on 3/28/03.<sup>43</sup>

b. game plan

*The American Heritage Dictionary* defines “game plan” as “1. the strategy devised before or used during a sports event 2. A strategy to reach an objective.”<sup>44</sup>

The military use of this term was defined by Pentagon spokesperson Victoria Clarke when she spoke to reporters on March 26. “It’s not changing the overall strategy. It’s not changing the overall *game plan*. One of the aspects of the overall *game plan*, the strategy, was to be able to adapt and adjust . . .”<sup>45</sup> Clarke had used the same term at a DoD news briefing March 22 when she explained to reporters the DoD’s plan for future war news briefings: “But for now that will be the general *game plan*—to try to get CENTCOM to brief early afternoon their time . . .”<sup>46</sup> Wolf Blitzer used the term on CNN at the outbreak of the war: “There’s no doubt that the original *game plan* was for a day or two of concerted air strikes before the US ground forces which are amassed in the northern part of . . . Kuwait . . . would move in . . .”<sup>47</sup> A military analyst on CNN, retired Col. David Hackworth, also used the term on March 21 when discussing air raids on Baghdad: “. . . those sirens are going to ring again and it’s not going to be long, because the *game plan* here is going to be slam, bam, goodbye, Saddam.”<sup>48</sup> Hackworth goes on to compare the US forces to the Dallas Cowboys football team (see “Football,” under Sports Terms, below). “Slam, bam, thank you Saddam” is a play on the expression, “wham, bam, thank you ma’am,” used by some American males to describe sexual intercourse. “Slam bam” or “wham bam” can also be used to describe physical action in a football game.

c. zero sum game

This term refers to a game such as chess where a win by one

player will cause a loss to the other, because the payoffs available to players add up to zero. Gwen Ifill on *WASHINGTON WEEK* on March 21 asked, “. . . what happens if the great *zero-sum game* that they have *waged* about the ad—about the White House’s relations with International—with—who used to be our allies, what if that doesn’t *pay off*?”<sup>49</sup> (Note also the use of the gambling term “pay off,” and the expression “wage” instead of “play” a game. Ifill might have chosen the word “wage” because she was thinking “to wage war,” but the similarity “wager” meaning “bet” is striking.)

d. play by the rules

Like games, wars are thought to have rules of engagement, such as the Geneva Convention, although these rules are sometimes honored in the breach in the case of war. Jason Bellini, CNN correspondent, reported, “We also began hearing for the first time about Iraqi paramilitaries dressed in civilian clothing. They’d point out, these guys were fighting us. We captured them, and they were not in uniform. They’re *not playing by the rules*.”<sup>50</sup>

Gambling Terms

a. wager

On March 19, the eve of the war, *CNN Insight*’s host Jonathan Mann said, “. . . maybe there is another aspect to all of this, which is that having *wagered* so much on this war, in very unpopular circumstances, that the United States needs to find these weapons as a *trophy* . . . .”<sup>51</sup>

b. gamble, stakes

Tom Gjelten of National Public Radio, when asked to predict the course of the war on 3/21, said, “I think the chances are that the war will be over by a week from tonight, but if it gets much longer than a week in duration with the *stakes* that we’ve talked about, I think that’s bad news.”<sup>52</sup>

Michael Beschloss on PBS’ *The News Hour* remarked, “One thing I think is part of American history that we’re seeing and that is that presidents oftentimes *take gambles* . . . .” Later in the same *News*



*Hour* segment, Haynes Johnson said, "So all those *stakes* are there and yet we're watching it [the war] as it happens . . ." Richard Norton Smith added, "I'd like to pick up on the point that Michael made earlier about presidents taking risks, *taking gambles* in effect. That is in effect what we elect presidents to do, but there are all kinds of risks, all kinds of *gambles*."<sup>53</sup> *Time's* Michael Duffy, speaking about President Bush on *WASHINGTON WEEK* March 28, commented, ". . . this is what he's *staked* his presidency on, both the fight against terror and this particular war. He has to stick to his position of resolve."<sup>54</sup>

c. bet, put money on

Doyle McManus (*The Los Angeles Times*) said on *WASHINGTON WEEK* April 4, "Nobody's winning yet, but I think you could *put a little bit of money on* his idea, on this possibility. If Rumsfeld *wins his bet* to go in and . . . and get an Iraqi interim government going right away—they're calling it '*a quick hand off*' . . . they may *run into* reality."<sup>55</sup>

d. lottery number

Dan Rather of CBS said to Larry King on April 14, "When you go into it [war], you just hope and pray that *your number won't come up*. Too many *numbers came up* for too many journalists in this war."<sup>56</sup> This fatalistic approach to loss of life is also reflected in the expression "fortunes of war" used by Larry King on April 8, when speaking of the death of journalists in Baghdad after US forces fired on the Palestine Hotel and offices of Al Jazeera TV: "Don't journalists accept this as the *fortunes* of war?"<sup>57</sup> In this usage, "fortune" is "fate" or "luck." What happened to the journalists was actually "misfortune."

Chess

Terms from the game of chess are used frequently in English to describe situations in war, politics, economics, or interpersonal relations. Chess was devised as a *simulation of war* to develop players' strategic and tactical skills. The game most probably originated in China, and forms of the game were played from ancient times in other

parts of Asia. The first recorded mention of the game comes from 6<sup>th</sup> century India, where it was called “chaturanga.” By the tenth century, the game of chess had become familiar to rulers and academics in Europe.<sup>58</sup>

Here are some examples of chess terms used in US television news reporting during the first month of the 2003 Iraq war.

a. move

On March 20, CNN news anchor Anderson Cooper describes the opening of the war as if it were a giant game of chess: “Well, nearly 30,000 US and British troops in the Gulf are awaiting word on their next *move*.”<sup>59</sup> Following his comment is another lengthy discussion of military technology with a reporter aboard the USS Constellation.

Moderator Gwen Ifill asks Michael Duffy on *WASHINGTON WEEK*, April 4, “Is this a debate—the debate of what happens next, what-what *move* you take, what deals you’re willing to accept or not accept?” Duffy replies that the State Dept. and Defense Dept. are probably too busy now to be arguing about *tactics*.<sup>60</sup>

b. end game

Walter Rodgers, embedded CNN Correspondent, said on March 21, “This is the mission which is being conducted here, the military mission, and the *end game* in all of this, according to both Prime Minister Tony Blair and President George W. Bush, is to force a regime change in Baghdad . . . .”<sup>61</sup>

Another example comes from Drew Brown, embedded reporter for Knight Ridder Newspapers, speaking from Baghdad International Airport on April 4 and describing the progress of the war to moderator Gwen Ifill on *WASHINGTON WEEK*: “. . . that evening we were crossing the Euphrates. At that point, I think people—you know, soldiers—began to think, ‘Well, you know—you know *the end game is up*.’ I mean, it’s near.”<sup>62</sup>

Abu Dhabi TV News anchor Jasim Al Azzawi said on *Larry King Live*, “Almost everybody’s going into this war is going with a different perspective, a different background, whether American, European, or Arabs. It’s very difficult to say at this late *stage of the game*, when the

*endgame* is almost nearing, that you are going to report differently.”<sup>63</sup>

Larry King used the same term when speaking to various correspondents on April 10: “I’m going to ask you all how the *endgame* occurs . . . .” Later King asks, “General Grange, what’s—what’s the *endgame*? How do they—if they want to—who surrenders?”<sup>64</sup>

A similar expression was used most compellingly on April 9 by Iraqi Ambassador Al Douri, as he met the press for the last time at the Washington Iraqi embassy. After weeks of denials, he finally concedes that the regime has toppled: “*The game is over.*” A reporter asks, “What do you mean?” The Ambassador replies, “The war . . . I mean . . . I hope the peace will prevail.”<sup>65</sup>

c. across the board

“People there, *across the board*, are going to be happy to see Saddam Hussein go, if that’s what happens in this particular event,” said Kevin Sites in Northern Iraq with the PUK (Kurdish fighters).<sup>66</sup> This usage means “everyone” but it makes the people of Iraq sound like pieces in a board game (see “pieces,” below).

d. overmatch

A military analyst on *Larry King Live*, retired Brig. Gen. David Grange, comments, “So I mean it’s [Iraq is] the kind of enemy you want to fight if you have to fight someone. So I’m not taking that away from the coalition forces at all, but it’s an *overmatch* in other things besides high technology.”<sup>67</sup>

e. pieces (in chess, or in any board game or a puzzle)

The repeated use on US network news of maps of Iraq and arrows showing US troop movements furthered the image that this war was like a giant chess or board game. Pentagon Spokesperson Victoria Clarke said at a press conference, “If things proceed as we all think they will, there will be a lot of parts and *pieces* moving.”<sup>68</sup> Again on March 22 she used the same expression when referring to control and command in Iraq: “They [the Iraqi leadership] appear not to have a lot of control over all the *parts and pieces* you would expect them to.”<sup>69</sup>

CNN’s Ben Wedeman said on April 9, “Despite the appearance of

the war moving toward the north, the Coalition is far from having all of its *pieces* in place here.” Earlier on the same report, Aaron Brown referred to “small *pieces* of the puzzle.”<sup>70</sup>

Other reporters referred to the war and news of it as a *puzzle*. Jamie McIntyre, Pentagon correspondent for CNN, commented, “We’re slowly *piecing* it [the news] together, Aaron.”<sup>71</sup> Carol Costello closes a segment of news by saying, “Yes, Cooper, just trying to pull all of the *pieces of the puzzle* together and bring you right to the front lines here on CNN.”<sup>72</sup>

### Dominoes

#### a. domino theory, domino effect

A domino effect is “A cumulative effect produced when one event sets off a chain of similar events . . . [From the fact that a row of dominoes stood on end will fall in succession if the first one is knocked over.]”<sup>73</sup> This term was used throughout the Cold War to refer to the possible expansion of communism from the Soviet Union, China and North Korea into other countries and areas of the world. In the Vietnam War era, it was used to refer to the theory that if one country in South Asia became a communist state, others might rapidly follow and “fall.”

In the 2003 Iraq war reporting cited below, similar terms are used to refer to the next country which could become a target of US wrath (perhaps Syria), and to a sort of reverse of the domino theory, the “democratic domino effect.” In all these usages, countries seem to be regarded as no more than small pieces (dominoes) in a geopolitical game.

On April 9, Chris Plante, CNN correspondent at the Pentagon, summarized an earlier press conference by Donald Rumsfeld and General Myers thusly: “The fact that Baghdad has for the most part fallen and that the regime appears to no longer be in power (at least from Baghdad) is a major *domino* in this process but it’s by no means *the end of the game*.”<sup>74</sup>

*WASHINGTON WEEK* Moderator Gwen Ifill discussed on April

11 what might happen next in the Gulf, especially with Syria: “. . . he [Colin Powell] said this week, ‘Hey, let’s not get into this *domino* thing.’”<sup>75</sup> Later, on April 18, Ifill asked, “Will there be a *domino effect* after Iraq? Is Syria next?”<sup>76</sup>

Robin Wright of *The Los Angeles Times* used the expression “democratic domino” to refer to the idea that democracy might spread through the Middle East if Iraq were to become a democratic nation after the war: “On the issue of the democratic *domino*, it’s, you know, really the most important thing *at stake*.”<sup>77</sup> Christiane Amanpour followed up on the same Larry King, program, “I’m fascinated to know whether [Robin Wright] believed that this so-called *domino theory* of democracy around the Arab world will hold.”<sup>78</sup>

### Cakewalk

A cakewalk is defined as: “1. Something easily accomplished: Winning the race was a cakewalk for her. 2. A 19<sup>th</sup>-century public entertainment among African Americans in which walkers performing the most accomplished or amusing steps won cakes as prizes.”<sup>79</sup> In my own experience, a cakewalk is a old fashioned game sometimes done at community events, school bazaars, and the like in twentieth century America to raise money for a worthy cause. Twenty to 25 contestants buy inexpensive tickets, perhaps fifty cents each, and stand in a large circle, around which they walk in time to music. When the music stops, the person standing on the winning square receives a cake as a prize. From this comes the meaning that much is gained from little effort.

Many reporters and analysts used this term in 2003 to discuss predictions about and progress of the war in Iraq. Interestingly, in most of the examples I found, the word is used negatively or interrogatively, implying that the war will not be easily accomplished for the US. Walter Rodgers, embedded reporter en route to Baghdad on March 21 says, “These are crack Republican Guard divisions and inside backing them up are the special Republican Guard units in the city itself. So no one should have any illusions that this is going to be

a *cakewalk*.”<sup>80</sup> Rodgers reports again later the same morning, “And there’s no question that even though this may appear to have been a *cakewalk* for the 15 hours or so of this march toward Baghdad, no one in the command structure believes it’s going to be a *cakewalk* unless there’s a regime change in Baghdad.”<sup>81</sup>

Ryan Chilcote asks a US soldier in Iraq on March 21, “What do you think this is going to be like? Do you think it’s going to be a *cake-walk*?”<sup>82</sup> (Note the emotional content of the question.) An unidentified voice on the war retrospective *CNN PRESENTS: The Road to Baghdad* says, “All the predictions were that this was going to be a *cake-walk*.”<sup>83</sup>

Tom Gjelten, National Public Radio, speaking on PBS’ *WASHINGTON WEEK*, April 11, 2003, notes after US troops occupy Baghdad: “. . . so much has been *at stake* with images and the way events have been portrayed. Remember in the beginning, we had the people who were convinced this was going to be over with in a couple of days, the *cakewalk* crowd.”<sup>84</sup> *Meet the Press* host Tim Russert says to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld on March 23, “There were some who were supportive of going to war with Iraq who described it as a *cake-walk*.” Rumsfeld then denies that anyone in the Pentagon ever used that term.<sup>85</sup>

### Card Games

a. play a card, hold a card, show a card, in the cards

The first three terms above refer to poker, a card game in which bluffing can be an important factor. The last expression could refer to any card game, or the fortune telling cards Tarot.

On *The News Hour*, Jim Lehrer asked, “Do you agree with that, Roger . . . that George W. Bush as an individual president of the United States literally *rolled the dice* of his presidency not only for the present but also for history by doing this?” Roger Wilkins replied, “I’d use a different metaphor. He said the other day he wanted the French and everybody else to *show their cards*. Well, he *showed his cards* . . . His whole presidency, his whole place in history is *on the*

*table now.*” Lehrer then picks up the card game metaphor and uses it again twice in the segment, “part of the *cards*” and “Turn this *card* up, turn that *card* up.”<sup>86</sup>

On *WASHINGTON WEEK* on April 4, *Time’s* Michael Duffy discusses the reported appearance of Saddam Hussein on the streets of Baghdad: “. . . in his speech which was taped . . . he seemed to also be opening the door for what could be a *game* that he begins to *play* in the next week which is: ‘What kind of deal might we be able to strike here?’ . . . It’s not clear that he has chemical weapons or will use them, but that’s obviously a *card he can play*.”<sup>87</sup>

Earlier, at the outset of the war on March 20, CNN’s Christiane Amanpour had made a similar reference to the use of a strategy as playing a card: “Saddam Hussein may *play the Baghdad card* and may try to draw troops into either defending Baghdad or draw them into fighting.”<sup>88</sup>

Jasim Al Azzawi, Abu Dhabi TV anchor, noted, “Senior American officials made it plenty clear that they have no intention of expanding this war right now into Syria or Iran. That is just not *in the cards* right now.” Here the use of “in the cards” might refer to the fortune telling cards, Tarot. He goes on, “In the next phase, the United States might use them [Iraqi Muhajadeen] in one way or another to destabilize Iran. This is a very powerful *card in the hands* of the Americans . . . .”<sup>89</sup>

b. wild card

CNN Correspondent Walter Rodgers spoke of everyone’s fear of biological or chemical weapons as US troops neared Baghdad: “It was a very real threat . . . There was never any thought that the Iraqis had a hope in hell against the US Army, but the one *wild card in the deck* of chemical or biological weapons was always there.” The narrator of this documentary then explains, “In the end, Iraq never *played that card*.”<sup>90</sup>

c. the luck of the draw

ABC News’ Richard Engel reports from inside Baghdad on the death of two fellow journalists as US troops were massing outside the

city: “. . . yesterday when the building we were in was struck and two colleagues were killed. I could see the journalists’ blood on the floor and know that that could have been me. It was just *the luck of the draw*.”<sup>91</sup> In this metaphor, his two colleagues were dealt “bad cards;” they had bad luck in the game of life. Engel goes on to describe his feelings of being a hostage to fate as a journalist in Baghdad before the arrival of US troops, when he was constantly being watched by Iraqi intelligence. “I feel relieved that it’s over, that I’m in charge of my life again.” “Fortunes of war,” and “your number comes up” in a lottery are similar expressions used by journalists to describe a fatalistic attitude about the possibility of being killed in the war zone, a risk all war correspondents take (see above).

#### d. chips

One meaning of “chip” is “a small disk or counter used in Poker and other games to represent money.”<sup>92</sup> Retired Gen. Wesley Clark on Larry King Live April 9, after the fall of Baghdad, noted, “. . . we still have to find the weapons of mass destruction and there’s a whole lot of other *chips* that have to be done fully to accomplish the purpose of this operation.”<sup>93</sup> With these words, Baghdad and its population becomes just one counter or token in the progress of the game of war.

#### e. The Deck of 55 Playing Cards

On April 11, the US Administration distributed a deck of 55 playing cards showing the faces of the Iraqi regime members still at large and wanted by the US. General Brooks referred to them as “this deck of cards” in his Central Command (CENTCOM) news briefing in Qatar on April 11. He went on to explain that in this memory aid, Saddam Hussein is the ace of spades, “Chemical Ali” who is accused of developing and using chemical weapons, is the king of spades, and so on through the former Iraqi leadership. Later the same day on *WASHINGTON WEEK*, Dana Priest of *The Washington Post* referred to them as *playing cards*: “We know that they got so frustrated this week [about not being able to find Saddam Hussein] that they actually issued these sets of *55 playing cards* to US troops to get them to help out.”<sup>94</sup> CNN’s Jamie McIntyre also referred to them as “playing



cards” on April 11.<sup>95</sup>

The Pentagon’s creation of the deck of 55 cards is a key example of how game language can trivialize the life and death nature of war and blur moral issues. The use of these cards, issued to troops in the field, raises questions about the American adherence to “the rules of engagement” of “civilized” warfare, as it implies that prices may have been put on the heads of the leaders of the former Iraqi regime without any war crimes trials or other legal proceedings to determine guilt and punishment. What springs to mind as a parallel image is the “Wanted Dead or Alive” posters from the Old American West, evoking an atmosphere of cowboy justice. The 55 Iraqi leaders have been reduced to caricatures of villains from a bad movie.

On the day the cards were issued, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld was asked by a reporter, “Can you account for any of those 55?” He replies, “I don’t know. Who keeps count?” According to the DoD transcript of the briefing, what follows is: “[Laughs. Laughter.]”<sup>96</sup>

On NBC’s *Meet the Press* 4/13, Host Tim Russert asks Rumsfeld, “Let me go back to this famous *deck of cards*. I could ask you to *pick a card, any card*. But I’ll take this one on top—the ace of spades, Saddam Hussein. Where do you think he is?”<sup>97</sup> “Pick a card, any card” is a humorous reference to a traditional type of magic trick.

After the *Meet the Press* program, at what is called a “media stakeout” outside the TV studio, Rumsfeld is questioned about the whereabouts of the Iraqi leadership. His answer is interesting, because so far no one in this interview has referred to the deck of cards, but that is how Rumsfeld chooses to refer to the missing Iraqi regime members: “I get told periodically that Number X and Number Y is gone, and I say good. But I don’t keep count.” The reporter then picks up the card lexicon in his next question: “Do you know how many of the 52 [sic] are still on the table?” (That is, how many leaders are still alive and not captured?) Rumsfeld replies, “I could guess, but why?”<sup>98</sup>

## Sports Language and Metaphor

### General Sports Terms

#### a. play by play

Watching the predicted “shock and awe” campaign of 3000 or more cruise missile and bombs hitting Baghdad on the first day of the war<sup>99</sup> was something quite different from viewing a sporting event or a game. However, even the respected news correspondent Walter Cronkite slipped into a sports metaphor when discussing the way the war was being reported on TV: “I think the reporting is exceptional . . . Now they’ve made—found a way to really *give us a play-by-play* as the war progresses. And we’ve got some very courageous correspondents among those 600 who are out there and accredited to the forces, embedded, as the word is.”<sup>100</sup> (He goes on to say that he thinks the term “embedded” is unfortunate because it implies the reporters are “in bed with the military,” or too close for objectivity.)

#### b. “Rah-rah”

“Rah” or “rah-rah” comes from the interjection “hurrah,” which can be “used to express approval or pleasure.”<sup>101</sup> In the USA, “rah rah” is a way to express support for the home sports team, as cheerleaders do. If war is presented metaphorically as a game or a team sport, the television viewing public is encouraged to “rally around” and support their “team.”

Gwen Ifill used this term to reflect on the way the Iraq war news was being presented in 2003: “I’ve been torn as a reporter about whether this [embedding] has been, given us great access to war that we wouldn’t have otherwise seen, or whether it’s made us even more *rah-rah* than we would have otherwise been.”<sup>102</sup>

#### c. keep score

On CNN, Miles O’Brien was trying to display graphics using a “zoom in” of a satellite map of Baghdad, to show “targets of opportunity” after the attempt to assassinate Saddam Hussein on Day 1 of the war. He says, “One more try and we’ll try to get this on GR 101

[satellite image], for those of you *keeping score* at home, is what we're trying to get up on the air here."<sup>103</sup>

d. scorecard

On the April 11 edition of *WASHINGTON WEEK*, David Sanger of *The New York Times* discusses world politics after the fall of Saddam: "Run through the *scorecard* for a minute. The Syrians have acted up after being on our side. The North Koreans . . . have gone underground . . . The Iranians have moved ahead with their nuclear program as well."<sup>104</sup>

e. team

" . . . the French said they would jump off their support *team* for him [Saddam] and my take on it militarily is he's waiting for us to surround Baghdad and that would be the time that he could deliver chemical and biological weapons . . ." said analyst Col. David Hackworth, Ret., on *Larry King Live*.<sup>105</sup>

Football

a. the red zone

Lt. General David McKiernan, US Army, takes credit for using this football term as a variant of the Iraqi's "red Line" around Baghdad. "Starting today . . . is the big maneuver fight in *the red zone* here [in Baghdad]. The Baghdad division is going to get isolated. It's going down. I came up with the term '*the red zone*,' kind of based on that analogy that, you know, you get inside the 20 yard line and maybe it gets a little harder to move the ball."<sup>106</sup> McKiernan goes on to express the fear that American entry into the red zone might cause the Iraqi leadership to use weapons of mass destruction. "If that were to happen, the word 'red' might take on a graver significance, one of blood and lives lost."<sup>107</sup>

b. handoff

Doyle McManus (*The Los Angeles Times*) on *WASHINGTON WEEK*, April 11 said, "There is a plan here—it's part of General Franks' plan; it was written out of the Pentagon—for a political turn-over to the Iraqis. It's called a *quick handoff* and it's going to start working early next week with political meetings in different parts of

the country.”<sup>108</sup>

d. juke

In football, juke means “to fake out of position.”<sup>109</sup> “You have to try to elicit the responses from the target . . . So a day or two of juking and fading and going in and out and putting the pressure on pays psychological dividends.”<sup>110</sup> —General Wesley Clark, Ret., CNN analyst.

e. Dallas Cowboys

Military analyst Col. David Hackworth compared the war between United States and Iraq to a football game between one of the strongest American professional teams and a children’s team: “And this is a game of almost the *Dallas Cowboys playing* a junior high school *team* when you look at the superiority of our armed forces versus the opposition.”<sup>111</sup> This is a good example of the “we will win” psychology.

Basketball

On Larry King Live on April 9, Ret. General Wesley Clark refers to a “*full court press*” to recover US military personnel missing or imprisoned in Iraq.<sup>112</sup>

Baseball

a. knock out of the ballpark

Retired Col. David Hackworth, military analyst, when questioned about the progress of the war on *Larry King Live* March 21, replies, “Knock them [the Iraqis] dead, Larry. *Knock them out of the ballpark.*”<sup>113</sup> The first use of “knock them dead” sounds like an allusion to a knockout in boxing, but the second use of “knock” refers to hitting a home run, a ball that is hit outside the stadium, hence a positive evaluation of US progress in the war. See also “hit it out of the park,” below.

b. backstopping

In baseball, the catcher stands in front of the backstop and catches anything the hitter can’t get. In this case the expression is

used to mean “back up” or secondary protection. Maj. Gen. McChrystal at a DoD news briefing April 10 said, “If you remember, some weeks ago there were also two Republican Guard divisions up north as well, which were essentially *backstopping* the regular army divisions . . . ”<sup>114</sup>

c. throw a curve ball/hit it out of the park

CNN anchor Aaron Brown said to correspondent Gary Striker, “Well, I *threw you a hanging curve*, and I appreciate very much your *hitting it out of the park*.”<sup>115</sup> In this metaphor, Brown compares his question to an unexpected pitch in baseball, and Striker’s answer to a home run.

d. step up to the plate

This is what a baseball player does when it is his/her turn at bat. The expression has come to mean “take responsibility.” Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison referred to the lack of funds for the war on terrorism in the US in this way: “I agree with Senator Durbin that we must make sure our first responders have the money they need to do the job we are asking them to do, and we have not *stepped up to the plate*.”<sup>116</sup>

### Boxing and Wrestling

a. punch

Embedded CNN correspondent Walter Rodgers, speaking to a cavalry captain on March 19 before President Bush announced the official start of the war, asked, “Tell us about the army. How much *punch* does this army have?”<sup>117</sup> In this case, punch means power. The next example is similar.

b. iron fist

Retired Co. David Hackworth, speaking on *Larry King Live* March 21, said, “. . . it’s certainly not going to be anything that will get in the way of this *iron fist* that’s coming at them [Iraqis]. And it’s coming at them might fast, Larry.” Later he explains, “I think that in two days, you’ll see two *iron fists*, that’s the Marines on the right, the third Mech Division US Army on the left, converging on Baghdad

. . . .”<sup>118</sup>

c. come out fighting

This is part of the instruction given to boxers by the referee just prior to the start of a boxing match. CNN’s Christiane Amanpour says to Aaron Brown on March 20, referring to a press conference being held in Baghdad at the start of the war by the Iraqi Information Minister and Minister of Culture denouncing the US invasion, “Well, Aaron, clearly a concerted effort by the top leadership in Baghdad to *come out fighting*, if you like, at least rhetorically and at least with their presence . . . .”<sup>119</sup>

d. have the upper hand (in a wrestling match)

Ibrahim Oshid, PUK commander in northern Iraq, said through a translator, “It seems the Iraqis are afraid of being attacked by the Kurds, so they do such a thing to *have the upper hand* on the Kurds.”<sup>120</sup> In war, as in wrestling, this means to have the advantage.

Foot Race

Walter Rodgers, en route to Baghdad March 21, says, “I rather hope it doesn’t turn into an Anglo-American *race* to see who gets there first because that would, that might be militarily reckless. . . . it will be a *race* to Baghdad just to try to stabilize the situation here in Iraq, given the various ethnic rivalries.”<sup>121</sup> Rodgers is so taken by this race image that he repeats it several times later on the same morning: “But *rac*ing across the desert, you know you’re traveling toward the jaws of what could be a major military battle . . . . But again, the problem, the difficulty, is that they outrace their supply train, . . . . And of course they don’t want to go racing into an ambush.”<sup>122</sup>

Target Shooting and Hunting

a. pop-up target

Chris Plante, CNN Correspondent at the Pentagon, reported, “Tonight’s episode [the launching of 40 cruise missiles at an unidentified location in Iraq] was sort of a *pop-up* opportunity, a target of opportunity, as the Pentagon calls it.”<sup>123</sup>

b. fair game

In hunting, this means a wild animal that can be legally killed. (According to local regulations, wild animals can usually be killed only during a prescribed season, and killing is often limited to male animals only.) Jamie McIntyre, Pentagon correspondent for CNN, said, “Hussein did not avail himself of the 48-hour window to seek exile in another country. And, at that point, the US believed he was *fair game*.”<sup>124</sup>

### Entertainment Terms

This paper has already considered the role of game and sports language in creating the feeling that the Iraq war was not something to be taken seriously, and that its consequences were beyond the control of ordinary people. In this last section of the paper, I will present examples of entertainment terminology used in actual news reports and briefings during the 2003 Iraq war. Although the metaphorical use of entertainment terms is common in the American language today, the frequent use of these terms in war reporting diminishes the gravity of war, and adds to the public feeling of unreality and powerlessness.

Military public relations people in the US must have been keenly aware of the element of “show business” in the reporting of the 2003 Iraq war. According to *The Washington Post*, the Defense Department paid over \$200,000 and hired a Hollywood designer to set up the CENTCOM briefing auditorium in Doha, Qatar. The interior walls of the room were draped with camouflage fabric even though the actual battlefields were hundreds of kilometers away. Also the main briefing spokesperson, Brigadier General Vincent Brooks, routinely wore a camouflage battle uniform to the briefings, although his was a desk job.<sup>125</sup> Add five large plasma TV screens to this set up, and the appropriate description of these briefings becomes “theater.”

The following are some entertainment terms found in US TV news reports during the first month of the war.

a. show

An interesting exchange occurred on March 22 when a reporter asked Pentagon spokesperson Victoria Clarke about the “shock and awe” bombing campaign in Iraq.

Reporter X: Are we likely to see another *show* like last evening?

Gen. McChrystal: Sir. I won’t predict the future, but I will say that it will happen as much as required.

Reporter X: Torie, can I add *the show* last night and the weapons you outlined—

Clarke: You know, let me stop you for a second. I know I am not always as careful with words as I should be. *It’s not a show, it’s not a game.* And I think people should be really, really careful with the words.

The reporter goes on to explain that “show” was not his word choice.<sup>126</sup> Nevertheless, the term was frequently used in reporting the Iraq war. Aaron Brown on CNN, April 11, referring to a new phase in the war after the US entered Baghdad, said, “the Pentagon runs the *show* from here on out . . . ”<sup>127</sup>

Omar al Issawi of Al Jazeera News Network used the term “one man show” to refer to Iraq’s government: “I think it’s very important to realize that, ultimately, it’s not just *a one man show* in Iraq. There are other important people . . . his sons . . . I think he [Qusay] has a hand in running part of the *show*. . . . You’ve also got Ali Hassan al Majid, who’s *running the show* in southern Iraq.”<sup>128</sup>

b. drama

If life is a stage, then war may be just a play, a drama. Michael Duffy of *Time*, speaking of Donald Rumsfeld and the administration’s possible openness to making a deal with Iraqi leaders to end the war without attacking Baghdad, said, “. . . in the past, they have been in previous *stages of this drama*, been open to some kind of solution that way.”<sup>129</sup>



c. scenario

“Scenario” is defined as, “1. An outline of the plot of a dramatic or literary work 2. A screenplay 3. An outline of a hypothesized or projected chain of events.”<sup>130</sup>

Some examples of the use of this term in Iraq war news have already been cited in this paper. Because this term has become linked with simulations and strategizing, it is perhaps inevitable that even some of the more objective and professional news presenters and reporters find themselves using it in war time. However, describing unfolding events as “scenarios” distances television viewers from reality and at the same time removes the sense of free choice (options and alternatives). Just as the outcome of a movie scenario is predetermined, so the public is subtly made to feel that war and its “collateral damage” is inevitable. Language like this can be used to convince the public that war is just and victory preordained. As President Bush said in his March 20 speech, “. . . we will accept no outcome but victory.”<sup>131</sup>

CNN Correspondent Miles O’Brien, talking about the operation of the Night Hawk aircraft with its mini-bunker buster bombs (note the emphasis on tech talk, which was a common feature of US network news reports in the early days of the war) said, “Let’s take a look at a *scenario* to give you a sense of how this operates.”<sup>132</sup> His description stops at the point where the bomb he’s describing actually explodes and does not elaborate on the consequences for those on the ground.

Kyra Philips, CNN Anchor, said on March 20, “Now, of course, *the perfect case scenario* is that Saddam Hussein would surrender.”<sup>133</sup>

Dana Priest of *The Washington Post* said on *WASHINGTON WEEK*, “And below the surface, there’s a lot going on to destabilize the regime which is their main goal right now so that they don’t face *the worst case scenario* in Baghdad, which is house to house or building to building combat.”<sup>134</sup> On the same program, Doyle McManus notes, “Fewer than 10 oil wells have gone up in flames out of something like a thousand. . . . That’s close so far to *a best case scenario*.”

Christiane Amanpour on CNN April 9 (*Newsnight*) commented, “It has always been the postwar *scenario* that has caused people in

this part of the world [the Middle East] the most worry.”<sup>135</sup>

Military analyst Col. David Hackworth (Ret.), commented, “And General Van Ripper’s *war scenario* was thrown aside by the controllers, because he was *muddying up the game*, but the things that he proposed, Larry, was precisely what’s happening now.”<sup>136</sup> (Note the mud allusion which comes from football.)

d. play, play out

Scenarios “play” or “play out.” Aaron Brown says on the first night of the war, “The theory here, obviously, is, if you take out Saddam Hussein or if you take out the leadership, then the military folds . . . Is that—one—not necessarily expected to *play out* that way?”<sup>137</sup>

Brown said again the next day, “It has been an extraordinary night, a night that none of us anticipated would *play out* in any way the way it has.”<sup>138</sup>

The previous night, he used the same expressions: “This [Kurdish force] is part of the complicated ethnic and religious makeup of Iraq that, over weeks that his war *plays out*, we suspect we’ll spend a fair amount of time talking about . . . .” A minute or two later, he said again, “We’ll be hearing their reports, in many cases, in real time, as *whatever plays out plays out*.”<sup>139</sup> The effect of the triple use of the term “play out” in one section of the news trivializes the war, and whether Brown intended it or not, makes it sound like either a game or a serialized drama.

Anderson Cooper said on CNN’s *Live at Daybreak* on March 26, “We are going next to Jerusalem because a lot of our focus over the last couple of hours has been how this war is *playing*, if one can use the term, in a larger Arab context . . . .”<sup>140</sup>

CNN correspondent Nic Robertson wonders, “What do the intelligence forces do? What do the government officials do? What do the soldiers do? And how do the journalists *play* into that? So it’s going to *play out* differently to all these other conflicts.”<sup>141</sup>

e. movie, film, TV program

Dima Katib, Al Jazeera Correspondent, observed, “For me, this war has been like an American *film*, really. We all know the end, but

we still watch it because we want to know how it's going to get to the end."<sup>142</sup>

A reporter asks Maj. Gen. McChrystal at a DoD news briefing about how Iraqi soldiers can surrender: "I mean, is it a white flag, like in the *movies*? Is there an 800 number? I mean . . . (Laughter)."<sup>143</sup>

Aaron Brown's observation about the hiatus at the start of the war feeling like a movie is an interesting contrast to his comment of March 20: "Well, we've gotten to see, all of us, on this, that war, believe me, is *not a television program*."<sup>144</sup>

The same sentiment is voiced by CMD. Sgt. Maj. Eric Haney, Ret., who appeared as an analyst on *Larry King Live*: "We still have a ways to go with this [war] . . . be patient. It's not a 30-minute *television program*, and it's not scripted as a *television program*."<sup>145</sup>

f. staged

Responding to video footage on Iraqi TV and claims that a US plane was shot down over Baghdad, Donald Rumsfeld said on NBC's *Meet the Press*, "The scene, some people are characterizing as *staged*."<sup>146</sup> In other words, Rumsfeld is suggesting that perhaps the Iraqis are making up the story.

f. fantasy

A lead from *The Washington Post* on March 21 was quoted on CNN by Aaron Brown, "Shortly before 4:00 p. m. yesterday, Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet offered President Bush the prospect, improbable to the point of *fantasy*, yet suddenly at hand, that the war might be transformed with its opening shots."<sup>147</sup> The fantasy here is that 40 Cruise missiles fired from a ship in the Persian Gulf at an unknown site in Iraq might have killed Saddam Hussein, thus potentially causing a quick end to the war before it had really started. The fantasy they were talking about was assassination of a head of state.

g. role

" . . . and the battle for Najaf, the battle for Nasariya, the battle for Karbala is going to *play a big role* to see to what extent the Brit-

ish and Americans, they can push forward.”<sup>148</sup>

An unidentified reporter asked at a DoD news briefing March 26, “. . . was it anticipated that these Fedayeen Saddam and Special Republican Guard units would have *played the role they’re playing* now . . . that is, preventing cities from being liberated . . . ?”<sup>149</sup>

h. hero

In the 1997 film *Wag the Dog*, the character Conrad Breen, a fictional political advisor to a fictional President who is facing allegations of sexual misconduct, recruits Stanley Motz, a fictional Hollywood producer, to help him create a publicity diversion in the remaining days before the presidential election. Conrad says, “Politics is show business . . . that’s why we’re here [in Hollywood].” He continues:

Conrad: We’ve got to distract them.

Stanley: What would hold it off?

Conrad: Nothing, nothing. You’d have to have a war.<sup>150</sup>

Conrad goes on to discuss the role of media and entertainment in previous wars, and the impact of visuals such as photographs and news clips. He asserts, “We remember the slogans. We don’t remember the wars.”

Later in the film, Conrad decides that he needs a hero for the phony war he has manufactured in a sound studio. However, the soldier he latches on to for this role turns out to lack most of the qualities needed by a genuine hero.

I found this 1997 film disturbingly prescient in many ways when I watched it six months after the US invaded Iraq. What Conrad was looking for in *Wag the Dog* was a hero like the heroine of the Iraq war, Jessica Lynch. Young, pretty, vulnerable, fragile, a small town American girl trying to pull herself up by her army boot straps (she wants to become a teacher), Lynch was wounded after her support unit got separated from the main body of troops. She endured several days of captivity before being rescued. That dramatic rescue and her recovery got news coverage for days, weeks, months.

i. dance

CNN's Aaron Brown described Saddam Hussein in this way: "Here's a guy who was badly trounced a dozen years ago . . . He's actually *done this dance* before with the United States, and he actually knows *how this plays out*."<sup>151</sup>

j. bandwagon

A bandwagon is (was) "1. An elaborately decorated wagon used to transport musicians in a parade. 2. A cause or party that draws increasing numbers of adherents."<sup>152</sup>

Doyle McManus spoke on *WASHINGTON WEEK* about the increasing number of US allies announced each day to be aiding the US in the war effort: "The idea here is . . . to try and produce a *bandwagon effect* that's going to make them [allies] want to join."<sup>153</sup>

A similar reference by Larry King on March 20 omits the last word "bandwagon" from the phrase "jump on board the bandwagon" in the same context as above: ". . . the coalition, according to Secretary Powell is growing, now numbers more than 40. Is that pleasing to you, Senator Kyl? Do you expect to see more *jump on board*?"<sup>154</sup>

k. orchestra

The following quote is from Dr. James Roche, Secretary of the Air Force, on March 20: ". . . in modern warfare we are able to coordinate forces in such a way that we've never been able to do in the past. General Franks can in fact *lead an orchestra* and if it makes sense at one point to use air power, he will, ground power, he will." He continues later, "And also, the degree of *orchestration* so that we can have, for instance, Air Force aircraft, Naval aircraft, Marine aircraft going at the same time . . ." <sup>155</sup> The people who were the targets of these aircraft might have been surprised at the use of this musical metaphor.

l. Elvis sightings

"I think these rumors about Saddam Hussein— . . . they're rather like—they're tantamount to *Elvis sightings*. I mean you can talk to any number of Iraqis who swear they've seen Saddam Hussein in the last two days."<sup>156</sup> Craig Nelson, Cox Newspapers, in Baghdad on April

9 discusses the improbability of Hussein being out in public at that point in the war. The comparison to Elvis Presley seems to imply that Hussein may be dead but that there are still many people who believe or wish him to be alive.

## Conclusion

Language shapes people's thinking, their cognitive frames. Rhetoric in the media is especially powerful in determining the way we interpret events in our world.

Whether by chance or design, it can be seen from the examples above that game, sports and entertainment terminology were frequently used by those who reported the 2003 Iraq war on American television. In *Collateral Language*, editors John Collins and Ross Glover speak of the need "to resist the manufactured inevitability of war."<sup>157</sup> The use of game, sports and entertainment language in war reporting does just the opposite; it encourages us to accept war as something of minor consequence, a necessary or unavoidable event. It helps us to ignore the trauma and suffering experienced by those on the other side, to accept war and its consequences as business as usual. This can happen if people come to think of war as just a game, perhaps even a videogame or another TV reality show.

In war, as in a game, it becomes "us vs. them." The public is not supposed to question what's done in the name of winning. Thus issues become reduced to black and white, and dissent or criticism becomes unacceptable. In the words of President George W. Bush, "You're either with us or against us."

The casual tone created by the use of game, sports and entertainment language in US network news reporting of the 2003 Iraq war, as well as the frequent use of "tech talk" in the news, is a stark contrast to the emotional terms of shock and horror used so frequently by the news media after the September 11 terrorist attacks in the USA.<sup>158</sup> On one hand, the rhetoric of the "war on terror" seems designed to keep citizens perpetually frightened, and perhaps paralyzed as a re-

sult. In contrast, the rhetoric of the war in Iraq, at least during the first month of news reporting, seemed in my opinion to minimize the impact of the war on real people, to gloss over the human cost and the physical damage of that conflict, and to distract people from the complex political issues surrounding the war. Thus the war news, in its early weeks, provoked little emotional response from most Americans other than boosterism.

At the time this is being written, the conflict in Iraq has entered a different stage. It remains to be seen how the media will respond, and what language they will choose.

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