

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN JOURNALISTS REPORT WARS? WHETHER THEY'RE LOOKING BACK OR FORWARD, DO THEY PUT THEIR READERS IN THE PICTURE? THIS CLASS LOOKS AT THE BACKGROUND TO HOSTILITIES AND DISCUSSES SOME EXAMPLES OF WAR REPORTING.

READING 1 *GOTCHA* "...they needn't worry about the war for some time now."



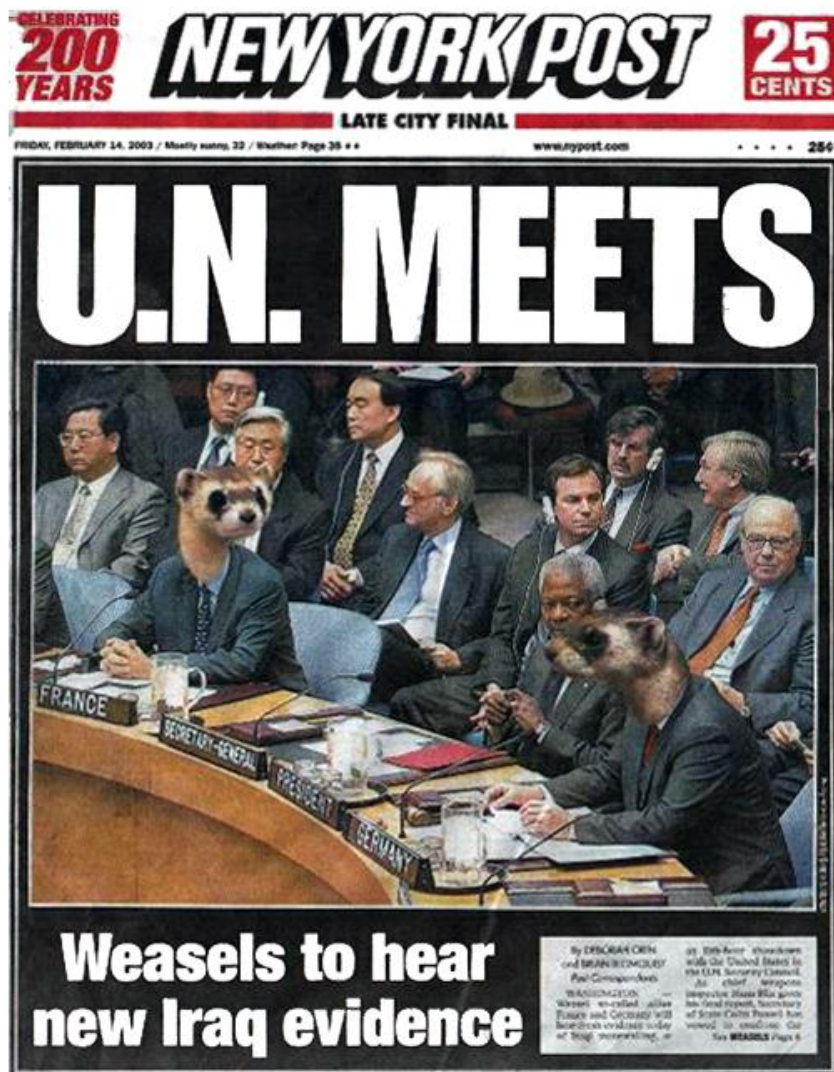
ONE MONTH INTO THE FALKLANDS WAR, on May 2nd 1982 the Argentine cruiser 'General Belgrano' was engaged by the Royal Navy submarine HMS Conqueror. Initial details were sketchy, and it appeared as if the Belgrano had been severely damaged. Two days later *The Sun*, Britain's most popular tabloid, ran the story. Editor Kelvin McKenzie ran 'GOTCHA' in a deep banner headline bold letters. "*Our lads sink gunboat and hole cruiser*", the story continued. "*The Belgrano and its 1,000 crew needn't worry about the war for some time now*".

It was an unremarkable headline, but as the story was running,

more details came in - the Belgrano hadn't just been holed, it had actually been sunk, and 368 of the 1,000 crew were dead. The headline is infamous: it was inappropriate to use a sports metaphor ('Gotcha' was a popular headline for stories about cricket) to mark a bloody military victory against a forty-year old WW2 relic which had been struck without

warning. The 'Gotcha' headline was pulled from later editions of *The Sun* but it summed up the unquestioning support the British tabloids gave to military action in the Falklands. Headlines ranging from 'Stick it up your junta', to 'High noon', 'This is it' and 'Wallop' glorified the attacks on the Argentinians, now dehumanised by the name 'Argies'. Neutrality was a dirty word, a view supported by the government of Margaret Thatcher. Even the BBC was called to account for its coverage, referring to 'Argentinian troops' and 'British troops' rather than 'our soldiers'.

Reporting from the Falklands was difficult. The Islands were relatively unknown to the public in Britain and because of the distance journalists were reliant on the military to get them there and information back. Long delays in news updates were compounded by the defence ministry that prevaricated over releasing details of military action. As is well known, news of Thatcher's cause for 'rejoicing' – the retaking of South Georgia – took five hours to reach the public.



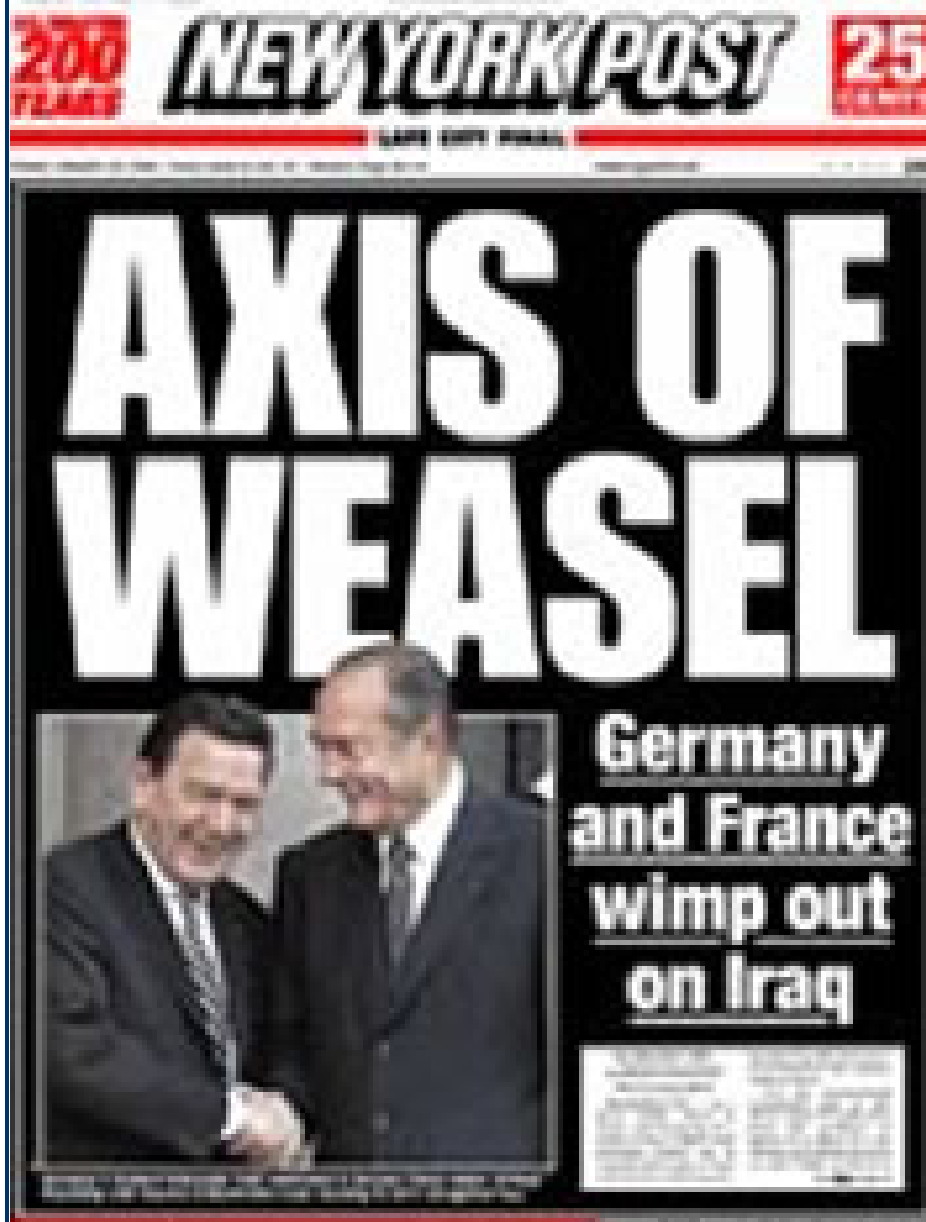
On Friday February 14 (Valentine's Day), at the height of the UN debate on the US campaign to invade Iraq, the tabloid *New York Post* front page superimposed the heads of weasels over the faces of the foreign ministers of France and Germany with the headline on the left.

WHAT DID THE FRENCH ACTUALLY SAY?

French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin's speech to the Security Council earned a round of applause from the other delegates present. Here is an excerpt: "...Let us be clear. Not one of us feels the least indulgence towards Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi regime. In unanimously adopting Resolution 1441, we collectively expressed our agreement with the two-stage approach proposed by France: disarmament

through inspections and, should this strategy fail, consideration by the Security Council of all the options, including the recourse to force. It was clearly in the event inspections failed and only in that event that a second resolution could be justified. The question today is simple. Do we believe in good conscience that disarmament via inspections is now leading us to a dead end, or do we believe that the possibilities regarding inspections presented in 1441 have still not been fully explored? In response to this question, France believes two things. First, the option of inspections has not been taken to the end. It can provide an effective response to the imperative of disarming Iraq. Secondly, the use of force would be so fraught with risk for people, for the region and for international stability that it should only be envisioned as a last resort...” Dominique de Villepin, the UN Security Council, February 14, 2003

READING 3: THE WEASELS KEEP WEASELING



Next day's Post returned to the fray with a variation on the "Weasels" theme. It was natural that they should. For the first time in decades, the New York Post was being noticed around the world. In the US, the headline played well, as fast-food restaurants took "French" fries off the menu and replaced them with "Victory" fries – a half-serious gesture that would come to seem increasingly ill-judged as the Iraq quagmire deepened and the US-led occupation struggled to hold back the suicide bombers and the roadside bombs.

In the end, the question is one of responsibility. Did the New York Post owe it to its readers to report what the French and German representatives actually said at the United Nations, or was it their task to play along with the sentiments of their readers? In wartime all bets are off: a smart editor will sell on the back of his reader's fears

and prejudices. Newspapers aren't accountable (except to their shareholders). That's why they sometimes offer great journalism, but also why they can get away with irresponsible rubbish.

READING 4: 1945-1995: THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE PACIFIC WAR

IN 1995, memories of Japanese ill-treatment of soldiers and civilians remained fresh. News reports in that year brought out a latent hostility towards Japan in Britain and the United States, but this was only partly rooted in war memories. In Britain, the press were keen to assert Britain's moral superiority in discussions of Japan's 'failure to apologise' for the war, and in the fact that the United States, not Britain, bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In January 1995, in Britain, John Major's Conservative government decided not to send Japan the same invitation to the Victory over Japan [VJ] celebrations as it would later send to Germany for the Victory in Europe celebrations. Major wanted to establish a compensation fund for British PoW's and Pacific War veterans, but met with no success in Tokyo. Britain's conservative press promoted Major's campaign heavily.

- **"THIS MAN REPRESENTS JAPAN. HE WILL BE AN HONOURED GUEST AT THE VE-DAY CEREMONIES. THIS MAN WAS TORTURED BY THE JAPANESE. HE WILL NOT BE INVITED TO THE VE-DAY CEREMONIES"** (*DAILY STAR* 22 JANUARY 1995)
- **"JAPAN MUST BE MADE TO APOLOGISE"** (*DAILY MAIL*, 23 JULY 1995)
- **"SAY SORRY TO POWS, MAJOR ORDERS JAPAN"** (*DAILY EXPRESS*, 29 JUNE 1995)
- **"JAPAN ON VERGE OF APOLOGY"** (*THE GUARDIAN*, 8 AUGUST 1995)
- In August an official apology came from Murayama Tomiichi and was treated as a victory: **"VETERANS WELCOME JAPAN'S APOLOGY FOR PRISON CAMPS" "TRIUMPH AFTER YEARS OF CAMPAIGNING"** (*DAILY EXPRESS*: 12 AUGUST 1995)

The *Guardian* maintained that this was the 'wrong apology', as Japan should have apologised "for going to war in the first place" (14 August 1995). There were also complaints that Murayama's letter only repeated what Hosokawa had said in his 1993 apology. Interestingly, Murayama's letter had been sent before the Hiroshima and Nagasaki anniversaries, but not published by the British Government until afterwards, which allowed the press campaign for apologies to gather force during the most sensitive period.

Acknowledgements to Hammond, Phil and Stirner, Paul (1997) "Fear and Loathing in the British Press". In Hammond, Phil (ed) (1997) *Cultural Differences, media Memories: Anglo-American Images of Japan* (London: Cassell) 104-5.

▼ more

READING 5: WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A WAR REPORTER? MICHAEL HERR ON THE VIETNAM WAR IN "DESPATCHES" (1972), A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS ON HIS EXPERIENCE REPORTING THE VIETNAM WAR FOR *ESQUIRE* MAGAZINE

BREATHING IN There was a map of Vietnam on the wall of my apartment in Saigon and some nights, coming back late to the city, I'd lie out on my bed and look at it, too tired to do anything more than just get my boots off. That map was a marvel, especially now that it wasn't real anymore. For one thing, it was very old. It had been left there years before by another tenant, probably a Frenchman, since the map had been made in Paris. The paper had buckled in its frame after years in the wet Saigon heat, laying a kind of veil over the countries it depicted. Vietnam was divided into its older territories of Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China, and to the west past Laos and Cambodia sat Siam, a kingdom. That's old, I'd tell visitors, that's a really old map.

If dead ground could come back and haunt you the way dead people do, they'd have been able to mark my map CURRENT and burn the ones they'd been using since '64, but count on it, nothing like that was going to happen. It was late '67 now, even the most detailed maps didn't reveal much anymore; reading them was like trying to read the faces of the Vietnamese, and that was like trying to read the wind. We knew that the uses of most information were flexible, different pieces of ground told different stories to different people. We also knew that for years now there had been no country here but the war.

The Mission was always telling us about VC units being engaged and wiped out and then reappearing a month later in full strength, there was nothing very spooky about that, but when we went up against his terrain we usually took it definitively, and even if we didn't keep it you could always see that we'd at least been there. At the end of my first week in-country I met an information officer in the headquarters of the 25th Division at Cu Chi who showed me on his map and then from his chopper what they'd done to the Ho Bo Woods, the vanished Ho Bo Woods, taken off by giant Rome plows and chemicals and long, slow fire, wasting hundreds of acres of cultivated plantation and wild forest alike, "denying the enemy valuable resources and cover."

It had been part of his job for nearly a year now to tell people about that operation; correspondents, touring congressmen, movie stars, corporation presidents, staff officers from half the armies in the world, and he still couldn't get over it. It seemed to be keeping him young, his enthusiasm made you feel that even the letters he wrote home to his wife were full of it, it really showed what you could do if you had the know-how and the hardware. And if in the months following that operation incidences of enemy activity in the larger area of War Zone C had increased "significantly," and American losses had doubled and then doubled again, none of it was happening in any damn Ho Bo Woods, you'd better believe it. . . .

PAGES 3-4: THE LOSSES KEEP MOUNTING

After enough time passed and memory receded and settled, the name itself became a prayer, coded like all prayer to go past the extremes of petition and gratitude: Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, say again, until the word lost all its old loads of pain, pleasure, horror, guilt, nostalgia. Then and there, everyone was just trying to get through it, existential crunch no atheists in foxholes like you wouldn't believe. Even bitter refracted faith was better than none at all, like the black Marine I'd heard about during heavy shelling at Con Thien who said, "Don't worry, baby, God'll think of something."

PAGES 56-57: THE WAR'S EFFECT ON PERSPECTIVE, TIME AND DISTANCE

Marines were all around us now, about fifteen of them, and one, a short, heavy kid with a flat, dark face and the bearing of an overdeveloped troll, came up and looked hard at us.

"You guys're reporters, huh? Boy, you really get it all fucked up," he said. "My old man sends me stuff from the papers, and he thinks you're all full of shit."

A couple of Marines booed him, most of them laughed. Lingle laughed too. "Well, podner, what can I tell you? I mean, we try, we really take a shot at it."

"Then why can't you guys just tell it right?"

PAGE 200: ON TRUTH TELLING AND REPORTING

I saw a picture of a North Vietnamese soldier sitting in the same spot on the Danang River where the press center had been, where we'd sat smoking and joking and going, "Too much!" and "Far out!" and "Oh my God it gets so freaky out there!" He looked so unbelievably peaceful, I knew that somewhere that night and every night there'd be people sitting together over there talking about the bad old days of jubilee and that one of them would remember and say, Yes, never mind, there were some nice ones, too. And no moves left for me at all but to write down some few last words and make the dispersion, Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we've all been there.

Epitaph: "All the wrong people remember Vietnam. I think all the people who remember it should forget it, and all the people who forgot it should remember it." - Michael Herr, 1989