

Nov 04, 2016 by [Gordon Robison](#)

## Motes, Beams, Hand Wringing <sup>[1]</sup>

Amman, Jordan

According to a front-page story in today's Los Angeles Times a Marine Lieutenant went on CNN on October 14 to announce that US forces near Fallujah had "crossed the line of departure". In military-speak that meant the long-expected US-led assault on the city had begun... only it had not (it actually began three weeks later). The military now acknowledges that the spokesman's words, while "technically true", were "misleading". Over the course of today CNN's own coverage of the incident has noted that the military pushed the spokesman onto the network – calling CNN to offer him up with assurances he had a big announcement to make.

The Lieutenant's turn on CNN appears to have been part of a psy-ops operation aimed at the insurgents and their supporters using the not unreasonable assumption that they keep an eye on CNN International.

So now the recriminations have begun. Pentagon spokesman Lawrence di Rita turned up on CNN this afternoon to state categorically that military's spokespeople do not lie to the media.

Oh, please.

Of course the Pentagon lies to journalists. Soldiers and Marines are in Iraq to accomplish a mission. If that requires lying to the media, they'll do so. The point is to complete the mission. Being nice to the press is an important, but fundamentally secondary, task. In private conversation, by the way, military public affairs officers are usually pretty upfront about this. After stretches in Baghdad on the payroll of CNN, Fox News and the Coalition my own opinion is that the military usually goes out of its way to be honest with the reporters covering their operations, but they will lie if they feel they have to.

The problem is not the Pentagon's willingness to deceive the media. It is the American media's willingness to take pretty much whatever the Pentagon tells it at face value. The American media has spent today wailing about being lied to, but, publicly at least, has devoted little consideration to its own responsibility to check out what the spokespeople are saying.

CNN, it is true, did have its Pentagon crew check out what the lieutenant said, and soon reported that an assault did not appear to be under way. By then, however, the damage had already been done. Clearly the Marines should not have hijacked CNN's air in the service of their psy-ops agenda, but does CNN not also bear some responsibility for letting them do it in the first place?

Today CNN is under the microscope, but it is hard to find a major American broadcaster or paper that is not equally guilty over these last two years. And it's not just us. The same British

papers that get amazingly self-righteous about the relationship between America's media and military, routinely serve up fawning coverage of British forces.

As for the Arab media, the journalistic obligation to check things out runs both ways. Yes, the American spokespeople lie. But they don't lie all the time, or even most of the time, and assuming they do is just as much a disservice to one's audience as taking them uncritically at their word.

Arab and western media alike have offered up a lot of brilliant and courageous reporting from Iraq over the last two years. But the record is far from perfect, so before bashing the military's PR people for doing what we all know they're paid to do let's start by looking inward at how we journalists handle those 'spokespeople' in the first place.

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