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# PSYOPS, PROPAGANDA AND GANGSTA RAP

why is saddam hussein rapping for the cia?

U.S. GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS are now defining their action in Iraq as one to liberate its citizens by removing Saddam Hussein and installing a democratically elected coalition government. If the current conflict is an effort on the Bush administration's part to implement a system of government and a free press is one of the rights protected by that system, then helping to establish a free press in Iraq may in fact be patriotic.

General Jay Garner, formerly head of the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, and the man who was responsible for U.S. governance during the early period of the occupation of Iraq, explained in the *New York Times* that the U.S. invasion and now occupation of Iraq is a mission to "give birth to a new system in Iraq.... It begins with us working together, but it is hard work, and it takes a long time. We will help you as long as you want us to."<sup>1</sup> One aspect of Iraqi infrastructure on which Garner expected to "work together" with Iraqis was establishing a free press. In fact, the U.S. government has already made efforts in this direction.<sup>2</sup> On 14 April 2003 Norm Pattiz, chair of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), a semiautonomous agency of the U.S. State Department, announced the introduction of a television service in Iraq that will air American news with Arabic-language captioning. ABC, CBS, PBS, NBC, and Fox news divisions are participating. The Middle East Committee

of the BBG will operate the program and Congress has been asked to vote on \$3 million of funding for the initiative.

But how will the broadcast of American news establish a free press in Iraq, especially in light of recent criticisms within the United States and abroad that these programs present news from a decidedly pro-American government stance? When asked a similar question, Mr. Pattiz protested: "What we are going to do is not propaganda" despite the fact that CNN's refusal to participate was based, according to a spokesman, on their belief that as an "independent, global news organization" it was not "appropriate to participate in a United States government video transmission." Perhaps other American news divisions are more patriotic, as CNN was the only organization of those asked that refused to participate. Spokespeople from participating network news programs denied having concerns about the ramifications of their involvement in the initiative. Although CBS News president Andrew Heyward was "skeptical" of the initiative's link to government agencies, he ultimately was convinced that this was "a patriotic thing to do."<sup>3</sup>

Lest we forget, the United States is not the only country with a free press. Why then aren't news stations from other democratic states participating in this program to institute a free press in Iraq? Could the current U.S. monopoly over the Iraqi press be

part of a more sinister psyops campaign—one designed to last long after the literal occupation is completed? If U.S. control over the media is part of a larger project of cultural imperialism, then the exportation of so-called McCulture could be part of a larger, cultural war being waged in the media and for the minds of the Iraqi people.

On 11 April 2003, BBC news reported that Radio Takrit<sup>4</sup>—a radio station thought to be backed by the CIA—was broadcasting in Iraq a *gangsta* rap-style parody of Saddam Hussein.<sup>5</sup> Radio Takrit's 2-hour-long evening broadcast reaches the entire Middle Eastern region, although its name implies that its targeted audience is Iraqi. There is some evidence that Radio Takrit is a "sister" station of al-Mustaqbal (The Future),<sup>6</sup> a program run by the London-based Iraqi exile group, the National Accord.<sup>7</sup> Upon further investigation, the BBC found that Radio Takrit was being broadcast from a CIA-owned transmitter in Kuwait—the same transmitter used by Voice of America.

How do Iraqis react to Radio Takrit broadcasts? It's hard to tell, of course, but a source in Iraqi Kurdistan told Radio Nederlands:

Here in northern Iraq people are completely mystified that anyone would name a station Radio Takrit. I have asked several Sunni Arabs what they think when they hear there is a new station called Radio Takrit and every one of them said "CIA."

BBC Monitoring later reported that Radio Takrit's call sign had been replaced by a broadcast called Radio Sumer.<sup>8</sup>

Radio Takrit's broadcasts are notable for their dissemination of a parody of rapper Coolio's anthem "Gangsta's Paradise" performed by a man impersonating Saddam Hussein.<sup>9</sup> The opening moments of the song are a jumble of noise: men laughing in the background, and English and Arabic ex-

clamations. As the verse starts, a male voice identifying itself as Saddam Hussein begins to rap over the din. The texture of the voice is hollow, as if computer generated. The noise in the background is constant—mostly indecipherable shouts in English and Arabic. The lyrics of the song are performed in Arabic and English, although the use of Arabic is confined to portions where the Hussein impersonator calls upon the audience for a response. In the English-language portions, "Saddam" raps:

If you don't like me, I kill you.

I am Saddam.

Bush wanna kick me, I don't know why,  
and if I call him, he does me goodbye.

Smoking weed and getting high.

I know the devil is by my side.

My days are finished and I will die—  
all I need is chili fries.

So why is the CIA funding an English- and Arabic-language parody of a gangsta rap song? And why do they have a Saddam impersonator singing—or rather, rapping?

Before the war even began, there were calls for the use of rap music in anti-Arab psyops campaigns. A call for victory—not by stealth fighter, but by a cultural offensive. As early as January 2003, for example, Barbara Black, an opinion writer for Vancouver's North Shore News, suggested "killing [Saddam] loudly with rap 'music.'"<sup>10</sup> Her rationale was that "rap's overt messages of dysfunction, trivial violence, degradation, and rebellion will initially draw in our evil man, prone as he is to enjoying displays of cruel torture inflicted on members of his populace." "Legitimated thuggery," as one critic calls rap, is Saddam's game.<sup>11</sup>

Since the early 1980s, critics have viewed rap music as legitimizing violence; this is a familiar depiction of the genre. These depictions fit a subgenre rap style called gangsta or reality rap. Gangsta rap is

directed at a young, black, urban, and “hard core” audience and is distinguished by its semantic representations of street life—boasts about physical violence and guns, boasts about the “hardness” of a geographic location, narratives about criminal life, satires of “straight” America from a gangster perspective, and “realistic” portrayals of socially marginal, transgressive (and usually male) identities. This system of signification values ghettocentricity and realism expressed in a confrontational style. In rap, cultural capital or authenticity takes the form of familiarity with aesthetic and musical nuances (audible and visual subgenre markers) and of social networks, often expressed as “being down” or well connected to industry executives and fellow artists and within a neighborhood. The neighborhood is the context within which subcultural capital is developed, where the particulars of hip-hop aesthetics, style, argot, music, and self-presentation are negotiated and given a strong local inflection. Local affiliations, events, people, and “crews” are reaffirmed and re-embedded in rap music. In this way, rap music provides meaning for young black people while still selling millions of records. Rap speaks to specific and local experience, yet sells globally.

The “reality” in reality rap both shapes and maps out the realities of black, inner-city life. One of the principle authenticating strategies is the symbolic collapsing of the persona onto the artist—the projection that the rapper himself *is* the persona—a voice from the “streets,” speaking from authentic experience. Artists who depict life, especially ghetto life, “as it is” diminish the space between their real and artistic identities. Unless these artists “keep it real” they make themselves vulnerable to attacks on their authenticity. When gangsta rappers describe themselves as “reality rappers” they are participating in a complex authenticating structure necessitated by their field of production.

We should be careful to afford rap artists the same artistic license we give to artists in other genres, especially considering the tight coupling of authenticity and localism within gangsta rap. Only a small number of rap artists subscribe to these guidelines and thus can be designated gangsta rappers. Gangsta rap comprised less than 13 percent of the rap music on the Billboard charts between 1979 and 1995.<sup>12</sup>

If depictions of violence in rap music are rhetorical, as opposed to real, violence, what then does this mean for Saddam Hussein, the gangsta rapper? Hussein, unlike most gangsta MCs, clearly engaged in nonrhetorical violence. Casting Saddam as a gangsta rap protagonist further obscures the purely symbolic connection between most gangsta rappers and the protagonists of their songs. If Saddam is really violent, and the song casts him as a gangsta rapper, then the song supports the association of rap music with very real violence.

In this way, the psyops campaign in Iraq is operating within our own borders and in our own domestic cultural wars, directing misinformation about rap music in the service of a cultural offensive against African Americans, continuing a centuries-long offensive. The popularity of Coolio’s version of the song and the sheer lunacy of this parody suggest that psyops planners believed the song would achieve market relevance. This particular parody reflects the various mechanisms that the social, political, and economic elite have used to censor, pervert, or extort African American artists and art forms over the last one hundred years (or more).<sup>13</sup>

Rap music has been a venue for political dissent for more than twenty years; Chuck D went so far as to claim that “rap music is black folks’ CNN.” As national war mobilization began in early 2003, the rap community began to turn their criticisms in George Bush’s direction. Many rappers argued that George Bush used gangsta-like tactics by bypassing the

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United Nations and pushing the United States into war. Professor X, from rap group X-Clan, said, "How much more *gangsta* can you get when you go before a body that sets rules of engagement and then decide that because they aren't moving fast enough or doing what you want that you then decide to jump up, pull out your guns and step to a situation?..." Let's

look at who's the original gangster."<sup>14</sup>

Direct political messages like this one get lost in the depiction of rap as dangerous and violent. There is ample evidence that the domestic (and racist) policing of black artists has accelerated in recent months. Individual rappers like Michael Franti of Spearhead<sup>15</sup> and Paris have been under government

surveillance or in detention for their antiwar views or songs. In late 2002, Franti performed an acoustic version of "U Can't Bomb the World to Peace," a song he wrote encouraging peaceful solutions to the current conflict, on the Craig Kilborne late night talk show. Franti alleged censorship when the segment was cut before the show aired. After performing at a peace rally in San Francisco on March 15 (performing songs like "Bomb da World") CIA agents allegedly interviewed band members and their families. The agents had photographs of performances, records of flights they had taken over several months, and even checking account records.

More insidious than the targeting of particular individuals is the institutionalization of polices that in effect censor artists and music. The political expression of rap artists in particular is threatened if two current censorship drives are successful. Both of these efforts, one by Congress and the other by corporate media conglomerate Clear Channel Communications, reach beyond the silencing of particular artists and instead work through more diffuse political and corporate control to silence unruly music and its messages; both will further marginalize political expression. Two bills have been proposed in Congress that would open the door for a total ban on live hip-hop shows. Like artists in other genres, hip-hop performers derive the majority of their income from touring. The RAVE Act and the CLEAN-UP Act would make it a federal crime for owners or managers of real estate to host events during which anyone on their property used or sold drugs of any kind. If these proposals became law, property owners would likely be afraid to rent or lease their property for rap or hip-hop events, as stereotypes dictate this population may include drug users. It would also open the door for other intrusions into the private sphere—a barbecue at a person's home during which one or more guests used illegal drugs of any kind could result in a \$500,000 fine and twenty years in federal prison.<sup>16</sup> A single arrest of a fan at a rap show could result in the closure of that venue or the elimination of hip-hop events in the future.

On the corporate media front, Clear Channel Communications, which owns 1,225 radio and 39 television stations in the United States and has equity interests in over 240 radio stations internationally, released a memo advising member stations to remove more than one hundred particular songs from their play lists.<sup>17</sup> These songs could cause lis-

teners undue stress and were deemed “lyrically questionable” by Clear Channel execs. Songs listed include the Steve Miller Band’s “Jet Airliner,” Pat Benatar’s “Love Is a Battlefield,” and the Bangles’ “Walk Like An Egyptian.” They also include John Lennon’s “Imagine” and a number of rap songs including two from rap group The Beastie Boys (“Sure Shot” and “Sabotage”). Rapper Big Daddy Kane has been quoted as saying: “radio stations operate just like the government. They aren’t allowing groups like a Dead Prez or Mos Def [underground political rappers] to be seen and heard so that they blow up like a 50 Cent or Jay-Z [massively popular nonpolitical rappers]. The result is that [radio stations] silence dissent.”<sup>18</sup>

These two features of our domestic cultural wars must cause us to question if American cultural freedom is ready for export. Transmitting U.S. government propaganda—either in the form of gangsta rap parodies, or the nightly news broadcast—will not ensure a free press in Iraq, nor will it aid democratic reforms.

### Notes

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1. Jane Perlez, “U.S. Overseer Vows Quick Restoration of Iraq’s Services,” *The New York Times*, 22 April 2003.
2. I would note that U.S. advisors have done so without establishing that Iraqis “want us to.”
3. Michele Greppi, “Iraq TV: No Propaganda: CNN Refuses to Participate but TV Channel Chairman Says It Will Be Unbiased,” *Television Week*, 14 April 2003. <http://www.tvweek.com/topstories/041403iraqtv.com>; accessed 17 April 2003, 4:04 P.M.
4. Takrit, the city nearest Saddam Hussein al-Tikriti’s birthplace (al-Ouja), is the location from which the dictator recruited his most trusted military and social advisors. The city’s significance derives from its association with twelfth-century Kurdish warrior Salah al Din al Ayubi (Saladin), who captured Jerusalem from the Crusaders and established a unified Islamic state centered in Egypt while sitting as sultan. In contrast, “Sumer” does not have such strong links to Hussein’s leadership.
5. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/2939433.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2939433.stm); 23 April 2003, 11:10 A.M.
6. <http://www.rnw.nl/realaudio/features/html/iraq-tikrit.html>; 15 April 2003, 10 A.M.
7. The National Accord is an Iraqi dissident group that encourages regime change through a coup d’etat, and its station, al-Mustaqbal, has been known to accept funding and other resources from the CIA. Radio Nederlands reported “multiple sources within the Iraqi opposition have independently confirmed that al-Mustaqbal broadcasts from a 50KW Harris transmitter located in Kuwait from a facility also used by the Voice of America.”
8. Sumer, a group of city-states located around the Lower Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what is now Iraq, is noted for developing the earliest written language on record (cuneiform). Their religion, a polytheistic creed that has echoes in modern Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, is not a historical referent linked to Saddam in any way. See <http://www.rnw.nl/realradio/features/html/iraq-tikrit.html>; 23 April 2003, 11:10 A.M.
9. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/2939433.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2939433.stm); 23 April 2003, 11:10 A.M.
10. Ms. Black’s suggestion to kill Saddam with music is not as wacky as it sounds. January’s *Harper’s Magazine* detailed a report by the U.S. Air Force Institute for National Security on new weaponry, including acoustic, low-frequency “bullets” or waves that would cause blunt-force

- trauma, discomfort, and even death. Another weapon uses a low-frequency infrasound that can penetrate buildings and objects to cause nausea, loss of bowel control, internal organ damage, and death.
11. [http://www.nsnews.com/issues03/w012603/01\\_4303/opinion/014303op1.html](http://www.nsnews.com/issues03/w012603/01_4303/opinion/014303op1.html); 23 April 2003; 10:14 A.M.
  12. Jennifer C. Lena, *From "Flash" to "Cash": Producing Rap Authenticity, 1979 to 1995* (Ph.D. diss., Department of Sociology, Columbia University, 2003).
  13. For historical examples in rap music see reference list below. For examples from other black musical genres, see, in the list below, Porter, Neal, and Marcus, among others.
  14. Quoted in Davey D's *FNV Newsletter*, 25 March 2003. <http://www.daveyd.com/>.
  15. See *FNV Newsletter*, 13 March 2003, Davey D; <http://www.daveyd.com/>.
  16. Ibid.
  17. Buck Wolf and Vinny Marino, "Songs Don't Remain the Same," 19 September 2001. <http://abcnews.go.com/sections/entertainment/DailyNews/songs010918.html>.
  18. Quoted in *FNV Newsletter*, 25 March 2003, Davey D; <http://www.daveyd.com/>.

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