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Father's Day: The Dangerous Notions of Michael Berg

Part I: A Serviceable Villian and an Idealist Son

By Chris Floyd

06/15/06 "Information Clearing House" -- -- After last week's killing of terrorist chieftain Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (or someone just like him) in Iraq, remembrances of his most celebrated alleged victim surfaced briefly in the press: Nicholas Berg, the American businessman whose horrific beheading was publicized in a video fortuitously released less than two weeks after the first revelations of U.S. torture at Abu Ghraib.

It was this video – which featured five surprisingly chubby terrorists, masked, one wearing a gold ring forbidden by extremist Islam, another reading in halting Arabic – that made Zarqawi the Pentagon poster boy for the insurgency. Pentagon documents unearthed by the Washington Post this April revealed that the elevation of Zarqawi's profile was a deliberate, multimillion-dollar propaganda campaign aimed at the American people to foment the lie that the insurgency was largely an al Qaeda terrorist operation, not a native rebellion against the occupation. As one Pentagon general told a group of deception commandos: "The Zarqawi Psy-Op program is the most successful information campaign to date."

Zarqawi – a Jordanian thug who, like so many others, had been radicalized by the American-backed anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan – was a White House tool from the beginning. Before the war, his two-bit terrorist wannabe organization in the Kurdish-held Iraqi north had been targeted for destruction by U.S. Special Forces. But as the Atlantic Monthly reports, George W. Bush prevented at least three separate operations that would have eliminated the Zarqawi group – because such a strike would have interfered with that earlier psy-ops attack on the American people: the selling of the Iraq invasion on false pretenses. Although Zarqawi's gang was in U.S.-controlled territory where Saddam had no power, the Regime's war-peddlers used it to "prove" the non-existent link between Iraq and al Qaeda.

Spared by Bush, Zarqawi proved a serviceable villain after the invasion, always there to be blamed for a new terrorist spectacular whenever a spate of bad war news hit the Homeland press – despite, once again, being in the crosshairs of American forces on several occasions. On at least three occasions in the past year, Jordanian intelligence had pinpointed Zarqawi's location in Iraq and passed the intelligence to their close compadres in the American security organs; but every time, the Americans somehow "arrived too late," as the Atlantic reports.

However by this spring, with no amount of psy-ops able to halt Bush's plunge in the polls – and with the horrific sectarian civil war unleashed by Bush's aggression eclipsing all other violence – the "Zarqawi program" was obviously faltering: not enough PR bang for the buck. And so they did his quietus make – not with a bare bodkin but a thousand pounds of bombs: a little bit of "shock and awe" to goose the news cycle. Bush could have stopped him long ago; he could have spared the Iraqi people the ravages of his favored freebooter; but he chose not to.

Who can say if the beheading of Nicholas Berg – which made Zarqawi a "star" and adroitly demonized the whole Iraqi resistance at such a critical moment – was part of that "most successful information campaign to date"? One can only hope not; one can only hope that in this, as in so many other instances, the Bush Regime was just lucky. After all, who can forget that incredible stroke of good fortune on September 11, 2001 – just one year after a group led by Dick Cheney, Don Rumsfeld and Jeb Bush declared that only a "new Pearl Harbor" could "catalyze" the American people into accepting their radical militarist program of conquering Iraq, establishing bases in Central Asia, waging "pre-emptive" wars, weaponizing space, gutting nuclear treaties, and larding the war-related industries with pork beyond the dreams of avarice. As Bush himself said while the Twin Towers were still smoldering: "Through my tears, I see opportunity."

Nicholas Berg, on the other hand, was remarkably unlucky. More of an idealist than a chest-thumping corporate predator like ex-CEOs Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld, Berg, 26, had developed a method for helping underdeveloped areas build safe, affordable structures where steel is hard to come by, as Wikipedia reports. Progress, not profit, was his motivating force. He was also an idealist in another way: he believed in his government. The president said Iraq had been liberated – "mission accomplished" – and that American companies needed to help the Iraqi people rebuild their land. Berg didn't realize that the president was a liar. Iraq had not been liberated but delivered into a new hell. Mass deaths, house raids, airstrikes, societal collapse and torture had spawned a fierce armed resistance. Bush's invasion had also loosed the most brutal, ignorant religious extremists – like Zarqawi – to prey upon the land. Meanwhile, "reconstruction" was a sick joke: it was just a pipeline for Bush cronies to drain Iraq, and the U.S. Treasury, bone-dry.

Berg came alone: no bodyguard of bristling mercenaries, no Halliburton subcontracts, no Beltway cronies. Work was promised, but without that insider grease, fell through. He decided to go home. Six days before his scheduled departure, he was suddenly seized by Iraqi police and turned over to U.S. forces. For reasons still unclear, he was held for 13 days – during which time the Abu Ghraib revelations ignited the land, and the tinderbox of Fallujah exploded when four mercenaries were killed in retaliation for the American shooting of Iraqi protestors a few days before.

Berg was released into this heightened turmoil one day after his family filed a lawsuit against his illegal detention; he disappeared four days later. His remains were found one month later near a Baghdad highway; the gruesome video appeared three days after that. Abu Ghraib disappeared from the front pages; it was not an issue in the presidential election that year.

Zarqawi – or "Zarqawi" – was the fake emblem of a fake war, the "war on terror" that the Bush Regime is pretending to fight while it goes about its long-planned business of exploiting "opportunities" like 9/11. Nicholas Berg was no emblem; he was just another human being literally ripped to shreds in that dark maw where high politics and low murder feast on the same lies, the same flesh.

Part II: A Dangerous Man

But despite the central role that Berg unwillingly played in the concoction of the Zarqawi legend, he was largely airbrushed from the lurid coverage of its grand finale. That's because any new story on Berg would naturally center around his most outspoken survivor, his father Michael. And Michael Berg is a man with a dangerous message, a radical subversion of every value that the Bush Administration is fighting to preserve.

In many ways, of course, it's an ancient danger, a destabilizing notion that has threatened the guardians of civilization for thousands of years. Its advocates have always been relegated to the lunatic fringe, ignored and forgotten, except in rare cases when their subversion has taken hold, usually among the lower orders. In each such case, however, down through the ages, the civilized world has, like a healthy body, acted swiftly to remove the carriers of disorder. Still, in every generation the bacillus emerges once again, and Michael Berg, no doubt weakened by his grief, has become seriously infected.

It's no wonder, then, that his media appearances last week were so brief and circumscribed. For there he was, father of a victim murdered in the most gruesome fashion imaginable by the terrorist Zarqawi (or someone just like him), a survivor fully entitled to exult in the revenging fury and violent self-righteousness that are among the chief values of the Bush Imperium – and all Berg could talk about was mercy and forgiveness, peace and restoration. He would not even take pleasure in

the death of Zarqawi, whom he called a "fellow human being." Instead, he grieved for Zarqawi's family and wished that the brutal killer could have been subjected to "restorative justice" – made to work in a hospital with children maimed by war, for example – setting him on a path where his human decency might have been restored.

Nor would Berg praise the guardian of civilization, George W. Bush, for finally ending the career of the terrorist he had used so cynically to justify aggressive war. Instead, Berg blamed Bush for unleashing mass death on the people of Iraq, and instigating the cycle of violence that had consumed his son. But even for the authors of war, for the state terrorists who kill on an industrial scale, by remote control, ensconced in safety, comfort, privilege and wealth, Berg called for restoration, not revenge: they should be removed from power and compelled to some compassionate labor that might redeem their corrupted humanity.

It goes without saying that Berg's comments were instantly condemned throughout the vast engine of bile-driven groupthink known as the rightwing media. He was reviled as a traitor, a fool, a terrorist-lover, "less than human," a monster whose son will slap his face in the afterlife. He was derided for his quixotic Congressional campaign as the Green Party candidate for Delaware: what place do such weapons of the weak – mercy, forgiveness, non-violence – have in the halls of power? For the mainstream, he was just a blip, a quirky diversion in the flood of triumphant stories on Zarqawi's demise.

And to be sure, it is foolish to oppose the cherished values of our 21st century civilization: violence, bluster, ignorance and fear. It's foolish to take upon oneself the responsibility to break the cycle of violence at last, to say: "Let it end with me, if nowhere else; let it end now, no matter what the provocation; let something new, something more human, some restoration take root in this bloodstained ground."

But what if such folly is the only way for humankind to begin climbing out of the festering pit we have made of the world?

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