

A DANSE MACABRE

By Michael Ventura

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William L. Shirer was an American journalist reporting on Hitler's Berlin from 1934 to 1941 (he would later write *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*). His *Berlin Diary* makes eerie reading now -- the atmosphere he describes feels familiar. He noted in October 1939: "I suppose every government that has ever gone to war has tried to convince its people of three things: 1) that right is on its side; 2) that it is fighting purely in defense of the nation; 3) that it is sure to win." Shirer documented the *danse macabre* that, for a century or more, seems a set ritual for modern nations on the brink of war -- any kind of nation, any kind of war.

First and foremost is the relentless military buildup that continues unabated no matter what negotiations are going on and no matter what the citizenry feels or expresses.

Second is the breaking of treaties and the sweeping aside of laws and precedents that might stand in the way of domination and war. We see this in the Bush administration's canceling of arms agreements with Russia; its backing out of America's commitment to the World Court and the Kyoto environmental treaty; its insistence, against the will of our allies, on building the so-called "missile-defense shield"; its antagonism to the United Nations; its defiance of our Constitution, imprisoning Americans without evidence or trial (though the Bill of Rights clearly states that *all* Americans, without exception, are entitled to lawyers and to a fair trial in which the evidence against them must be made public); its USA PATRIOT and Homeland Security acts, confining our liberties and implementing Total Information Awareness, a Pentagon operation to assemble dossiers on every American citizen; and in Bush's stated willingness to use atomic weapons in "conventional" warfare and his disruptive new doctrine of "pre-emptive" war, claiming the "right" to aggression against any country he feels *might* be a threat -- thereby not merely rewriting but canceling the most basic principles of what until now was considered international law.

Third step in this danse macabre are the endless conferences, negotiations, meetings, consultations. Everybody talks. Nothing changes. Everybody says war will be "the last resort" when it is clear they consider war the only resort. Everybody spends months repeating that war is not inevitable but behaving as though war is the only possible outcome. The nation intent on war uses conferences, negotiations, etc., as a stall while it gets in position to open fire. The nations about to be attacked, and those that will be affected, play for time, for leverage, for sympathy, for anything they can get before the explosion that everyone knows is coming.

Fourth is the "music" to which this danse macabre is choreographed: a cacophony of propaganda -- the more contradictory the better. In this case Bush has managed to portray one of the weakest nations on Earth as an unparalleled threat. He is fortunate in having Saddam Hussein sitting atop all that oil, because Saddam is a verified monster -- you don't have to go very far to demonize a demon. What's interesting is that much that Bush says of Saddam is equally true of Bush: He has weapons of mass destruction and has demonstrated his willingness to use them; he will not accept or accede to world opinion (all those treaties we've broken or canceled and all those allies we ignore); he will not accept inspections (the United States is the only major country that refuses to

sign a world treaty on chemical and biological inspections -- the treaty requires inspections and the U.S. won't allow that); he is threatening weaker countries; he has usurped dictatorial powers; his word can't be trusted. Here is Bush speaking at Fort Hood on Jan. 4: "[Our enemies] reach across oceans to target innocent people. They seek weapons of mass murder on a massive scale. The terrorists will not be stopped by mercy *or by conscience*." (My italics.) But it is Bush who is reaching across oceans to target innocent people (the UN estimates that half a million Iraqis will be killed or injured in this war, 3 million will go hungry, 1 million will become refugees -- we are targeting Saddam, but we will kill or otherwise destroy many innocents to get to him). It is Bush who commands an arsenal designed for mass murder, and has stated his willingness to use it. And, by his own admission, he has dispensed with the inconvenient notions of mercy and conscience.

A people asked to believe one thing one day, and to believe its opposite on the following day -- and whose questions are responded to not with answers but with ever-inventive and unverifiable new assertions, assertions that in turn beg questions which in turn are not answered -- such a people no longer *expects* to trust reality and can no longer believe in their capacity (perhaps even in their right) to influence or even to comprehend what's going on.

Contradictions:

Bush and Powell say Iraq is involved with al Qaeda; the CIA says it's not. Bush says Saddam will give weapons of mass destruction to terrorists; the CIA reported last October that "Baghdad for now appears to be drawing a line short of conducting terrorist attacks [in the U.S.]. Should Saddam conclude that a U.S.-led attack could no longer be deterred, he probably would become much less constrained in adopting terrorist actions." According to the CIA, then, Bush's actions are creating the danger that Bush is supposedly going to war against. Last summer, Bush and Cheney repeatedly said they had proof that Iraq was developing nuclear weapons; in October he claimed to have satellite photos proving this -- which has since been exposed as a flat-out lie; inspectors state that "we have to date found no evidence that Iraq has revived its nuclear weapon program since the elimination of that program in the 1990s." The Bush administration points to documents confiscated from an Iraqi scientist's home as proof of evasion; the chief UN nuclear inspector, Dr. ElBaradei (whose integrity has never been questioned) said that these documents referred to Iraq's nuclear program before 1991. Powell says that Saddam is hiding stuff in unidentified "buildings"; but everyone agrees that the Iraqis have unhesitatingly allowed inspectors into any building they care to enter. And speaking of contradictions: Why don't we move against Iran, which is openly developing nuclear capacity and has ties with terrorists? Or North Korea, which has nuclear weapons and sells missiles (and who knows what?) to whoever has the cash?

And along with the contradictions, there are mysterious reversals. Hans Blix, the chief UN inspector for biological and chemical weapons, first declared the discovery of a dozen or so empty chemical artillery shells "not very important"; a week later he said they are "the tip of an iceberg." For months he's been saying that the Iraqis are cooperating with the inspectors promptly and completely; then he issued a report that says it ain't so. (Who got to him, and how?) Or Colin Powell -- dove-ish, hawk-ish, depending on the political weather. On the day this paper goes to press, Powell will address the UN Security Council, producing new evidence -- or so they say; what they don't say, or don't say loudly, is that there have been many reports (which Bush, of course, refuses to confirm) that U.S. Special Forces are already operating in Iraq --

planting evidence? So the word "evidence" has no meaning anymore. It is a matter of record that during the first Gulf War Powell signed on to blatant lies and presented satellite photos that were later proved to be fake. When, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Adlai Stevenson presented those damning photos to the UN, the photos were believed because everyone knew that Stevenson could be trusted; Powell, as his Gulf War record demonstrates, can't be trusted ... and so ... what are we to believe?

It doesn't matter. And that's the point. The Constitution, international law, public opinion, and reason itself, no longer matter. Contradictions and proven lies are reported unobtrusively in our newspapers as though they are somehow ancillary to the major story; on TV they are rarely mentioned at all. The White House stonewalls every serious question; instead of headlines shouting WHITE HOUSE STONEWALLS AGAIN, Press Secretary Ari Fleischer's evasions are perfunctorily quoted -- and that's that. Bush made this incredible statement to Bob Woodward: "I do not need to explain why I say things. That's the interesting thing about being the president ... [I] don't feel like I owe anybody an explanation." His assertion goes unchallenged.

All that matters is: There will be war. And from this war will rise ... something unimaginable. It always does. ■

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