

IRAQI-AMERICANS NOT IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD!

Judi Lynn Lake

Today's global culture displays its very definition of itself with the rich use of images, print media, and virtual connection to its constituents spun country by country. For example, the American perspective comes to its citizenry filtered through its highly-utilized media. In like manner, the Iraqi perspective is filtered to its citizens through its own use of the media. Un-spinning spin is the average citizen's route to truth. But, it takes energy and the will to know. The spinmeisters depend on that very human frailty, effectively demonstrating how the spin given to the printed word can and does form cultural definition, opinion and boundaries. *Textual Imagery* at its most powerful.

Throughout our daily lives, what we hear, see and read affects us either consciously or subconsciously causing us to form personal opinions and prejudices with the capacity to last forever. For years the movie industry, television, radio, news media, print media, advertising, and most recently the Internet, have depicted numerous images that



often play a contributing role in how the American people shape their beliefs and opinions about certain countries, events, and people of various races. This *Textual Imagery* – information and communication filtered to us second by second—has a major influence on the American public, and millions of people have

grown up believing that they know different cultures simply by virtue of what they have read, heard or seen.

In a world that grows more complicated by the second, the media play an important role in helping the public sift through issues, pointing out which issue needs more attention and providing facts that help people make informed decisions. And as the world prepares to possibly enter one of its most serious wars in history, the

media is most crucial for the American people to be able to obtain information and understand issues. But what should have been the age of information has instead morphed into a golden season of propaganda, enhanced truths, and

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hyped realities, as mainstream news is manipulated by the masters of the political spin.

It used to be that the spins were confined mostly to the Hollywood pages—at least that's what most people assumed.

In the past, information given to us was generally aboveground; most of the time it was clear where the news stopped and sensationalism began. But today's political spinmeisters seem to prefer to work unseen by the public, even as a few of them arrogantly flaunt their influence—if not outright power—over select, well-placed journalists. And as their insidious influence on newsrooms grows, so does the amount of disinformation that is inflicted on a still largely unsuspecting public. There is, unfortunately, no telling how much of the information supplied to us is being spun, with journalists themselves sometimes not even realizing that they are already part of a web of deceit.

So it is that the meanings these images represent play a vital role in the formation of stereotypes, thus inciting deep-rooted, unfounded prejudice among entire cultures. It is within these particular images, one form of *Textual Imagery*, that the general public often defines another entire culture. Think Italian and automatically the mob is connected, think Black and Hispanic and you know there is some street gang involved with violence and sex, think Gay and there will be flamboyancy, and let's not forget the Jews. We fail to acknowledge a heartbeat within different races and cultures identifying them as human beings. Let's face it, different really is *not* good. But who is at the top of the ladder determin-

ing "different"? Who is leading us? Where can the true solidarity of mankind be found?

CBS evening anchorman Dan Rather demonstrated a glaring example of *Textual Imagery* on his September 19, 2005 news segment. He began a news package with the following: "Ordinary Iraqis are faced with an extraordinary surge of crime, banditry and thuggery from carjacking and robbery to kidnapping and murder." And as an aside, he concluded, "A reminder that television sometimes has trouble with

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perspective. So you may want to note that in some areas of Iraq things are peaceful." *Textual Imagery* gone awry.

Through the creative use of *Textual Imagery*, stereotypes are automatically or unconsciously generated in the mind, and this categorizing is an important part of the mental process of evaluating the world. It is the myths about Arabs which have often inspired Hollywood directors, producers and screenwriters to develop movies based on stereotypes. In the early days of film, Arabs were over-sexed

exotic creatures. By the 1970s, a new stereotype had emerged: the oil sheikh - rich, vengeful, corrupt, and sneaky. Basically, this was simply a recasting of the anti-semitic Jewish banker stereotype. From the 1980s onward, Hollywood Arabs have generally been terrorists.

Obviously since some races 'have moved up in status', Hollywood is slowly running out of bad-guy stereotypes that it can get away with. According to Godfrey Cheshire, a critic on the *New York Press*, "the only vicious racial stereotype that's not only still permitted but actively endorsed by Hollywood" is that of Arabs as crazed terrorists.

Hussein Ibish, a spokesman for the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee says: "These negative stereotypes are rooted in the very aggressive role that the US plays in the Middle East. The stereotypes emerge from the popular culture then inform government policy, and that reinforces the willingness ... to promote the stereotypes, and so on. It's a spiral."

We are unconsciously surrounded by *Textual Imagery* daily: television, radio, the news, magazines, daily conversation, etc.—any form of words or images that communicate information, which does and will influence our truth about different cultures. While Americans go through their daily lives believing that the 'monster of prejudice' is no longer in the closet, the truth is that prejudice abounds in America now more than ever. It just wears a different face, a different color, spurred by cultural differences, fear, and more importantly, the persuasive *Textual Imagery* to which we've been exposed each day.

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September 11, 2001 set the final stage for the entire Middle Eastern Culture to be viewed as barbarians and terrorists who harbor weapons of mass destruction, and as rogues desperately in need of liberation and democratization. The *Textual Imagery* we witnessed ignited an even deeper fear and prejudice against a nation that we really don't know and who doesn't really know us. To further enforce the importance of our protection, the Administration frequently issued color-coded terrorist alerts to warn Americans of impending danger without any discussion about the reasons for the alerts. The only successful thing these warnings managed was to heighten the American public's fear. A fear fueled by dramatic *Textual Imagery* of Iraq and its enigmatic people.

September 11, 2001 will forever endure, embedded in the hearts of most as the darkest day in history – personally life-changing, and globally world-changing. As a New Yorker, I still struggle with the memory of what was done to my beloved city, as well to our beloved country. But there inevitably comes a time for healing on some level, a time for the truth and for reasoning which ultimately grants us the true freedom each of us strives for. Without true understanding and knowledge of other cultures, we remain static and forego any possibility of the true freedom that our forefathers fought so dearly for. A civilized human society *can not* afford to think in tribal terms. That type of thinking leads to despair and, in due course, to completely unjustifiable disasters such as 9-11.

In the Spring of 2005, I was approached by Dr. Amaal V.E. Tokars to design and work with her on her book: *Textual Imagery & Iraq: Beaconing Organic Citizenry*. Although I had recently relocated to South Carolina, I have been and still

am a New Yorker who had actually walked Ground Zero five days after the tragedy of 9-11.

I remembered initially asking Dr. Tokars what her book was about, as the title spoke nothing to me and I was not interested in working on anything that could possibly be treasonous. She began by explaining her concept of *Textual Imagery* to me (a combination of words and pictures intended to convey information to citizens). We had a few initial phone conversations and I agreed to have her send her manuscript for me to review before I committed to work on it.

While working on another deadline, I recall picking up one of her chapters and pondering why I was hesitant to delve into her writing. I instantly realized that my personal 'inner demons' intervening – 'demons' I hadn't even realized I had. Without consciously knowing it, I had stereotyped Dr. Tokars in my mind as 'the enemy' and although I wanted to approach her as a professional, I could not. Why? I had always considered myself open-minded, fair and non-judgmental. While truly soul searching, I discovered that I did not trust her or her people and I was certainly not interested in pursuing anything about this topic. Reflexively I felt that SHE, too, was to blame for the horrendous attack of September 11, 2001, along with all her people regardless if they were American Iraqis or not. My subconscious warned me of the 'danger' of 'these people', and trust was not a part of my relationship with Dr. Tokars at that time.

In Long Island, NY, many Middle Eastern people run businesses and suspicion arose automatically among us, without our realizing it or even thinking about why. The War on Terror was amidst us daily; when we shopped, when we walked

leisurely through Manhattan; when we witnessed Middle Eastern families waiting in line with their children at the movie theatres—everywhere there was suspicion and everywhere there was prejudice—and everywhere was potential 'danger'—even from children—*afterall, weren't all Iraqi children trained to kill from the time of conception?* I can recall many Iraqi families being boycotted from the most simple, everyday things for no other reason than our prejudice and fear. One winter following 9-11, I recalled a heating and air conditioning business refusing a service call for a family within the community simply because ... *well they are Iraqi aren't they?!!*

Pondering Dr. Tokars' work I became haunted. I began reflecting upon that horrible day which changed the world forever. Burdened by the realization that September 11, 2001 changed everyone's lives, I recalled my own 9-11 experience:

Tuesday, September 11, 2001, I was watching the TV news, drinking my morning coffee from my Southampton, Long Island home when suddenly the screen changed to images of utter terror: A plane had just struck The World Trade Center. At first, I thought it was a preview for a movie but it didn't take long for my senses to accept that this was the real thing. My husband was already at work and I couldn't reach him, but my phone kept ringing. Terror and despair gripped everyone. What happened??? Then the second plane hit. By now it was pretty clear that this was an act of terrorism and this was reality, not a Hollywood movie. Then the Pentagon, then the field in Pennsylvania. WHAT IS HAPPENING?? While transfixed in

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The rubble and remaining building structures of the World Trade Center are being broken down by heavy machinery. Manhattan, New York.

ing on Long Island, but I knew better...

As I approached the Lincoln Tunnel, sighted on the left was a mass of smoke ... the financial district in distress. I will forever remember the eerie feeling of seeing lower Manhattan in a smoky glow. I had to go there and see for myself and my friends suddenly realized that this would be a New York that they would never forget.

Somehow, somehow we managed to get right into lower Manhattan without being stopped and without being questioned. Fortunately, that familiar saying, 'ignorance is bliss' applied to me here – I was on a mission and I drove blindly.

As we approached SoHo we witnessed parts of the Trade Center already being carried away by vehicles – the city, which normally resounds with energy and vibrance was so quiet that you could literally hear a pin drop – not even one obnoxious 'New York horn' blew. Finally finding a parking space, we got out of the car. I grabbed the baby stroller and we walked in a complete daze – my only description would be similar to walking on Holy Ground. Familiar sites were now covered in dust, destruction everywhere, and there before us was the shattered Twin Towers. Red Cross tables were lined up everywhere for the fire fighters, and familiar storefronts belied the fact that they were now temporary morgues. As we walked and prayed, yes, prayed, we were a people united, a people who mourned together and were on a mission to find everyone missing who were trapped within the Trade Center.

I can't recall how long we stayed there but it was a very long, dark

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front of the TV, the World Trade Center had become a horrifying image of dense smoke and carnage right before my eyes, and my home, my beloved New York, was in flames ... under attack ... vulnerable and shattered. I sat in shock unable to move.

My first thoughts were to contact everyone I knew who worked in or around the World Trade Center. Having worked in Manhattan and having had several friends and business associates in The World Trade Center created an enormous fear within me –I felt helpless and frightened. Within hours it was clear that a few dear friends and associates were indeed stuck inside those towers. Because there was absolutely no entrance into Manhattan for those of us waiting, the only thing to do was to watch and pray. Along with millions of others, my heart ached for every person in and near the towers as well as for their families and

friends—were they safe, were they alive?

Piece by piece information was relayed about friends and associates. A very good friend who worked at Kemper Insurance on the 34th floor was relaying information from her cell phone to her husband who in turn called each of us.

As the days passed, all eyes and ears were glued to TV's and radios. Although we lived 3 hours away from Manhattan, the reality of the attack touched us in our immediate homes and businesses by rendering us without phone service for two weeks. On the fifth day after the attack, I was anxious and knew I needed to see for myself. I called two friends who were visiting from Kentucky, packed my 2 year old daughter into the car and headed for the Southern State Parkway. My friends accompanying me were under the assumption that I was taking them sight-see-

day. It is one thing reading about something but it is truly another thing being an eyewitness to the mass destruction. One of my friends, Vern, being a professional photographer, ironically had his video camera with him at the ready, and he shot everything we saw – how precious that film is to us to this very day.

As the weeks passed the pain never ceased as the death toll mounted, and many people I knew were added to that list. A longtime friend of mine, Fr. Robert McGuire, SJ, was inundated with numerous funerals – weekly, and endlessly. A girl I was to train for a job (who was not returning my phone calls) was eventually pronounced dead.

In every way our lives will now never be the same.

And so I began reading Dr. Tokars' book, (title now changed to: *America & Iraq: Seduced by Fear*). I groaned inwardly as I thought, "Here I am, as woefully misinformed about the true heart of the Middle Eastern people as most Americans, and vice versa." Her work absorbed me and I finished reading it in one sitting. I could clearly understand that Dr. Tokars' mission was not to divide and conquer but, rather, to inform, educate and promote peace and true freedom within different cultures. Because of her heritage, obviously America and Iraq are the central protagonists in her work, but her work applies to every culture: White, Black, Hispanic, Oriental, etc. I myself have experienced raw and personal stereotyped prejudice simply because my grandmother was Spanish, and more recently being a 'Yankee' relocated to the south.

By reading her work, I concurred that it was imperative to debunk

Hollywood stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims as wild-eyed, Koran-waving fanatics. These are pernicious ideas that stand in the way of fair judgment. I also concurred that Dr. Tokars' book is important work that should be read by everyone. And that is when I, personally, decided to design and publish it.

Throughout the last year, Dr. Tokars and myself have had many conversations and we have bonded brilliantly as two women who think similarly with regard to family, life and society as a whole. Through our connection, I have discovered that the average Iraqi DOES NOT have "links" to Osama bin Laden, IS NOT a prospective suicide bomber,

nor would they defend such indefensible actions. Our conversations have spanned a multitude of topics and, through those conversations, I have discovered that we have much in common as women. Through her work, she and I have connected on a 'human level' and mutually agree that both Americans and the Iraqi people should strive to puncture the myth that "we" are somehow essentially different from "them." ■

A native New Yorker, Judi Lynn Lake resides in South Carolina, with her husband and 7 year old daughter. She owns a successful Advertising/PR Firm. Contact Judi at judilake.com

Learn more about Dr. Amaal V.E. Tokars' mission at www.seducedbyfear.com

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AMERICA & IRAQ:

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DISCOVER FOR YOURSELF HOW THE AGE OF INFORMATION HAS MORPHED INTO A SEASON OF HYPED REALITIES



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In her upcoming book, *America & Iraq: Seduced by Fear*, Dr. Amaal Tokars takes you on a journey before 9-11 and after, demonstrating why the **average citizen should have been prepared for war** and how the notion of our freedom has been relegated to a diminished voice.

Dr. Tokars guides us toward the process of becoming an **Organic Citizenry** by learning how to discern truth with clarity and discover where to go to acquire the facts, renewing our authentic voice and true freedom. Dr. Tokars challenges her readers to be *Organic Citizens*, to commit themselves to decipher and challenge all *Textual Imagery*—to think, question, act, and participate. Dr. Tokars gives us an intriguing analysis and a challenge to live our lives as better citizens of the world.

IN THIS BOOK YOU WILL LEARN:

- Without knowledge citizens do not have genuine choice, and without choice, there is no freedom.
- Groups that use misinformation to shut out the knowledge of other groups isolate themselves and isolate those they claim to inform.
- Those who have been misinformed rather than educated about other cultures remain static in their own contribution to civil society.
- Fear-producing alerts about the other countries precede every war.

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