



Reporting in the “Fog of War”: The Story of Jessica Lynch

On the evening of April 1, 2003, Americans turning on their televisions for the latest news on the two-week-old war in Iraq got a happy surprise: Jessica Lynch, a young Army private missing in action, had been rescued from an Iraqi hospital where she had lain, grievously injured, for ten days. The attack on Lynch’s Army maintenance unit on March 23, which at the time was “the most deadly ambush of the war,”¹ had been a low point in the early days of the US invasion of Iraq; a harrowing videotape, first aired on Iraqi TV, showing the bloodied bodies of dead American soldiers and several frightened-looking captives from Lynch’s company, had brought the harsh realities of war into the nation’s living rooms, and cast a pall on hopes for a quick campaign with minimal cost in lives.

The news that Private First Class Lynch had been found alive and brought to safety was itself an occasion for rejoicing, but the emerging details of the rescue effort, captured on videotape by the military and widely broadcast on TV, boosted the spirits of the American public at a time when doubts about the efficacy of the war effort had begun to surface. Dramatic accounts of the rescue effort saturated the airwaves and ran on the front pages of newspapers across the country. Under cover of darkness, a crack team of US Special Forces had landed in the hospital compound where the bedridden Lynch lay, in the town of Nasiriyah, the scene of intense fighting for almost two weeks; under fire from Iraqis, they had stormed the hospital, and soon thereafter raced back out bearing Lynch on a stretcher to a waiting Black Hawk helicopter, which whisked her away to Kuwait. She was, according to the Pentagon, the first US prisoner of war to be rescued from

¹ Nancy Gibbs, “The Private Jessica Lynch,” *Time*, November 17, 2003, p. 24.

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“hostile territory” since World War II—and the first woman soldier ever rescued.² “The US military,” said an NBC reporter several days later, “had pulled off one of the most astonishing rescues in the annals of war, and the world would soon know it.”³

Lynch’s rescuers were not the only ones whose heroism was celebrated in the media, however. On April 3, *The Washington Post* reported on its front page that Lynch had “fought fiercely” when her maintenance company was ambushed, “firing her weapon until she ran out of ammunition,” even after she had sustained “multiple gunshot” and stab wounds. The *Post* story was quickly picked up by other newspapers and by TV, and Lynch, a “petite” supply clerk from a small town in West Virginia, was soon lionized for putting up a “Rambo-worthy fight” against her attackers.⁴

While Lynch herself remained in seclusion in an Army hospital, the saga of her capture and rescue was told and retold in the media; friends and family were exhaustively interviewed, and the soon-to-be familiar video footage of her rescue replayed on network and cable news shows; newspaper editorials hailed her bravery and the daring of her rescuers. Lynch and the Special Forces who saved her, wrote an editorialist for the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* on April 4, “demonstrated the courage of which legends are made. And America always has room for more such heroes.”

Yet three months later, key parts of that legend had been debunked or called into question. Lynch, it turned out, had not been as heroic, nor her rescuers as daring, as originally portrayed in the media. In the recriminations that followed new information about the capture and rescue, some in the press blamed the Pentagon for hyping the Jessica Lynch story for “propaganda” purposes, while some in the Pentagon blamed the press for over-dramatizing the story and indulging in speculative reporting. Others, like *Washington Post* reporter Dana Priest, attributed the misinformation to the “fog of war,” a well-worn phrase used to describe, among other things, the confusing and hard-to-confirm reports emanating from the battlefield. One lesson to be gleaned from the coverage of Jessica Lynch, Priest suggested, was “that the fog of war is a real thing, and the fog of reporting about war is a real thing.”⁵

But even when the fog began to lift, it revealed a shifting landscape of shades of gray, where the truth—about what had happened to Jessica Lynch, and about how her story came to be told—was still difficult to pin down.

² Transcript, “World News Tonight,” ABC News, April 2, 2003; Thom Shanker with John Broder, “A Nation at War: Liberated; the rescue of Private Lynch: Iraqi’s tip was a bugle call,” *The New York Times*, April 3, 2003, p. B1.

³ Transcript, “Dateline NBC,” NBC News, April 6, 2003.

⁴ Maki Becker, “POW Jessica was tortured,” *Daily News* (New York), April 3, 2003, p. 7.

⁵ Transcript, “On the Media,” National Public Radio, June 20, 2003.

Background: The Ambush of the 507th Maintenance Company

The ground war in Iraq was just four days old when news reports began filtering in that a maintenance convoy attached to the Army's 3rd Infantry Division had taken a wrong turn in the desert and driven into the town of Nasiriyah, some 200 miles south of Baghdad, where it encountered heavily armed Iraqi irregular forces. In the fierce battle that ensued, two of the 33 members of the 507th Maintenance Company were killed, five were taken prisoner, and eight—including Jessica Lynch—were classified as "duty status whereabouts unknown," or missing in action.⁶

That night, March 23, Al Jazeera, the Arab satellite news network, broadcast "gruesome Iraqi television footage," as *The Washington Post* put it, of a makeshift morgue with dead US soldiers lying on the floor; the camera panned over some of them for "lingering, close-up images" of their head wounds and, in a chilling moment, captured on tape the smile of an Iraqi orderly attending the bodies.⁷ Equally unnerving was the spectacle of five prisoners—four men and one woman—from the 507th being questioned by their Iraqi captors. Some appeared seriously wounded—one soldier was heard groaning in pain—others dazed and frightened. Their plight was rendered all the more distressing by the fact that none of them had expected to see combat: they were, in the words of one later ABC-TV program, "clerks, cooks, mechanics," hauling supplies and spare parts to support the soldiers in the vanguard of the attack.⁸ When asked by his interrogator why he had come to Iraq, one answered poignantly that he had come not to fight, but to "fix ... stuff."⁹

The 507th Maintenance Company was not the only unit to suffer serious losses that day. Nine Marines were killed, also in Nasiriyah, reportedly when Iraqi soldiers pretending to surrender opened fire on them instead;¹⁰ elsewhere US troops encountered the stiffest resistance, and greatest number of casualties, to date. Summing up the grim news he had just reported, one CNN anchor remarked, "You have to put this down as, really, a bad day."¹¹ The events of March 23 provided a sobering check to the "hopeful imagery of American tanks plowing effortlessly through the desert," in the words of Jim Rutenberg of *The New York Times*, that had characterized

⁶ Amy Goldstein, "Families of missing wait uneasily for word; some express anger at Army, which they say tells them little," *The Washington Post*, March 27, 2003, p. A23.

⁷ Susan Glasser and Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "Clashes at key river crossing bring heaviest day of American casualties; 16 may be dead; five others are taken prisoner," *The Washington Post*, March 24, 2003, p. A1. Not all the bodies shown in the footage were soldiers from the 507th Maintenance Company.

⁸ Transcript, "Primetime Live," ABC News, November 11, 2003.

⁹ Robert Reid, "Al-Jazeera airs footage allegedly of captured American troops in Iraq," Associated Press, March 23, 2003.

¹⁰ According to an Associated Press story on April 5, 2003, *The Washington Post* reported that the Marines had been killed by friendly fire.

¹¹ Jim Rutenberg, "A Nation at War: The TV Watch; after days of buoyant images, reporting enters a second and more ominous act," *The New York Times*, March 24, 2003, p. B1.

coverage in the first days of the war. In its place were graphic video clips and descriptions of dead bodies and terrified POWs, or heartrending interviews with anguished members of the families of soldiers who were killed or taken captive or, like Lynch, missing—and possibly dead—somewhere in the chaotic battlefield that was Iraq. “Everyone is praying,” Lynch’s father, Greg, told reporters. “I am hopeful. She was raised in the country. I think she’s got enough knowledge that if she got away, she is out there somewhere, laying low and trying to figure out how to get back to her unit.”¹²

For the time being, however, there was no news of Lynch, or of any other missing soldiers of the 507th maintenance unit. The war in Iraq plodded on, its conduct increasingly subject to second-guessing as Iraqi resistance intensified and the perception grew that the campaign had stalled. On CNN’s “Wolf Blitzer Reports,” Pentagon correspondent Jamie McIntyre noted on April 1 that “frustration here at the Pentagon has reached the boiling point” over “criticism that perhaps the Pentagon sent too few troops” to Iraq. General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was shown declaring that such charges bore “no resemblance to the truth, and it’s just harmful to our troops that are out there fighting very bravely, very courageously.”

Breaking News. Several hours later, at 7:00 p.m., CNN reported on its “Special Coverage” program that the US Central Command (CENTCOM) had summoned reporters to a pre-dawn briefing at its wartime base in Qatar.¹³ The hour was “highly unusual,” noted CNN anchor Paula Zahn—CENTCOM officials normally held a daily press briefing at 7:00 a.m. Eastern Time. (Baghdad was eight hours ahead of Eastern Time.) At first, Zahn told viewers that expectations were that “a major ground offensive” would be announced, but that expectation changed, as reporters pressed their Pentagon sources for more information. “We are told,” reported McIntyre sometime later, “that they’ll be announcing good news for US military personnel. ... Very preliminary reports that we are getting back here [in Washington] indicate that at least one prisoner of war may have been rescued or recovered or retrieved or somehow gotten back. It might be a woman, a female prisoner. But we have no name, no identification and no final confirmation of that.”

When later that night—early morning in Iraq—Brigadier General Vincent Brooks, deputy director of operations at CENTCOM, appeared before the press, his terse announcement did little to clarify matters. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “I have a short statement to make, and I will not be taking any questions. Coalition forces have conducted a successful rescue mission of a US Army prisoner of war held captive in Iraq. The soldier has been returned to a coalition-controlled area. More details will be released as soon as possible. Thank you.” With that, the briefing came to

¹² Jim Yardley, “A Nation at War: Prisoners; TV images confirm fears of prisoners’ kin,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 2003, p. A1.

¹³ One of nine “unified commands” of US combat forces, Central Command’s “area of responsibility” extended from the Horn of Africa to Central Asia, and included the Middle East.

an end, but speculation on the soldier's identity, and on the details of her ordeal, was just beginning.

First News Reports

It took less than an hour for reporters to ascertain that the rescued soldier was Jessica Lynch, just 19 years old, from the tiny town of Palestine, West Virginia. It would take considerably longer to piece together a definitive account of her experiences from the time her company was ambushed to the moment she was transported out of Iraq, about ten days later. The first reports, carried on live TV news broadcasts the night her rescue was announced, were sketchy, relying on Brooks's minimalist announcement and whatever information could be gleaned from Pentagon sources. On ABC News's "World News Tonight" on April 1, anchor Peter Jennings called Lynch's rescue "some of the best news of the day," but had little to add to the barebones story. On NBC's "Dateline" program that night, Stone Phillips told viewers that a "daring rescue mission in the middle of the night has found and freed an American who'd been missing in action." The show also provided photographs of PFC Lynch—an appealing young blonde—her hometown, her home, and a brief comment from her father. CNN managed to talk to Jim Wilkinson, CENTCOM's director of strategic communications in Qatar, who provided a little additional information. "I really don't want to go into details," he told CNN's Wolf Blitzer. "What I'll say is that we've been up all night here," watching the rescue operation. "A small group of people knew about this rescue. It was kept to a very small group to preserve operational security." Wilkinson continued: "I will say that America is a nation that does not leave its heroes behind."

Wilkinson's comment was repeated the next day, April 2, in *The Washington Post's* front-page story on the rescue. Citing anonymous "defense officials" and a "US official," the *Post* reported that "CIA operatives in Iraq" had located Lynch and provided "the geographical coordinates" that had allowed a Special Operations rescue team, composed of Navy SEALs and Army Rangers, to "swoop down quickly" by helicopter and spirit Lynch away. Meanwhile, US Marines had "staged a decoy attack" in Nasiriyah to divert Iraqi forces from the hospital.¹⁴ *The New York Times* also quoted anonymous sources—a "Central Command official" and an "Army official"—in its April 2 account. Among other things, these sources told the *Times* that Lynch "had several gunshot wounds," though no details of how or when she had incurred them were offered. They also noted that the rescue had been videotaped, and that the "tape may be shown later" in the day.¹⁵

¹⁴ Vernon Loeb and Dana Priest, "Missing soldier rescued; US forces remove POW from hospital," *The Washington Post*, April 2, 2003, p. A1.

¹⁵ John Broder, "A Nation at War: Prisoners of war; commandos rescue soldier; she was held since ambush," *The New York Times*, April 2, 2003, p. A1. During a broadcast that same day, CNN correspondent Tom Mintier also mentioned that "there were reportedly pictures of this raid from an Army combat team that had cameras out there." [Transcript, CNN Live Event/Special, April 2, 2003.]

At CENTCOM. The decision to film the rescue was not in itself unusual: the military deployed “combat camera personnel,” explains Lieutenant Colonel John Robinson, chief of plans in CENTCOM’s public affairs division, to “roam the battlefield” and record military operations.¹⁶ Their “video products” had become a regular adjunct to CENTCOM’s daily sessions with some 700 reporters at its base in Qatar. In fact, Robinson observes, “much of the briefing of this war was driven by the visuals.” Public affairs officials routinely asked combat cameramen to “gather us footage” from particular operations to use in their briefings. Due to the vicissitudes of combat, they did not always get what they sought and settled instead for what videos were available, Robinson notes, “and that’s often what drove the brief.”

In the case of Jessica Lynch, Robinson and his colleagues knew some days in advance that a rescue operation would be attempted, and sought to capture the event on videotape. “There was a great desire,” he explains, “to show everyone that this had been conducted.” At that point in the war, Robinson points out, “there was all this news out there that our logistics lines were stretched too thin, that our troops were not properly equipped.” Moreover, he notes, “everyone was kind of down and out because of what had happened to Jessica Lynch’s unit,” and rattled by the graphic footage aired on Al Jazeera. “It was very difficult for our troops,” Robinson observes, “as well as for those of us in headquarters to keep spirits up when things like this happened. So we thought, all right, we’re going to rescue this lady, and we’re going to show everyone that all is well. ... So we put out the request that we do get this video.” He adds: “We wanted to tell a good story—there’s no doubt about it. But that said, we also wanted to tell an accurate story. And if the mission had failed and people had been lost, we would have had to tell that story. We were just hoping that’s not the story that we [would have] to tell.”

As it turned out, the story was a good one—PFC Lynch had been brought to safety without any injury or loss of lives. But CENTCOM did not lead with it when it held its regular 7:00 a.m. press briefing on April 2, hours after the first brief announcement of the rescue. In fact, there was no mention at all of Lynch in the opening statements made by Brig. General Brooks, who screened video clips of recent “precision attacks against regime targets,” and described those operations. It was only when Brooks threw open the session for questions that the subject of Lynch came up, broached by CNN correspondent Tom Mintier—the first reporter Brooks called on—who asked to see the video of the rescue.¹⁷ In response, Brooks provided more details of the rescue mission, which had taken place at Saddam Hospital in Nasiriyah. “We were successful in that operation last night,” said Brooks, “and did retrieve PFC Jessica Lynch, bringing her away from

¹⁶ Author’s interview with Lt. Col. John Robinson, March 9, 2004. All further quotes from Robinson, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

¹⁷ Michael Getler, ombudsman for *The Washington Post*, later recalled hearing that CNN had been “primed” to inquire about the rescue video at the press briefing. This was confirmed by a senior military official, who says that a member of the White House political staff working at CENTCOM’s wartime headquarters had asked Mintier to bring up the rescue during the question and answer session. “To me,” the official adds, “the whole thing looked contrived.” The military official would not agree to speak on the record; Mintier himself could not be reached for comment.

that location of danger, clearing the building of some of the military activity that was in there. There was not a firefight inside of the building, I will tell you, but there were firefights outside of the building getting in and getting out." Inside the building, he said, the Special Forces team found ammunition and other evidence that the hospital "was being used as a military command post" by the Iraqi regime.

Brooks characterized the rescue as "a classical joint operation" —involving Army Rangers, Air Force pilots, Marines, and Navy SEALs—"done by some of our nation's finest warriors, who are dedicated to never leaving a comrade behind." Then he screened a soundless videotape—taken under night-vision conditions, which gave it an eerie, greenish tinge—showing soldiers carrying Lynch, bundled onto a stretcher, to the waiting Black Hawk helicopter; the brief footage ended with a still shot of Lynch inside the helicopter, looking pained and dazed, with a folded American flag lying on her chest. "PFC Jessica Lynch," said Brooks. "At this point she is safe. She's been retrieved, and some brave souls put their lives on the line to make this happen, loyal to a creed that they know they will never leave a fallen comrade and never embarrass their country."

In response to further questioning, Brooks told the assembled reporters that "regime forces" had occupied the hospital, but "[t]hey'd apparently moved most of them out before we actually arrived, although, as I mentioned, there were buildings outside of the Saddam Hospital where ... the assault force received fire during the night." Again in reply to a reporter's query, Brooks confirmed disturbing news, which CENTCOM had announced earlier that morning: in addition to Lynch, the rescue team, led by "someone that was taken into custody" at the hospital, had discovered the "remains" of eleven as-yet unidentified people, two of them in a morgue and the others outside in a shallow grave.¹⁸ Brooks declined, however, to provide details on Lynch's condition, saying only that she was alive and "receiving appropriate medical attention and care ... and for her privacy, I won't go further into that."

But while the military remained officially tight-lipped about Lynch's condition, the press, using information credited to unnamed sources, was providing graphic details of her heroic conduct during the ambush and the severe wounds she suffered as a consequence.

The Washington Post Reports

On Thursday, April 3, *The Washington Post* ran a front-page article on Lynch with the arresting headline, "'She was fighting to the death,'" a quote from an anonymous source identified only as a "US official." PFC Lynch, the *Post* story began, had "fought fiercely and shot several enemy soldiers after Iraqi forces ambushed the Army's 507th Ordnance Maintenance Company, firing her weapon until she ran out of ammunition, US officials said yesterday." She had "continued firing at the Iraqis even after she sustained multiple gunshot wounds and watched

¹⁸ Eventually, nine of the eleven bodies were identified as members of the 507th Maintenance Company.

several other soldiers in her unit die around her in fighting March 23, one official said. ... 'She was fighting to the death,' the official said. 'She did not want to be taken alive.'" In addition to being shot, the *Post* reported, Lynch had been "stabbed when Iraqi forces closed in on her position." Her condition was reported to be "stable," but she was suffering from "broken arms and a broken leg in addition to the gunshot and stab wounds, sources said."

The article, written by Vernon Loeb and Susan Schmidt, with contributions from Alan Sipress and Dana Priest—all of them, except for Sipress, based in Washington, DC—did include a caveat in the fifth paragraph: "Several officials cautioned that the precise sequence of events is still being determined, and that further information will emerge as Lynch is debriefed. Reports thus far are based on battlefield intelligence, they said, which comes from monitored communications and from Iraqi sources in Nasiriyah whose reliability has yet to be assessed. Pentagon officials said they had heard 'rumors' of Lynch's heroics, but had no confirmation." Official Pentagon spokespeople were offering few details on Lynch's experiences or her condition. Victoria Clarke, assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, would only say, the *Post* reported, that she was "in good spirits and being treated for injuries."

Sources. The Pentagon's demurrals notwithstanding, the *Post* reporters felt they had good reason to believe their story was an accurate reflection of what was understood to have happened at the time of the ambush. The three Washington-based reporters, according to Dana Priest, had used different sources to put together the story on Lynch's capture. Priest's information came from sources she had cultivated during her six-year stint as the *Post's* Pentagon reporter—she had since moved on to cover the CIA—and, she says, "I think they talked to me because we trust each other."¹⁹ Although she was no longer on the defense beat, Priest had been asked to "help out" on the Jessica Lynch story, which was typically done, she says, "when something like this happens, where you have this focused event that you know is going to be interesting, and you also know it's going to be really hard to get at. ... We were trying to get every little detail that we could because we knew ... that would make the difference between what we wrote and what anybody else wrote." The *Post* reporters working on the story, she adds, were sharing "not necessarily our sources, but our tips and our leads."

Priest's sources—there were two of them—were "obscure people," who were "not involved with the day-to-day Pentagon press machine." Both had access to "raw intelligence reporting from the field. ... And both of these people had seen reports that quoted Iraqis talking to each other, ... saying that there was a woman and she was fighting [during the ambush]." But, she observes, "people talking to us about this is very sensitive, and they [were] requesting that we cover their tracks in certain ways that it still is honest but not revealing." In this case, the article provided deep cover, identifying its sources only as "US officials," which, Priest acknowledges, "doesn't say anything except that the person has a government position."

¹⁹ Author's interview with Dana Priest, March 6, 2004. All further quotes from Priest, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

Vernon Loeb, who succeeded Priest as the *Post's* defense correspondent, also heard about the information contained in raw intelligence reports from Iraq. These reports, he later explained on National Public Radio's "Fresh Air" program, were based on "intelligence from the battlefield that had been gathered for the previous, say, week to ten days while [Lynch] was being held prisoner. So they were surfacing just as she was surfacing. ... " Some of these were "signal intercepts of Iraqis talking about ... a blond American firing back" during the ambush of the 507th unit, "and I guess those reports quickly became interpreted by some intelligence analysts to be Jessica Lynch firing back."

Loeb's sources came from the "intelligence community," not the Pentagon, which he was covering at the time. "In fact," he noted, "I could never get anybody from the Pentagon to talk about those reports at all." But his information came from "some really good intelligence sources here in Washington," said Loeb, who had previously reported on the CIA for the *Post*. "... We basically told our readers that day what the US intelligence community was telling senior members of the US government."²⁰

While Priest could not be sure what other reporters were hearing about Jessica Lynch, she sensed that her sources, at least, had not talked to anyone else. "I was pretty certain," she recalls, "that we had a set of details that probably weren't widely known." The fact that the Pentagon would not confirm the story of Lynch's capture did not seriously concern her because "at that point," Priest says, "I think we were probably even ahead of some of the public affairs people."

This was, apparently, the case. Back in Qatar, public affairs officials for CENTCOM were, according to Lt. Col. John Robinson, basically in the dark as far as the details of Lynch's capture, or even her physical condition, were concerned. After her rescue, she had been flown to Kuwait and, the next day, to an Army hospital in Germany, thereby transferring her to "a different theater" altogether. Public affairs officials at CENTCOM had moved on to other developments on the battlefields of Iraq, referring queries on Jessica Lynch to their counterparts at the Department of Defense in Washington. When the *Post* story appeared in the press, Robinson maintains, he and his colleagues had no reason to disbelieve it, particularly since, he points out, "we didn't really know how her injuries had come about." He adds: "The perception in Qatar was that there were people out there ... that may have information that was more detailed than even what we had at CENTCOM headquarters, because perhaps they had spoken to people from this secret organization [i.e., the Special Forces] that conducted this rescue. ... So as we saw and heard these things, we thought, 'Wow, is that true? I didn't know that.'"

That was pretty much the state of affairs in the public affairs division of the Pentagon as well, though there was perhaps more skepticism about the *Post* story. "There was nothing but unnamed sources in there," observes Bryan Whitman, deputy assistant secretary of defense for

²⁰ Transcript, "Fresh Air," National Public Radio, December 15, 2003.

public affairs. "... I don't know where [their] information came from, and I've learned over the years that initial reports are often quite wrong."²¹ The public affairs division in Washington held to a wait-and-see approach on Lynch's story and counseled reporters to do the same. "We were still gathering facts and trying to ascertain what the ground truth was," Whitman maintains, "and quite frankly we cautioned everybody to be careful until we know what the details are."

Spreading the Word

The details would be a while in coming, however, and, in the meantime, the *Post's* dramatic story on Lynch's capture spread rapidly, carried by newspapers across the country and on all major TV news programs. Some, like *The Boston Globe*, cited the "unidentified officials" who had been the sources of the story in the *Post*; others, like Katie Couric of NBC's "Today" show, simply named the *Post* itself as the source. "According to *The Washington Post* this morning," said Couric, "[Lynch] fought fiercely, even running out of ammunition before she was captured by Iraqi troops."²² Vernon Loeb himself appeared on television on April 3, first on CNBC and then more briefly on NBC's "Dateline" program, to tell the story of the capture. "[I]t's still sort of emerging as we speak," he said on CNBC, "but the initial accounts that came back here to Washington, that were briefed to the very highest levels of our government, come from Iraqi informants on the ground who either witnessed the battle or heard stories of the battle. ... The Iraqis are the ones who basically told American intelligence that Jessica Lynch fought until she ran out of ammunition and ... it was the Iraqis themselves who were basically stunned at her fierce resistance on the battlefield."²³

The story of Lynch's stand against her attackers impressed Americans at least as much as the Iraqi informants Loeb cited. She was characterized as a "combat tiger" in the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* and a "Rambo" fighter in the New York *Daily News*.²⁴ Across the ocean, *The Times* of London declared that "Private Lynch has won a place in history as a gritty, all-American hero, to rival the likes of Bonnie and Clyde."²⁵ Members of the medical crew that transported Lynch to Germany spoke admiringly of her spunk. She was "just a little thing," said one. "She must be tough as

²¹ Author's interview with Bryan Whitman, April 1, 2004. All further quotes from Whitman, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

²² Transcript, "Today," NBC News, April 3, 2003. The lack of "qualifier," wrote one observer, gave the account of Lynch's capture "the authority of *The Washington Post*, not of murky anonymous sources with an undefined but remote connection to the events in question." [Peter Sussman, "Rescuing Private Lynch—and rescuing journalism," *Quill Magazine*, November 2003, p. 24.]

²³ Transcript, "The News with Brian Williams," CNBC News, April 3, 2003.

²⁴ The article in the *Daily News* added its own imaginative details to the story of Lynch's capture. "Lynch opened fire on the Iraqi assailants," the paper reported, "picking them off one by one until she ran out of ammunition, according to today's *Washington Post*." [Becker, *Daily News* (New York), April 3, 2003.]

²⁵ Elaine Monaghan, "Jessica enters the realms of Bonnie and Clyde," *The Times* (London), April 4, 2003, p. 10. Monaghan appeared somewhat skeptical of the report in the *Post*, however. "Quite where [Lynch] found the strength to shoot back," Monaghan wrote, "while her comrades lay dead or dying around her and she bled, apparently, from multiple bullet wounds, remains a mystery."

nails.”²⁶ Bobby Knight, the famously combustible college basketball coach, wished out loud to have “five of her” on his team and called her “the greatest heroine of all time.”²⁷

Admiration for Lynch’s courage grew as some in the media began raising the possibility that she had been tortured during her captivity. One early account of this, on April 2, came from NBC correspondent Kerry Sanders, who was “embedded” with a Marine battalion in Iraq. Sanders described his startling encounter the previous day with an Iraqi citizen who “came up to us, who spoke perfect English and said, ‘There’s an American soldier being held. She’s being tortured. She’s at the hospital. Make sure the authorities know.’”²⁸ Sanders’ report was picked up by the *Daily News*, which consulted Amy Waters Yarsinke, an “expert on POW treatment,” on the question of torture. “Her broken bones are a sure sign of torture,” Yarsinke declared, pointing out that in “the first gulf action, they tried breaking their [captured US airmen’s] legs with steel bars.”²⁹

A somewhat less dire description of Lynch’s ordeal emerged a couple of days later, on April 4, when three newspapers—*The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *The Miami Herald*—ran stories about an Iraqi lawyer, initially identified only as “Mohammed,” who had apparently tipped off the Marines as to Lynch’s whereabouts. Mohammed told reporters that during a visit to Saddam Hospital, where his wife worked as a nurse, he had learned from a doctor friend of his that an American soldier was being held there. He described seeing a young woman lying in bed, in bandages, and an Iraqi man dressed in black—the uniform of Iraqi paramilitaries known as the “Fedayeen”—standing over her. “Mohammed watched,” according to *The Washington Post’s* account, “as the man slapped the American woman with his open palm, then again with the back of his hand”—a chilling image that supported the assertion that Lynch, if not tortured, had at least been brutalized while a captive. “My heart is cut,” Mohammed said. “I decided to go to the Americans and tell them about this story.”³⁰ First, though, he slipped into Lynch’s hospital room to reassure her. “I say, ‘Don’t worry,’” he recalled. “She smiled.”³¹ Mohammed then walked six miles in search of American troops and told them what he had witnessed. He was sent back to the hospital a number of times to gather information on its layout and do a head-count on the Fedayeen who were using it as a base—he counted 41, including four posted outside Lynch’s door. The Marines, the *Post* noted, had “vouched for” Mohammed’s story of his encounter with them.

Reporters for the three newspapers—plus one from *US News & World Report*, which ran a story on Mohammed in its April 14, 2003 edition—had learned of Mohammed’s existence while at the main headquarters of the Marines in Iraq, where they were embedded during the war, says

²⁶ As quoted on “The News with Brian Williams,” CNBC News, April 3, 2003.

²⁷ Rick Freeman, “Knight impressed with rescued POW; less so with team,” Associated Press, April 3, 2003.

²⁸ Transcript, “Nightly News,” NBC News, April 2, 2003.

²⁹ Becker, *Daily News* (New York), April 3, 2003. The article also reported that Marines had found “at least one shredded woman’s uniform spattered with blood and the name patch torn off” in another hospital near Nasiriyah.

³⁰ Peter Baker, “Iraqi man risked all to help free American soldier,” *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2003, p. A1.

³¹ Juan Tamayo, “POW abuse prompted tip by Iraqi, and rescue,” *The Miami Herald*, April 4, 2003, p. 1.

Peter Baker, who wrote the *Post's* story. Because Mohammed and his family were considered at risk of retaliation for helping an American, they had been taken to the Marines' headquarters en route to a refugee center and, eventually, the US, where they were granted asylum. "We heard from one of the officers we knew there that an Iraqi, who had helped the Marines figure out the hospital layout and so forth, was being brought through the camp we were at," Baker recalls. "We asked to speak with him, and they asked him if he would be willing. He was, and we interviewed him for our stories."³²

Mohammed's account of his role in Lynch's rescue was picked up and widely told in the press; he became something of a media celebrity in his own right, and won the gratitude of Lynch's father, who called him "an angel," and vowed that if he ever met Mohammed, "he would get a world of hugs out of that heroic deal."³³ His tale became part of the narrative of Lynch's wartime ordeal that began taking shape in the days immediately following her removal from Saddam Hospital. One part of that narrative concerned her heroism during the ambush and the ordeal of her captivity; the other focused on the rescue effort.

"Saving Private Lynch." Possibly the most common word used in the media to describe the rescue of PFC Lynch was "daring," though some resorted to "spectacular" and even "breathtaking." More than one story was headlined "Saving Private Lynch"—a reference to "Saving Private Ryan," a popular movie about World War II heroism. Gen. Brooks's somewhat ambiguous words about firefights were translated into more vivid language in some accounts. The "commando raid," wrote the *Los Angeles Times*, was "carried out ... in a blaze of gunfire" as soldiers "shot their way into the [hospital] building under heavy fire. ... " US Special Forces, said one CBS reporter, "ran through a hail of gunfire not once, but twice."³⁴

Over the next few days, the initial story of the rescue was fleshed out a little, as the Pentagon released more video clips and offered a fuller account of part of the rescue effort. On April 5, during a press briefing, Major General Victor Renuart, CENTCOM's director of operations, did not elaborate further on the kind or degree of resistance Special Forces encountered within the hospital compound, but he did provide poignant details of the moment when the rescue team arrived at Lynch's bedside. Apparently frightened by the noise of the Special Forces team as it entered the hospital, Renuart said, Lynch had pulled a sheet over her head and, though she lowered it when her name was called, did not initially respond. But when a soldier said, as Renuart reported it, "Jessica Lynch, we're the United States soldiers, and we're here to protect you and take you home," she replied, "I'm an American soldier, too." Once on board the helicopter, Renuart recounted, Lynch "grabbed the [Army] Ranger doctor's hand, held onto it for the entire

³² Baker's comments were conveyed through e-mail, March 25 and 26, 2004.

³³ Allison Barker, "Rescued POW's father says Iraqi who reportedly led US troops to her deserves a world of hugs," Associated Press, April 4, 2003.

³⁴ Tracy Wilkinson and Greg Miller, "War with Iraq/Midnight Rescue; Saving Private Lynch," *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 2003, p. A1; transcript, "CBS Evening News," CBS News, April 2, 2003.

time and said, 'Please don't let anybody leave me.' It was clear she knew where she was and she didn't want to be left anywhere in the hands of the enemy."

More than one media commentator noted the storybook—or, more frequently, the "Hollywood"—nature of Lynch's rescue. "The story of her rescue," said CNBC anchor Brian Williams, "is right out of a major motion picture."³⁵ "The story of Private First Class Jessica Lynch is worthy of anything Hollywood could dream up," declared CNN's Heidi Collins. "A young girl from the country, small-town West Virginia, captured in a faraway combat zone, rescued by commandos and now recovering in safety at a military hospital in Germany."³⁶ And the happy ending for Lynch—though not for the eleven in her unit who were killed in the ambush—seemed to buoy the nation's spirits after more than a week of troubling reports from the battlefield. The "news of the rescue of PFC Jessica Lynch—the teenager from Palestine, W.Va., who looks more as if she should be baby-sitting the neighborhood kids than battling the world's bully—offers a moment to give thanks and feel joy amid days that are otherwise far too grim," wrote one editorialist.³⁷ The rescue, said Lesley Stahl of CBS, "lifted the nation's mood" and, as several other commentators also noted, that of the combat forces in Iraq, who began rapidly advancing on Baghdad; it "almost seemed to fuel the surge by US-led forces right to Baghdad's doorstep," said Dan Rather.³⁸

Some regarded the hoopla surrounding Lynch with a more jaundiced eye. "Like a beacon shining through the much-discussed 'fog of war,'" wrote one reporter, "the daring rescue of 19-year-old PFC Jessica Lynch has instantly become, in Hollywood terms, the first 'feel-good' story of the war. ... In the media free-for-all that has ensued, virtually anyone who has known or come into contact with Lynch is in demand."³⁹ And, indeed, Lynch family and friends seemed to blanket both network and cable TV shows in the days immediately following the rescue. Lynch's parents and brother and sister, her school friends, her kindergarten teacher, even her soccer coach were interviewed, sometimes on multiple programs in the same day. Stories were told of Lynch's enlisting in the Army to finance her college education so that she could fulfill her ambition to become a kindergarten teacher; and a brief video was aired of her interview with a Dallas TV station shortly before she shipped out to Iraq from Fort Bliss in Texas. "I love my job," Lynch said in the video, "so I love being here and I like my unit. I wouldn't change a thing."⁴⁰

But at the same time that Lynch was being celebrated in print and on air, and inundated with book and TV-movie deals, some doubts were being raised in the press. As journalists foraged

³⁵ Transcript, "The News with Brian Williams," CNBC News, April 2, 2003.

³⁶ Transcript, "CNN Newsnight with Aaron Brown," CNN News, April 2, 2003.

³⁷ "Cause for happiness amid horror," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 3, 2003, p. 18A.

³⁸ Transcript, "48 Hours: Target Baghdad," CBS News, April 2, 2003.

³⁹ Brian Lowry, "War with Iraq: On TV jumping on the one happy ending so far," *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 2003, p. A15.

⁴⁰ As quoted on "The Early Show," CBS News, April 3, 2003.

for more information, the story of what had actually happened to Lynch gradually became more confused.

Contradictions

The first stirrings of doubt came early, on April 3, when a number of newspapers and TV shows began reporting that Lynch’s father, Greg, had heard from doctors that his daughter’s injuries were not from gunshot or a stabbing. “But as for some of the stories that she suffered from stab wounds as well as gunshot wounds,” said one Fox News correspondent, “her father said those are simply not true.”⁴¹ *The Washington Post* also reported Greg Lynch’s comments in a brief article on April 4, which was largely devoted to a phone conversation Lynch had had with her parents from her hospital bed in Germany. “We have heard and seen reports that she had multiple gunshot wounds and a knife stabbing,” Greg Lynch said. “The doctor has not seen any of this. There’s no entry wounds whatsoever.” In the following paragraph, however, the *Post* reiterated its original account of Lynch’s capture, stating that she had “fought fiercely and shot several enemy soldiers, ... firing her weapon until she ran out of ammunition, US officials said this week. Family and friends who know her here said that such accounts matched their memories of the scrappy, petite ‘country girl.’”⁴² But some expressed skepticism over the *Post*’s account. “A ‘senior defense official,’ reported the *Daily News* on April 4, “took a shot at the story [of Lynch’s capture]. ‘Somebody in the Army is trying to turn her into Audie Murphy,’ he said”—a reference to the most-decorated hero of World War II.⁴³

That same day, April 4, Col. David Rubenstein, commander of the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, where Lynch was hospitalized, held a press briefing, which provided the most detailed account of Lynch’s injuries to date. Doctors had examined Lynch, said Rubenstein, and found that she had suffered multiple fractures—in both legs, her right foot and ankle, her right arm, and her spine—as well as a laceration to the head. But, Rubenstein told reporters, the “most recent evaluations by our staff do not suggest that any of her wounds were caused by either gunshot or stabbing injuries.”⁴⁴ He refused to comment, however, on how or when she had sustained her injuries.

Rubenstein’s remarks were widely quoted in the press, though they were not generally given front-page coverage. Many of the articles on the press conference in Landstuhl were brief, drawn from wire service reports and often introduced by other details of Lynch’s recovery, as, for

⁴¹ Transcript, “Special Report with Brit Hume,” Fox News, April 3, 2003.

⁴² Peter Whoriskey, “W.Va. soldier, parents revel in small talk over the phone,” *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2003, p. A33.

⁴³ Jose Martinez with Thomas DeFrank, “Hero doesn’t know it; Jessica asks if rescue made the hometown paper,” *Daily News* (New York), April 4, 2003, p. 9.

⁴⁴ Jayson Blair with Mark Landler, “A Nation at War: The Rescue; gifts and offers for book deals arrive at rescued private’s house as she has surgery,” *The New York Times*, April 4, 2003, p. B6.

instance, in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, which led off its April 5 report on Rubenstein's press briefing with the line, "When PFC Jessica Lynch can eat solid food again, here are what she longs for: turkey, with applesauce and steamed carrots." The *Daily News's* April 5 story on the briefing reported on Lynch's injuries and on Rubenstein's descriptions of her prognosis ("excellent") and emotional state ("extremely good"), but did not include his remarks about gunshot and stab wounds. "Officials have refused to say why so many of Lynch's bones were broken," the paper noted, "but it's likely she was tortured."

Col. Rubenstein's efforts notwithstanding, a definitive account of Lynch's injuries proved elusive. On April 4—the same day that Rubenstein briefed the press—the Associated Press (AP) wrote that a cousin of the Lynch family, Dan Little, had offered contradictory information on her injuries. The wounds on Lynch's left leg and right arm, the family had been told in a conversation with doctors who were treating her, were "consistent with low-velocity, small-caliber rounds," according to Little, and "evidence of shrapnel was discovered next to bones. ..."⁴⁵

It was this information that *The Washington Post* used to preface its brief coverage of Rubenstein's press conference. In an April 5 article, whose lead subject was the identification of the bodies retrieved from Saddam Hospital when Lynch was rescued, the *Post* made note of the AP's report the previous day that Lynch "did suffer gunshot wounds." The *Post* continued: "Reports in the media, from *The Washington Post* and elsewhere, that Lynch suffered two entry and exit wounds were contradicted by the commander of the hospital, Col. David Rubenstein, who had said she was not shot or stabbed." The article then repeated Dan Little's summary of the family's conversation with doctors.⁴⁶ Two days later, on April 7, the *Post* printed an AP article on Lynch's reunion with her family at her hospital in Germany, which included an excerpt from "a statement" by hospital officials: "The medical staff says, after more closely examining those wounds, there is a possibility they were caused by a low velocity, small caliber weapon."⁴⁷

Other papers, faced with seemingly opposing statements emanating from the same hospital in Germany, simply chose to pair the accounts offered by Rubenstein and Dan Little in their stories on Lynch. "The discrepancy," noted *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis) in an April 5 article drawn from AP reports, "could not be resolved."

After a flurry of reports on her recent surgeries, her reunion with her family, and the nature of her wounds, coverage of Jessica Lynch dwindled to a trickle for several days. But in mid-April, her name began to appear again in the press, this time in connection with a series of articles that challenged the veracity of the stories that were being told of her capture and rescue.

⁴⁵ Allison Barker, "Family: doctors say Army POW suffered gunshot wounds," Associated Press, April 4, 2003.

⁴⁶ Daniel LeDuc, "Pentagon identified 8 soldiers killed in ambush," *The Washington Post*, April 5, 2003, p. A27. The *Post* ran a slightly longer piece on the same subjects the next day, with the headline: "Pentagon identifies 8 soldiers killed in ambush; Pfc Jessica Lynch, rescued from Iraqi captivity, did suffer gunshot wounds, relatives say."

⁴⁷ Colleen Barry, Associated Press, "PFC Lynch gets visit from family; freed POW listed in stable condition," *The Washington Post*, April 7, 2003, p. A19.

Second Thoughts

The first challenge to what might be called the Jessica Lynch narrative came from *The Washington Post* itself. On April 15, an article by Keith Richburg, reporting from Nasiriyah, painted a starkly different picture from what had been depicted in the media. In what would become something of a leitmotif in coverage of Lynch, it, too, invoked the aura of "Hollywood" in Lynch's rescue and capture, only this time with ironic intent. "Accounts of the US military's dramatic rescue of Pfc Jessica Lynch from Saddam Hospital here two weeks ago read like the stuff of a Hollywood script," it began. "For Iraqi doctors working in the hospital that night, it was exactly that—Hollywood dazzle, with little need for real action." The rescue team "made a big show," asserted one of the Iraqi physicians who had treated Lynch. "It was just a drama. A big, dramatic show." The Fedayeen and other Iraqi fighters who had used the hospital as a command post had, it turned out, already left the premises by the time the Special Forces arrived. The US troops, therefore, met with no resistance when they forcibly entered the hospital, needlessly breaking down "several doors ... before locating Lynch." The doctors also disputed the account of Lynch's wounds as reported in the *Post* on April 3. Her injuries were the result of "a road traffic accident," said one. "... There were no bullets or shrapnel or anything like that." Perhaps stung by allegations of torture or mistreatment while Lynch was in the hospital, one doctor noted that she had been "given special care, more than the Iraqi patients."⁴⁸

Richburg's piece was followed in quick succession by three others—two by overseas newspapers, *The Times* of London and *The Daily Telegraph* (also London), and one by *The New York Times*—which covered essentially the same ground.⁴⁹ Reported in each case from Nasiriyah, they also featured many of the same Iraqi physicians, one of whom—Dr. Harith Al-Houssona—would be much-quoted in the weeks to come. In all three pieces, hospital doctors complained about the unnecessarily rough treatment they had received at the hands of the Special Forces team, which had handcuffed some of them, as well as a couple of patients. US soldiers were depicted as "rampag[ing] through the hospital wards," in search of the since-departed Fedayeen. "It was just like a Hollywood movie," said Houssona, except that "there was louder shouting and scarier bombs." Houssona and other members of the hospital staff took pains to describe the care and consideration provided to Lynch; she was given the hospital's only bed for patients with bedsores, and was sung to at night by a nurse, who tried to soothe her distraught patient. They also added an intriguing new detail to the saga of Lynch's captivity: they had actually tried to hand Lynch

⁴⁸ Keith Richburg, "Iraqis say Lynch raid faced no resistance," *The Washington Post*, April 15, 2003, p. A17.

⁴⁹ The three articles were: "So who really did save Private Jessica," by Richard Lloyd Parry, *The Times* (London), April 16, 2003, p. 11; "Doctor who risked life to care for Pte. Jessica," by Sandra Laville, *The Daily Telegraph* (London), April 16, 2003, p. 9; and "Aftereffects: A Hospital Ward; rescued soldier's Iraqi doctors doubled as her guardians," by Alan Feuer, *The New York Times*, April 21, 2003, p. A12.

over to US forces, doctors said, but when the driver of her ambulance came under fire from American troops as he approached, he turned back.⁵⁰

Although they appeared to undermine the accepted narrative of Lynch's ordeal and rescue, these articles, none of them given a prominent place in their papers, aroused little notice. But at *The Washington Post*, source of one of the most influential stories in the Lynch narrative, there were rumblings of concern from one quarter as questions about the nature of her injuries began to crop up in the press.

The Ombudsman Speaks Out. As Michael Getler, the *Post's* ombudsman, recalls, even before questions arose, the April 3 account of Lynch's capture "stood out" troublingly from the rest of the paper's coverage of the war. It "smelled from the start," he maintains, and his immediate "visceral reaction" to it was that it was "sort of breathless" and "excessive" in tone.⁵¹ "It struck me as a story that should have been much more cautiously told and that it had a strong propaganda tone to it," he says. "Of course, it happened at a very low point in the war."

Whatever reservations Getler had about the *Post's* April 3 story were reinforced after Col. Rubenstein discussed Lynch's injuries with the press on April 4. Rubenstein's statement that there was no evidence of gunshot or stab wounds "should have been a big red flag," Getler maintains, but the *Post* "did not do much with that comment at all," relegating it to the back pages of the paper. For Getler and for many readers, however, Rubenstein's report set off alarm bells of suspicion. "I had a ton of reader reaction," he recalls. That response, plus his own concerns, "cemented the fact that I was going to write about it."

Getler's column on the issue—entitled "Reporting Private Lynch"—appeared in the April 20, 2003 edition of the *Post*.⁵² It began with a description of the opening paragraphs of the April 3 piece by Vernon Loeb and Susan Schmidt—the first few detailing Lynch's fierce resistance to her attackers, followed by one cautioning readers that the reliability of the intelligence reports had yet to be assessed. "Hours after the *Post* account appeared," Getler wrote, both Col. Rubenstein and Greg Lynch were quoted in the press saying that there were no signs on Lynch of wounds from gunshot or stabbings. "At that point, several readers wrote to complain," Getler reported, "saying they did not doubt 'the gravity of Lynch's situation,' as one put it, but that the *Post*, 'using unnamed sources,' was 'creating a sensationalist story riddled with inaccuracies.' 'I smell an

⁵⁰ Like so much of the Jessica Lynch story, there were variants to this tale. In *The New York Times's* version, no shots were fired at the driver; later, other more radically different versions of this event would appear in the press. In addition, the *Times* article had Dr. Houssona giving a different account of Lynch's injuries: she came to Saddam Hospital, he said, suffering from "a fractured leg, a gunshot wound and a pulmonary edema."

⁵¹ Author's interview with Michael Getler, March 15, 2004. All further quotes from Getler, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

⁵² Although Getler's first public mention of the *Post's* Jessica Lynch story came on April 20, he had already raised his concerns about the piece internally, in his April 4 weekly memo to the paper's staff. "I was on this immediately," he says. [E-mail correspondence from Getler, May 18, 2004.]

agenda,’ said one reader, suspecting wartime ‘propaganda.’ Another was suspicious of the ‘Hollywood-like telling of the story.’”

Getler did make note of the AP report, printed in the *Post* on April 7, in which the statement by the “medical staff” of the Army hospital in Germany raised the possibility of gunshot wounds from a low-caliber weapon; but, he pointed out, there was “no name associated with the statement.” In fact, Getler observed, there had been “no statement by an authoritative US or military official since Rubenstein’s” on the subject of Lynch’s injuries—only the comments of Iraqi doctors that their examination of Lynch had turned up “no bullets or shrapnel. . . .”

Schmidt and Loeb were “experienced reporters,” Getler continued, “and there is no reason to doubt they were told what they reported, and by a source in whom they had confidence.” Still, the “*Post* exclusive about [Lynch’s] actions and ordeal was a powerful additional element at the time. People remember that story. But what really happened is still not clear.” Getler acknowledged that the Lynch “episode is just a footnote” to the wider Iraqi conflict. “But,” he concluded, “let’s hope an authoritative public account emerges, at least for journalistic, if not historical, reasons.”

But at the *Post*, at least, reporters had moved on to other stories—although, says Dana Priest, Susan Schmidt “kept at the issue of [Lynch’s] medical condition, and got so many conflicting accounts over and over again.” Priest recalls “editors [at the *Post*] coming by and saying, ‘We should go back to this story,’” but the press of events in Iraq—where, in short order, Baghdad had fallen and Saddam Hussein had gone into hiding—made it difficult to revisit the issue. “There were other things going on,” she points out. “. . . In the scheme of things, [the Jessica Lynch story] seemed mildly but not hugely important. What was really important was the next day’s story and figuring out where things are going.”

Further Inquiries. Still, reporters elsewhere were giving the Jessica Lynch narrative increasingly closer scrutiny. The lengthiest treatment to date appeared in the *Toronto Star* on May 4; and, unlike its predecessors, it was prominently featured on the paper’s front page. It provided a brief recap of the “flawless midnight rescue” and then threw in the by-now obligatory Hollywood reference: “All Hollywood could ever hope to have in a movie was there in this extraordinary feat of rescue—except, perhaps, the truth.” Dr. Houssona made his by-now obligatory appearance, along with other doctors, who emphasized once again that the hospital had been emptied of Iraqi fighters hours before the Special Forces team arrived.⁵³ In fact, the *Toronto Star* reported, Special Forces troops, accompanied by an interpreter, had approached an Iraqi outside his home to ask if any Iraqi fighters were still in the hospital and had been assured there were not. Nevertheless, the *Star* continued, the rescue team had burst in, terrifying the hospital staff, which was huddled in the facility’s X-ray department.

⁵³ The exact number of hours since the Iraqi fighters had departed ranged from six to almost forty-eight, depending on the account.

The *Toronto Star* piece detailed the medical care Iraqi doctors had provided—stitching her wounds, setting her broken bones, giving her blood, performing surgery on her shattered leg—and the efforts made to comfort the frightened soldier and find foods that she would eat. Hospital staff expressed dismay at reports that Lynch had been mistreated while under their care. "This is a lie," said one nurse. "But why ask me? Why don't you ask Jessica what kind of treatment she received?" But, as the *Star* noted, that would be difficult to do. Lynch, who by this time had been transferred to the Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, DC, continued to be off limits to the media. "Until such time as she wants to talk—and that's going to be no time soon, and it may be never at all," said an Army spokesman, "the press is simply going to have to wait."⁵⁴

Some in the press were not content to wait, however, and continued to probe Iraqi sources for information on Jessica Lynch. Three days after the *Toronto Star* piece, ABC's "World News Tonight" aired a brief segment that brought the Iraqi side of the Jessica Lynch story to primetime TV. It included most of the elements of the earlier stories in the press: the charge that troops had used unnecessary force—breaking down doors in the intensive care unit, when, according to ABC-TV reporter David Wright, "they could have just asked where [Lynch] was"; the staff's efforts to care for their anxious patient; and an assessment of her injuries that was at variance with the original story of her capture.⁵⁵ But a much more inflammatory depiction of the events surrounding Lynch's ordeal was waiting in the wings. In mid-May, the BBC aired a program that pushed latent questions about the media's coverage of Lynch into the open and helped precipitate a heated debate that went beyond the particulars of her story to touch on larger issues of the press's independence and its potential vulnerability to manipulation by its sources.

"*War Spin.*" The BBC program, which aired on May 18, 2003, was called "War Spin." As its title indicated, its subject was the broader issue of the control and manipulation of information about the war—chiefly, in the BBC's view, by the Pentagon—but it used the Jessica Lynch story as its jumping-off point. By this time, the details—and the cast of characters—of that story were familiar, but the BBC's treatment of them was more explicit than earlier presentations in pointing a finger of blame at the Pentagon, and far more provocative in tone. A May 15 article in *The Guardian* of London by BBC correspondent John Kampfner, who reported and narrated "War Spin," gave readers a taste of what was to come on the show. Kampfner did not mince words. The rescue of Lynch, he wrote, "will go down as one of the most stunning pieces of news management yet conceived." The TV show struck a similar opening chord. "Jessica Lynch," it began, "an all-American icon of the war. Captured by the Iraqis. Saved for the nation in a daring helicopter rescue. This was a script made for Hollywood. Made by the Pentagon."

⁵⁴ Mitch Potter, "The real 'Saving Pte. Lynch,'" *Toronto Star*, May 4, 2003, p. A1.

⁵⁵ Transcript, "World News Tonight," May 5, 2003. One conservative weblog, or "blog," detected a link between the World News Tonight story and the *Toronto Star* report; the *Star*, noted the "CyberAlert" blog, was the "hometown newspaper" of World News Tonight's Canadian-born anchor, Peter Jennings. [CyberAlert, May 19, 2003. Online at <http://www.mrc.org/cyberalerts/2003/cyb20030519.asp#4>.]

Kampfner followed up this opening salvo with specific examples that, he argued, revealed the Pentagon’s manipulation of the event to enhance its drama and, in the process, the military’s public image: the mysterious pre-dawn summons to the press to announce the rescue; the claims of risk to the Special Forces team (“They were said to have come under fire”); the “race against time” to edit a video to have ready for the next press briefing (and, as the TV program would say, “rushed out for breakfast shows in America just when the news was bad and the talk was of a long hard campaign”). It was a sign of how differently the Lynch story was being seen that, in the *Guardian* piece, the word “daring” as a descriptor of the rescue was now bracketed in ironic quotation marks.

Kampfner’s article—and program—cast new doubt on other elements of the Lynch story, more often through implication than outright refutation. On the topic of the Iraqi lawyer Mohammed, for example, he wrote: “According to the Pentagon, Al-Rehaief [Mohammed’s last name] risked his life to alert the Americans that Lynch was being held. ... Al-Rehaief was granted asylum barely two weeks after arriving in the US. He is now the toast of Washington, with a fat ... book deal.” As he did in the case of Mohammed, Kampfner occasionally attributed to the Pentagon assertions that were in fact made by others—as when he wrote that “the Pentagon claimed that Lynch had stab and bullet wounds, and that she had been slapped about on her hospital bed and interrogated.”

Both the *Guardian* piece and the TV program included interviews with Iraqi doctors, who essentially repeated the story they had already told other journalists, although often in more emphatic language. The ubiquitous Dr. Houssona, for example, was unambiguous in his description of Lynch’s injuries and their cause. An examination of her had revealed broken bones, he said, but there was “no bullet inside her body, no stab wound, no other thing—merely RTA, only road traffic accident.”⁵⁶ Houssona also supplied some of the most controversial lines in the show when, in once again describing US soldiers breaking into the hospital, he implied that they had blanks, not bullets, in their guns: “Like a film of Hollywood, they cry, ‘Go, go, go!’ and shout, ‘Go, go, go!’ with guns and blanks, without bullets. Blanks and the sound of explosions. ... They make a show for the American attack [on] the hospital—action movies like Sylvester Stallone or Jackie Chan, with jumping and shouting. ...”⁵⁷

To Kampfner, the significance of the Jessica Lynch story lay in its revelation of the Pentagon’s media operations, which he depicted as intent on bolstering public support for the war while keeping a firm hand—if not a stranglehold—on the flow of information. Journalists at CENTCOM’s base in Doha, Qatar were “drip-fed information,” he maintained on TV. “... Real information, what there is of it, is usually given away from the podium and away from the camera.” In this view, he had an ally in Simon Wren—whom Kampfner described as “Downing

⁵⁶ Transcript, “War Spin,” BBC, May 18, 2003. In the *Guardian* article, Houssona added: “They want to distort the picture. I don’t know why they think there is some benefit in saying she has a bullet injury.”

⁵⁷ In some newspaper accounts, however, this claim was attributed to another Iraqi physician, Dr. Anmar Uday.

Street's [the residence of the British prime minister] man in Doha" — who called the Lynch incident "hugely overblown" and, Kampfner wrote, "symptomatic of a larger problem. 'The Americans never got out there and explained what was going on in the war,' [Wren] said. 'All they needed to be was open and honest. They were too vague, too scared of engaging with the media.'" US journalists, he added, bore some of the blame: they "didn't put them under pressure," Wren said, "so they were allowed to get away with it."

Given an opportunity to respond to some of the questions raised in "War Spin," the Pentagon maintained its reticence. When Kampfner asked Bryan Whitman, deputy assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, whether the Special Forces team had met with resistance during the rescue, Whitman replied, "I think that I will leave that story to be told in great detail when the time is right." He was equally noncommittal when asked about Lynch's injuries. "Well, I'm not going to get into the specific injuries that she received," Whitman said. "That's up to her and her doctors to discuss at the appropriate time."⁵⁸ The Pentagon, Kampfner reported, also refused his request for an unedited version of the videotape of the rescue "to clear up any discrepancies."

In declining to answer Kampfner's questions, Whitman says, "I wasn't trying to be coy. The message I was trying to get across is that I don't have to speculate about what all the facts are. We will know all the facts, and they will all come forward at the appropriate time." When that appropriate time would come, however, was not clear. The Army had, according to a report in *The Washington Times*, ordered an investigation into the ambush of the 507th Maintenance Company that would, said an Army spokesman, determine what had happened to Lynch and other soldiers during the attack. No date for the completion of the report was given, however.⁵⁹ As for Lynch herself, who was undergoing intensive rehabilitation after multiple surgeries, there were growing questions about how much she would be able to contribute to her own story, due to what Whitman terms "issues of recollection." There were reports in the media that Lynch was suffering from "amnesia," though the extent of it was unclear. Kampfner reported, in "War Spin," that her doctors were saying that "she has no memory of the whole episode and probably never will," but other reports indicated that her memory loss was limited. According to ABC's Peter Jennings, for example, Lynch's doctors "say she is not suffering from amnesia. ... [They] say she simply does not remember details of the ambush that put her in an Iraqi hospital."⁶⁰

As for the videotape of the rescue, the Pentagon, according to Lt. Col. John Robinson, was unable to comply with Kampfner's request. There was no unedited version of the rescue that could be shown. "When we got the [rescue] footage," he explains, "it had already been edited by the Special Operations unit ... based upon whether or not any of their own personnel could be

⁵⁸ Transcript, "War Spin," May 18, 2003.

⁵⁹ Rowan Scarborough, "Army to probe Lynch capture," *The Washington Times*, May 23, 2003.

⁶⁰ Transcript, "World News Tonight," ABC News, May 8, 2003.

identified, because they're a secret unit." In addition, he explains, "we had to take out some of the video that revealed" classified information about the way the Special Forces operated. The editing, Robinson stresses, was not done for self-serving purposes. The Special forces were "not concerned about whether [the press] believed or didn't believe what happened, because they knew what happened. What they were trying to do was protect their own security. ... "

But while a clear accounting of events still lay somewhere in the undefined future, the BBC program had succeeded in grabbing the attention of the media. In the weeks following the broadcast of "War Spin," network and cable television news programs and columnists in the press took a second look at the Jessica Lynch story and saw a different narrative emerging.

Revisiting Jessica Lynch

In some respects, how one viewed "War Spin" depended on how one viewed the war in Iraq. Opponents or skeptics generally accepted the BBC depiction of events and castigated the Pentagon for its blatant manipulation of the news. Among the most outspoken of these was *Los Angeles Times* columnist Robert Scheer who, in a May 20 column about "War Spin," described Lynch's rescue as "a premeditated manufacture." Repeating the charges by Iraqi doctors that soldiers had used blanks during their raid on the hospital, Scheer asserted that the video of the rescue was "artfully edited by the Pentagon and released as proof that a battle to free Lynch had occurred when it had not." To Scheer, and others who shared his opinion, the "fabrication" of the Lynch rescue was of a piece with the Bush administration's "trumped-up claims" about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and ties to the terrorist organization, Al Qaeda. The Lynch "rescue story—a made-for-TV bit of official propaganda—will probably survive as the war's most heroic moment," Scheer wrote, "despite proving as fictitious as the stated rationales for the invasion itself."

On the other end of the spectrum were those like Col. David Hunt, a military analyst for Fox News, who sprang to the defense of the military and dismissed the BBC's critique as an ill-informed anti-war screed. Appearing on "The O'Reilly Factor," Hunt called the BBC's charges "outrageous." He had "talked to the guys who were on the raid," he said. "I talked to a guy who was number one in the door"—which, he pointed out, the BBC and the *Toronto Star* had not⁶¹—and ascertained that appropriate force, and real ammunition, had been used. The Special Forces "did have to assault that building," he maintained. "They use live bullets in training, [never mind] in combat. This is an absolute required assault. They saved this young woman's life." Host Bill O'Reilly questioned the impartiality of those who accused the Pentagon of news manipulation.

⁶¹ However, according to an Associated Press report, spokesmen for "the commando units involved in the rescue declined requests to allow participants to be interviewed." [Scheherezade Faramarzi, "Hospital staff say forceful US rescue operation of American POW wasn't necessary," Associated Press, May 28, 2003.]

"The BBC reported this," he remarked to Hunt, "a Toronto newspaper reported this, ... very anti-American, very anti-war."⁶²

Many commentators took a more middle-of-the-road approach, finding some fault on either side. The BBC, wrote *Time* magazine, "may be guilty of exaggeration itself" in claiming that the Pentagon had staged the rescue. *Time* noted, among other things, that the Pentagon "does not deny that US forces met no resistance inside the hospital, but spokesman Bryan Whitman says, 'This was a facility that was hostile and could have potentially had a lot more resistance than what was encountered.'"⁶³ NBC News sent reporter Jim Avila to Saddam Hospital to look into some of the allegations in the BBC program; he came back with a mixed report. "NBC News," said Avila, "found the story of Private Lynch was not all it was built up to be," though this was not always the Pentagon's doing. The story of the capture, Avila pointed out, had come from *The Washington Post*, which "quoted an unnamed single source. ... " He continued: "No one from the Pentagon ever said on the record that Jessica had fired her weapon or had been shot, but a steady stream of leaks built a dramatic and false impression, an erroneous report often repeated."⁶⁴

Kampfner himself seemed to moderate his own views a little when questioned about the most eyebrow-raising assertions on "War Spin." Asked by CNN anchor Leon Harris whether he believed the rescue "was in any way a staged event and not real," he replied, "No. First things first. Credit where it is due. The Americans had a legitimate right in getting Lynch out of the hospital in Nasiriyah. They had no way of knowing what her fate was, whether she was being well or badly treated." What "we" did take issue with, he continued, "was the way the Americans did it. They went in all guns blazing, helicopters, a great heroic rescue mission." As for the Iraqi doctor's charge that soldiers were using blanks, Kampfner said, "Well, that is his contention," and went on to point out that the Pentagon had declined to clear up such questions by releasing the videotape of the rescue.⁶⁵

Although it continued to keep a tight lid on information about Lynch, the Pentagon did mount a vigorous defense of its actions at the rescue, calling the BBC's charges that it had stage-managed the event "ridiculous," and that blanks were used "ludicrous." In a May 26 letter to the *Los Angeles Times* written in response to Scheer's column, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Victoria Clarke called his claims "patently false and unsupported by the facts." The rescue team members, she wrote, "put their lives on the line in a hostile area during combat operations to accomplish the mission." The accounts by "official spokespeople" as well as the video footage

⁶² Transcript, "The O'Reilly Factor," Fox News, May 22, 2003.

⁶³ Michele Orecklin, "The controversy over Jessica Lynch," *Time*, June 9, 2003, p. 33. The article also pointed out that, while it was true that a resident of Nasiriyah had told US soldiers that Iraqi forces had left the hospital, the conversation had occurred "just minutes before the rescue. ... "

⁶⁴ Transcript, "Nightly News," NBC News, May 30, 2003. As for the blanks, Avila reported that the hospital staff were saying that these were actually "flash-bang grenades" used to stun and head off "potential resistance." The staff also told him that the American soldiers' behavior had been "humane."

⁶⁵ "BBC correspondent defends Lynch documentary," CNN.com, May 20, 2003.

"reflected the events accurately and as fully as possible. ... To suggest otherwise," Clarke maintained, "is an insult" and "a grave disservice" to those involved. Others stressed the uncertainties of operating in a town that had been the scene of two weeks of intense fighting and only recently brought under US control. Though Bryan Whitman acknowledged in an interview with CNN that, as things turned out, US forces could simply have driven up to the hospital and removed Lynch, they did not know that at the time. "If we had good knowledge we could drive in and take her out," he said, "we certainly would have done that rather than a joint operation. We don't look to do them in a more difficult, complex way."⁶⁶

Whitman also maintained that "speculative reports in the media," as CNN put it, "not Pentagon pronouncements" were responsible for some of the misinformation circulating about Lynch—including the *Post's* account of her capture. The Pentagon had, in fact, "never released an account of what happened to Lynch because it didn't have an account," Whitman said. "She never told us."⁶⁷

Overall, the revisionist narrative of the Jessica Lynch story, as it played out in the media, remained highly sympathetic to Lynch herself—who was seen, if anything, as the victim of the inflated accounts of her heroism—and increasingly inclined to criticize both the Pentagon for its role, whether active or passive, in encouraging such reports and the press for its gullibility in reporting them uncritically. The April 3 article in the *Post* and the subsequent reports that cast doubt on it, wrote David Kirkpatrick in *The New York Times*, had raised "questions about whether the United States military manipulated the episode for propaganda purposes and about whether American news organizations were seduced by a gripping, patriotic tale."⁶⁸ Even Bill O'Reilly, a staunch supporter of the military, argued that the Pentagon had "hyped the rescue of Private Lynch when it was a rather routine operation." He also criticized the Pentagon for refusing to "allow military witnesses to tell us exactly what happened, thereby giving critics like [Robert] Scheer ammunition." When, he asked, will "the military and Bush administration ... wise up and stop with all the secrecy nonsense," which only encouraged "crazy conspiracy people to run wild. ... " The military, he concluded, "rescued Private Lynch. They did their job. It's the aftermath that should have been handled differently."⁶⁹

More Rumblings at the Post. Meanwhile, some in *The Washington Post* were turning a critical eye on the paper and prodding it to address its role in fostering what some were calling the

⁶⁶ "Report says commando raid was unnecessarily theatric," CNN.com, June 17, 2003.

⁶⁷ Whitman did, however, provide the first official hint that the *Post's* story of Lynch's capture was inaccurate. "Certain facts about what happened to other soldiers," he said, "got confused with what may have happened to Lynch."

⁶⁸ David Kirkpatrick, "After the War: The Rescue; reports on soldier's capture are partly discounted by paper," *The New York Times*, June 18, 2003, p. A14.

⁶⁹ Transcript, "The O'Reilly Factor," Fox News, May 29, 2003. O'Reilly made his remarks after the Associated Press published a report on May 28, based on interviews with Iraqis, that verified most of the points made in earlier accounts of Lynch's stay at Saddam Hospital and her rescue by US Special Forces.

"myth" of Jessica Lynch. On May 23, commentator Richard Cohen, in a column entitled "On not admitting mistakes," took the *Post* to task for its backhanded way of setting the record straight on the story it had reported on April 3. "The original story about Lynch played on the front page," Cohen pointed out. "Later, when it turned out that some of the gripping details in the story were questionable, the 'corrections'—although they were never labeled that—were played inside the paper." It was possible that "the Pentagon hyped the Lynch story," he continued, or that "some honest people in the Pentagon just got things wrong. Whatever the case, the *Post* seemed unable to simply say so. ... Instead, the caveats and doubts were folded into other stories." The *Post* "seemed to be backing off its original account, but not in a forthright way."

The issue of the press's credibility, Cohen wrote, was a particularly sensitive one in the wake of one of the most damaging scandals in journalism in recent years. On May 11, *The New York Times* revealed in a lengthy front-page article that one of its reporters—Jayson Blair—had plagiarized or fabricated many of the articles he had written for the paper.⁷⁰ The Blair scandal was a "black eye not just for the *Times* but for the press in general," Cohen maintained. "We are not trusted. We are not believed. ... Our aloofness, our defensiveness, our sheer inability to concede uncertainty (which goes beyond merely correcting factual mistakes) has cost us plenty."

The revelations about Jayson Blair were also on *Washington Post* ombudsman Michael Getler's mind when he wrote his May 25 column on anonymous sources. In it, Getler wrote that the Blair scandal underscored "a real and growing credibility problem for news organizations, especially in today's environment," which included "a steady increase in the number of major stories attributed to anonymous sources ... and a sense that intelligence information is being politicized and that reporters aren't probing hard enough against the defenses of an administration with an effective, disciplined and restrictive attitude toward information control." The *Post*, like other newspapers, Getler noted, had "rules about sourcing": reporters were expected to make "every effort" to get their sources to speak on the record and, failing that, to provide their reasons for not doing so and as much information about their identities and motives as possible. "My impression," he added, "is that these rules have largely fallen by the wayside ... because the use of unnamed sources has become so routine."

Getler used his May 25 column to urge the *Post* again to re-examine its April 3 story of Lynch's capture, which relied heavily on anonymous sources. "This account, which has remained exclusive to the *Post*," he wrote, "is by far the story that readers continue to question most." The questions, he continued, were "increasing as journalism is put in the spotlight. If there is a different version, or a confirming version, of this [story] that is authoritative, I hope somebody will write it, along with a more probing account of her rescue."

⁷⁰ Some of these, it turned out, were articles on the Lynch family, which were ostensibly written from their hometown of Palestine, West Virginia; *Times* investigators turned up no evidence that Blair had ever visited the area.

Getler would get his wish, albeit not as soon as he might have wanted. Sometime after his column on anonymous sources ran, the *Post* decided to take a second look at Jessica Lynch. The precise cause of this decision was unclear. Getler himself recalls that "in the aftermath of the Jayson Blair episode" and his May 25 column, he met privately with the paper's "top editor" to "express my view that the Jessica Lynch story was still unresolved journalistically as far as I was concerned and as far as other media were concerned, who were pursuing what really did happen to [her]." As Dana Priest remembers it, growing criticism, from Getler and others, was a spur that prompted editors to say, "Look, we've got to go back and figure out [what happened]." She adds, "We weren't seeing it as a correction, really. I was seeing it as a larger version, ... a more definitive version of what happened." While acknowledging that, as Getler and others pointed out, the *Post* was slow to revisit the issue, Priest notes that it would not "have been possible to get a definitive version several days afterward, because I think things were still shaking out. ... I'm not sure that the Army went back right away and knew ... what the deal was on her injuries, on what role she played [during the ambush]. It wasn't their top priority either." By June, however, it had become a priority for both: the Army's investigation was in full swing, and the *Post* had determined to do an investigation of its own. The result was, if not a definitive version of the Jessica Lynch story, then the most comprehensive and detailed account to date.

The Post Revisits Jessica Lynch

On June 17, 2003, *The Washington Post* published its first front-page story on Lynch since April 4. It was a lengthy piece—almost 5,600 words (or two-and-a-half pages) long—reported by Dana Priest and Susan Schmidt from Washington and William Booth from Nasiriyah, and drawn from interviews with "dozens of people," including Lynch family members, Iraqi hospital staff, and intelligence and military officials, "three of whom have knowledge of a weeks-long Army investigation into the matter."

"Jessica Lynch, the most famous soldier of the Iraq war," it began, "remains in a private room at the end of a hall on an upper floor of Walter Reed Army Medical Center, her door guarded by a military police officer." Her physical condition was "severe," and her memory of the time between the ambush and her arrival hours later at Saddam Hospital apparently incomplete. In the sixth paragraph, the article referred to the press's early efforts to fill in the blank spaces in her story. "Initial reports, including those in *The Washington Post*, which cited unnamed US officials with access to intelligence reports, described Lynch emptying her M-16 into Iraqi soldiers," it noted. Those accounts of Lynch fighting fiercely and being shot and stabbed "became the story of the war, boosting morale at home and among the troops." But the real story proved "far more complex and different than those initial reports," the article acknowledged. The *Post's* early coverage "attracted widespread criticism because many of the sources were unnamed and because the accounts were soon contradicted by other military officials." The June 17 piece represented the *Post's* effort "to document more fully what had actually happened to Lynch,"

although, the authors warned, "[m]uch of the story remains shrouded in mystery, in large part because of official Army secrecy, concerns for Lynch's privacy and her limited memory." The result was "a second, more thorough but inconclusive cut at history. While much more is revealed about her ordeal, most US officials still insisted that their names be withheld from this account."

With that, the *Post* article delved into the details of the Lynch saga. Using still-unreleased information from the Army's investigation, it provided an account of the miscommunications, breakdowns, and wrong turns that had led the 507th Maintenance Company, cut off from the main convoy, into the arms of Iraqi forces, which attacked it with gunfire, grenades, and mortar shells. It was not yet known whether Lynch had been able to take part in the ensuing gun battle—only that, as a "senior military official" told the *Post*, her "weapon jammed severely." Lynch had been neither shot nor stabbed, the article said, but had been gravely injured when the Humvee she was riding in was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade and crashed into a jackknifed truck at high speed. Only Lynch, whose arms and legs were "crushed" on impact, survived the "catastrophic" collision; the driver of the vehicle—Lynch's good friend Lori Piestewa—died later in a military hospital, and the other passengers were killed instantly.

"In the hours after the ambush," the *Post* reported, "Arabic-speaking interpreters at the National Security Agency [part of the Department of Defense], reviewing intercepted Iraqi communications from either hand-held radios or cellular phones, heard references to 'an American female soldier with blond hair who was very brave and fought against them,' according to a senior military officer who read the top-secret intelligence report when it came in." Other Iraqi reports gathered from the field contained information about a female soldier who was variously said to have been wounded by shrapnel, shot and stabbed. "These reports were distributed only to generals, intelligence officers and policymakers who are cleared to read the most sensitive information the US government possesses," the *Post* authors wrote. "These intelligence reports, and the one bit of eavesdropping, created the story of the war."

That story, however, had a gap. No one knew what had happened to Lynch from the time of the collision soon after 7:00 a.m. until the moment she arrived at a military hospital in Nasiriyah, some three hours later. Two "US officials with knowledge of the Army investigation said Lynch was mistreated by her captors," the *Post* reported, but they "would not elaborate." According to the doctor who treated her at this facility, Lynch was unconscious, showing signs of shock and trauma. He cut away her uniform, stitched up her head wound, and tended to some of her broken bones. A few hours later, she was transferred to Saddam Hospital.

From that point, the *Post's* June 17 piece followed the now-familiar outlines of Lynch's stay at the hospital: how she was given special care, how one nurse tried to comfort the weeping soldier by singing to her, how they protected her from "Iraqi combatants" who were using the hospital as a base. The *Post* report appeared to confirm the doubt first cast by the BBC on the story told by the lawyer, Mohammed Odeh Rehaief (or al-Rehaief, in some versions). While the Marines

corroborated Rehaief's claim that he had alerted them to Lynch's presence at Saddam Hospital and helped map out its interior, hospital staff disputed the rest of his tale. There was no nurse named Iman (Rehaief's wife) working at the hospital, as he had claimed, nor, for that matter, any nurse married to a lawyer. As for Rehaief's assertion that he had witnessed Lynch being slapped around by a member of the Fedayeen, Dr. Harith Hassona (presumably the Harith al-Houssona of previous news stories) dismissed that as "some Hollywood crap you'd tell the Americans."

The *Post's* account of the rescue also largely followed that of earlier news reports, although it shed some light on the maneuvers of US forces. Soldiers acting as a "protective shield just outside the hospital walls," it reported, "took light fire from adjacent buildings, according to military sources." When rescue team members "burst into the hospital," they "fired explosive charges meant to disorient anyone inside. ... " Iraqi doctors reported that no shots were fired in the hospital, but repeated their charge that US forces were unnecessarily aggressive when they entered the hospital, with guns pointed. "It was like a 'Rambo' movie," one doctor said. "But we were not Rambo. We just wanted to be told what to do."

After the rescue, the *Post* continued, CENTCOM's "public affairs office in Qatar geared up to make the most of the rescue." But, Col. Robinson insisted, the story spoke for itself. "There was not an intent to talk it down or embellish it," he said, "because we didn't need to. It was an awesome story." Still, one unnamed colonel observed, "[I]t took on a life of its own. Reporters seem to be reporting on each other's information. The rescue turned into a Hollywood concept."

Reaction and Retrospection

The June 17 piece prompted another round of examinations and critiques of the *Post's*, and the press's, handling of the Lynch story, most of them unflattering. While the paper was given credit for publishing the fullest account of Lynch's ordeal, it continued to take heat for its initial report and for its failure, in the eyes of some, to be more forthright in acknowledging its errors. The page-one article, wrote Christopher Hanson in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, "begins as a feature updating Lynch's condition. Only after the jump [to the inside of the paper] does it reveal itself to be the journalistic equivalent of Napoleon's retreat from Moscow."⁷¹

This was a point Getler made as well, when he yet again took up the issue of the *Post's* coverage of Lynch. "This is the third column in as many months devoted in whole or in part to the case of Army Pfc Jessica Lynch," he wrote on June 29. "If you're tired of it, I can't blame you. But judging from the response to the *Post's* recent effort to reconstruct how Lynch was captured and rescued, many readers are not yet tired of it, and neither am I." In the critique that followed, Getler applauded the June 17 "investigative piece" for providing "many new details and ... a corrective to the initial reporting." However, he pointed out, readers did not find out about the problem with

⁷¹ Christopher Hanson, "American Idol," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July 1, 2003, p. 58.

the initial report "on the front-page portion of the story; it was in the continuation on page A16." Moreover, the front-page segment referred to "initial news reports, including those in *The Washington Post*," which, Getler observed, "made it appear that the *Post* was not alone on the initial story. But the *Post* story was exclusive. The rest of the world's media picked it up from the *Post*, which put this tale into the public domain."

While the June 17 article was an improvement, "it did not address the issues that eat away at the trust of large numbers of readers," Getler wrote, "many of whom have called or e-mailed to complain. Why did the information in that first story, which was wrong in its most compelling aspects, remain unchallenged for so long? ... How do these unnamed sources explain putting out this information and not correcting it sooner? Did the government intend to manipulate the press?"

This last question was much on the minds of commentators as they re-examined the Jessica Lynch story. For many, the answer appeared to be yes, though the press was often seen as a willing party to the manipulation. If the Lynch rescue was "a p.r. windfall for the military," wrote Christopher Hanson, it was "a godsend to the press corps, which loves 'firsts,' lives for 'people' stories, and goes crazy over any rescue." It was this appetite for an "emotionally fulfilling saga of good beating evil" that, for example, inclined the *Post* to take "at face value the account of a self-promoting Iraqi lawyer named Mohammed, who 'risked all' to help rescue Lynch. ..."⁷²

In an equally scathing piece in *Quill Magazine*, Peter Sussman made a similar point about the consequences of what some viewed as the media's weakness for a good human-interest story. A "compliant press corps," he wrote, "intent on competing for exclusive, dramatic details of the same hot-selling story that every other news organization is chasing, depends on the government's image-makers for raw material and is unlikely to serve as a real check on government's sophisticated and beguiling powers of deception."⁷³ When "journalists strayed from their purely stenographic role" in transmitting the Lynch story, he added, it was only "to pass along vivid details from anonymous sources and to spin out the aura of drama inherent in the military's original, brief recital of events." Sussman briefly traced the development of the Jessica Lynch narrative, from the first article in the *Post* to its subsequent telling in other newspapers and on TV news shows that picked up the story. "Each rewriting or repetition of the *Post's* story," he maintained, "seemed to raise the temperature a few more degrees."

Like other commentators, Sussman aimed his critical guns at the Pentagon as well for its role in the Lynch saga. The Pentagon's assertion that its spokespeople had not given out misinformation to the press was "narrowly" true, he wrote, but the "military appears complicit in

⁷² Hanson and some others attributed the initial Mohammed story to the *Post*, although both *The Miami Herald* and *USA Today* also wrote similar articles on him the same day.

⁷³ Peter Sussman, "Rescuing Private Lynch—and rescuing journalism," *Quill Magazine*, November 2003, p. 23. *Quill* is a publication of the Society of Professional Journalists.

the myth-making in several regards." For one, some of the anonymous officials who provided the *Post* with "erroneous information and spicy quotes" worked for the Pentagon, Sussman pointed out. For another, the dramatic early morning press conference, the rescue videotape, and General Brooks's description of the rescue as a "classic operation, done by some of our nation's finest warriors" did not "sound like an uneventful retrieval from an undefended hospital." Finally, Sussman wrote, "no one from the Pentagon or elsewhere in the government volunteered, 'Wait a minute. It didn't happen that way,' though Defense Department officials must have known from military doctors and others that at least part of the prevailing story was false."

But Sussman reserved his harshest judgments for the press. Invoking the Jayson Blair scandal, he declared, "[I]t is important to recognize that there is a continuum between deliberate fabrication of details and the tailoring of fragmentary reports to fit a good story line. When a premium is set on the unique angle, the exclusive source and the crowd-pleasing narrative, journalists are far more susceptible to the unsubstantiated, the invented and the exaggerated. In this case, much of the American press fell for the patriotic Jessica Lynch Story that they themselves had a large role in creating through sloppy sourcing and attribution."

Response. The chief targets of these critiques—in the *Post* and in the Pentagon—offered a spirited defense of their actions. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Steve Coll, managing editor of the *Post*, stood by the paper's early reporting on Lynch, arguing that the June 17 article "provided some details of the flow of early intelligence reports that matched the paper's earlier account. ... 'I think the story today makes clear that there was a reportorial basis for the earlier story,' he said."⁷⁴ In his appearance on NPR's "Fresh Air," Vernon Loeb conceded that "in retrospect ... I would have written [the original article] in a less dramatic fashion, but at the time we wrote it, it was an absolute legitimate story." Like Loeb, Dana Priest—who was interviewed about the story on NPR's "On the Media" and CNBC's "Capitol Report"—stressed that the *Post*'s sources for the original article were trusted and multiple. The reporters on the story had checked with different sources, she said, and had moreover "tried to craft a paragraph that made it clear that they were initial reports from the field ... that [do] not always turn out to be accurate."⁷⁵ "[A]s we see our job," she explained, "it is to pass [information] along after verifying the credibility of it, and then to update it if it turns out not to be correct. And that's what we did in this case."⁷⁶

Priest did, however, acknowledge that there was a risk inherent in "initial reporting," especially in wartime conditions, when, she says, "everyone is doing stuff on the fly." The "larger question," she reflects, "is, do you go with something that you don't know is totally reliable? We do it all the time in war, all the time, [because] you're relying on someone else's [information]

⁷⁴ Kirkpatrick, *The New York Times*, June 18, 2003.

⁷⁵ "On the Media," June 20, 2003. Priest acknowledged that the caveat "should have been higher up" in the original April 3 article.

⁷⁶ Transcript, "Capitol Report," CNBC News, June 17, 2003.

except when you're embedded and you can see for yourself—and even then you have a very hard time actually seeing what's happening."

As for the vexing question of anonymous sources, Priest argues that this was a harsh fact of life for reporters. Those willing to speak on the record, at least for the Pentagon, "weren't that helpful during the war at all," according to Priest, "so we all used different people." But those "different people" almost never wanted to go on record. "We do push our sources to be identified in some way," Priest says. "It's ultimately not our decision. So we either don't write it or we use it."⁷⁷

Priest emphatically did not agree with the claim made by some that Pentagon sources were manipulating the news behind a shield of anonymity. "It didn't dawn [on me], I guess because of who they were," she says of her own sources, "... that they would be trying to spin it as a hero-type of story." To the contrary, "I knew in my heart that ... the people I talked to weren't trying to use me. They were actually trying to help me out, and they turned out to be wrong. Those reports were raw reports." The same mutual trust, Priest adds, lay behind her sources' willingness to share sensitive and potentially damaging findings from the Army's ongoing investigation of the errors that had led to the ambush of the 507th Maintenance Company; this information had enabled the *Post* to break new ground in its June 17 story. "To be frank," she says, "I think the reason I got so much was because of the same thing: I knew a lot of people who trusted that I would portray it in an accurate light, just like the guys who gave me the initial [intelligence]."

Priest was bemused by the charges that she—along with other reporters—had been, in essence, a pawn in the hands of Pentagon spin-masters—"especially," she notes wryly, because "I've written so many critical stories about the administration."⁷⁸ To her, the issue of press coverage of Lynch had taken on its own symbolic freight—not unlike what had happened to Jessica Lynch herself—"where the media grab hold of a story, and it really symbolizes something important. In this case, it symbolizes, 'Aha, the administration is lying to us, and the press is being suckered in.' ... What drove me nuts is no matter what I said, no matter how much I explained how this happened, it didn't matter. It got the same questions over and over again from people who obviously did no work on their own to find out, well, was it true? Was this just a case of inaccurate first reporting that was not corrected enough [to] everybody's satisfaction in the weeks after? Or was it, as people were claiming, a campaign by the Pentagon to get good coverage? No one ever proved it. They didn't try to prove it. They just kept repeating it."

⁷⁷ Priest, and others, believed that the insistence on anonymity was more common among officials in the Bush administration than in the Clinton administration.

⁷⁸ Another *Post* reporter, Peter Baker, who wrote the paper's article on Mohammed, was skeptical as well about the charge of manipulation in his case. "Was the military happy with Mohammed's story?" he asks. "Probably. Was our interview with him an active element of a broader PR strategy? I don't think so." The interview with Mohammed, he notes, came about by happenstance, and the Iraqi lawyer "seemed genuine and credible to us at the time."

The official voice of the Pentagon, the public affairs division, took a similar stance in regard to the accusation that it “hyped” the story of Jessica Lynch—maintaining that the charge was unproven and, as Bryan Whitman terms it, “absurd.” “I know I certainly didn’t [hype],” he says. “I know that General Brooks didn’t. I know that Jessica Lynch’s doctors didn’t. I guess I would want to know who hyped.” The Pentagon strove at all times, Whitman maintains, to stay within the framework of known facts. “All of our public statements were measured and careful to articulate what it was that we knew. Whether it was about her capture, whether it was about her rescue, each step of the way we were careful to make sure that we provided as much information as we could, but that we were providing only that information that we could verify, too.”

Whitman took issue with those who maintained that the Pentagon did nothing to correct misinformation about Lynch that began circulating in the press. On the matter of her injuries, he points out, within roughly 48 hours of her rescue, “after her doctor had had an opportunity to examine her, [he] actually did a press conference on [April] 4th and described the extent of her injuries”—making clear that the evaluations of Lynch’s medical team did not suggest her wounds were caused by gunshot or stabbing.⁷⁹

But other questions took longer to answer; this was particularly true of the capture of Lynch. “The nature of her capture was not something that we had a lot of information about,” Whitman says. “Remember, many of those individuals were killed; others [like Lynch] ended up in the hospital. ... When you have something that’s as complex as that, you have to go back and conduct interviews. [Lynch] was having trouble remembering many of the aspects of the event as it took place.” The military “has procedures for investigating incidences,” Whitman adds, “and they may not be as fast as I would like them, or anybody else would like them, to [be]; but they are very thorough, and at the end of those investigations, we have a pretty good grasp of what the facts are in any particular case. So speed and accuracy are always something that have to be balanced with respect to these things.”

Those who sought to bypass the official process did so at their own risk, Whitman says. “I think it’s always a danger when, in the interest of having a sexier story, one is willing to be speculative about things that are not known to be true or factual, and I think that’s what happened in this particular case”—reporters “got ahead of their own facts.” Whitman regarded anonymous sources and those who used them with equal skepticism. “You often wonder,” he says, “about the credibility of not only the sources, but the credibility of the people who might be saying they have a source”—as had happened, he pointed out, in recent journalistic scandals. Whitman contrasted his own forthright stance with that of the shadowy figures who supplied information to reporters. “I can’t speak for every unnamed official that thinks they have information that they’re so certain of that they’re not willing to put their name up,” he says. But, he adds, “I’m on the record out there, trying to keep things in perspective with respect to what we know.”

⁷⁹ Of the later statement by “medical staff” that some of Lynch’s injuries could be consistent with low-caliber gunshot wounds, Whitman says, “I have no knowledge of that.”

For those who found the information available from official Pentagon sources thin gruel, however, the unofficial channels continued to provide a vein of richer, more interpretive material. As late as November 2003, these sources were still offering up their private views on the Lynch saga to reporters. The erroneous capture story, unnamed Pentagon officials told *Time* magazine, was less a public relations ploy than "a comedy of errors." A "five-line report that wasn't grounded in anything," said "a senior Pentagon official," was picked up and exaggerated by "somebody grasping at straws, someone who was on the periphery and not knowing what was really going on." Said "another senior military official": "I think it was the Army looking for a hero."⁸⁰

By this time, however, the subject of so much speculation and debate, Jessica Lynch herself, had emerged from seclusion to tell her own story.

Jessica Lynch Speaks

Early November 2003 saw a fresh burst of interest in Lynch, largely due to the publication of her book about her ordeal—*I Am a Soldier, Too*, written by former *New York Times* reporter Rick Bragg—on November 11. Around the same time, she was also the subject of a made-for-TV movie on NBC and featured on the cover of *Time* magazine. The day her book was released, Lynch made her first public appearance—many more were to follow—on ABC's "Primetime" with Diane Sawyer.

By this time, more information about the events surrounding her capture and rescue had been circulated. The Army had made public its official account of the ambush of the 507th Maintenance Company, much of it already outlined in the *Post's* June 17 article; and the Defense Department's Inspector General had issued a report on the "alleged premeditated fabrication and inappropriate conduct of US military personnel involved in the rescue" of Lynch, finding no evidence of either.⁸¹ In addition, it was now generally believed that the soldier spoken of admiringly in intercepted Iraqi conversations after the ambush was not in fact Lynch, but most likely Sgt. Donald Walters, also a blond, who had apparently gone to his death fighting. "Army brass," according to one account, "now suspect that the idea of Ms. Lynch's supposed heroism resulted from a mistranslation: During the firefight, an Iraqi radio transmission reported some valiant fighting from a blonde American and possibly used the wrong pronoun."⁸²

⁸⁰ Gibbs, *Time*, November 17, 2003.

⁸¹ Only a brief executive summary was available to the public; the full report was classified.

⁸² Meghan Cox Gurdon, "A far from unknown soldier," book review, *The Wall Street Journal*, November 14, 2003, p. W8. Later, an Army investigation concluded that Walters had not died during the fighting, but had been executed by his Fedayeen captors. [Andrew Kramer, "Soldier in Lynch ambush killed after capture, US says," *The Boston Globe*, May 29, 2004, p. 2.]

The most attention-getting news on Lynch surfaced shortly before November 11, when it was learned that her book would reveal that, according to her medical records, she had been "the victim of anal sexual assault," sometime after she fell into the hands of Iraqi fighters. Like so much else in her story, this was sharply disputed by Iraqi doctors, including one who had seen her when she first arrived, fully clothed and in shock, at the military hospital.⁸³

The story Lynch told in her book and in her "Primetime" appearance was far less heroic than originally depicted, but brave and poignant nevertheless. She was not a hero, she told Sawyer at the beginning of the program—"I'm more of a survivor." Lynch was forthright in describing her actions during the terrifying ambush of her unit. She was "hurt," Lynch said, by the stories of her heroism that had appeared in the press. "The other four people in my vehicle [the Humvee that crashed] aren't here to tell that story," she said. "So I would have been the only one to have been able to say, yeah, I went down shooting. But I didn't." The truth was, she explained, that her weapon jammed, "and I did not shoot a round. Nothing." She described herself, in the book and on TV, as cowering in the back seat of the Humvee. "I went down, praying on my knees," she recalled. "And then, that's the last I remember."

Some three hours after the crash, she briefly regained consciousness in the Iraqi military hospital, where she was treated before being moved to Saddam Hospital. Her recollection of her experiences in both hospitals largely tallied with the accounts of Iraqi doctors and hospital staff. She was frightened and in great pain, partially paralyzed from the damage to her spine, but treated with kindness. She remembered the nurse who rubbed her back and sang to her, and doctors who tried to reassure her—although she recalled fighting off an attempt to amputate her shattered left leg. Lynch also confirmed the Iraqi doctors' assertion that they had put her in an ambulance and tried to deliver her to US forces.

Although Lynch was afraid of the Iraqi men—most likely paramilitaries—who sometimes came to her room, she strongly asserted that she had never been beaten or interrogated or, as Mohammed al-Rehaief had claimed, slapped. Nor did she recall Rehaief's visit to her bedside when, he claimed, he had told her not to worry. When Diane Sawyer remarked that Rehaief had gotten "a television movie," Lynch answered curtly, "I heard," but did go on to say, "I'm grateful for whatever he did to help. ... I'm just saying I don't remember him. I don't know if he was there." Staff members at Saddam Hospital were less circumspect. "He's a big liar," said one nurse. "He should be hung by his ears."⁸⁴

⁸³ "Iraqi doctors dispute Lynch rape claim," CNN.com, November 7, 2003. During Lynch's appearance on "Primetime," Diane Sawyer told viewers that she had spoken with Lynch's physician at Walter Reed Hospital, "who told me there is, of course, an element of speculation, but confirmed that the medical record of her first examination by medical doctors in Germany does show agreement" on the signs of an anal assault. Lynch herself, who appeared somewhat skeptical of the charge, had no memory of an assault.

⁸⁴ Still, some of Rehaief's story held up. Peter Baker of the *Post* points out that, in his interview with US reporters back in April, Rehaief had mentioned that Lynch's Iraqi doctors were considering amputating her leg; this was later corroborated by Lynch's own testimony, though their accounts of who convinced doctors to drop the idea differed. (According to Rehaief, he urged a doctor friend to halt the amputation.)

Toward the end of the show, Sawyer addressed some of the controversies swirling around Lynch's rescue. "There were accusations," she said, "... that this was just Hollywood stuff. They didn't have to use maximum force. They had no resistance of any kind. And that this was all done and filmed to have a good story to tell in the middle of a very, very dicey and worrying war." In response, Lynch appeared to defend her rescuers. "Yeah, I don't think it happened quite like that, though," she replied. "Anyone ... in that kind of situation would obviously go in with force, not knowing who was on the other side of the door." The Iraqi doctors, Sawyer then noted, "have said, in fact, they could have walked right in [to the hospital]." Lynch responded, "They didn't know that. The military would not have known that. There's no way you could have walked in a building, knowing there was no resistance there."

Lynch did acknowledge her discomfort with the taping of the rescue, however. Asked by Sawyer, "Does [the video] bother you at all?", Lynch replied, "Yeah, it does. It does, that they used me, as a way to symbolize all this stuff. I mean, yeah, it's wrong. I mean, I don't know why they filmed it. ..."⁸⁵ Nevertheless, she agreed, when asked, that her rescuers were "heroes." "They're the ones that came in, they rescued me," Lynch said. "Those are my heroes. Those are my true fact heroes. They risked their [lives]."

But some of Lynch's statements about the rescue came out more negatively in the press. On November 7—after ABC posted excerpts of the upcoming "Primetime" interview on its website—there was a flurry of stories on Lynch's comments on the program. A number of these articles quoted one line of her response to Sawyer's questioning in such a way that it appeared as if she were agreeing with the charge that the military had over-dramatized the rescue. So, for example, CNN reported on its website: "Responding to questions that the military may have exaggerated the danger of her nighttime rescue from a Nasiriyah hospital by US commandos, [Lynch] said, 'Yeah, I don't think it happened quite like that.'" Similarly, *The New York Times* wrote that, "asked about reports that the military exaggerated the danger of the rescue mission, Ms. Lynch said, 'Yeah, I don't think it happened quite like that,' although she added that in that context anybody would have approached the hospital well-armed."⁸⁶

Other headlines told a similar story, many of them drawn from a series of Associated Press reports published that day. "Former prisoner of war Jessica Lynch criticizes military," declared one AP headline on November 7. The article began: "Former prisoner of war Jessica Lynch accused the military of using her capture and dramatic nighttime rescue to sway public support for the war in Iraq." Other articles stressed Lynch's remarks about the rescue videotape. The *New York Daily News's* story on Jessica Lynch for November 7 carried the headline, "Jessi: Army used me; says

⁸⁵ The following day, November 12, on NBC's "Today" show, Katie Couric asked Lynch if she was "comfortable or uncomfortable" about the videotaping of her rescue. "I was a little uncomfortable at first, not knowing why they taped it," she replied. "... But now, you know, it's like, okay, well, you know, they saved me. They rescued me. I don't care if they taped it or not."

⁸⁶ David Kirkpatrick, "Jessica Lynch criticizes US accounts of her ordeal," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2003, p. A25. Kirkpatrick, like others, omitted the word "though" at the end of Lynch's remark.

rescue taped for PR." The *Dow Jones International News's* headline on Lynch for that day read, "Ex-POW says US military was wrong to manipulate her story."

On this rather sour note, the saga of Jessica Lynch, at least as it played out in the press, drew to a close.⁸⁷ The young Army private whose "all-American apple pie looks" and much-ballyhooed wartime heroics had prompted historian Douglas Brinkley in April to dub her "the great new symbol of women in our armed forces," had by November become, at least to some, "a symbol of Bush administration propaganda and the press's war-time credulity in buying it."⁸⁸ Still, however "shamelessly enhanced, inflated and used by the US military" Lynch was seen to be,⁸⁹ she continued to be regarded in the press with sympathy and admiration for her ordeal—on and off the battlefield. "She did something every bit as brave as confronting those Iraqis," wrote one commentator. "She came back home and told the truth."⁹⁰

⁸⁷ There were other sour notes as well, including some bitter statements from families of other members of the 507th Maintenance Company, disgruntled over the attention and rewards Lynch had reaped, and news reports that Larry Flynt, the notorious publisher of *Hustler* magazine, had purchased topless photos of Lynch.

⁸⁸ Jesse Leavenworth, "Supply clerk joins legendary warriors," *The Hartford Courant*, April 5, 2003, p. A9; Frank Rich, "Pfc. Jessica Lynch isn't Rambo anymore," *The New York Times*, November 9, 2003, Section 2, p. 1.

⁸⁹ Betty Cuniberti, "The nonfiction Jessica Lynch was heroic enough," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 12, 2003, p. E1.

⁹⁰ Ellis Henican, "Larry Flynt is least of Jessica's exploiters," *Newsday* (New York), November 12, 2003, p. A4.