

Unsafe at Any Creed

It was 1995, a scant four years after the District's crack-era murder wave crested and broke. We were still living in the spume. (1991 saw 482 murders in city limits, '95

a mere 36. In four years I guess we grew some weak little gangsters.) I was in high school, on my way to a hip-hop show in Brookland, a pretty but rough-hewn Northeast enclave by the Catholic University of America. It was a grim winter night, darkness stiff as ice; an acetone wind burned in my nostrils. A scurf of dirty snow clung to the gutters, soaking through the duct tape patching the soles of my thrift-store high heels. Two blocks from the Metro, the place looked like the Cold War had broken the wrong way. The streets were lightless, neglected, empty. I got lost.

After an unpleasant interlude of skidding on black ice and stumbling into pot-holes, I ran across three friendly white folks, CUA students who'd foundered on some unshaven streetcorner. I told them where I was going—they'd never heard of it—and then gave the address. The girl's eyes got big. "Oh—are you sure? You want to go there?"

She then gave me some of the worst advice I have ever received from a non-professional: "Here's how you get there, but while you're walking, keep your head down and walk as fast as you can!"

Did this chick want me to get mugged? Why not baste myself in heroin? Yes, the best advice when traveling through a shaky neighborhood is to keep your head down, ensuring that you are less aware of your surroundings, and act like you don't belong. The shutters came down over my face and I headed off to my concert, bemused and a bit smug.

For once, pride bore no connection to a fall. The locals were cordial and the show adequate. My corner encounter, the trailer for "The Row Houses Have Eyes," is the only thing I can now recall from that night, and until I became Catholic, it was my only experience in Brookland.

After my conversion, I got to know a different side of the university and of the neighborhood. Catholics and their institutions marble Brookland like fat in meat. There's the university, of course, but also the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, blue and white domes curving like folded wings, where you can stand just outside the crypt church and hear Masses in three languages at once. There's the Dominican House of Studies, Philip Larkin's "serious house on serious earth," thronged with habits. The place is blindingly sincere. Driving down into the valley where the Basilica nests is like entering another country, an alternate-history America where Fr. Junipero Serra and Lord Baltimore take the places of Ben Franklin and George Washington. If my high-school experience of Brookland was the bass, this confection of piety might be the treble.

Because I have what Max Weber might have called a Catholic work ethic, and where others have gifts of prayer or healing I have a charism of failure, I've frequently availed myself of the university chapel's late-night Sunday Mass. When even 5 PM is too early to claw my way into consciousness, there's always the 9 o'clock at CUA. Despite the hour,

the chapel fills with well-scrubbed teens happily doing what Protestants call "fellowshipping." It's unsettling.

A college chapel is a misshapen thing compared to a parish church. A few years of the lifespan are swollen to gargantuan proportions, and the rest of the generations are hardly represented. Or compare the chapel to a book, where the parish church is a medieval text illuminated with every kind of monk and monkey, a wild efflorescence of weirdness, gargoyle and infant and dog-headed man, the college chapel is a well-kept textbook where the most diligent student in the class has taken careful notes in earnest handwriting.

These good students stroll in and out of the darkness in clusters. A skinny sweater-clad hipster boy shares a hymnal with his friend. The priest gives the only really great homily I've heard in my life: he spins a tale of pitching the stigmata to Protestant tourists in Assisi, then tells these sweet-faced undergraduates that they must suffer with Christ to love Christ. We have definitely entered Bizarro America. The kids love this gospel-of-austerity line.

Outside, after church, I hike back up the hill toward the Metro. A weary security guard gives me a wave. Brookland still isn't the safest part of town; I had brunch with students living in an idyll of gentle hills and heard stories of muggings practically on their front stoop. But maybe Catholic University shouldn't be in the safest part of town. As long as you don't keep your head down, and don't walk too fast, you'll be okay. ■

Eve Tushnet is a freelance writer in Washington, D.C. She blogs at <http://eve-tushnet.blogspot.com>

Spinning Out of Control

The Pentagon propaganda plan to win hearts and minds—of Americans

By Kelley Beaucar Vlahos

IT WASN'T a good day for the Department of Defense when *Stars and Stripes* scooped the Pentagon's secret scheme to profile journalists covering the war. Seems that the Rendon Group—the tyrannosaurus rex of military public-relations contractors—was getting paid to weed out reporters who did not fit the command's ideal of tractability.

The Army and Rendon have vociferously denied that embed requests were being held up on this basis, despite subsequent revelations of two confirmed cases to the contrary and reports by individual journalists who obtained their Rendon-generated profiles.

Seeing an exposé of these practices was akin to spotting a tiny glitch in the virtual-reality world of "The Matrix" and getting a glimpse of the reality underneath. What lies beneath here is a powerful engine that propels our war machine. This Matrix is the construct of military "Strategic Communications," a rubric that covers everything from military public affairs to public diplomacy to information operations. "Info ops" (IO) in turn include battlefield intelligence, some forms of electronic warfare, psychological operations (PSYOPS), military deception, and anything in these broad areas that serves to sell, manage, and manipulate the preferred messaging of the military. This massive complex is as expensive as it is complicated. But more importantly, notes author and war correspondent Robert Young Pelton, "it doesn't work."

It hasn't worked in Iraq or Afghanistan or anywhere else in the Muslim world because locals have long developed an immunity against American mil-

itary attempts to win them over. "If they see thousands of people getting killed, they react to that more than a school being built," Pelton says. Therein lies the trouble with trying to conduct public diplomacy at gunpoint.

Critics charge that Strategic Communications, or "StratComm," is also ill-fated because at its core it's all about us—generating the right kind of news over there to stoke support for the war enterprise back here. When self-sustaining interests come first, military planners lose sight of what the Iraqi and Afghan people are really thinking. They never gain their trust, a key pillar in the counterinsurgency mission.

"Strategic Communications is not just 'shaping information' and needless internal churn, it's a process designed to constantly justify the reason for the Department of Defense to be in this war," charges Pelton, author of *Licensed to Kill: Hired Guns in the War on Terror*. He has worked on both sides of the wire, as an embed and independent journalist and as a private consultant for the International Security Assistance Force.

"It's become its own industry," Pelton adds. "It's crossed the line from countering propaganda and allowing access to shaping propaganda and shaping what journalists do. It's a monstrous system of controlling bits of information and misleading people," and despite anti-propaganda laws and compartmentalization, the mission and the message are the same overseas and stateside.

Understanding the breadth of StratComm as it has developed over the last 10 years is a challenge in itself. Accord-

ing to an Associated Press investigation, the military increased its spending on "winning hearts and minds at home and abroad" 63 percent over five years, for a total of \$4.7 billion in 2009 alone. That includes \$1.6 billion for military recruitment and advertising and \$547 million for public affairs.

These domestic activities provide jobs for 27,000 employees. Think of the slick media campaigns and provocative video games designed to lure potential warriors to recruiting offices. Then there's the steroidal "war porn" generated by the Pentagon Channel and its surrogates in other niche media markets, like the Military and History Channels. During the Bush administration, there was a 50 percent increase in prepackaged videos, press releases, and radio interviews handed to news networks by DoD's "Hometown News." These press kits were often published and broadcast as original reporting with no Pentagon byline.

"We have such a massive apparatus selling the military to us, it has become hard to ask questions about whether this is too much money," Sheldon Rampton, research director of the Center for Media and Democracy, told the AP.

Meanwhile, overseas StratComm spans a sprawling public-affairs and information-operations network. According to Matt Armstrong, a popular StratComm blogger and Washington consultant, PSYOPS are typically employed to change the behavior of a key audience or adversary. About 60 percent are "white ops," he said, while 40 percent are "gray" or "black," meaning they are tactical and