

LUKE MITCHELL: WE STILL TORTURE

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BARACK HOOVER OBAMA

The Best and the Brightest Blow It Again

By Kevin Baker

LABOR'S LAST STAND

The Corporate Campaign to Kill the Employee Free Choice Act

By Ken Silverstein

WAIT TILL YOU SEE ME DANCE

A story by Deb Olin Unferth

Also: Mark Slouka and Paul West

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READINGS

[Proposal]

THE IRONIC CLOUD

By D. Graham Burnett and Jeff Dolven, from “Irony in the National Defense.” Last winter, Lockheed Martin Corporation approached Princeton University with a request for research initiatives. In April, Burnett, an historian of science, and Dolven, a professor of English, submitted the proposal, the cost of which they estimated to be \$750,000; Princeton declined to forward it to Lockheed.

Irony is a powerful and incompletely understood feature of human dynamics. A technique for dissimulation and “secret speech,” irony is considerably more complex than lying and even more dangerous. Ideally suited to mobilization on the shifting terrain of asymmetrical conflict, inherently covert, insidiously plastic, politically potent, irony offers rogue elements a volatile if often overlooked means by which to demoralize opponents and destabilize regimes. And yet while major research resources have for forty years poured into the human sciences from the defense and intelligence community in an effort to gain control over the human capacity to lie (investments that led to the modern polygraph, sodium pentothal–derived truth serums, “brain fingerprinting,” etc.), we have no comparable tradition of sustained, empirical, applied investigation into irony. We know very little about its specific manifestations in foreign cultures; we understand almost nothing about the neurological basis of its expression; we are without

forward-looking strategies for its mastery and mobilization in the interest of national defense. This project—a sustained three-year, three-pronged, interdisciplinary investigation, drawing on social scientists, engineers, and neurobiologists—will position Lockheed Martin for field leadership in a crucial new area of strategic and commercial growth.

HUMAN TERRAIN

If we don’t know how irony works and we don’t know how it is used by the enemy, we cannot identify it. As a result, we cannot take appropriate steps to neutralize ironizing threat postures. This fundamental problem is compounded by the enormous diversity of ironic modes in different world cultures and languages. Without the ability to detect and localize irony consistently, intelligence agents and agencies are likely to lose valuable time and resources pursuing chimerical leads and to overlook actionable instances of insolence. The first step toward addressing this situation is a multilingual, collaborative, and collative initiative that will generate an encyclopedic global inventory of ironic modalities and strategies. More than a handbook or field guide, the work product of this effort will take the shape of a vast, searchable, networked database of all known ironies. Making use of a sophisticated analytic markup language, this “Ironic Cloud” will be navigable by means of specific ironic tropes (e.g., litotes, hyperbole, innuendo, etc.), by geographical region or language field (e.g., Iran, North Korea, Mandarin Chinese, Davos, etc.), as well as by specific keywords (e.g., nose,

[Instructions]

KVETCH-22

From tips on how to avoid mandatory military service in Israel, issued by Target 21, an Israeli antiwar organization. The group's name is a reference to Profile 21, a code used by the Israel Defense Force to classify people deemed unfit for service because of physical or psychological disabilities. Translated from the Hebrew by Ariel Babinsky.

Complain about backaches and headaches. These are difficult for the army to validate.

It is easier to “play” a character at least partially based on real details. A good way to avoid contradictions in your story to army officials is to provide the least amount of information possible. Give short answers, no more than a single sentence, and parry troublesome questions with a general answer such as, What’s the difference?

A depressed person does not speak logically. Speak quietly, so quietly that sometimes it will be difficult for others to hear what you’re saying. From time to time, mumble something unintelligible to yourself instead of directly answering a question.

The way you act during the meeting with army psychiatrists is crucial. Opt for a downcast look, and constantly fiddle with your weapon or watch or necklace.

If you show up dressed in freshly ironed clothes and well-polished boots and then complain of being clinically depressed, they will know you are pretending. If you show up barefoot, dressed in rags, with a two-month-old beard, they will suspect that you are intentionally exaggerating. A sloppy appearance is the most appropriate for the clinically depressed.

Generally, crying is not a fundamental element of clinical depression. You may cry, but yours should be a calm, restrained cry—not hysterical.

Avoid an explicit suicidal statement, which can lead to forced hospitalization. Try to imply that you’re only suicidally inclined.

jet ski, liberal arts, Hermès, night soil, etc.) By means of constantly reweighted nodal linkages, the Ironic Cloud will be to some extent self-organizing in real time and thus capable of signaling large-scale realignments in the “weather” of global irony as well as providing early warnings concerning the irruption of idiosyncratic ironic microclimates in particular locations—potential indications of geopolitical, economic, or cultural hot spots.

ADVANCED ACTIVE AND PASSIVE SENSING

This monitory feature of the Ironic Cloud leads to further consideration of the different ways to scan for and detect irony. But this work needs to be done at multiple scales: global, regional, theater, sect, individual, etc. The development of increasingly refined technologies for brain imaging has opened a staggering new world for the investigation of the somatic basis of psychological functioning. Language research has been at the forefront of this work. The time is ripe for a full-scale study of the neurophysiology of irony. What subregions of the brain are metabolically most active in an ironizing subject? What dynamical patterns are revealed by ironic expressions? Can irony be “stimulated” or “suppressed” by chemical or electro-physiological or magneto-inductive means? The answers to these questions will be crucial to the design and testing of irony-scanning equipment. While it is likely that such devices will for some time require relatively high-cost technology, there is reason to hope that biochemical or macrometabolic correlates will be discovered that would allow for inexpensive and portable “Irony Kits” (probably saliva-based, and possibly making use of litmus paper-like tabs) that could be counted on to identify ironic subjects or situations to an adequate first-order level of accuracy. The field value of such systems for military intelligence and domestic surveillance needs no elaboration.

DISTRIBUTED ISR AND ATTACK

Admittedly the most speculative dimension of this project is the preliminary investigation into modes of weaponized irony. Superpower-level political entities (e.g., Roman Empire, George W. Bush, large corporations, etc.) have tended to look on irony as a “weapon of the weak” and thus adopted a primarily defensive posture in the face of ironic assault. But a historically sensitive consideration of major strategic realignments suggests that many critical inflection points in geopolitics (e.g., Second Punic War, American Revolution, etc.) have involved the tactical redeployment of “guerrilla” techniques and tools by regional



The Commons, by Erik Benson, was on exhibit this spring at Black & White Gallery, in New York City.

hegemons. There is reason to think that irony, properly concentrated and effectively mobilized, might well become a very powerful armament on the “battlefield of the future,” serving as a nonlethal—or even lethal—sidearm in the hands of human fighters in an information-intensive projection of awesome force. Without further fundamental research into the neurological and psychological basis of irony, it is difficult to say for certain how such systems might work, but the general mechanism is clear enough: irony manifestly involves a sudden and profound “doubling” of the inner life of the human subject. The ironizer no longer maintains an integrated and holistic perspective on the topic at hand but rather experiences something like a small tear in the consciousness, whereby the overt and

covert meanings of a given text or expression are sundered. *We do not now know just how far this tear could be opened—and we do not understand what the possible vital consequences might be.* Even under the current lay or primitive deployments of irony, we see instances of disorientation, anger, and sometimes even despair. There is thus reason to hope that the irony of the future, suitably tuned, refined, and charged, might be mobilized to “stun” the enemy or possibly *kill outright*. This would be an extreme form of the sort of “speech act” theorized by the English philosopher (and, significantly, Strategic Intelligence Service officer in MI-6) J. L. Austin. Excitingly, such systems could be understood as the tangible culmination of a 2,500-year humanistic Western project of *making words matter*.