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From Director, News

The Rt. Hon. Gerald Kaufman M.P.,
The House of Commons,
LONDON.
SW1A 0AA

Handwritten signature/initials

15 April, 2003

Dear Mr. Kaufman,

Thank you for your letter of 10 April.

I regret the fact that you feel our coverage on the day Baghdad fell to American forces (9 April) was too negative. BBC1 was, of course, the only terrestrial TV channel to broadcast live the symbolic scene of Saddam's statue being toppled. However, I will tackle your specific criticisms in turn.

You begin with the BBC 1 News at 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. In each case you imply that the effect of the interview between the news presenter and Rageh Omaar was to underplay the sense of happiness in Baghdad. I reach a rather different conclusion about the impact of the exchange. It is certainly true that television pictures on the day the Berlin Wall fell – or the day Slobodan Milosevic lost power – showed far more people than the pictures from last week. However, of course, that does not mean people did not feel an enormous sense of relief or joy. And that is exactly the point that was clarified by the journalism to which you object. I quote the relevant passage from Rageh Omaar:

“The thing is that those dramatic scenes we saw just in front of us from our hotel that we have been reporting this war from - was beamed live round the world. You were seeing dozens, if not hundreds, of similar scenes certainly on the bank of the Tigris river, in the Shia suburbs where they came to beat their chests in a Shia ritual that had been banned for years. I think the word spread very fast and hundreds of such demonstrations took place.”

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So we established there were more demonstrators than were literally visible to the cameras. I am satisfied that nevertheless these public expressions of joy were not on the scale of some of the mass euphoria that accompanied the end of the Cold War – perhaps because many may have felt concerned about their safety.

Jeremy Paxman's question to Paul Wood about the demonstrations was not about where the celebrations took place – but rather about where the television pictures were shot. I quote the question to Paul Wood :

"Paul, those pictures were very dramatic, very telling, very symbolic, but they were all in a small area. Can you judge tonight the wider mood?"

Again – I believe this to be a perfectly proper question which produced a perfectly reasonable answer from Paul Wood. Paul , who speaks some Arabic, spent hours moving around the city that day and talked to a number of people. I back his judgement both on the nature of the celebrations and the nature of public sentiment.

As for the 'Newsnight' interview with Captain Thorp, Jeremy Paxman's line of questioning legitimately explored the problem of looting and violence. The interview was courteously conducted with Captain Thorp in Doha. He put his case across – 'Newsnight' asked proper questions .

You suggest that our journalism has not been sufficiently sceptical about Iraqi claims about civilian casualties. In all the output that I have watched or heard the figures have always been sourced. I do not think it would be right to refuse to publish them. As for the pictures of the children with burns - this was the commentary from Paul Wood:

"The hospitals are overflowing; the doctors are exhausted; the drugs are running out. This is another crisis for the Americans to contend with."

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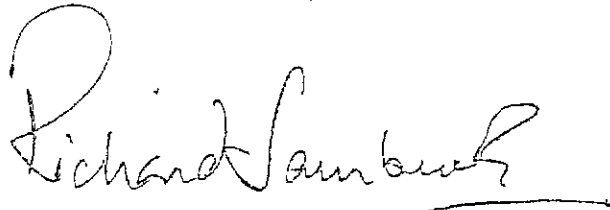
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I do not regard this as unreasonable or unfair.

Finally you compare our coverage of the anti-war demonstration in mid-February with the coverage last Wednesday. I am not sure whether you think we went overboard about the million people who marched in London. At that time of course there was significant public and Parliamentary opposition to the war. It is not of itself a decisive argument but I can assure you we have received letters and e-mails from many who think we paid too little attention to it.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richard Sambrook', with a horizontal line underneath the name.

(Richard Sambrook)