

# Of Rumor and Reality

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) | April 30, 2004

*"I speak of peace while covert enmity*

*Under the smile of safety wounds the world,*

*And who but Rumor, who but only I,*

*Make fearful musters, and prepared defense."* Shakespeare, Henry IV, Part II

May 1st marks a full year since President Bush declared major combat to be over in Iraq. At that point, 138 U.S. military personnel had died in Iraq, 115 killed by hostile fire.

Since then, another 598 have died, 456 in combat. Of this latter number, 126 were killed in April alone; that's 22% of total combat deaths (571) in one month.

Many of these casualties come from the three-week stand-offs at Fallujah and Najaf. Brigadier General Kimmitt, a Coalition Provisional Authority spokesperson, has warned repeatedly in the last ten days that time is running out for peaceful settlement of the confrontations. "Our patience is not eternal," he remarked on April 28th.

He didn't address how patient the Iraqi people have been about the slowness in restoring basic services—clean water, sewage and garbage collection, electric water, medical stocks for hospitals, education for children, and above all else, physical security. When these issues or the broader ones of reconstructing Iraq are raised, the stock answer is that the lack of security has affected the pace of reconstruction.

In this atmosphere, distrust is rampant, and so is rumor.

Marines say they always intended to retake control of Fallujah, which was a hub for numerous attacks on coalition forces. Rumor says the Marines are out to revenge the deaths and mutilation of four U.S. contractors in Fallujah. Reality is that the "truce" declared by U.S. Marines to encourage negotiations is violated daily—and nightly. Rumor says that the insurgents are using the truce to bring in more arms and ammunition, and possibly men, even though Marines

surround the city and "control the night" with their night vision devices. Rumor also says that insurgents are able to move about the city through a network of tunnels, thereby escaping detection by the Marines. The latest rumor—initially denied by the U.S. but confirmed by movements on the ground—is that a new 1,000-strong "Fallujah Protection Army" of former Iraqi soldiers will be inserted into Fallujah to deal with the estimated 1,500 insurgents diplomatically, if possible, militarily if necessary.

Near Najaf, where firebrand cleric Moqtada al-Sadr has retreated and is being protected by an estimated 500 members of his Mahdi militia, CPA officials have declared that al-Sadr will either be arrested or killed. This week, rumor says that U.S. soldiers were in a firefight in Najaf with members of the Mahdi militia. This was denied by CPA representatives, who said all fighting was across the river from Najaf.

What is not rumor is the death and destruction on both sides. Yet even here, what is "reality" depends on the point of view. In Fallujah, a Sunni cleric told a reporter: "They [Americans] are trying to destroy everything." Conversely, the U.S. military points to their controlled "precision" fire and efforts to limit casualties among civilians. But as a foreign occupying force, the U.S. version remains unconvincing to ordinary Iraqis even when it is accurate. A recent poll discovered that most Iraqis regard U.S. troop conduct negatively even though only seven percent of those polled had had personal contact with U.S. troops. Iraqi rumor becomes Iraqi reality.



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At this point, only high-profile deeds have any chance against rumor. The decision to bring in an all-Iraqi unit commanded by Iraqi officers is a giant leap forward. Moreover, success in Fallujah might just convince the CPA to rely more on Iraq's ex-soldiers and ex-officers, properly vetted, in building Baghdad's new armed forces.

At some point, the coalition has to begin trusting the Iraqis, empowering them and giving them a stake in the new Iraq. Iraqis in Najaf have made it clear that the Mahdi militia is not welcome and will not be able to shelter in Najaf from U.S. forces. In Fallujah, who better than an Iraqi can separate Iraqi "nationalists" fighting for a hopeful future from Iraqis and foreigners fighting to destroy that future?

Trust wins reciprocal trust, and winning the trust of local leaders through actions is the critical step in subduing rumor.

Mark Twain once observed that "rumor will die itself if you will only give it three days." One year after the end of major combat, the military has turned a corner by recognizing that a short-term military resolution will only delay—and increase the human cost of—the needed political solution. Unfortunately, this recognition comes 362 days too late to stifle rumor's shelf life and avoid the deaths and injuries of thousands—U.S. and coalition personnel as well as Iraqis.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org)). ©2004. All rights reserved.

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### Recommended citation:

Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.), "Of Rumor and Reality," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, April 30, 2004).

### Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0404rumorreality.html>

### Production Information:

Writer: Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.)  
Editor: John Gershman, IRC  
Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

