

Inside the control room: A roar of affirmation for civil liberties

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [August 24, 2004](#) issue

In *Control Room*, a film on the Arab language television satellite network al-Jazeera, interviewer Abdullah Schleifer presses U.S. Marine Lieutenant Josh Rushing to look at the Middle East as it is seen by the people who live there. Sitting in his headquarters in Doha, Qatar, at the start of the Iraq war, Rushing is trying to be helpful. Finally, he says, “Oh, you mean the *Arab perspective*.” And indeed, that is precisely what Schleifer, a journalism instructor from American University in Cairo, Egypt, has in mind.

Al-Jazeera, with an estimated audience of 40 million Arab-speaking viewers, brings an Arab perspective to its news coverage exactly as U.S. networks bring an American perspective to their viewers. Unfortunately, U.S. viewers rarely see the Arab perspective. Which makes director Jehane Noujaim’s *Control Room* an especially important film for Americans to see.

The star of the film, at least from an American perspective, is Rushing. Pat McDonnell Twair, writing in the *Washington Report*, describes Rushing as “a dream straight out of central casting: a squeaky clean, idealistic American.” Early in the film, says Twair, Rushing “earnestly tells the camera the U.S. is not in the gulf to occupy or take oil, [and] you know he believes it.”

But with prodding from both Schleifer and al-Jazeera reporter Hassan Ibrahim, Rushing begins to acknowledge the Arab suffering he has seen in his role as a public information officer. At one point he admits that he is bothered that “images of Iraqi dead and wounded do not affect him the same way that observing fallen American troops does.” It is clear in this and in other scenes that Rushing has begun to acknowledge the importance of personal perspective.

Twair reports that Rushing has since been promoted to captain and plans to retire from the marines after 14 years in service. The pending resignation may have been on his mind when at one point in *Control Room* Rushing muses, on camera, “If I get

out of the Marine Corps and I do anything, I want to do something with the Palestinian issue. I don't think Americans are getting good information about it." This is not the sort of military candor U.S. audiences are accustomed to receiving in their own media coverage.

Arab audiences also have not been accustomed to receiving Arab reports from democracies in action—until, that is, al-Jazeera arrived on the scene. During the recent Democratic National Convention, according to the *International Herald Tribune*, al-Jazeera “brought 16 employees [to Boston], compared with only three in 2000 and none in 1996, the year the network was launched.” Al-Jazeera was one of three Arab language networks at the Boston convention. (The other two: U.S. government-funded al-Hurra and the Saudi Arabian-based al-Arabiya.) Al-Jazeera devoted as much time to the convention as did the profit-driven three major U.S. networks combined—between 12 and 15 hours over a four-day period.

One of al-Jazeera's experiences in Boston must have felt more like treatment from a Middle Eastern dictatorial government than from a democracy. In the *Herald Tribune*, Jennifer Lee reported that al-Jazeera spent \$2,000 of its \$80,000 convention budget on a banner to hang outside its rented skybox at the convention center, only to have it disappear before the convention opened. The banner, which would have hung beside the ABC, CBS, CNN and NBC boxes, later turned up in a distant warehouse after convention officials ordered it taken down.

Al-Jazeera was told the convention needed the space to advertise a John Kerry Web site. A news-starved convention press gallery of more than 15,000 had trouble accepting that explanation, and rushed to print or the airwaves with stories about the “disappeared” banner. As a result, al-Jazeera got more publicity from the banner that Democratic convention bosses didn't want on display than it would have received had the banner stayed in place.

Some messages that resonated with al-Jazeera viewers did get through the convention control net. The *Herald Tribune* reported that just before al-Jazeera's Tuesday night broadcast, a few staffers were relaxing outside their trailer when “an American television journalist rushed over to tell them how [Illinois U.S. Senate candidate] Barack Obama's keynote speech brought people to their feet with a line about Arab Americans: “If there's an Arab American family being rounded up without benefit of attorney or due process, that threatens my civil liberties.”

This reference drew a more spirited response from the delegates than any of the other concerns voiced by Obama, the son of a black Kenyan father and a white Kansas mother. The convention made no promise to find a way to better understand the Arab perspective, offered no corrective to the oppressive Bush-sponsored Patriot Act, and referred to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in only one sentence: John Edwards's guarantee to protect "the security of the state of Israel." But when Obama demanded protection and due process for Arab Americans, his words evoked wild cheers from the delegates.

We can only hope that candidates Kerry and Edwards took note of the roar of affirmation their own delegates gave for civil liberties. Scripted conventions display the power of political leaders, but unscripted moments reveal how the delegates really feel.