

OFF THE RECORD ON FILIPINO MONKEY

By now you've read the explanation of why the press, like Pascal Pavlov's dogs, went nuclear with the story about ~~Borat~~ Filipino Monkey threatening our Navy. After contemplating the event for a day, the Pentagon decided to manufacture it into a press event. So they seeded the story using an off the record briefing.

The encounter between five small and apparently unarmed speedboats, each carrying a crew of two to four men, and the three U.S. warships occurred very early on Saturday Jan. 6, Washington time. But no information was released to the public about the incident for more than 24 hours, indicating that it was not viewed initially as being very urgent.

The reason for that absence of public information on the incident for more than a full day is that it was not that different from many others in the Gulf over more than a decade.

[snip]

With the reports from 5th Fleet commander Vice-Adm. Kevin Cosgriff in hand early that morning, top Pentagon officials had all day Sunday, Jan. 6, to discuss what to do about the encounter in the Strait of Hormuz. The result was a decision to play it up as a major incident.

[snip]

That decision in Washington was followed by a news release by the commander of the 5th Fleet on the incident at about 4:00 a.m. Washington time Jan. 7. It was the first time the 5th Fleet had ever

issued a news release on an incident with small Iranian boats.

The release reported that the Iranian "small boats" had "maneuvered aggressively in close proximity of [sic] the Hopper [the lead ship of the three-ship convoy]." But it did not suggest that the Iranian boats had threatened the boats or that it had nearly resulted in firing on the Iranian boats.

On the contrary, the release made the U.S. warships handling of the incident sound almost routine.

[snip]

That press release was ignored by the news media, however, because later that Monday morning, the Pentagon provided correspondents with a very different account of the episode.

At 9 a.m., Barbara Starr of CNN reported that "military officials" had told her that the Iranian boats had not only carried out "threatening maneuvers", but had transmitted a message by radio that "I am coming at you" and "you will explode". She reported the dramatic news that the commander of one boat was "in the process of giving the order to shoot when they moved away".

CBS News broadcast a similar story, adding the detail that the Iranian boats "dropped boxes that could have been filled with explosives into the water". Other news outlets carried almost identical accounts of the incident.

The source of this spate of stories can now be identified as Bryan Whitman, the top Pentagon official in charge of media relations, who gave a press briefing for Pentagon correspondents that morning. Although Whitman did offer a few remarks on the record, most of the Whitman

briefing was off the record, meaning that he could not be cited as the source.

The result, as we've tracked closely, was so pathetic that even Fox was embarrassed.

I just wanted to add one detail to this. We now know the Pentagon very deliberately seeded this story, but did so in a manner that couldn't be traced back to them. Which is why I wanted to bring back this denial from the Pentagon.

Pentagon officials insist that they never claimed Iran made the threat. "No one in the military has said that the transmission emanated from those boats. But when they hear it simultaneously to the behavior of those boats, it only adds to the tension," said Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell.

Now, obviously, I wasn't present at the off the record briefing. But if "military officials" named Bryan Whitman indeed told CNN's Barbara Starr that the Iranian boats had had transmitted a message saying "I am coming at you" and "you will explode," doesn't that equate to Pentagon officials claiming Iran made the threat? If so, doesn't Barbara Starr owe it to the public to tell them that when the Pentagon claimed they had never blamed the Borat voice on the Iranians, they were lying?

I understand the hypothetical need to respect off the record briefings. But when such briefings are abused in such a childish and dangerous manner, don't you think it's time to tell the American people they're being lied to?

Update: Fixed my Pavlovian mistake.