

### III IN SEARCH OF TRUTH: AN ELUSIVE SEAGULL AND A FEEBLE QUEST FOR PEACE

When pack journalism produces a cast of thousands chasing the same scraps of meat, when the pools are overflowing and the briefings only half true, it is time for a good reporter to strike out on another path. Geneviève Rossier, of Radio-Canada, complained that she had wasted a whole day looking for the famous oil spill, said to be ten times, or twelve times, or eighteen times the size of the Alaska oil spill caused by the tanker Exxon Valdez. With the one-month war in its later stages, she boarded a Saudi aircraft and spent a large part of a day hunting for a slick of oil spreading from a refinery near the Kuwait sea front. She and the pilot could not find it. She counted it a lost day, but in fact it was another useful reminder that in wartime at least, official spokesmen are not to be taken at their word, simply because it is part of their job to confuse and mislead the enemy. In that process, friends too are misled. Ms. Rossier did not say there was no oil slick; undoubtedly there was, since others took pictures of it. What she said as a member of the first panel on day one of the seminar was that no evidence was available that the slick was eighteen times the size of the Alaska oil spill, as stated officially. Nor could she obtain reliable information as to who or what had loosed oil on the waters of the Gulf.

Rajhida Dergham, New York correspondent for the London-based Arab newspaper *Al-Hayat*, answered a question about whatever happened to the famous oil-soaked seagull, which surely every TV watcher of the war carries engraved somewhere in the memory-track. "It was not even a local bird -- it was an imported bird," she said. The seagull was often used to illustrate the oil slick story on television, but some reporters believed it was not authentic. Geneviève Rossier later said that she and the reporters and camera crew she travelled with had not seen dead birds on beaches.

Ms. Dergham also criticized the failure to obtain Iraqi casualty figures. Both she and Ann Nelson, director of the (US) Committee to Protect Journalists, quoted the Harvard Medical School estimate of 170,000 dead, with people still dying from wounds. General Sidle said, "You've got to keep after the story, and I can tell you as a victim: Do it, because they