

But every third answer was either “To be determined” or “We’re working on that” or “This scenario is unlikely.” At one point, an answer included the “fact” that the United States military would physically secure the geographic border of Iraq. Curious, I checked the length of the physical border of Iraq. Then I checked out the length of our own border with Mexico. Given our exceptional success in securing our own desert borders, I found this statement interesting.

Soon after, I was out-processed for retirement and couldn’t have been more relieved to be away from daily exposure to practices I had come to believe were unconstitutional. War is generally crafted and pursued for political reasons, but the reasons given to Congress and the American people for this one were so inaccurate and misleading as to be false. Certainly, the neoconservatives never bothered to sell the rest of the country on the real reasons for occupation of Iraq—more bases from which to flex U.S. muscle with Syria and Iran, better positioning for the inevitable fall of the regional sheikdoms, maintaining OPEC on a dollar track, and fulfilling a half-baked imperial vision. These more accurate reasons could have been argued on their merits, and the American people might indeed have supported the war. But we never got a chance to debate it.

My personal experience leaning precariously toward the neoconservative maw showed me that their philosophy remains remarkably untouched by respect for real liberty, justice, and American values. My years of military service taught me that values and ideas matter, but these most important aspects of our great nation cannot be defended adequately by those in uniform. This time, salvaging our honor will require a conscious, thoughtful, and stubborn commitment from each and every one of us, and though I no longer wear the uniform, I have not given up the fight. ■

**The Pentagon is organizing Task Force 121, a joint Department of Defense/CIA special-operations assassination team,** investigative journalist Seymour Hersh has revealed.

Force 121’s primary objective is to identify and capture or kill the organizers of resistance to the American occupation in Iraq. Strongly opposed by other senior Pentagon officers, it is the brainchild of Donald Rumsfeld and Gen. William Boykin. Force 121 is training at Fort Bragg with assistance from Israeli advisers, Israel being the world’s pre-eminent authority on targeted killing. The Pentagon has also obtained a Presidential Finding authorizing it to use the Task Force along the borders with Iran and Syria, crossing over whenever necessary to “interdict.” Ethical considerations and international law aside, critics of the Task Force note that its effectiveness is linked to development of good intelligence on the whereabouts of Iraq’s underground leaders. At present, there is virtually no reliable intelligence on the ground in Iraq (or in Afghanistan). History repeats itself. In Vietnam, the similar Phoenix Program’s informants who provided the names of alleged Viet Cong were often both unreliable and exercising personal vendettas, leading to the killing of 40,000 civilians, most of whom had nothing to do with the VC.



**The White House depends on a daily threat matrix to determine if a terrorist action is imminent** either in the

United States or overseas. The matrix is largely a statistical compilation that reflects the number and location of threat indicators and does not require anyone in the White House to have to read anything, which is fortunate. The matrix has fallen slightly since the end of Ramadan but remains at an unusually high level by the standards of the past two years. All threat indicators continue to point outside the United States at this time. Counter-terrorism analysts believe al-Qaeda is still intent on a major terrorist event in North America but probably cannot act until late 2004. Intelligence information suggests that the next target in America will not include hijacked aircraft and may be on the West Coast.



**Neocons in the administration are intent on rewarding Israel** for the “restraint” it has shown while American soldiers were busy

subduing Iraq. Israeli interrogators, embedded in U.S. Army intelligence, are assisting their American counterparts in Baghdad by sharing the soft-torture techniques developed in Ramallah to get almost anyone to agree to almost anything. Israeli companies have been invited to take a slice of the huge contracts being floated for the reconstruction of Iraq, while that gleam in the fathomless eyes of Doug Feith and Richard Perle is the dream of a reconstructed oil pipeline from Mosul to Haifa in Israel. The pipeline, to be upgraded at a cost of around \$1 billion to the U.S. taxpayer, would guarantee Israel’s energy supply and would earn Tel Aviv considerable transit fees. Most observers believe the idea of the pipeline is ludicrous. It passes through Sunni regions of Iraq and would be blown up so often it would quickly resemble Swiss cheese.

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# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[*Big Fish*]

### Life of a Salesman

By Steve Sailer

BECAUSE TIM BURTON directs comedies and fantasies, he has yet to receive an Oscar nomination, despite making movies as memorable as “Beetlejuice,” “Batman,” and “Ed Wood.” With “Big Fish,” though, he delivers a film so original, likeable, and expertly acted that even the pompous Academy will be hard pressed to deny him again.

Burton, for example, aces the casting challenge that “The Human Stain” flunked: finding look-alike movie stars who can play the same character at different ages. Albert Finney of 1963’s “Tom Jones” and his young doppelganger, Ewan McGregor of 2001’s “Moulin Rouge,” combine as the title character, while Jessica Lange (“Tootsie”) and Alison Lohman (“Matchstick Men”) portray his wife.

“Big Fish” is a delightful, often astonishing vindication of much that is out of fashion, including traveling salesmen, the Southern tall-tale tradition, and fathers who bring home the bacon but don’t share their feelings.

Young screenwriter John August brilliantly adapted Daniel Wallace’s 1998 novel into a triumphant reply to Arthur Miller’s “Death of a Salesman.” Nobody is more scorned in theory than the salesman, especially since Miller’s 1949 drama, in which Bernard, the straight-A nerd next door who is Miller’s alter ego,

gets his revenge on the all-American (and thus doomed) Loman family by becoming a Supreme Court litigator, while the Lomans’ sports and business ambitions shatter. Yet, nobody is more popular in real life than the successful jock-turned-salesman. To make it in his ego-crushing profession, he must possess the self-confidence, optimism, and wit that the rest of us hope will somehow rub off on us if we buy what he’s selling.

After a lifetime peddling wholesale merchandise across America with a smile and a story, Edward Bloom is dying. In contrast to Willy Loman, however, Edward is prosperous because he is not only liked, but “well liked,” and precisely because of his refusal to face facts. Everybody loves Edward’s comic fish stories, his endlessly polished Davy-Crockett-style yarns about his early days.

Everybody that is, except Edward’s prosaic son William (Billy Crudup of “Almost Famous”). A fact-grubbing UPI reporter (like me), William flies home to Alabama desperate to get a straight story out of his father at last. When William was a boy, he had hungered for his dad’s rare visits home and believed every word of his whoppers. But, now, about to become a father himself, he wants to know who this man really was.

Infuriatingly, Edward instead charms one last new audience, William’s pregnant wife, with his well-practiced fibs, which Burton shows us in hilarious flashbacks.

Back when he was the high-school sports hero, Edward volunteered to save his little town from a hungry 15’ tall giant (portrayed affectingly by the 7’-6” actor Matthew McGrory, who is in the Guinness Book of World Records for wearing size 26 shoes). Being a go-getter

with a “sociable disposition,” Edward easily persuaded the behemoth that they were both big fish trapped in a too-small pond.

So, Edward found his new pal a job at the circus. He then spotted the one true love of his life in the bleachers, but she disappeared before he learned her name. The ringmaster (Danny DeVito) promised to reveal one clue about her each month if Edward became his indentured servant. After three years of being shot out of cannons, Edward found her but was immediately drafted into the Korean War. He parachuted behind Red lines and escaped only with the help of two beautiful Chinese singers, Siamese twins who wanted him to introduce them to Bob Hope.

Slowly, William begins to grasp that his father’s stories do contain some truth, suitably stretched. Who ultimately is Edward Bloom? He’s an artist of gab, a Picasso of the pitch.

Moreover, Edward was something that hasn’t been much honored in movies lately, especially since the rise of Steven Spielberg, who still resents his father’s workaholicism. Edward was a good provider, a traveling man who couldn’t stand to stay home but always came back eventually to his wife and son, often with big paychecks.

Unlike Edward, I’m very much the fashionable homebody father. I suspect, though, that styles will change again, and someday my boys will ask, “Dad, why did you always hang around with us, when you could have been out schmoozing clients so you’d have something to leave us in your will?” ■

Rated PG-13 for a fight scene, some images of nudity, and a suggestive reference.

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