By ERROL MORRIS

You have your fear, which might become reality; and then you have Godzilla, who is reality. — from the movie “Godzilla: King of the Monsters”

As almost everyone knows by now, various major daily newspaper published, on July 10, a photograph of four Iranian missiles streaking heavenward; then Little Green Footballs (significantly, a blog and not a daily newspaper) provided evidence that the photograph had been faked. Later, many of those same papers published a Whitman’s sampler of retractions and apologies. For me it raised a series of questions about images.[1] Do they provide illustration of a
text or an idea of evidence of some underlying reality or both? And if they are evidence, don’t we have to know that the evidence is reliable, that it can be trusted?
Hany Farid, a Dartmouth professor and an expert on digital photography, has published a number of journal articles and a recent Scientific American article on digital photographic fraud. He seemed to be a good person to start with. If a photograph has been tampered with, he’s the person to analyze how the tampering has been done. I wanted to discuss with him the issue of the Iranian photograph starting with the issue of why we trust photographs in the first place.

HANY FARID: The short answer is: I don’t know. The longer answer is: if you look at the neurological level, what’s happening in our brain, roughly 30 to 50 percent of our brain is doing visual processing. It’s just processing the visual imagery that comes in, and if you think about it in terms of bandwidth, there is a remarkable amount of information entering into our eyes and being processed by the brain. Now, the brain samples like a video camera, but 30 frames a second, high resolution, massive amounts of information. Vision is a pretty unique sense for the brain. It’s incredibly powerful and is very valuable from an evolutionary point of view. So it’s not surprising that it has an emotional effect on us. The Vietnam War, the war abroad and the war at home, has been reduced to a few iconic images — the Napalm girl, the girl at Kent State. What seems to emerge from major events and eras are one or two images that effectively embody the emotion and rage, the happiness and anger. The whole thing somehow is enfolded in there. The brain is just very good at processing visual imageries and bringing in memories associated with images.

ERROL MORRIS: But text is often brought in visually as well.

HANY FARID: Sure, but processed in a different part of the brain. So, yes, the visual system has to process it, but where it’s actually being processed is not in the back of the brain where the visual processing is, it’s on the side of the brain.
It’s the language center, which is completely different. And there are plenty of people out there, my girlfriend is a middle school teacher and she talks all the time about kids who are visual learners and kids who are language learners, and who are auditory. So there’s different ways of processing information. But there’s no doubt that it is remarkably powerful. For example, when you put out a fake, like the Kerry/Fonda one. And even like this missile one. You start putting it out there and saying, “Oh look, this picture? It’s a fake. This picture? It’s a fake.” But you know what people remember? They don’t remember, “It’s a fake.” They remember the picture. And there are psychology studies, when you tell people that information is incorrect, they forget that it is incorrect. They only remember the misinformation. They forget the tag associated with it. They did these great studies, especially with older people. They give them information about health, Medicare, Medicaid, that kind of stuff. And they say, “this information that you heard? It’s wrong.” And what ends up happening is, that information gets ingrained into their brains, and even if they are subsequently told it’s wrong, they end up believing it.

ERROL MORRIS: It occurred to me, just with respect to the missile photograph, that if the people who Photoshopped this photograph wanted to call additional attention to it, they could do no better than what they did.

HANY FARID: That’s exactly right. Look at how much attention is being brought to it. At the end of the day, even though they doctored the photograph, it shows that these guys still fired three missiles, and they sure brought a lot of attention to it.

ERROL MORRIS: The threat remains. What are we supposed to infer? It’s a fake, so there is no need to worry?
The real threat is only 75 percent of what we thought. Three missiles instead of four.

HANY FARID: It raises a whole other level of information warfare, right? You intentionally put things out there just to know that the controversy in and off itself will help you make your point.

ERROL MORRIS: And since it is a version of chest thumping or saber rattling — whatever you want to call it — the thumping and the rattling linger on.

HANY FARID: Has there been a response from the Iranians?

ERROL MORRIS: A variety of different responses — from bellicose to reassuring. Ahmadinejad said that Iran had no intention of attacking Israel.[5]

HANY FARID: But no admission about doctoring the photograph?

ERROL MORRIS: No. Not that I’m aware of. But doctored photographs are the least of our worries. If you want to trick someone with a photograph, there are lots of easy ways to do it. You don’t need Photoshop. You don’t need sophisticated digital photo-manipulation. You don’t need a computer. All you need to do is change the caption.

[The photographs presented by Colin Powell at the United Nations in 2003 provide several examples. Photographs that were used to justify a war. And yet, the actual photographs are low-res, muddy aerial surveillance photographs of buildings and vehicles on the ground in Iraq. I’m not an aerial intelligence expert. I could be looking at anything. It is the labels, the captions, and the surrounding text that turn the images from one thing into another.[6]
Photographs presented by Colin Powell at the United Nations in 2003. (U.S. Department of State)

Powell was arguing that the Iraqis were doing something wrong, knew they were doing something wrong, and were trying to cover their tracks. Later, it was revealed that the captions were wrong. There was no evidence of chemical weapons and no evidence of concealment.
There is a larger point. I don’t know what these buildings were *really* used for. I don’t know whether they were used for chemical weapons at one time, and then transformed into something relatively innocuous, in order to hide the reality of what was going on from weapons inspectors. But I do know that the yellow captions influence how we see the pictures. “Chemical Munitions Bunker” is different from “Empty Warehouse” which is different from “International House of Pancakes.” The image remains the same but we *see* it differently.[7]

Change the yellow labels, change the caption and you change the meaning of the photographs. You don’t need Photoshop. That’s the disturbing part. Captions do the heavy lifting as far as deception is concerned. The pictures merely provide the window-dressing. The unending series of errors
engendered by falsely captioned photographs are rarely remarked on. – E.M.]

HANY FARID: You are absolutely right; you don’t need Photoshop to editorialize. We can go back to Mao and Stalin and Castro and Mussolini, and all these guys. All the dictators doctored photographs in order to effectively change history. So why is this a big deal? Is it because of the power of visual imagery, the fact that it resonates so much? Maybe that will change with the next generation. Maybe this new generation will be thinking about images differently. There is a savviness about what technology can do. Kids now are growing up in digital age where they routinely see doctored images in their mailboxes, in the media, on television, and so on and so forth.

ERROL MORRIS: But, as we become more and more sophisticated about images — about how images are processed — haven’t we become more sophisticated about detecting fraud? Photoshop manipulations are relatively easy to detect. They fool the eye, but they don’t necessarily fool the expert.

HANY FARID: The answer is: yes and no. It depends on the image source. So, if we have the raw files[8], if we have the original footage from someone’s digital camera, you can’t fool us anymore. We have enough technology today where, given the camera, the original images that came off the camera, we can tell if you’ve manipulated them. If, however, you are talking about an image that has been cropped and reduced and compressed and posted on the web, then we might be able to do it, but there’s no guarantee. The task is decidedly harder because a lot of information has been thrown away. You’ve compressed the image; you’ve resized it. This is why all the Loch Ness monster and ghost images are always so tiny and grainy, because then you can’t see the
signs of tampering. With low-res images it’s much harder to detect a fake. Definitely, when we have a high-res original image, we are much better at it.

[People often trust low-res images because they look more real. But of course they are not more real, just easier to fake. We look at picture of Nessie (the Loch Ness Monster). It’s grainy, fuzzy. It’s hard to make anything out. You never see a 10-megapixel photograph of Big Foot or the Abominable Snowman or the Loch Ness Monster. One explanation is: these monsters don’t exist. But if they did exist — so the thinking goes — they are probably unwilling to sit still for portraiture. The grainy images are proof of how elusive Nessie can be. This belief extends to documentary filmmaking, as well. If it’s badly shot, it’s more authentic. – E.M.]

ERROL MORRIS: Well, finding evidence that someone has used the Photoshop clone-tool is relatively easy, isn’t it, if you have a raw file in front of you as a comparison?

HANY FARID: Well, certainly if you have the original, but even without the original, we’re actually pretty good at detecting cloning. Now interestingly, in the Iranian missile image, I actually ran the clone detection software, and it did not detect it. Here’s the reason: they’re not perfect clones. They actually have been adjusted a little bit, and if you look carefully at the image, you will see this. There are two things going on. First of all, the image has been JPEG compressed, which changes the cloning a little bit, but we can still detect cloning in the present JPEG. But what happened is it was altered after it was cloned. Somebody went in and actually manipulated in small places to make it look less obvious. The Iranian photograph was done much more carefully and much more subtly. There were these four folds of smoke in the bottom right hand corner in one of the plumes. If they
had actually adjusted that a little bit, which is what I do when I clone, people wouldn’t have seen it. That makes the fake even more impressive, because it wasn’t just copy, paste. We would have detected that. And frankly, if we didn’t have the photo with the third missile not launching, and somebody asked me what do you think, I would have said, “Well, I think it’s suspicious, but I’m not sure.”

ERROL MORRIS: But here’s a question. First, there was one picture. Then there were two. When did the second picture become available? Did the Iranians post both photographs, the cloned and the uncloned original? If I’m interested in deceiving you, and I have produced an altered photograph B based on photograph A, which has not been cloned, don’t I suppress A? Don’t I suppress the unaltered photograph?

HANY FARID: I don’t know where it [the three-missile photograph] came from.[9] Maybe there was just another photographer there. And if you look, it is not the original photograph that was manipulated. The photo with three missiles was taken just before, and from a slightly different vantage point. So I think what was happening was that there was another photographer and that image got released also, and that’s how we know that the third missile misfired. By the way, it’s not obvious, although everybody’s saying it is, that this is only a clone job. It could’ve been that that fourth missile fired, just at a later time, so that they tested it afterwards. It fired, they took a picture of it, and then they composited it, as opposed to cloned it, into the original picture. That also would explain why they’re not exact copies of each other. So I’m not exactly sure what happened.

ERROL MORRIS: If you believe that it could not have been simple cloning, or they went in and they altered a pixel here and there, to muddy the waters, can you really say that with certainty?
HANY FARID: The reason why we’re sure it was tampered with is because we have that other photograph. That’s why we know, right? That’s what really locks it in.

ERROL MORRIS: But how do you know that that other photograph hasn’t been altered?

HANY FARID: That’s a fair question. How do we know that that one’s not fake, as well?

ERROL MORRIS: Yes. There’s a remarkable story about the forging of the Hitler diaries. The forger was so prolific, he created so many forgeries — letters, watercolors, diaries, etc. — that handwriting analysts (charged with the task of authenticating the diaries) took writing examples done by the forger thinking they were genuine examples of Hitler’s handwriting and compared them to the diaries. They authenticated the diaries on that basis.[10] Often we make a comparison between something that we believe is real and something that we believe is fake. I guess the moral of the story is we should always consider the possibility that we may be comparing something fake with something else that is fake.

HANY FARID: It’s sort of like Rembrandt, right? His body of work has been shrinking for decades now, right? And so what’s considered to be his body of work is completely different now, cause he was faked so heavily. It’s a good question. The reason why we believe that the one with the four missiles is fake is that there is pretty strong, at least circumstantial, evidence that the cloning was there. The plumes of smoke look very, very similar. There are a lot of little pieces. But also, when you clone with a standard clone tool, there’s like a soft cloning, so it does a little bit of like alpha matting, so that it’s not a hard edge. And you see along the rocks, there’s definitely some funny business going on. Again, visually it’s not a certainty. But it certainly looks more
suspicious.

ERROL MORRIS: But when we see something suspicious, aren’t we asking also asking the questions: What are they up to? Why are they doing this? Why are there three missiles in one photograph and four in another? What is going on here? What were they thinking? The simple answer: If my desire is to present a bellicose posture to the West, fine, clone a couple of those missiles. We know it’s a fake. But what are we supposed to infer from the photograph? Is it that these Iranians are so unscrupulous they will stop at nothing?

* * ***

Looking at photography critically is also very much part of the agenda of Little Green Footballs. I spoke with Charles Johnson, who created and manages the Web site, about the role that he has played in uncovering several photographic frauds. He originated the term “fauxtography” and is something of a gadfly. His method is often visual, using elegant visual comparisons — jumping back in forth between two images to highlight the similarity of certain details. He has used this technique to challenge the authenticity of the Killian documents[11], as well as several fauxtrographs from Lebanon and Iran.[12]

ERROL MORRIS: How did the controversy start?

CHARLES JOHNSON: Someone emailed me and said, “Go look at this photograph.” He said, “This looks like there really aren’t four missiles here.” So I took a look at the photo, and there it was, repeating patterns in the smoke. [In Little Green Footballs, Charles Johnson graphically explains the similarities between specific areas of the fauxtograph.][13]

ERROL MORRIS: Did you subject it to any kind of test?

CHARLES JOHNSON: Well, you can take the image into Photoshop and exaggerate the contrast, or do some other
kinds of manipulations. That can show you where areas were cut and pasted. There is no need to really put it under the microscope when it’s staring you in the face.

Repeating patterns in the smoke. (Charles Johnson, littlegreenfootballs.com)

ERROL MORRIS: What I find puzzling about it is they now have shown two different photographs. The photograph pre-Photoshop, and then of course the other one post-Photoshop.

CHARLES JOHNSON: The pre-Photoshop shows that one of the missiles didn’t launch.

ERROL MORRIS: Yes. But if you wanted to put out a fake story why would you release both photographs?

CHARLES JOHNSON: It’s an odd thing, isn’t it? You could really go down the rabbit hole with that. You can start concocting different theories, like maybe they wanted it to be discovered. But, I’ve learned that you should never attribute to cleverness what can be easily explained by stupidity. And I
think there’s a lot of stupidity in those organizations. It’s not really surprising that one hand might not know what the other was doing. They all came from Iran, I know that much. If I check it out, I think it was Sepah. The L.A. Times on their front page actually credit it to the Revolutionary Guard. I thought that was pretty ironic.

ERROL MORRIS: Ironic?

CHARLES JOHNSON: Well, it’s just very odd to see a photo on the cover of a major American newspaper that’s credited to one of our sworn mortal enemies. And I don’t think I’m the only one who finds that a bit disturbing.

ERROL MORRIS: I guess the attribution tells you you’re looking at a genuine Iranian photograph — the photograph really came from Iran — not that the photograph itself is genuine.

CHARLES JOHNSON: It’s important for a totalitarian regime to maintain control over information. And when they have a failure and it’s supposed to be one of their glorious weapons demonstrations, they want to cover it up. That’s the easiest and simplest explanation.

ERROL MORRIS: That seems entirely reasonable. They want us to be impressed with the military might of Iran. With their capacity to retaliate. It says visually: if attacked, we are going to annihilate you.

CHARLES JOHNSON: Which is apparently what most of the editors of major newspapers in America thought. Because they ran it on their front pages.

ERROL MORRIS: Do you think that’s their reasoning?

CHARLES JOHNSON: No, I think their reasoning is it was a sexy picture. That’s what I think. I don’t think it has anything
to do with ideology.

ERROL MORRIS: It just looks good?

CHARLES JOHNSON: Right.

ERROL MORRIS: But it does convey, on some very basic level, military might even though you don’t really know what the payload is. You don’t know what the range is. You don’t know anything about the missiles. You just know that there are four of them, and they’re streaking into the sky. And presumably they’re heading west. But even in exposing the fraud, we’re still left with the missiles, no?

CHARLES JOHNSON: Right. They were real missiles, yes.

ERROL MORRIS: Well, we presume they’re real missiles.

CHARLES JOHNSON: As far as we know.

ERROL MORRIS: As far as we know. So why is it so important to expose this kind of fraud?

CHARLES JOHNSON: Well, one reason is because I don’t think you should ever not expose fraud. When you see a photo that’s been faked, and it’s on the cover of newspapers, and it came from a regime that’s our enemy, you’ve got to expose that, if you see it.

ERROL MORRIS: Does this fraud in any way change your view of the government of Iran?

CHARLES JOHNSON: Probably not my view, but it might change other people’s views.

*   *   * Charles Johnson’s term “fauxtography,” of course, suggests that there is something “true” about photography, at least photography that isn’t posed or Photoshopped. And in recent years, the mainstream
press has embraced this orthodox view. The principle is straightforward. Zero tolerance. Allow no digital manipulation. No posing. If a photographer uses any one of a variety of Photoshop tools, fire him.

It’s not that I disagree with these rules. I don’t, but the development of Photoshop (1) can heighten our awareness of how a photograph can be manipulated, and (2) may inure us to all the other ways in which an image’s relationship to truth can be compromised. It allows the false assumption: if we can just determine that this photograph wasn’t Photoshopped, then it must be “true.”[14] But Photoshop serves as a reminder to us of something that we should have known all along: photographs can deceive.

The presumption behind a photograph is: “Someone saw this.” It is supposedly presenting something that someone saw and wished for someone else to see. What is it that angers us? Charles Johnson has it right. We are angered because we have been the victims of fraud. We have been tricked. In essence, we have been lied to. The problem is not that the photograph has been manipulated, but that we have been manipulated by the photograph. Photoshop is not the culprit. It is the intention to deceive.[15]

Of course, the manipulation of photographs is nothing new. It is as old as photography itself. And there are manipulated photographs that make no attempt to deceive. John Heartfield, one of the creators of photomontage in the 1920’s and 30’s (along with other representatives of Dada — Ernst, Hoch and Hausmann), employed the motto: “Use Photography as a Weapon.” And sure enough, he juxtaposed familiar photographic images to create a bleak picture of Europe on the verge of war. (The picture at left appeared in Prague on June 29, 1938. By the end of September the Munich Agreement was signed and the Sudetenland ceded to
Hitler.) Text, particularly ironic text, was an essential element of almost all of Heartfield’s pictures. Here it reads: “This is the Salvation They Bring.”
A photomontage by John Heartfield, which appeared in Workers' Illustrated Newspaper, June 29, 1938. (2008 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/ VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn)
Heartfield changed his name from Helmut Herzfeld because of his pacifist sympathies. After World War I, he no longer wished to see himself as German. Herzfeld, who was five-foot-two, used photomontage to take on the Third Reich. He fled Berlin in April 1933, just a step ahead of the Gestapo and went to Prague where he continued to work for almost six years. In December, 1938 Germany was demanding Heartfield’s extradition and just ahead of the Gestapo, he fled to London, where he remained for the rest of the war.[16]

Heartfield was asked in 1967, the year before he died, how he got the idea of photomontage. He replied, “I started making photomontages during the First World War. There are a lot of things that got me into working with photos. The main thing is that I saw both what was being said and not being said with photos in the newspapers ... I found out how you can fool people with photos, really fool them ... You can lie and tell the truth by putting the wrong title or wrong captions under them, and that’s roughly what was being done ...” [17]

He had become convinced that photographs were being used to sell a war that had already been lost. For Heartfield, lurking around every image is manipulation. The very real possibility that images can and will be used as propaganda even though no (chemical or digital) manipulation is involved. Heartfield, in one of his most powerful images (from 1930), uses photomontage to challenge images and words.

The text accompanying the image[18] states: “Whoever reads bourgeois newspapers becomes blind and deaf. Away with these stultifying bandages.”
Heartfield’s point is that we should be suspicious of what we see and what we read — of what we are told. The essence of his art is an attempt to take images — usurp them and use them to tell a different story. He is asking us to think of images as images — to think of them ironically — and to make connections where connections were not made before. It is not so much expropriation of images — to use a term that is currently fashionable — as a repurposing of them.

A similar thing is happening today. Pop culture parodies of the Four-Missile Photograph emerged almost at once. The blog Boing Boing sponsored a contest: “Iran: You Suck at Photoshop” and posted several of the winners.[19] The Iranian-Godzilla image might be my favorite, if only because it raises the specter of atomic disaster. Wasn’t Godzilla (according to the narrative) accidentally awakened and mutated by the atomic bomb? The image ridicules the Iranians but at the same time reminds us of the possibility of an apocalypse in the Middle East? The possibility of World War III?

Other blog postings include cartoon characters and others kinds of clones. Uncle Sam clutching one missile and looking reprovingly at the Photoshopped missile, as if to say, “You won’t get away with this.”
A cloned storm-trooper army of rampaging Ahmadinejads.
For me, Godzilla and Wile E. Coyote are in the spirit of Heartfield.
The intention is not just to ridicule, but to make us think. Godzilla, emerging from the smoke of three rockets, reminds us of the danger of nuclear war. And Wile E. Coyote, reminds us of our vulnerability. Did he order his shield from the Acme Anti-Ballistic Shield Corporation? Here he is, holding his pathetic orange umbrella as the world devolves into nuclear war — another scheme to catch the Roadrunner gone horribly awry.

Are we all Wile E. Coyotes?

After Godzilla was first introduced to the public, there were some questions about whether Godzilla was a good monster or a bad monster. Sure, he crushed people and created havoc in Tokyo, but did he have bad intentions? Several additional movies were needed in order to clarify this and other questions about his motivations. New monsters were proposed, vetted and movie projects built around them. First,
Rodan, then Mothra. If Godzilla wasn’t so bad, who or what was worse?

The answer was soon forthcoming. Ghidrah (sometimes spelled Ghidorah[20]), a particularly nasty three-headed monster, was introduced and revealed to be Godzilla’s mortal enemy. A new axis of evil. Monsters fighting other monsters. Presumably, we can’t even create fictional monsters without dividing them into good and evil. Clearly, we are fascinated by the spectacle of a war fought by the monsters we conjure in our minds. In the film Ghidrah: King of the Monsters, it is revealed that Godzilla is a good guy, not a villain — his hatred of humans is the product of a series of unprovoked attacks by humans against him.

We should remember that the power of photographs comes not only from their ability to copy reality, but also to alter reality. Photographs can be used — to borrow Heartfield’s phrase — as weapons. They can be used to warn us about the dangers of impending war. They can also be used to ratchet up the blind forces of rage and unreason that drag us into conflict.

* * * Acknowledgments. I would like to thank Charles Silver, Ron Rosenbaum, Julia Sheehan, Dan Polsby, Alice Truax and Ann Petrone for reading several drafts of this essay and suggesting a number of essential ideas. Joshua Woltermann provided research and fact checking.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] The images have been discussed in The Lede.

[2] I have discussed the Kerry/Fonda image in a previous essay. Basically, a fauxtograph was created putting Kerry and Fonda together at an anti-war rally. They had both been to anti-war rallies, but they were not speaking together at one
rally.

[3] We believe things that we have been told are false. We also “remember” things that never happened to us. An image can make us think that we were present at events that we have no direct experience of. When natural selection put our brains together, was there a set of pigeon-holes for information, e.g., this piece of information came from The National Enquirer, this other piece of information came from The New York Times, this third piece of information came from direct experience. Of course, we try to assess the reliability of information, but with the swirl of information around us, there is often little opportunity to sort it into reliable, less reliable and totally unreliable information. It’s just a sodden mass of information. Years ago, I was watching “Six O’Clock News,” a documentary film by Ross McElwee. In the movie, there is a scene of a television crew shooting ‘Baywatch’ from the Santa Monica pier. A year later I was standing on the Santa Monica Pier telling a producer, “The last time I was here I watched a television crew shooting ‘Baywatch.’” The producer said, “No, you weren’t. You were watching Ross McElwee’s film ‘Six O’Clock News.’” Of course, the producer was correct. I was confused. I had confabulated the experience of seeing something in a movie with real life. Supposedly, Ronald Reagan often made this mistake, but how can you really remember which experiences were first-hand, which were seen in a movie? Or appeared on television or in a magazine?


“When I was a boy in England long ago, people who traveled on trains with dogs had to pay for a dog ticket. The question arose whether I needed to buy a dog ticket when I was traveling with a tortoise. The conductor on the train gave me
the answer: ‘Cats is dogs and rabbits is dogs but tortoises is insects and travel free according.’

Nicholas Humphrey in a letter to the editors pointed out that “the very same encounter appeared as a cartoon in Punch in 1869. The caption of the cartoon reads:

Railway Porter (to Old Lady traveling with a Menagerie of Pets). “‘STATION MASTER SAY, MUM, AS CATS IS ‘DOGS,’ AND RABBITS IS ‘DOGS,’ AND SO’S PARROTS; BUT THIS ‘ERE ‘TORTIS’ IS A INSECT, SO THERE AIN’T NO CHARGE FOR IT!” [Punch, 1869, Vol. 57, p. 96]”

An 1869 cartoon by Charles Keene that appeared in Punch magazine. Used with permission from The Punch Library.

Freeman Dyson replied:

“Thanks to Nicholas Humphrey and Michael Jackson for letters informing me of the 1869 Punch cartoon about
tortoises and dogs on trains. My memory of traveling with a tortoise has two possible explanations. The first and more probable is that I heard of the conversation recorded in the Punch cartoon and transformed it over the years into a memory. This would not be the first time that I remembered something that never happened. Memories of childhood recollected in old age are notoriously unreliable. The second possible explanation is that the memory is accurate. In that case the conductor on the train knew the cartoon and said what he was supposed to say according to the script.”

Here, Dyson essentially admits to having confabulated seeing a Punch cartoon with a real experience. My friend Charles Silver has provided a thoughtful analysis. “Here are several (overlapping) definitions for ‘confabulation’: inventing things that aren’t true; making up something that’s thought to be true for a variety of reasons, one being to fill in memory gaps; inventing something that’s hoped to be true; imagining that something happened to you after hearing a report or reading a story about someone else; manufacturing, deliberately or not, a portion of reality; arriving at a fabricated story; and just plain lying.”

[5] That Iran is interested in projecting a bellicose posture to Israel and the West is hardly arguable. Globalsecurity.org has published a series of Iranian press releases. This one might be called “The Regretful Response,” but more appropriately, it could be called, “The Not-So Regretful Threat.”

**IRNA – Islamic Republic News Agency**

Tehran, July 11, IRNA –Iran-Prayers-Kashani — Substitute Friday prayers leader of Tehran Ayatollah Mohammad Emami Kashani said Friday that the Islamic Republic of Iran is not a threat but will give a regretful response to possible invasions. “... So, Iran is not a threat. That’s what regional
and even western states have said. They say Iran is ready for talks. Don’t raise hue and cry against Iran. Oh! The world’s liars! Oh the liar Israel! Oh the liar White House! If you wish to attack Iran, we will give you a response that will make you regretful,” said Ayatollah Kashani in his second Friday prayers sermon.”

[6] The Times a year later ruefully admitted that the “intelligence” was in error. “According to the interviews conducted by The New York Times, the administration’s argument that Iraq was producing biological weapons was based almost entirely on human intelligence of unknown reliability. When mobile trailers were found by American troops, the White House and C.I.A. rushed out a white paper reporting that the vehicles were used to make biological agents. But later, an overwhelming majority of intelligence analysts concluded the vehicles were used to manufacture hydrogen for weather balloons or possibly to produce rocket fuel...” Powell’s Case, a Year Later: Gaps in Picture of Iraq Arms, by Douglas Jehl and David E. Sanger, The New York Times, Feb. 1, 2004.

[7] Powell’s words before the United Nations provide little justification beyond various appeals to authority:

“Let me say a word about satellite images before I show a couple. The photos that I am about to show you are sometimes hard for the average person to interpret, hard for me. The painstaking work of photo analysis takes experts with years and years of experience, poring for hours and hours over light tables. But as I show you these images, I will try to capture and explain what they mean, what they indicate, to our imagery specialists. Let’s look at one. This one is about a weapons munitions facility, a facility that holds ammunition at a place called Taji. This is one of about 65 such facilities in Iraq. We know that this one has housed
chemical munitions. In fact, this is where the Iraqis recently came up with the additional four chemical weapons shells. Let me give you a closer look. Look at the image on the left. On the left is a close-up of one of the four chemical bunkers. The two arrows indicate the presence of sure signs that the bunkers are storing chemical munitions. The arrow at the top that says ‘security’ points to a facility that is a signature item for this kind of bunker. Inside that facility are special guards and special equipment to monitor any leakage that might come out of the bunker. The truck you also see is a signature item. It’s a decontamination vehicle in case something goes wrong. This is characteristic of those four bunkers. The special security facility and the decontamination vehicle will be in the area, if not at any one of them or one of the other, it is moving around those four and it moves as needed to move as people are working in the different bunkers.”

[8] The raw data from the image sensor or chip of a digital camera.

[9] Both the three and four missile photographs were posted on the website of Sepah News, the media arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

[10] Ludwig Wittgenstein in the “Philosophical Investigations”, section 265. It is “[a]s if someone were to buy several copies of the morning paper to assure himself that what it said was true.”

[11] These documents, critical of George W. Bush’s service in the Texas Air National Guard in the 1970s, were allegedly written by Bush’s commander, Lt. Col. Jerry B. Killian. They were used by Dan Rather in a segment of “60 Minutes” piece on September 8, 2004. The faxed copies were presented as facsimiles of the originals. The evidence supplied by Charles Johnson makes this seem unlikely.
[12] I recently had a discussion with my friend Ron Rosenbaum about the difference between a skeptic, a contrarian, and what I call a hyperbolic contrarian.

The Skeptic says, “Everybody believes it, but I’m not so sure I believe it;”

The Contrarian says, “Everybody believes it, so I think it’s probably false.

The Hyperbolic Contrarian says, “Everybody believes it, so it’s definitely false.

I mention these distinctions because there is a little of the Hyperbolic Contrarian in Charles Johnson and probably in me, as well.


[14] I argued against the idea that photographs are either true or false in my first essay for Zoom, “Liar, Liar, Pants On Fire.”

[15] The handkerchief may be the vehicle of Iago’s deception, but it is Iago who does the deceiving.

[16] Heartfield survived the war, the Third Reich did not.


[18] Here is part of the additional text in small print on the right side of the photomontage: “I AM A CABBAGE HEAD. DO YOU KNOW MY LEAVES? FROM WORRIES I AM AT MY WIT’S END, BUT I KEEP QUIET AND HOPE FOR A SAVIOUR... I DON’T WANT TO SEE AND HEAR ANYTHING, OR TO INTERFERE WITH PUBLIC AFFAIRS...”

[20] I don’t want to further antagonize him by misspelling his name.