

Six days of shame

Today is a day of shame for the British military as it declares the Iraqi city of Basra, with a stricken population of a million men, women and children, a “military target”. You will not read or hear those words on the BBC or elsewhere in the establishment media that claims to speak for Britain. But they are true. With Basra, shame is now our signature, forged by Blair and Bush.

Having destroyed Basra’s water and power supplies, and cut off food distribution, and having failed to crack its human defences, they are now preparing to lay siege to Iraq’s second city which, reflecting the nation as a whole, is more than 40 per cent children.

What an ignominious moment in British history. Here is an impoverished third world country under attack by a superpower, the United States, which has unimaginable wealth and the world’s most destructive weapons, and its “coalition” accomplice, Britain, which boasts one of the world’s best “professional” armies: an army with every hi-tech weapon in its arsenal and which we are called upon to “support” in its execution of an illegal and immoral war.

Believing their own propaganda, the British and American military brass have been stunned by the Iraqi resistance. They have tried to belittle the militia defending Basra with lurid stories that its fighters are “terrorists”.

Last night the Ministry of Defence in Qatar was suggesting that “there might just be an uprising against the regime” in Basra. Even if this is true, in no way does it excuse the British assault on a civilian city. The truth is that the Iraqis, with no air power, are fighting like lions to defend not a tyrant, but their homeland.

It is a truth the overwhelming majority of decent Britons will admire; indeed, the historical comparison Tony Blair and his propagandists fear above all is that of the British defending themselves against invasion. That happened 60 years ago; now “we” are the rapacious invaders, sent by a prime minister whose deceptions are now his reputation.

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Yesterday, Blair said that 400,000 Iraqi children had died in the last five years from malnutrition and related causes. He claimed that “huge stockpiles of humanitarian aid” and clean water awaited them in neighbouring Kuwait if only the Iraqi regime would allow safe passage.

In fact, voluminous evidence, including that published by the United Nations Children’s Fund, makes clear that the main reason these children have died is an enduring siege, a 12-year embargo driven by America and backed by Britain. As of last July, \$5.4 billion worth of humanitarian supplies, approved by the UN and paid for by the Iraqi government, were blocked by Washington, with the Blair government’s approval.

And now Blair’s troops are firing their Milan wire-guided missiles in order to “soften up” Basra: a city of “1,000 children under five at grave risk”, says the UN. I have walked through the crooked streets of Basra, along a street blown to pieces by an American missile. The casualties were children, of course, because children are everywhere. I held a handkerchief over my face as I stood in the swirling dust of a school playground with a teacher and several hundred malnourished youngsters.

The dust, Dr Jawad Al-Ali told me, carried “the seeds of our death”. In the children’s wards of Basra’s main hospital, deaths from a range of hitherto unseen cancers are common; and specialists like Dr Al-Ali have little doubt that up to half the population of southern Iraq will die from cancers linked to the use of a weapon of mass destruction deployed by the Americans and the British in 1991 - uranium tipped shells and missiles.

Images of bandaged and traumatised children in hospital wards are appearing on British television; but these are the acceptable faces of war. You do not see the result of a RAF Tornado’s cluster bombing. You are not being shown children scalped by shrapnel, with little legs reduced to bloody pieces of string.

The reason given is reminiscent of the BBC’s refusal almost 40 years ago to show Peter Watkins’ remarkable film, *The War Game*, which graphically showed what would happen to human beings during a nuclear attack on Britain. In 1981, Sir Ian Trethowan, director-general of the BBC, said he feared for the effect on “the elderly” and on people of “limited mental intelligence”.

Certainly, the unseen television images from Iraq are devastating and which I, having seen similar sights, find difficult to look at. But that is beside the point. They are the truth. Iraqi parents have to look at their mutilated children, so why shouldn’t those of us, in whose name they were slaughtered, see what they see? Why shouldn’t we share their shock and pain? Why shouldn’t we see the true

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nature of this criminal invasion? Other wars were sanitised by the suppression of their visual horrors, allowing them to be repeated.

Remember it is not those who oppose this war who need to justify themselves, regardless of Blair's vainglorious calls to "support our troops". The peoples of South Africa and Indonesia and Czechoslovakia overthrew their dictatorships without the Royal Marines and the American Seventh Cavalry. In 1932, having been bombed and invaded, Iraqis threw out their British colonial rulers. In 1958, they got rid of the Hashemite monarchy and declared a republic. Indeed, Iraqis are a people who have shown they can overthrow dictators against the odds. So why have they not been able to throw out Saddam Hussein? Because the United States and Britain armed him and propped him up while it suited them, making sure that, when they grew tired of him, they alone would be the alternative to his rule and the profiteers of his nation's resources. Imperialism has always functioned like that.

The "new Iraq", as Blair likes to call it, will have many models, such as Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua, all of them American conquests and American ruled until Washington allowed a vicious dictatorship to take over. Saddam Hussein only came to power in Iraq after the Americans had helped install his Ba'ath Party in 1979. "That was my favourite coup," said the CIA officer in charge.

Keep in mind the cynicism behind these truths when you next hear Blair's impassioned insincerity; and when you glimpse, if you can, the "unacceptable" images of children killed and mangled and starved in your name, and in the cause of what the prime minister calls "our simple patriotism" - the kind of patriotism, wrote Tolstoy, "that is nothing else but a means of obtaining for the rulers their ambitions and covetous desires, and for the ruled the abdication of human dignity, reason and conscience." **JP**