

We see too much. We know too much

We now glimpse the forbidden truths of the invasion of Iraq. A man cuddles the body of his infant daughter; her blood drenches them. A woman in black pursues a tank, her arms outstretched; all seven in her family are dead. An American Marine murders a woman because she happens to be standing next to a man in a uniform. "I'm sorry," he says, "but the chick got in the way."

Covering this in a shroud of respectability has not been easy for George Bush and Tony Blair. Millions now know too much; the crime is all too evident. Tam Dalyell, Father of the House of Commons, a Labour MP for 41 years, says the Prime Minister is a war criminal and should be sent to The Hague. He is serious, because the prima facie case against Blair and Bush is beyond doubt.

In 1946, the Nuremberg Tribunal rejected German arguments of the "necessity" for pre-emptive attacks against its neighbours. "To initiate a war of aggression," said the tribunal's judgment, "is not only an international crime; it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole."

To this, the Palestinian writer Ghada Karmi adds, "a deep and unconscious racism that imbues every aspect of Western policy towards Iraq." It is this racism, she says, that has cynically elevated Saddam Hussein from "a petty local chieftain, albeit a brutal and ruthless one in the mould of many before him, [to a figure] demonised beyond reason".

To Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill, the Iraqis, like all Arabs, were "niggers", against whom poison gas could be used. They were un-people; and they still are. The killing of some 80 villagers near Baghdad last Thursday, of children in markets, of the "chicks who get in the way" would be in industrial quantities now were it not for the voices of the millions who filled London and other capitals, and the young people who walked out of their schools; they have

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saved countless lives.

Just as the American invasion of Vietnam was fuelled by racism, in which “gooks” could be murdered with impunity, so the current atrocity in Iraq is from the same mould. Should you doubt that, turn the news around and examine the double standard. Imagine there are Iraqi tanks in Britain and Iraqi troops laying siege to Birmingham. Absurd? Well, it would not happen here. But the British military is doing that to Basra, a city bigger than Birmingham, firing shoulder-held missiles and dropping cluster bombs on its population, 40 per cent of whom are children. Moreover, “our boys” are denying water to the stricken people of Basra as well as to Umm Qasr, which they have controlled for a week. It is no wonder Blair is furious with the al-Jazeera channel, which has exposed this, and the lie that the people of Basra were rising up on cue for their liberation.

Since 11 September 2001, “our” propaganda and its unspoken racism has required an imperial distortion of intellect and morality. The Iraqis are not fighting like lions, in defence of their homeland. They are “cowardly” and subhuman because they use hit-and-run tactics against a hugely powerful invader – as if they have any choice. This belittling of their bravery and disregard of their humanity, like the disregard of thousands of Afghans recently bombed to death in dusty villages, confronts us with a moral issue as profound as the Western response to that greatest act of terrorism, the wilful atomic bombing of Japan. Have we progressed? In 2003, is it still true that only “our” lives are of value?

These Anglo-American invasions of weak and largely defenceless nations are meant to demonstrate the kind of world the US is planning to dominate by force, with its procession of worthy and unworthy victims and the establishment of American bases at the gateways of all the main sources of fossil fuels. There is a list now. If Israel has its way, Iran will be next; and Cuba, Libya, Syria and even China had better watch out. North Korea may not be an immediate American target, because its threat of nuclear war has been effective. Ironically, had Iraq kept its nuclear weapons, this invasion probably would not have taken place. That is the lesson for all governments at odds with Bush and Blair: nuclear-arm yourself quickly.

The most forbidden truth is that this demonstrably militarist British government, and the rampant superpower it serves, are the true enemies of our security. In the plethora of opinion polls, the most illuminating was conducted by American Time magazine among a quarter of a million people across Europe. The question was: “Which country poses the greatest danger to world peace in 2003?” Readers were asked to tick off one of three possibilities: Iraq, North Korea

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and the United States. Eight per cent viewed Iraq as the most dangerous; North Korea was chosen by 9 per cent. No fewer than 83 per cent voted for the United States, of which, in the eyes of most of humanity, Britain is now but a lethal appendage.

Only successful propaganda, and corrupt journalism, will prevent us understanding this and other truths. Rupert Murdoch has been admirably frank. In lauding Bush and Blair as “heroes”, he said, “there is going to be collateral damage in Iraq. And if you really want to be brutal about it, better we get it done now.” Every one of his 175 newspapers carries that sinister message, more or less, as does his American television network. The 80 villagers rocketed to death on Thursday are proof of the urgency he describes; other victims in other countries are waiting.

For those journalists who see themselves as honourable truth-tellers, there are difficult choices now: rather like the choice of the young woman at the GCHQ spy centre in Cheltenham who allegedly leaked documents revealing that US officials were trying to blackmail members of the Security Council; rather like the two British soldiers who face court martial because they exercised their right, enshrined by the Nuremberg judges, to refuse to fight in a criminal war that kills civilians.

For journalists who are not “embedded” and are deeply troubled by the kind of propaganda that consumes even our language, and who, as James Cameron put it, “write the first draft of history”, similar courage is required. Brave Terry Lloyd of ITN, killed by the ‘coalition’, demonstrated this. The threats are now not even subtle, such as this from our Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon. “One of the reasons for having journalists [embedded],” he said, “is to prevent precisely the kind of tragedy that occurred to an ITN crew ... because [Terry Lloyd] was not part of a military organisation. And in those circumstances, we can’t look after all those journalists ... So having journalists have the protection of our armed forces is both good for journalism. It’s also good for people watching.”

Like a mafia boss explaining the benefits of a protection racket, Hoon is saying: do as you are told or face the consequences. Indeed, Donald Rumsfeld, Hoon’s superior in Washington, often quotes Al Capone, the famous Chicago mobster. His favourite: “You will get more with a kind word and a gun than with a kind word alone.”

How do we face this threat to all of us? The answer lies, I believe, in understanding the extent of our own power. Patrick Tyler wrote wisely in the New York Times the other day that America faced a “tenacious new adversary”–

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the public. He says we are entering a new bi-polar world with two new superpowers: the Bush/Blair gang on one side, and world opinion on the other, a truly popular force stirring at last and whose consciousness soars by the day. Wasn't it the poet Shelley who, at a time like this, exhorted us to: "Rise like lions after slumber"? **JP**