

Painful decisions?

As the world protests against war, we hear again the lies of old. “A painful decision,” say the supporters of an invasion. But it is not they who will feel the pain: it will be the Iraqi infants writhing in the dust when the cluster bombs fall.

In “Dulce et decorum est”, his classic poem from the First World War, Wilfred Owen described young soldiers, doomed to die, “like old beggars under sacks”, and a man’s “hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin”.

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,-
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

What has changed since Owen wrote those words, not long before his own death in the trenches? In the Gulf war in 1991, the slaughter of Iraqi conscripts was conducted in a similar industrial way. Three brigades of the United States 1st Mechanised Infantry Division used snow ploughs mounted on tanks and combat earth movers, mostly at night, to bury terrified Iraqi teenagers, many of them still alive, including the wounded, in more than 70 miles of trenches. A brigade commander, Colonel Anthony Moreno, said: “For all I know, we could have killed thousands.”

The policy of General Norman Schwarzkopf, the American field commander, was that the Iraqi dead were not to be counted. “This is the first war in modern times,” said one of his aides, “where every screwdriver, every nail, is accounted for.” As for human beings, “I don’t think anybody is going to come up with an accurate count for Iraqi dead.”

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In fact, Schwarzkopf did provide figures to Congress, indicating that at least 100,000 Iraqi soldiers had been killed. He offered no estimate of civilian deaths. Almost a year later, the Medical Education Trust in London published a comprehensive study of casualties. Up to a quarter of a million men, women and children were killed or died in the aftermath of the American-led attack.

As in 1914-18, the war was a bloodfest, with one difference. Almost all the casualties were on one side, and as many as half of them were civilians. A quarter of the 148 American soldiers who died were killed by other Americans. Most of the British who died were also killed by Americans, including nine blown to bits by an American tank. Little of this was reported at the time. The massacre of conscripts and the wounded was revealed six months later by one tenacious reporter, Knut Royce, in New York's *Newsday*. Although journalists sent to report the Gulf war enjoyed extraordinary communications, their editors allowed them to be corralled in a censorial "pool" system.

Little had changed since 1914-18 when the *Times* correspondent Sir Philip Gibbs (compliant media stars were knighted then; nowadays it's more likely to be an OBE) wrote: "We were our own censors . . . some of us wrote the truth . . . apart from the naked realism of horrors and losses, and criticism of the facts which did not come within the liberty of our pen." When the Gulf war was over, the BBC's foreign editor, John Simpson, reported from Baghdad: "As for the human casualties, tens of thousands of them, or the brutal effect the war had on millions of others . . . we didn't see much of that." If the Gulf war was the most "covered" war in history, it was also the most covered-up. With honourable exceptions, the massacre of so many human beings was not considered news.

Every effort is now being made to repeat this travesty, this "old lie". In his interview on 6 February with the Prime Minister, the BBC's Jeremy Paxman's only reference to the human cost of the Bush/Blair adventure was to repeat a question from a woman in his audience. "She asked you," said Paxman to Tony Blair, "about the deaths of innocent people. I mean, as a Christian, how do you feel about innocent people dying?" He then allowed Blair to get away with a self-serving answer that included the lie that, prior to Nato's attack on Yugoslavia, he "let the peace negotiations go on for several more weeks in order to try and get them sorted".

Paxman made no mention of a United Nations estimate, based on World Health Organisation figures, that "as many as 500,000 people could require treatment as a result of direct and indirect injuries" and that an attack was "likely to cause an

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outbreak of diseases in epidemic if not pandemic proportions”. Neither did he ask Blair how he could justify attacking a nation where almost half the population were children, and a large proportion of them were stricken from the consequences of an American and British-driven blockade. If the American and British governments had no quarrel with the Iraqi people and wished to liberate them, Paxman might have asked, quoting Blair himself, why was the United States currently blocking more than \$5bn worth of humanitarian supplies approved by the Security Council?

No, the BBC’s inquisitor was more concerned with the complexities of a second UN resolution, a fig leaf, an amoral contrivance. The clear implication was that as long as the killing of large numbers of innocent human beings was backed by a second resolution, “the problem” was solved. That the Security Council’s principal members were themselves the sources of numerous human rights crimes was not deemed relevant.

Suppressing the human cost of war is the “old lie” in Wilfred Owen’s wonderful poem. Yet in 2003, a privileged establishment journalist paid large amounts of public money ensured that the prime minister did not have to justify the old lie, just as he ensured that Blair did not have to explain the hypocrisy and double standards of Britain’s long and cynical role in Iraq. He even allowed Blair contemptuously to dismiss “the oil thing” as a “conspiracy theory”. With the lives of thousands in the balance, he asked Blair if he prayed with George W Bush.

The opposition of the great majority of the British people, and of people all over the world, to an unprovoked attack on another country has illuminated the indecency of those who claim to speak for and share the public’s essentially liberal values. From behind a humanitarian mask, they promote killing. To this “liberal” lobby, it is wrong to kill innocent people if you are Saddam Hussein (evil) and right to kill them if you are Tony Blair (good). The actual deaths and the crime of killing are irrelevant; the attitude of their killers is what matters.

On 3 February, I pointed out that the Observer, in its editorial of 19 January, had finally buried the principled “freethinking” legacy of its great editor, David Astor. The paper that had stood against British imperialism’s attack on Egypt in 1956 announced it was for attacking Iraq. Coming to the defence of the Observer’s betrayal of its history and readers was the Guardian group’s latest right-wing provocateur, David Aaronovitch, who exemplifies the mask-wearers. Promoting himself as a “liberal”, Aaronovitch is a former apparatchik of the Communist Party that supported the crushing of the Hungarian uprising in 1956. The

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transition from Party hack to pro-Bush warmonger is a smooth road trodden by many. The obscenity of those like Aaronovitch is crystallised in three words in his Observer column of 2 February. The attack on Iraq, he wrote, will be “the easy bit”.

“The easy bit” will be an onslaught of hundreds of missiles on a defenceless population, resulting in countless, and uncounted, civilian casualties. Defending the right of rapacious power to do what it likes when it likes, from Hungary to Iraq, Aaronovitch’s “easy bit” is the callous dismissal of the lives of innocent people who will be cut to pieces by cluster bombs, dropped by American and British pilots from a safe height. “Shooting fish in a barrel”, the American aircraft carrier pilots called it in 1991.

Unlike the witness-nothing windbags, who appear almost to yearn for war, I have seen the victims of cluster bombs. From many snapshots, here is one. Two children writhe on a dirt floor, their bodies displaying hundreds of small open wounds. They have been showered with tiny plastic objects from an American “pellet bomb”, the prototype of the cluster bomb. As the darts move through their vital organs, they die a terrible death, the equivalent of swallowing acid.

“For many of us [supporting an attack on Iraq],” wrote Aaronovitch, “this has become the most difficult and painful judgement to make.” Painful? What pain will he feel? Pain is what the children on the dirt floor felt. Pain is what dying Iraqi infants, who are denied painkillers by the Anglo-American blockade, feel. Ask Denis Halliday, the former UN assistant secretary general and UN humanitarian co-ordinator for Iraq, who watched them die and demanded that the embargo’s enforcers, such as Blair, join him and hear the children’s screams.

Who among the “liberals” who say their motive for backing Bush and Blair is to “liberate” the Iraqi people has spoken out against this medieval siege that has “liberated” hundreds of thousands of Iraqis from life? Their specious compassion is like that of the man who stands beside a torturer, reassuring the victim that his ordeal will end if he accepts the torturer’s terms. “Nothing about Iraq is hard for Pilger,” wrote Aaronovitch. “He was opposed to the containment of Saddam through the enforcement of the no-fly zones, dismissive of the threats to the Kurdish people of the north.” Once again, the unworthy victims are airbrushed. The fishermen, farmers, shepherds and their families and sheep, slaughtered by marauding “coalition” aircraft, are simply omitted. Their deaths are documented in a United Nations security section report and verified by the UN humanitarian co-ordinator for Iraq.

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As for “the threats to the Kurdish people of the north”, year after year, Kurdish villages in northern Iraq have been viciously attacked by the Turkish military, guardians of Nato. They carry out their atrocities under cover of the illegal “no fly-zones” and with the complicity of the US and Britain, which routinely ground their own planes so that their Turkish allies can get on with killing the Kurds. This is rarely reported. In his seminal essay “The Banality of Evil”, Edward S Herman described the important state function of certain journalists and commentators as “normalising the unthinkable for the general public”. What it is wonderful to see these days is that they have failed. There has never been a time of such overwhelming popular opposition to a war before it began. What Aaronovitch calls “the left” are people of decency and common sense from right across the political spectrum.

I read a letter recently by a former conservative Australian politician, Bob Solomon, writing on behalf of other Australian Tories. Its deeply offended and angry tone is representative of the feelings of millions. He wrote: “Wilful mixing of the ‘war against terrorism’ with alleged threat from Iraq is an insult to our intelligence, and if there’s one thing I like less than mindless war, it’s being treated like an idiot by people not bright enough to know we know or too full of their own importance to care. George Bush Junior is the worst leader of a major democracy I have observed for more than 50 years.”

Today, all over the world, the common decency of the majority of humanity is ranged against Bush and Blair and their suburban propagandists, who can either listen and draw back and save countless lives – or they can do as Bertolt Brecht suggested in “The Solution”:

The Secretary of the Writers’ Union
Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee
Stating that the people
Had forfeited the confidence of the government
And could win it back only
By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier
In that case for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another? **JP**