

The unthinkable is becoming the normal

Last Sunday, seated in the audience at the Bafta television awards ceremony, I was struck by the silence. Here were many of the most influential members of the liberal elite, the writers, producers, dramatists, journalists and managers of our main source of information, television; and not one broke the silence. It was as though we were disconnected from the world outside: a world of rampant, rapacious power and great crimes committed in our name by our government and its foreign master. Iraq is the “test case”, says the Bush regime, which every day sails closer to Mussolini’s definition of fascism: the merger of a militarist state with corporate power. Iraq is a test case for western liberals, too. As the suffering mounts in that stricken country, with Red Cross doctors describing “incredible” levels of civilian casualties, the choice of the next conquest, Syria or Iran, is “debated” on the BBC, as if it were a World Cup venue.

The unthinkable is being normalised. The American essayist Edward Herman wrote: “There is usually a division of labour in doing and rationalising the unthinkable, with the direct brutalising and killing done by one set of individuals ... others working on improving technology (a better crematory gas, a longer burning and more adhesive napalm, bomb fragments that penetrate flesh in hard-to-trace patterns). It is the function of the experts, and the mainstream media, to normalise the unthinkable for the general public.”

Herman wrote that following the 1991 Gulf War, whose nocturnal images of American bulldozers burying thousands of teenage Iraqi conscripts, many of them alive and trying to surrender, were never shown. Thus, the slaughter was normalised. A study released just before Christmas 1991 by the Medical Educational Trust revealed that more 200,000 Iraqi men, women and children were killed or died as a direct result of the American-led attack. This was barely reported, and the homicidal nature of the “war” never entered public consciousness in this country, let alone America.

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The Pentagon's deliberate destruction of Iraq's civilian infrastructure, such as power sources and water and sewage plants, together with the imposition of an embargo as barbaric as a medieval siege, produced a degree of suffering never fully comprehended in the West. Documented evidence was available, volumes of it; by the late 1990s, more than 6,000 infants were dying every month, and the two senior United Nations officials responsible for humanitarian relief in Iraq, Denis Halliday and Hans von Sponeck, resigned, protesting the embargo's hidden agenda. Halliday called it "genocide".

As of last July, the United States, backed by the Blair government, was wilfully blocking humanitarian supplies worth \$5.4bn, everything from vaccines and plasma bags to simple painkillers, all of which Iraq had paid for and the Security Council had approved.

Last month's attack by the two greatest military powers on a demoralised, sick and largely defenceless population was the logical extension of this barbarism. This is now called a "victory", and the flags are coming out. Last week, the submarine HMS Turbulent returned to Plymouth, flying the Jolly Roger, the pirates' emblem. How appropriate. This nuclear-powered machine fired some 30 American Tomahawk cruise missiles at Iraq. Each missile cost £700,000: a total of £21m. That alone would provide desperate Basra with food, water and medicines.

Imagine: what did Commander Andrew McKendrick's 30 missiles hit? How many people did they kill or maim in a population nearly half of which are children? Maybe, Commander, you targeted a palace with gold taps in the bathroom, or a "command and control facility", as the Americans and Geoffrey Hoon like to lie. Or perhaps each of your missiles had a sensory device that could distinguish George Bush's "evil-doers" from toddlers. What is certain is that your targets did not include the Ministry of Oil.

When the invasion began, the British public was called upon to "support" troops sent illegally and undemocratically to kill people with whom we had no quarrel. "The ultimate test of our professionalism" is how Commander McKendrick describes an unprovoked attack on a nation with no submarines, no navy and no air force, and now with no clean water and no electricity and, in many hospitals, no anaesthetic with which to amputate small limbs shredded by shrapnel. I have seen elsewhere how this is done, with a gag in the patient's mouth.

One child, Ali Ismaeel Abbas, the boy who lost his parents and his arms in a missile attack, has been flown to a modern hospital in Kuwait. Publicity has saved him. Tony Blair says he will "do everything he can" to help him. This must be the

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ultimate insult to the memory of all the children of Iraq who have died violently in Blair's war, and as a result of the embargo that Blair enthusiastically endorsed. The saving of Ali substitutes a media spectacle of charity for our right to knowledge of the extent of the crime committed against the young in our name. Let us now see the pictures of the "truckload of dozens of dismembered women and children" that the Red Cross doctors saw.

As Ali was flown to Kuwait, the Americans were preventing Save The Children from sending a plane with medical supplies into northern Iraq, where 40,000 are desperate. According to the UN, half the population of Iraq has only enough food to last a few weeks. The head of the World Food Programme says that 40 million people around the world are now seriously at risk because of the distraction of the humanitarian disaster in Iraq.

And this is "liberation"? No, it is bloody conquest, witnessed by America's mass theft of Iraq's resources and natural wealth. Ask the crowds in the streets, for whom the fear and hatred of Saddam Hussein have been transferred, virtually overnight, to Bush and Blair and perhaps to "us".

Such is the magnitude of Blair's folly and crime that the contrivance of his vindication is urgent. As if speaking for the vindicators, Andrew Marr, the BBC's political editor, reported: "[Blair] said they would be able to take Baghdad without a bloodbath, and that in the end the Iraqis would be celebrating. And on both of those points he has been proved conclusively right."

What constitutes a bloodbath to the BBC's man in Downing Street? Did the murder of the 3,000 people in New York's Twin Towers qualify? If his answer is yes, then the thousands killed in Iraq during the past month is a bloodbath. One report says that more than 3,000 Iraqis were killed within 24 hours or less. Or are the vindicators saying that the lives of one set of human beings have less value than those recognisable to us? Devaluation of human life has always been essential to the pursuit of imperial power, from the Congo to Vietnam, from Chechnya to Iraq.

If, as Milan Kundera wrote, "the struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting", then we must not forget. We must not forget Blair's lies about weapons of mass destruction which, as Hans Blix now says, were based on "fabricated evidence". We must not forget his callous attempts to deny that an American missile killed 62 people in a Baghdad market. And we must not forget the reason for the bloodbath. Last September, in announcing its National Security Strategy, Bush served notice that America intended to dominate the world by force. Iraq was indeed the "test case". The rest was a charade.

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We must not forget that a British defence secretary has announced, for the first time, that his government is prepared to launch an attack with nuclear weapons. He echoes Bush, of course. An ascendant mafia now rules the United States, and the Prime Minister is in thrall to it. Together, they empty noble words – liberation, freedom and democracy – of their true meaning. The unspoken truth is that behind the bloody conquest of Iraq is the conquest of us all: of our minds, our humanity and our self-respect at the very least. If we say and do nothing, victory over us is assured. **JP**