

Iraq's epic suffering is made invisible

For the past few weeks, I have been watching videotapes of the attack on Iraq, most of them not shown in this country. The tapes concentrate on the epic suffering of ordinary Iraqis. There are photographs, too, that were never published here. They show streets and hospitals running with blood, as American and British forces smashed their way into Iraq with weapons designed to incinerate and dismember human beings.

It is difficult viewing, but necessary if one is to understand fully the words of the Nuremberg judges in 1946 when they laid down the principles of modern international law: "To initiate a war of aggression... 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."

Guiding me through this visual evidence of a great crime is the diary of a young law graduate, Jo Wilding, who was in Baghdad with a group of international human rights observers. She and the others stayed with Iraqi families as the missiles, bunker busters and cluster bombs exploded around them. Where possible, they hurried to the scene of civilian casualties and followed the victims to hospitals and mortuaries, interviewing eyewitnesses and doctors. Their work received scant media coverage.

Jo has described to me, in detail, attacks on civilian targets that were - she is in no doubt - deliberate. In any case, the sheer ferocity of the assault on elusive Iraqi defenders could not fail to kill and injure large numbers of civilians. According to a recent study, up to 10,000 civilians were killed.

"One of the stunning things about the quick coalition victory," John Bolton, George Bush's under-secretary of state for international security, told me in Washington recently, "was how little damage was done to Iraqi infrastructure, and how low Iraqi casualties were."

I said, "Well, it's high if it's 10,000 civilians."

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He replied, "Well, I think it's quite low if you look at the size of the military operation."

Quite low at 10,000. And multiply that many times when the figure includes the killing of mostly teenage conscripts who, as a Marine colonel said, "sure as hell didn't know what hit them". Keep multiplying when the wounded are added: such as 1,000 children maimed, according to Unicef, by the delayed blast of cluster bomblets.

What does it take for journalists with a public voice and responsibility to acknowledge the truth of such a crime? Are those who stand in front of cameras in Downing Street and on the White House lawn, incessantly obfuscating the obvious (a technique they call objectivity), that conditioned? The resistance to the illegal Anglo-American occupation of Iraq is now propagated as part of Bush's "war on terror". The deaths of Americans, Britons and UN people are news; Iraqis flit across the screen: otherwise, they do not exist.

For Blair's ministers, the cover-up, like almost everything, originates in Washington. Read the armed forces minister Adam Ingram's replies to the tireless questioning by Llewellyn Smith MP and his message is almost identical to Bolton's. The "regrettable" loss of life is really not too bad, considering "a military operation of [this] size". As to numbers of people killed, "we have no way of establishing with any certainty ...". Whoever Adam Ingram is, remember the name, for he embodies the mundane, routine, amoral apologist for state murder.

Of course, if the great crime in Iraq was represented not by the poignant moment of a dead squaddie's flag-draped coffin returning, but by the unrelenting horror I have watched on unseen videotape, the cover would crack. And the illusion presented by the Hutton inquiry would be revealed. As it is, Hutton is the magician Blair's best trick so far, for an inquiry into the death of one man ensures that real public investigation into why Blair took Britain into war will not happen. It ensures that while we are allowed to read internal e-mails in Whitehall, we are denied scrutiny of the traffic between Blair and Bush, which almost certainly would expose the biggest lie of all, and reveal that the decision to invade was taken long before Washington dreamt up the charade of weapons of mass destruction. That would sink Blair.

Instead, we have glimpses of truth. On 17 September 2001, six days after the attacks in America, Bush signed a document, marked Top Secret, in which he directed the Pentagon to begin planning "military options" for an invasion of Iraq. In July last year, Condoleezza Rice, Bush's national security adviser, told another Bush official: "That decision has been made. Don't waste your breath"

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(Washington Post, 12 January 2003; New Yorker, 31 March 2003). On 2 July last, Air Marshal Sir John Walker, the former chief of defence intelligence and deputy chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee, wrote a confidential memo to MPs to alert them that the “commitment to war” was made a year ago. “Thereafter,” he wrote, “the whole process of reason, other reason, yet other reason, humanitarian, morality, regime change, terrorism, finally imminent WMD attack ... was merely covering fire.”

The unfettered disclosure of this would present an uncontrollable crisis to the clique that runs Britain: the secret service, the civil service, Downing Street, the favoured City and the courted media. Few spooks and mandarins have much time for the strange, Messianic Blair, but they will strive to protect him in order to protect themselves and to ensure that their version of Lord Curzon’s “great game” (ie, imperialism), continues unopposed.

It is a game exemplified by the arms fair that opened in London on 9 September, hosted by a government and an arms industry that are together the world’s second-biggest merchant of death, selling to the usual tyrants and state killers. Their ruthlessness was expressed when the same fair last convened in 2001, and 11 September happened. Public events, such as the TUC conference, were abandoned out of respect for the victims in New York and Washington. The arms fair was told to keep going.

“The kaleidoscope has been shaken,” Blair said in the wake of 11 September. “The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us.” Whoever wrote that inanity might have left Downing Street now; but Blair tells us constantly that he believes what he says, and perhaps he does. Several of the defendants at Nuremberg offered the same plea, and so have other state murderers at The Hague. Like them, Blair should have his day in court. **JP**