

# Bombing the peace protestors

**By David Edwards**

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**B**efore last year's war on Iraq, Media Lens reported the extraordinary level of establishment opposition to the attack. Writing in the Financial Times in January 2003, Douglas Hurd, former Conservative Foreign Secretary, argued that the war ran "the risk of turning the Middle East into an inexhaustible recruiting ground for anti-western terrorism". (Financial Times, January 3, 2003).

Anatol Lieven, a Senior Associate of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, wrote that the Bush administration was pursuing "the classic modern strategy of an endangered right-wing oligarchy, which is to divert mass discontent into nationalism," inspired by fear of lethal threats. America, Lieven warned, "has become a menace to itself and to mankind". ('The Push for War', Anatol Lieven, London Review of Books, October 2002).

In similar vein, Ami Ayalon, the head of Israel's General Security Service (Shabak) from 1996 to 2000, suggested that "those who want victory" against terror without addressing underlying grievances "want an unending war". (Quoted, Noam Chomsky, Hegemony Or Survival, Hamish Hamilton, 2003, p.213).

No surprise, then, that as the US-UK "coalition" finalised its plans for war in early 2003, a UN report indicated that al-Qaeda recruitment had accelerated in 30 to 40 countries. By February 15, 2003, public concern at the illegality, immorality, and sheer self-destructive insanity of what Bush and Blair were planning had 2 million people marching on London's streets. That month, fully 90% of the population opposed unilateral action by the US and Britain.

Blair's response to Britain's largest ever protest was to suggest that no matter how many people had marched that day, they were more than matched by the victims of Saddam Hussein. Blair said: "There will be no march for the victims of Saddam, no protests about the thousands of children that die needlessly every year under his rule, no righteous anger over the torture chambers which if he is left in power, will remain in being... If there are

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500,000 on the [Stop the War] march, that is still less than the number of people whose deaths Saddam has been responsible for.” (Blair, ‘The price of my conviction’, The Observer, February 16, 2003)

Blair’s reference to dying children was one of his more cynical Machiavellian ploys. Senior UN diplomats and aid agency reports had repeatedly pointed out that Western sanctions – driven precisely by Bush and Blair – bore primary responsibility for the mass death of Iraqi children under sanctions. There *had* been marches and protests in response – Blair simply ignored them.

As for Saddam Hussein’s 500,000 victims, we asked Amnesty International for broad-brush statistics on the tyrant’s crimes. Amnesty sent a report in response: ‘Human rights record in Iraq since 1979’. This showed that Saddam Hussein’s worst atrocities were behind him – in the years when he was armed, funded and protected by the West, to be precise. Killings in Iraq over the previous ten years had been horrific enough, but they were numbered in the hundreds per year, not hundreds of thousands. As ever, Blair’s skill lay in calculating exactly how much the public knew and didn’t know – and in then exploiting the blind spot.

We now know Saddam had no links whatever with al-Qaeda – although al-Qaeda surely has links with Iraq now. We know there were no WMDs to be found in Iraq. We know that with some 55,000 Iraqi dead (Medact, November, 2003), hundreds of Americans killed (563 at time of writing), and many thousands horrifically wounded, that the invasion was not a cake-walk. We know that the Iraqis have not gratefully rolled over in accepting the version of ‘democracy’ the United States has in mind for them. And we know, with 200 hundred killed and 1,500 injured in Madrid, that the protestors were right in everything they feared and warned about the war on Iraq.

So how might we expect liberal journalism to respond to all of this? In an article entitled, ‘Blair is doomed to be ignored’, Andrew Rawnsley of the Observer writes: “I have increasingly got the sense that Tony Blair feels that he has turned into the Cassandra of Downing Street. He issues his warnings to the people about the threat. He is fated to be right. And doomed to be ignored.”

By whom? By the British public, of course: “The Twin Towers may well have been a ‘wake-up call’ to the Prime Minister. For much of his country, it was not long before people punched the snooze button, snuggled back under the duvet of prosperity and went back to sleep.” (‘Blair is doomed to be ignored’, Andrew Rawnsley, The Observer, March 14, 2004).

So it is the millions of people who trudged through the streets of London under a grey sky on February 15 last year who are guilty of dozing complacently while Blair – vigilant, passionate, sincere, caring – struggles to alert us to the threat of international terrorism.

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In reality, of course, it was the public which knew that while the invasion of Iraq was based on any number of illusory pretexts, it was sure to have one very real outcome – it was bound to generate yet more violence in the hearts of those who “love death” and who are eager to express that “love” on our streets. This is the same public which, unlike Blair, has no choice but to travel into London by train on a daily basis.

Rawnsley, further, invites us to consider Blair’s plight in attempting to defend us from terrorism without over-reacting: “Imagine the reaction in Madrid if it were to turn out that the Spanish government had been given warning of a possible atrocity, decided to err on the side of not causing massive disruption on the railways, crossed its fingers that all would be OK – and turned out to be horribly wrong.”

In fact the Spanish government *had* been given unmissable warnings of a possible atrocity by the 90% of the Spanish population that opposed the war – some of them certainly now buried in graves. A 23-year-old pre-school teacher at a polling station in Cozlada, east of Madrid, said last week: “Our prime minister has gotten us into a terrible, completely wrong war. And because of it, I spent yesterday and today going to funerals. I am thinking of a 3-year-old child at my school who no longer has a mother.” (Elaine Sciolino, ‘Following Attacks, Spain’s Governing Party Is Beaten’, The New York Times, March 15, 2004)

Julián, a 79-year-old retired carpenter, said: “I certainly did not vote for the Popular Party. My daughter’s hand was cut off, and she almost lost a part of her leg. Aznar should come here to see that, to see these people. But he did nothing for us. He did nothing for the poor. He is one who brought us to war. I went through the civil war, and the postwar. But this is worse.”

It is appalling to reflect that nothing like the marches protesting the Madrid bombings had been seen in Spain since the anti-war demonstrations of 2003. Then, Spaniards marched in their millions every Saturday, throughout February, all across the country. They were simply ignored.

How appalling, also, that Aznar should have led the recent marches even as his government was trying to blame the Basque terrorist group, Eta, to protect itself, therefore further compromising the security of the Spanish people – even as they grieved.

Aznar paid the price in last weekend’s elections, losing in a shock defeat to the Socialists. The media has expressed outrage at what it perceives to be a “surrender” to terrorism. In the New York Times, David Brooks describes how the bombs have caused Spanish voters to “throw out the old government and replace it with one whose policies are more to al-Qaida’s liking”. Brooks asks: “What is the Spanish word for appeasement?” (Brooks, ‘Al-Qaeda’s wish list’, The New York Times, March 16, 2004).

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Max Hastings writes in the Daily Mail: “Al Qaeda has achieved a victory beyond its wildest imaginings.” (Hastings, ‘So would the voters in Britain be any braver?’ The Daily Mail, March 16, 2004).

On Channel 4 News, reporter Sarah Smith (March 15, 2004) repeatedly asked Spanish Socialist Party politicians whether the election had in fact been won by al-Qaeda.

But the truth is that Aznar lied his way to Bush’s war, just as Blair did, against the overwhelming opposition of his people. The Spanish electorate’s response should, first and foremost, be seen as a rejection of Aznar’s arrogance and deceit.

José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Spain’s prime minister elect, said this week: “The war has been a disaster [and] the occupation continues to be a disaster. It has only generated violence.”

Others may urge Spain to keep its 1,300 peacekeeping troops in Iraq, Zapatero added, but “fighting terrorism with bombs ... with Tomahawk missiles, isn’t the way to defeat terrorism. Terrorism is confronted by the state of law ... that’s what I think Europe and the international community have to debate.” (‘New Spanish PM promises Iraq withdrawal’, Simon Jeffery and agencies’, The Guardian, March 15, 2004).

Millions of people around the world have been shouting exactly this awareness at our political leaders for more than a year. But when, as John Dewey noted, “politics is the shadow cast on society by big business”, our leaders are not obliged to listen.