

Farce, morality and innocent victims

Having failed to fabricate a link between Iraq and al-Qaeda, and prove that Iraq has a secret armoury of banned weapons, the warmongers have fallen back on the “moral case” for an unprovoked attack on a stricken country. Farce has arrived. We want to laugh out loud, a deep and dark and almost grief-laden laugh, at Blair’s concern for the “victims of Saddam Hussein” and his admonishment (reprinted in the Observer) of the millions of protesters: “There will be ... no protests about the thousands of [Iraqi] children that die needlessly every year ...”

First, let’s look back to Saddam’s most famous victim, the British journalist Farzad Bazoft, who was hanged in 1990 for “spying”, a bogus trial following a bogus charge. Those of us who protested at his murder did so in the teeth of a smear campaign by the British government and a press determined to cover for Britain’s favourite tyrant.

The Sun smeared Bazoft by publishing his conviction for stealing when he was a student – information supplied by MI5 on behalf of the Thatcher government, which was then seeking any excuse not to suspend its lucrative business and arms deals with the Iraqi dictator. The Mail and Today suggested that Saddam was right - that Bazoft was a spy. In a memorable editorial, the Sunday Telegraph equated investigative journalism with criminal espionage. Defending Saddam, not his victim, was clearly preferable.

What did Tony Blair say about this outrage? I can find nothing. Did Blair join those of us who protested, on the streets and in print, at the fact that ministers such as Douglas Hurd were commuting to Baghdad, with Hurd going especially to celebrate the anniversary of the coming to power of the dictator I described as “renowned as the interrogator and torturer of Qasr-al-Nihayyah, the ‘Palace of the End’”?

There is no record of Blair saying anything substantive about Saddam

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Hussein's atrocities until after 11 September 2001 when the Americans, having failed to catch Osama Bin Laden, declared Saddam their number one enemy. As for Blair's assertion that there have been "no protests about the thousands of children that die needlessly under his rule", the answer is straightforward.

There have been years of protests about the effect of the Anglo-American embargo on the children of Iraq. That the US, backed by Britain, is largely responsible for hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqi deaths is the great unspoken in the so-called mainstream of politics and journalism. That the embargo allowed Saddam Hussein to centralise and reinforce his domestic control is equally unmentionable. Whenever the voluminous evidence of such a monumental western crime against humanity is laid out, the crocodile tears of Blair and the rest of the warmongers barely disguise their cynicism.

Denis Halliday, the former assistant secretary general of the United Nations who was the senior UN official in Baghdad, has many times identified the "genocide" of the American-driven sanctions. The UN's Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) has paid tribute to the Iraqi rationing system, giving it credit for saving an entire population from famine. This, like the evidence and witness of Halliday and his successor, Hans von Sponeck, and the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) and the Catholic Relief Agency (Cafod) and the 70 members of the US Congress who wrote to President Clinton describing the embargo as "infanticide masquerading as policy", has been airbrushed out. In contrast, the gassing of the Kurdish town of Halabja in 1988 has become part of Blair's and Bush's vocabulary. Eleven months after this atrocity, the assistant US secretary of state James Kelly flew to Baghdad to tell Saddam Hussein: "You are a source for moderation in the region, and the United States wants to broaden her relationship with Iraq."

What did Blair say about this? I can find nothing. Read the Murdoch press at the time. There is nothing about Saddam being "another Hitler"; no mention of torture chambers and appeasers. Saddam is one of us, because Washington says so. The Australian, Murdoch's flagship in the country of his birth, and currently a leading warmonger, thought the most regrettable aspect about Iraq's use of chemical weapons at Halabja was that it had "given Tehran a propaganda coup and may have destroyed western hopes of quiet diplomacy". Like other Murdoch papers, it defended Saddam by suggesting that Iraq's use of chemical and nerve agents was purely defensive.

Of the media warmongers in this country, it is difficult to choose the most

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absurd. Murdoch's blustering hagiographer, William ("Mr X") Shawcross must defer, alas, to David Aaronovitch, the retired Stalinist apologist now employed by the Guardian Group to poke a stick at its readership and whose penchant for getting things wrong makes him the doyen. In his condescending lecture to the millions who marched on 15 February, Aaronovitch wrote:

"I wanted to ask, whether among your hundreds of thousands, the absences bothered you? The Kurds, the Iraqis – of whom there are many thousands in this country – where were they? Why were they not there?"

There were more than 4,000 Kurds marching en bloc. The Kurds foresee clearly yet another sell-out by the west, now that Washington is encouraging the Turkish military to occupy Iraqi Kurdistan. According to my Iraqi friends, there were "a minimum of 3,000 Iraqis" marching. Two years ago, I attended an Iraqi festival at Kensington and Chelsea Town Hall. More than 2,000 Iraqis were present with their families. When Denis Halliday called for an end to the economic siege of Iraq and the implementation of that crucial passage of Security Council Resolution 687, which requires a ban on weapons of mass destruction throughout the region, in Israel as much as Iraq, he received thunderous applause. Everyone there, it seemed to me, had little or no time for Saddam Hussein; but none wanted their country strangled, attacked and occupied by the west yet again.

Patrick Tyler, a perceptive writer in the New York Times, says that Bush and Blair now face a "tenacious new adversary" – the public. He says we are heading into a new bipolar world with two new superpowers: the regime in Washington on one side, and world public opinion on the other. In a poll of half a million Europeans, Time magazine asked which country was the greatest threat to peace: 5.8 per cent said North Korea, 6.8 per cent said Iraq and 87 per cent said the United States. In other words, the game is up.

People have become aware, above all, that the most dangerous appeasement today has little to do with a regional tyrant, and everything to do with "our" governments. **JP**