

The shocking truth about 'shock and awe'

Things are going wrong. We are not telling the truth

So far, the Anglo-American armies are handing their propaganda to the Iraqis on a plate. First, on Saturday, we were told – courtesy of the BBC – that Umm Qasr, the tiny Iraqi seaport on the Gulf, had “fallen”. Why cities have to “fall” on the BBC is a mystery to me; the phrase comes from the Middle Ages when city walls literally collapsed under siege. Then we were told – again on the BBC – that Nasiriyah had been captured. Then its “embedded” correspondent informed us – and here my old journalistic suspicions were alerted – that it had been “secured”.

Why the BBC should use the meretricious military expression “secured” is also a mystery to me. “Secured” is meant to sound like “captured” but almost invariably means that a city has been bypassed or half-surrounded or, at the most, that an invading army has merely entered its suburbs. And sure enough, within 24 hours, the Shia Muslim city west of the junction of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers proved to be very much unsecured, indeed had not been entered in any form – because at least 500 Iraqi troops, supported by tanks, were still fighting there.

With what joy did Taha Yassin Ramadan, the Iraqi Vice President, inform us all yesterday that “they claimed they had captured Umm Qasr but now you know this is a lie”. With what happiness did Mohamed Said al-Sahaff, the Iraqi Information Minister, boast yesterday that Basra was still “in Iraqi hands”, that “our forces” in Nasiriyah were still fighting.

And well could they boast because, despite all the claptrap put out by the Americans and British in Qatar, what the Iraqis said on this score was true. The usual Iraqi claims of downed US and British aircraft – four supposedly “shot down” around Baghdad and another near Mosul – were given credibility by the Iraqi ability to prove that the

Robert Fisk » The shocking truth about ‘shock and awe’

collapse of their forces in the south was untrue – quite apart from the film of prisoners obtained last night.

We know that the Americans are again using depleted uranium munitions in Iraq, just as they did in 1991. But yesterday, the BBC told us that US Marines had called up an A-10 strike aircraft to deal with “pockets of resistance” – a bit more military-speak from the BBC – but failed to mention that the A-10 uses depleted uranium rounds. So for the first time since 1991, we – the West – are spraying these uranium aerosols in battlefield explosions in southern Iraq; and we’re not being told. Why not?

And where, for God’s sake, does that wretched, utterly dishonest phrase “coalition forces” come from? There is no “coalition” in this Iraq war. There are the Americans and the British and a few Australians. That’s it.

The “coalition” of the 1991 Gulf War does not exist. The “coalition” of nations willing to “help” with this illegitimate conflict includes, by a vast stretch of the imagination, even Costa Rica and Micronesia and, I suppose, poor old neutral Ireland, with its transit rights for US military aircraft at Shannon. But they are not “coalition forces”. Why does the BBC use this phrase? Even in the Second World War, which so many journalists think they are now reporting, we didn’t use this lie. When we landed on the coast of North Africa in Operation Torch, we called it an “Anglo-American landing”.

And this is an Anglo-American war, whether we – and I include the “embedded ones” – like it or not. The Iraqis are sharp enough to remember all this. At first, they announced that captured US or British troops would be treated as mercenaries, a decision that Saddam himself wisely corrected yesterday when he stated that all prisoners would be treated “according to the Geneva Convention”.

All in all, then, this has not been a great weekend for Messrs Bush and Blair. Nor, of course, for Saddam although he’s been playing at wars for almost half the lifetime of Tony Blair. And even those journalists who have most bravely tried to see for themselves what is going on without the protection of their armies – an ITV crew near Nasiriyah, for example – are in mortal peril of their lives.

So here’s a question from one who believed, only a week ago, that Baghdad might just collapse and that we might wake up one morning to find the Baathist militia and the Iraqi army gone and the Americans walking down Saadun Street with their rifles over their shoulders. If the Iraqis can still hold out against such overwhelming force in Umm Qasr for four days, if they can keep fighting in Basra and Nasiriyah – the latter a city that briefly rose in revolt against Saddam’s regime in 1991 – why should Saddam’s forces not keep fighting in Baghdad?

Certainly, Iraqi history will not be complete without a new story of “martyrdom” in the country’s eternal battle against foreign occupiers. The last fighters of Um Qasr will

Robert Fisk » The shocking truth about 'shock and awe'

become, in the years to come – whatever the fate of Saddam – men of song and legend. The Egyptians long ago did the same for their men killed at Suez in 1956.

Of course, this might all be a miscalculation. The pack of cards may be more flimsy than we think. But suddenly, this weekend, the quick and easy war, the conflict of “shock and awe” – the Pentagon’s phrase is itself a classic slogan from the pages of the old Nazi magazine *Signal* – doesn’t seem so realistic. Things are going wrong. We are not telling the truth. And the Iraqis are riding high on it all. ♦