

The ministry of mendacity strikes again

It must be tough having to defend the indefensible

Poor old Geoff Hoon. It must be tough having to defend the indefensible when the Americans insist on plastering their missiles with computer codes that reveal their provenance even after they have blown the innocent to pieces. Take the poor old man – far poorer in every way than Mr Hoon – who produced that telling scrap of fuselage at Shu'ala last week, proving that the missile which hit the dirt-poor Shia Muslim slums was made by Raytheon, manufacturers of the cruise missile.

The Iraqi intelligence service is a brutal, crude organisation, but subtlety and sophistication are not its strong points. To suggest that President Saddam's goons could have turned up in the slums – amid a population known for its hatred of the Iraqi Baath party and possibly responsible for killing a number of its apparatchiks – and persuaded these largely illiterate people to tell a complicated lie to foreign journalists is beyond credibility. There were many bits of the same wretched missile all over Shu'ala. I collected five pieces myself, made of the same alloy, two of them dug out of the muck with my own hands.

Does Mr Hoon really think the Iraqi torturers have the ability to go about these hostile slums, burying obscure pieces of shrapnel for the likes of The Independent to dig up there? Does he think that the uncle of one of the dead men could make up his description of seeing the aircraft bank away after the attack? So, too, the two missiles that struck the Sha'ab district of Baghdad earlier in the week. Again, they exploded amid Shia Muslim slums, homes of the very people who most oppose President Saddam's regime. I had heard an aircraft fly over Baghdad and fire two missiles at an army barracks a little earlier – I was amused to note that Mr Hoon did not question this

Robert Fisk » The ministry of mendacity strikes again

air attack – and at least three men in Sha'ab talked to me about the plane they heard at the time of the missile strike.

These were not members of President Saddam's regime, as Mr Hoon libels them; they were the very people indeed whom Mr. Hoon has sworn to "liberate" from the Iraqi leader. And the two explosions occurred exactly opposite each other, one on each side of the dual carriageway in Sha'ab. Does Mr Hoon think the Iraqis were able to stage two identical explosions – from the air – at exactly equidistant points in a street packed with cars, pedestrians, apartment doormen, restaurant workers and car repair boys? But I suppose it's the familiar, world-weary mendacity of the Hoon statement that is most pathetic. After the Americans bombed Libya in 1985, we were treated to the same nonsense.

The civilian dead were killed by the Libyan secret service or by Libya's anti-aircraft fire. The Israelis had claimed the same about many of the 17,500 dead of their 1982 Lebanon invasion. When the Americans slaughtered dozens of Albanian refugees in Kosovo in 1999, they claimed Serb aircraft had committed the massacre, until The Independent discovered the missile parts, again dug out of the craters with my own hands, which contained the computer codings that forced Nato to admit the truth.

How many times, I wonder, do ministers think they can con their electorate with this miserable routine? How often will the likes of David Blunkett smear journalists for reporting "from behind enemy lines" in a war that his government supports but which many millions of Britons refuse to acknowledge as legitimate? I cannot help remembering an Iranian hospital train on which I travelled back from the Iran-Iraq war front in the early 1980s. The carriages were packed with young Iranian soldiers, coughing mucus and blood into handkerchiefs while reading Korans. They had been gassed and looked as if they would die. Most did. After a few hours, I had to go around and open the windows of the compartments, because the gas coughed back from their lungs was beginning to poison the air in the carriage.

At the time, I was working for The Times. My story ran in full. Then an official of the Foreign Office lunched my editor and told him my report was "not helpful". Because, of course, we supported President Saddam at the time and wanted revolutionary Iran to suffer and destroy itself. President Saddam was the good guy then. I wasn't supposed to report his human rights abuses. And now I'm not supposed to report the slaughter of the innocent by American or RAF pilots because the British Government has changed sides. It's a tactic worthy of only one man I can think of, a master of playing victim when he is in the act of killing, a man who thinks nothing of smearing the innocent to propagate his own version of history. I'm talking about Saddam Hussein. Geoff Hoon has learnt a lot from him. ◆