

The twisted language of war

Lies are being used to justify the unjustifiable

Why do we aid and abet the lies and propaganda of this filthy war? How come, for example, it's now BBC "style" to describe the Anglo-American invaders as the "coalition". This is a lie. The "coalition" that we're obviously supposed to remember is the one forged to drive Iraqi occupation troops from Kuwait in 1991, an alliance involving dozens of countries – almost all of whom now condemn President Bush Junior's adventure in Iraq. There are a few Australian special forces swanning about in the desert, courtesy of the country's eccentric Prime Minister, John Howard, but that's it.

So, who at the BBC decreed this dishonest word "coalition"? True, there's a "coalition of the willing", to use Mr Bush's weird phrase, but this is a reference to those nations that have given overflying rights to the United States or have given political but not military support. So the phrase "coalition forces" remains a lie.

Then there's the historical slippage to justify the unjustifiable. When Jonathan Charles, an "embedded" journalist, reported in the early days of the invasion that the British army outside Basra was keeping a watchful eye on the Iranian border because the Iranians had "stirred up" an insurrection in the city in 1991, his dispatch was based on a falsehood. The Iranians never stirred up an insurrection in Basra. President Bush Senior did that by calling for just such a rebellion – and then betraying the Shia Muslims who followed his appeal. The Iranians did everything they could to avoid involvement in the uprising.

Then there's the disinformation about the "securing" of Basra. This was followed by an admission that though the British had "secured" Basra they hadn't actually captured it – and, indeed, have still not captured it. The same goes for the US Marines

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who were said to have “secured” Nasiriyah, but didn’t capture it until last week when, given the anarchy that broke out in the city, they appear to have captured it without making it secure. The US forces bravely rescued a captured American female soldier; what didn’t make it into the same story was that they also “rescued” 12 more Americans, all of whom were already dead.

The Iraqis try to imitate the US Central Command (CentCom) propaganda operations, though with less subtlety. An attempt to present an American cruise missile attack on a secret police office in the Mansour district last week as the attempted destruction of a maternity hospital – it was just across the street but only sustained broken windows – was straight out of the “Huns crucify nuns” routine. Iraqi military communiqués inevitably claim a number of American and British tanks and personnel carriers destroyed that is way beyond credibility. At Najaf, the Iraqi Armed Forces General Command (communiqué number 16) stated on Friday that Iraqi forces had destroyed 17 tanks, 13 armoured personnel carriers and a Black Hawk helicopter. Whoops.

Yesterday, according to the Information Minister, Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf, Iraqi troops destroyed four US personnel carriers and an American warplane.

Sometimes the communiqués are verifiable. An Apache actually was shot down by a farmer and CentCom admitted an F-18 bomber was shot down over Iraq last week. However, the sheer military detail put out by the Iraqi authorities, grotesquely exaggerated though it often is, far outstrips the old bones chucked by the Americans at the correspondents in their air-conditioned high-security headquarters in Qatar.

Another enjoyable lie was the American assertion that the anti-chemical weapons suits issued to Iraqi soldiers “proved” that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. The Iraqis neatly replied that the equipment was standard issue but that since US and British forces carried the same equipment, they too must be in possession of forbidden weapons. The Iraqi lie – that the country remains united under a beloved leader – is hardly questioned in press conferences held by Taha Yassin Ramadan, the Iraqi Vice-President. Unity may be the one element Iraq will never possess under US occupiers. But its existence under Saddam Hussein has been imposed through terror.

Then there’s the famous “war in Iraq” slogan which the British and American media like to promote. But this is an invasion, not a mere war.

And isn’t it turning into an occupation rather than a “liberation”? Shouldn’t we be remembering in our reports that this whole invasion lacks legitimacy? Sure, the Americans claim they needed no more than the original UN resolution 1441 to go to war. But if that’s the case, why did Britain and the US vainly seek a second resolution? I can’t help thinking readers and viewers realise the mendacity of all this sleight of

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hand, and that we journalists go on insulting these same readers and viewers by thinking we can con them.

Thus, we go on talking about an “air campaign” as if the Luftwaffe was taking off from Cap Gris Nez to bomb London, when not a single Iraqi aircraft has left the ground. So, it’s “coalition forces”, a war not an invasion, liberation rather than occupation, and the taking of cities that are “secured” rather than “captured”, and when captured, are insecure.

And all this for the dead of 11 September. ♦