

# Who is to blame for this collapse in morality?

*Pillage merits special mention in Geneva Convention*

**L**et's talk war crimes. Yes, I know about the war crimes of Saddam. He slaughtered the innocent, gassed the Kurds, tortured his people and – though it is true we remained good friends with this butcher for more than half of his horrible career – could be held responsible for killing up to a million people, the death toll of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war. But while we are congratulating ourselves on the “liberation” of Baghdad, an event that is fast turning into a nightmare for many of its residents, it is as good a time as any to recall how we've been conducting this ideological war.

So let's start with the end – with the Gone With The Wind epic of looting and anarchy with which the Iraqi population have chosen to celebrate our gift to them of “liberation” and “democracy”. It started in Basra, of course, with our own shameful British response to the orgy of theft that took hold of the city. Our defence minister, Geoff Hoon, made some especially childish remarks about this disgraceful state of affairs, suggesting in the House of Commons that the people of Basra were merely “liberating” – that word again – their property from the Baath party. And the British Army enthusiastically endorsed this nonsense.

Even as tape of the pillage in Basra was being beamed around the world, there was Lieutenant Colonel Hugh Blackman of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards cheerfully telling the BBC that “it's absolutely not my business to get in the way.” But of course it is Colonel Blackman's business to “get in the way”. Pillage merits a specific prevention clause in the Geneva Conventions, just as it did in the 1907 Hague Convention upon which the Geneva delegates based their “rules of war”. “Pillage is prohibited,” the 1949 Geneva Conventions say, and Colonel Blackman and Mr Hoon

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should glance at Crimes of War, published in conjunction with the City University Journalism Department – page 276 is the most dramatic – to understand what this means.

When an occupying power takes over another country's territory, it automatically becomes responsible for the protection of its civilians, their property and institutions. Thus the American troops in Nasiriyah became automatically responsible for the driver who was murdered for his car in the first day of that city's "liberation". The Americans in Baghdad were responsible for the German and Slovak embassies that were looted by hundreds of Iraqis on Thursday, and for the French Cultural Centre, which was attacked, and for the Central Bank of Iraq, which was torched yesterday afternoon.

But the British and Americans have simply discarded this notion, based though it is upon conventions and international law. And we journalists have allowed them to do so. We clapped our hands like children when the Americans "assisted" the Iraqis in bringing down the statue of Saddam Hussein in front of the television cameras this week, and yet we went on talking about the "liberation" of Baghdad as if the majority of civilians there were garlanding the soldiers with flowers instead of queuing with anxiety at checkpoints and watching the looting of their capital.

We journalists have been co-operating, too, with a further collapse of morality in this war. Take, for example, the ruthless bombing of the residential Mansur area of Baghdad last week. The Anglo-American armies – or the "coalition", as the BBC still stubbornly and mendaciously calls the invaders – claimed they believed that Saddam and his two evil sons Qusay and Uday were present there. So they bombed the civilians of Mansur and killed at least 14 decent, innocent people, almost all of them – and this would obviously be of interest to the religious feelings of Messrs Bush and Blair – Christians.

Now one might have expected the BBC World Service Radio next morning to question whether the bombing of civilians did not constitute a bit of an immoral act, a war crime perhaps, however much we wanted to kill Saddam. Forget it. The presenter in London described the slaughter of these innocent civilians as "a new twist" in the war to target Saddam – as if it was quite in order to kill civilians, knowingly and in cold blood, in order to murder our most hated tyrant. The BBC's correspondent in Qatar – where the Centcom boys pompously boasted that they had "real-time" intelligence (subsequently proved to be untrue) that Saddam was present – used all the usual military jargon to justify the unjustifiable. The "coalition", he announced, knew it had "time-sensitive material" – ie that they wouldn't have time to know whether they were killing innocent human beings in the furtherance of their cause or not – and that this

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“actionable material” (again I quote this revolting BBC dispatch) was not “risk-free”.

And then he went on to describe, without a moment of reflection, on the moral issues involved, how the Americans had used four 2,000lb “bunker-buster bombs to level the civilian homes”. These are, of course, the very same pieces of ordnance that the same US air force used in their vain effort to kill Osama bin Laden in the Tora Bora mountains. So now we use them, knowingly, on the flimsy homes of civilians of Baghdad – folk who would otherwise be worthy of the “liberation” we wished to bestow upon them – in the hope that a gamble, a bit of faulty “intelligence” about Saddam, will pay off.

The Geneva Conventions have a lot to say about all this. They specifically refer to civilians as protected persons, as persons who must have the protection of a warring power even if they find themselves in the presence of armed antagonists. The same protection was demanded for southern Lebanese civilians when Israel launched its brutal “Grapes of Wrath” operation in 1996. When an Israeli pilot, for example, fired a US-made Hellfire missile into an ambulance, killing three children and two women, the Israelis claimed that a Hezbollah fighter had been in the same vehicle. The statement proved to be totally untrue. But Israel was rightly condemned for killing civilians in the hope of killing an enemy combatant. Now we are doing exactly the same. And Ariel Sharon must be pleased. No more namby-pamby western criticism of Israel after the bunker-busters have been dropped on Mansur.

More and more, we are committing these crimes. The mass slaughter of more than 400 civilians in the Amariyah air raid shelter in Baghdad in the 1991 Gulf War was carried out in the hope that it would kill Saddam. Why? Why cannot we abide by the rules of war we rightly demand that others should obey? Why do we journalists – yet again, war after war – connive in this immorality by turning a ruthless and cruel and illegal act into a “new twist” or into “time-sensitive material”?

Wars have a habit of turning normally sane people into cheerleaders, of transforming rational journalists into nasty little puffed-up fantasy colonels. But surely we should all carry the Geneva Conventions into war with us, along with that little book from the City University. For the only people to benefit from our own war crimes will be the next generation of Saddam Husseins. ♦