

Rumbling explosions and calls to prayer

Unimpressive start to George Bush's 'War on Saddam'

Initially, the city of Baghdad was stunned by the onset of war. For more than an hour, I watched the tracers racing across the pre-dawn sky above the city and the yellow flash of anti-aircraft batteries positioned on a ministry roof. The sound was impressive – the Iraqis have always been good at London Blitz-style sound effects – but by first light the few rumbling explosions were already mixed with the call to the Fajr prayer from the minarets of Baghdad. How many times under siege over the past 1,000 years, I wondered, must that call have echoed across this city?

If this was the start of George Bush's "war on Saddam", it was unimpressive. Two dull thumps of sound far to the south yesterday morning and a burst of tracer and anti-aircraft fire overhead, and all you could conclude was that the Anglo-American conflict had begun with a whimper, not a bang. Thirty-five Cruise missiles – at a cost of \$40m (£25m) as well as four attacks by aircraft – could not destroy Saddam Hussein. In other words, the Americans missed.

And, within an hour, at 5.30 yesterday morning, there was President Saddam himself on Iraqi state television, specifying the exact minute and hour of his post-attack appearance, looking tired perhaps but very much the gravel-voiced Tikriti we have come to know. "You will be victorious, Iraqi people," he announced. "Your enemy will go to hell and will be killed, God willing." As always, he did not forget his repetitive military rhetoric. "Use your sword, don't be afraid. Use your sword. Don't fear anybody. Use your sword and it will be your witness."

So Round One to President Saddam. All day, the Iraqis pondered what on earth the Americans were doing. They had heard how Mr Bush was talking up a "coalition" of 35 nations, although they know well that only the British are prepared to fight alongside

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the Americans. They could not comprehend why Mr Bush, having boasted of the “shock” and “awe” of his air bombardment, should have begun like this. They expected a lion’s roar. And all the Iraqis got was a mouse, a “target of opportunity”, as the Pentagon called it, that simply missed.

Meanwhile, life of a sort went on in the capital.

A few Iraqis bought their all-too-government-controlled papers, printed too late for the air raid, but filled with the usual exhortations to fight. Only a few food shops were open; my search for vegetables and fresh fruit was hopeless. There were more soldiers on the streets and policemen in new steel helmets with plastic camouflage strips and squads of young men digging pits and surrounding them with sandbags. Yet I saw only two armoured vehicles in the entire city and most of the troops grinned at journalists and dutifully gave “V” for victory signs. Could they have done anything else?

There was much discussion in Iraq – as there must have been in Europe and America – about President Bush’s extraordinary suggestion that his war “could last longer and be more difficult than expected”. An Iraqi businessman, lunching at one of the few remaining city hotels to stay open, concluded that the difficulties of the Bush conflict had been deliberately kept from the Americans and British until it was too late to turn round. Even the scarce Westerners in Baghdad were floored. As one of them put it: “He hadn’t told us that before.”

Around Baghdad, President Saddam’s soldiers are digging in. On a 20-mile journey out of the city yesterday, I saw troops building artillery revetments on the approaches to the city and military trucks hidden under motorway overpasses – and barracks already deliberately abandoned by their soldiers. These are standard tactics for any defending army – the Serbs did just the same before the Nato bombardment in 1999 – while every major facility was guarded by Baathist volunteers and local tribesmen.

At one grain silo I visited – there were still two Australian female human shields there – almost every other worker was armed with a Kalashnikov rifle.

The Iraqi Minister of Trade, flanked by two dozen Iraqi cameramen, turned up to express his gratitude to the two ladies. They beamed into the cameras although later, of course, when the war is over, they may find their participation in this bit of theatre something to forget rather than to remember. It all depends, of course, on what bats fly out of the box if the United States “prevails” – as Mr Bush likes to say – and how the world then looks back upon President Saddam’s regime.

But yesterday, it was still very much alive. Every railway crossing was guarded by soldiers and militiamen, most crossroads boasted a military checkpoint. Yet Iraq is a country that has already been at war for too long. The unpainted houses of the suburbs, the untended bougainvillea, the empty wagons and idle diesel locomotives

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that haunt the railway yards, speak of tiredness and economic ruin. The platforms of the great Baghdad railway station – an empire folly built by the British in the post-1914-18 war mandate complete with pseudo-Islamic dome – are lined with grass and weeds. What a place for Messrs Bush and Blair to fight over, one couldn't help thinking.

And it was only back in Baghdad, where you can watch the butane gas burning off from the oil refineries, that it was possible to remember what has made Iraq so tempting a target since 1917. ♦