

The missiles came with devastating shrieks

The B-52s were dead on time

Saddam's main presidential palace, a great rampart of a building 20 storeys high, simply exploded in front of me – a cauldron of fire, a 100ft sheet of flame and a sound that had my ears singing for an hour after. The entire, massively buttressed edifice shuddered under the impact. Then four more cruise missiles came in. It is the heaviest bombing Baghdad has suffered in more than 20 years of war. All across the city last night, massive explosions shook the ground. To my right, the Ministry of Armaments Procurement – a long colonnaded building looking much like the façade of the Pentagon – coughed fire as five missiles crashed into the concrete.

In an operation officially intended to create “shock and awe”, shock was hardly the word for it. The few Iraqis in the streets around me – no friends of Saddam I would suspect – cursed under their breath.

From high-rise buildings, shops and homes came the thunder of crashing glass as the shock waves swept across the Tigris river in both directions. Minute after minute the missiles came in. Many Iraqis had watched – as I had – television film of those ominous B-52 bombers taking off from Britain only six hours earlier. Like me, they had noted the time, added three hours for Iraqi time in front of London and guessed that, at around 9pm, the terror would begin. The B-52s, almost certainly firing from outside Iraqi airspace, were dead on time.

Police cars drove at speed through the streets, their loudspeakers ordering pedestrians to take shelter or hide under cover of tall buildings. Much good did it do. Crouching next to a block of shops on the opposite side of the river, I narrowly missed the shower of glass that came cascading down from the upper windows as the shock

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waves slammed into them.

Along the streets a few Iraqis could be seen staring from balconies, shards of broken glass around them. Each time one of the great golden bubbles of fire burst across the city, they ducked inside before the blast wave reached them. At one point, as I stood beneath the trees on the corniche, a wave of cruise missiles passed low overhead, the shriek of their passage almost as devastating as the explosions that were to follow.

How, I ask myself, does one describe this outside the language of a military report, the definition of the colour, the decibels of the explosions? When the cruise missiles came in it sounded as if someone was ripping to pieces huge curtains of silk in the sky and the blast waves became a kind of frightening counterpoint to the flames.

There is something anarchic about all human beings, about their reaction to violence. The Iraqis around me stood and watched, as I did, at huge tongues of flame bursting from the upper stories of Saddam's palace, reaching high into the sky. Strangely, the electricity grid continued to operate and around us the traffic lights continued to move between red and green. Billboards moved in the breeze of the shock waves and floodlights continued to blaze on public buildings. Above us we could see the massive curtains of smoke beginning to move over Baghdad, white from the explosions, black from the burning targets.

How could one resist it? How could the Iraqis ever believe with their broken technology, their debilitating 12 years of sanctions, that they could defeat the computers of these missiles and of these aircraft? It was the same old story: irresistible, unquestionable power.

Well yes, one could say, could one attack a more appropriate regime? But that is not quite the point. For the message of last night's raid was the same as that of Thursday's raid, that of all the raids in the hours to come: that the United States must be obeyed. That the EU, UN, Nato – nothing – must stand in its way. Indeed can stand in its way.

No doubt this morning the Iraqi Minister of Information will address us all again and insist that Iraq will prevail. We shall see. But many Iraqis are now asking an obvious question: how many days? Not because they want the Americans or the British in Baghdad, though they may profoundly wish it. But because they want this violence to end: which, when you think of it, is exactly why these raids took place.

Reports were coming in last night of civilians killed in the raids – which, given the intensity of the cruise missile attacks, is not surprising. Another target turned out to be the vast Rashid military barracks, perhaps the largest in Iraq.

But the symbolic centre of this raid was clearly intended to be Saddam's main palace, with its villas, fountains, porticos and gardens. And, sure enough, the flames licking across the façade of the palace last night looked very much like a funeral pyre. ◆