

Saddam starts to sound like his hero, Uncle Joe

Patient. But confident in victory. Fighting evil

Let us now praise famous men. Saddam Hussein was keen on doing just that yesterday. And he proceeded to list the Iraqi army and navy officers who are leading the resistance against the Anglo-American army in Umm Qasr, Basra and Nasariyah. Major-General Mustapha Mahmoud Umran, commanding officer of the 11th Division, Brigadier Bashir Ahmed Othman, commander of the Iraqi 45th Brigade, Brigadier-Colonel Ali Kalil Ibrahim, commander of the 11th Battalion of the 45th Brigade, Colonel Mohamed Khallaf al-Jabawi, commander of the 45th Brigade's 2nd Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel Fathi Rani Majid of the Iraqi army's III Corps ... And so it went on.

"Be patient," President Saddam kept saying. Be patient. Fourteen times in all, he told the army and the people of Iraq to be patient. "We will win ... we will be victorious against Evil." Patient but confident in victory. Fighting evil.

Wasn't that how President Bush was encouraging his people a few hours earlier? At other times, President Saddam sounded like his hero, Joseph Stalin. "They have come to destroy our country and we must stand and destroy them and defend our people and our country ... Cut their throats ... They are coming to take our land. But when they try to enter our cities, they try to avoid a battle with our forces and to stay outside the range of our weapons."

Was this, one wondered, modelled on the Great Patriotic War, the defence of Mother Russia under Uncle Joe? And if not, how to account for – let us speak frankly – the courage of those hundreds of Iraqi soldiers still holding out under American air and tank attacks?

People, party, patriotism. The three P's ran like a theme through the Saddam speech

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along with a bitter warning: as the American and British forces made less headway on the ground, President Saddam said, they would use their air power against Iraq ever more brutally.

So what does it feel like to live these days in President Saddam's future Stalingrad? Early yesterday, the cruise missiles and the planes came back. The great explosions clapped across Baghdad in the darkness. One of the Tomahawks smashed into the grounds of the Al-Mustansiriya University – 25 students wounded and one dead, so they claimed.

There were other sounds in the early hours. A blaze of automatic gunfire on the Tigris Corniche – attempts to capture two escaping US airmen, the authorities insisted – and then a full-scale gun battle not far from the city centre at 2.30am. There were rumours. Armed men had come from Saddam City – the great Shia slums on the edge of Baghdad – and had been intercepted by state security men. No “independent confirmation”. A story that the railway line north of Baghdad has been cut. Denied.

But the sheer amount of military and statistical detail coming from the Iraqi authorities is beginning to make the US Centcom information boys look like chumps. On Sunday, the Iraqi Minister of Defence, General Sultan Hashim, gave a remarkable briefing on the war, naming the units involved in front-line fighting – the 3rd Battalion of the Iraqi army's 27th Brigade was still holding out at Suq ash-Shuyukh south of Nasariyah, the 3rd Battalion of the Third Iraqi Army was holding Basra. And I remembered how these generals gave identical briefings during the terrible 1980-88 war against Iran. When we set off to check their stories then, they almost always turned out to be true.

Does the same apply now? General Hashem repeatedly insisted that his men were destroying US tanks and armour and helicopters.

This was easy to dismiss – until videotape of two burning US armoured personnel carriers popped up on the television screen. Vice-President Taha Yassin Ramadan has been obliging enough to explain the Iraqi army's tactics. It was Iraqi policy to let the Anglo-American armies “roam around” in the desert as long as they want, and attack them when they tried to enter the cities. Which seems to be pretty much what they are doing.

From Baghdad, with its canopy of sinister black oil smoke and air raid sirens, the American plan appears to be rather similar: to barnstorm up the desert parallel to the Tigris and Euphrates valley and try to turn right at every available city on the way. If there's trouble at Umm Qasr, try Basra. If Basra is blocked, have a go through Nasariyah. If that's dangerous, try to turn right through Najaf.

But the open road – the long highway to Baghdad lined with adoring Iraqis throwing

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roses at GIs and Tommys – is proving to be an illusion.

By this morning, the Americans could be outside Baghdad. But in military terms they might as well be in Kuwait.

Perhaps, in American and British terms, this is too pessimistic an assessment. In Baghdad, it's easy to see not just how badly the Americans and British have miscalculated, but it's also possible to imagine just how long President Saddam and his army and Baath party militias can endure, a sobering thought for those of us sitting in the Iraqi capital and only too well aware that the Stalingrad symbolism might turn out to be real. Saddam's tactics are clearly those of Stalin. Every day that passes is a day of further pain for Washington and London.

You could observe this cockiness when Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf, the Information Minister, spoke. Of Tony Blair, he said jovially yesterday: "I think the British nation has never been faced with a tragedy like this fellow." Mr Sahaf then presented a casualty list, which, however imaginative it might turn out to be, was credible to the average Iraqi, and perhaps to anyone. Civilian wounded and dead respectively: in Baghdad, 194 wounded (13 less than estimated); in Ninevah, eight wounded; in Karbala 32 wounded and 10 killed; in Salahuddin, 22 wounded and 2 killed. In Najaf, the figures were 36 and 2; in Qadissiyah, 13 and 4; in Basra, 122 and 14. In Babylon, the Iraqi government claims 63 wounded and 30 killed.

Sixty-two dead civilians – if the statistics are correct – is not a massacre. But there's nothing surprising about such a figure. It looks as if the Americans and British are bleeding to "liberate" a people who are not all that keen to be liberated by the Americans and British. A moral problem, of course. But not so big a moral problem as it would be if all this Iraqi suffering at the hands of the Americans and British turned out to be about oil. ♦