

This is a crime against humanity

A BBC television producer, moments before he was wounded by an American fighter aircraft that killed 18 people with “friendly fire”, spoke to his mother on a satellite phone. Holding the phone over his head so that she could hear the sound of the American planes overhead, he said: “Listen, that’s the sound of freedom.”

Did I read this scene in *Catch-22*? Surely, the BBC man was being ferociously ironic. I doubt it, just as I doubt that whoever designed the Observer’s page three last Sunday had Joseph Heller in mind when he wrote the weasel headline: “The moment young Omar discovered the price of war”. These cowardly words accompanied a photograph of an American marine reaching out to comfort 15-year-old Omar, having just participated in the mass murder of his father, mother, two sisters and brother during the unprovoked invasion of their homeland, in breach of the most basic law of civilised peoples.

No true epitaph for them in Britain’s famous liberal newspaper; no honest headline, such as: “This American marine murdered this boy’s family”. No photograph of Omar’s father, mother, sisters and brother dismembered and blood-soaked by automatic fire. Versions of the Observer’s propaganda picture have been appearing in the Anglo-American press since the invasion began: tender cameos of American troops reaching out, kneeling, ministering to their “liberated” victims.

And where were the pictures from the village of Furat, where 80 men, women and children were rocketed to death? Apart from the *Mirror*, where were the pictures, and footage, of small children holding up their hands in terror while Bush’s thugs forced their families to kneel in the street? Imagine that in a British high street. It is a glimpse of fascism, and we have a right to see it.

“To initiate a war of aggression,” said the judges in the Nuremberg trial of the Nazi leadership, “is not only an international crime; it is the supreme

JOHN PILGER | THIS IS A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY

international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.” In stating this guiding principle of international law, the judges specifically rejected German arguments of the “necessity” for pre-emptive attacks against other countries.

Nothing Bush and Blair, their cluster-bombing boys and their media court do now will change the truth of their great crime in Iraq. It is a matter of record, understood by the majority of humanity, if not by those who claim to speak for “us”. As Denis Halliday said of the Anglo-American embargo against Iraq, it will “slaughter them in the history books”. It was Halliday who, as assistant secretary general of the United Nations, set up the “oil for food” programme in Iraq in 1996 and quickly realised that the UN had become an instrument of “a genocidal attack on a whole society”. He resigned in protest, as did his successor, Hans von Sponeck, who described “the wanton and shaming punishment of a nation”.

I have mentioned these two men often in these pages, partly because their names and their witness have been airbrushed from most of the media. I well remember Jeremy Paxman bellowing at Halliday on Newsnight shortly after his resignation: “So are you an apologist for Saddam Hussein?” That helped set the tone for the travesty of journalism that now daily, almost gleefully, treats criminal war as sport. In a leaked e-mail Roger Mosey, the head of BBC Television News, described the BBC’s war coverage as “extraordinary – it almost feels like World Cup football when you go from Um Qasr to another theatre of war somewhere else and you’re switching between battles”.

He is talking about murder. That is what the Americans do, and no one will say so, even when they are murdering journalists. They bring to this one-sided attack on a weak and mostly defenceless people the same racist, homicidal intent I witnessed in Vietnam, where they had a whole programme of murder called Operation Phoenix. This runs through all their foreign wars, as it does through their own divided society. Take your pick of the current onslaught. Last weekend, a column of their tanks swept heroically into Baghdad and out again. They murdered people along the way.

They blew off the limbs of women and the scalps of children. Hear their voices on the unedited and unbroadcast videotape: “We shot the shit out of it.” Their victims overwhelm the morgues and hospitals – hospitals already denuded of drugs and painkillers by America’s deliberate withholding of \$5.4bn in humanitarian goods, approved by the Security Council and paid for by Iraq. The screams of children undergoing amputation with minimal anaesthetic qualify as the BBC man’s “sound of freedom”.

JOHN PILGER | THIS IS A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY

Heller would appreciate the sideshows. Take the British helicopter pilot who came to blows with an American who had almost shot him down. “Don’t you know the Iraqis don’t have a fucking air force?” he shouted. Did this pilot reflect on the truth he had uttered, on the whole craven enterprise against a stricken third world country and his own part in this crime? I doubt it. The British have been the most skilled at delusion and lying. By any standard, the Iraqi resistance to the high-tech Anglo-American machine was heroic. With ancient tanks and mortars, small arms and desperate ambushes, they panicked the Americans and reduced the British military class to one of its specialities – mendacious condescension.

The Iraqis who fight are “terrorists”, “hoodlums”, “pockets of Ba’ath Party loyalists”, “kamikaze” and “feds” (fedayeen). They are not real people: cultured and cultivated people. They are Arabs. This vocabulary of dishonour has been faithfully parroted by those enjoying it all from the broadcasting box. “What do you make of Basra?” asked the Today programme’s presenter of a former general embedded in the studio. “It’s hugely encouraging, isn’t it?” he replied. Their mutual excitement, like their plummy voices, are their bond.

On the same day, in a Guardian letter, Tim Llewellyn, a former BBC Middle East correspondent, pointed us to evidence of this “hugely encouraging” truth – fleeting pictures on Sky News of British soldiers smashing their way into a family home in Basra, pointing their guns at a woman and manhandling, hooding and manacled young men, one of whom was shown quivering with terror. “Is Britain ‘liberating’ Basra by taking political prisoners and, if so, based on what sort of intelligence, given Britain’s long unfamiliarity with this territory and its inhabitants . . . The least this ugly display will do is remind Arabs and Muslims everywhere of our Anglo-Saxon double standards – we can show your prisoners in . . . degrading positions, but don’t you dare show ours.”

Roger Mosey says the suffering of Um Qasr is “like World Cup football”. There are 40,000 people in Um Qasr; desperate refugees are streaming in and the hospitals are overflowing. All this misery is due entirely to the “coalition” invasion and the British siege, which forced the United Nations to withdraw its humanitarian aid staff. Cafod, the Catholic relief agency, which has sent a team to Um Qasr, says the standard humanitarian quota for water in emergency situations is 20 litres per person per day.

Cafod reports hospitals entirely without water and people drinking from contaminated wells. According to the World Health Organisation, 1.5 million people across southern Iraq are without water, and epidemics are inevitable. And

JOHN PILGER | THIS IS A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY

what are “our boys” doing to alleviate this, apart from staging childish, theatrical occupations of presidential palaces, having fired shoulder-held missiles into a civilian city and dropped cluster bombs?

A British colonel laments to his “embedded” flock that “it is difficult to deliver aid in an area that is still an active battle zone”. The logic of his own words mocks him. If Iraq was not a battle zone, if the British and the Americans were not defying international law, there would be no difficulty in delivering aid.

There is something especially disgusting about the lurid propaganda coming from these PR-trained British officers, who have not a clue about Iraq and its people. They describe the liberation they are bringing from “the world’s worst tyranny”, as if anything, including death by cluster bomb or dysentery, is better than “life under Saddam”. The inconvenient truth is that, according to Unicef, the Ba’athists built the most modern health service in the Middle East.

No one disputes the grim, totalitarian nature of the regime; but Saddam Hussein was careful to use the oil wealth to create a modern secular society and a large and prosperous middle class. Iraq was the only Arab country with a 90 per cent clean water supply and with free education. All this was smashed by the Anglo-American embargo. When the embargo was imposed in 1990, the Iraqi civil service organised a food distribution system that the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation described as “a model of efficiency . . . undoubtedly saving Iraq from famine”. That, too, was smashed when the invasion was launched.

Why are the British yet to explain why their troops have to put on protective suits to recover dead and wounded in vehicles hit by American “friendly fire”? The reason is that the Americans are using solid uranium coated on missiles and tank shells. When I was in southern Iraq, doctors estimated a sevenfold increase in cancers in areas where depleted uranium was used by the Americans and British in the 1991 war. Under the subsequent embargo, Iraq, unlike Kuwait, has been denied equipment with which to clean up its contaminated battlefields. The hospitals in Basra have wards overflowing with children with cancers of a variety not seen before 1991. They have no painkillers; they are fortunate if they have aspirin.

With honourable exceptions (Robert Fisk; al-Jazeera), little of this has been reported. Instead, the media have performed their preordained role as imperial America’s “soft power”: rarely identifying “our” crime, or misrepresenting it as a struggle between good intentions and evil incarnate. This abject professional and moral failure now beckons the unseen dangers of such an epic, false victory, inviting its repetition in Iran, Korea, Syria, Cuba, China.

JOHN PILGER | THIS IS A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY

George Bush has said: “It will be no defence to say: ‘I was just following orders.’” He is correct. The Nuremberg judges left in no doubt the right of ordinary soldiers to follow their conscience in an illegal war of aggression. Two British soldiers have had the courage to seek status as conscientious objectors. They face court martial and imprisonment; yet virtually no questions have been asked about them in the media. George Galloway has been pilloried for asking the same question as Bush, and he and Tam Dalyell, Father of the House of Commons, are being threatened with withdrawal of the Labour whip.

Dalyell, 41 years a member of the Commons, has said the Prime Minister is a war criminal who should be sent to The Hague. This is not gratuitous; on the prima facie evidence, Blair is a war criminal, and all those who have been, in one form or another, accessories should be reported to the International Criminal Court. Not only did they promote a charade of pretexts few now take seriously, they brought terrorism and death to Iraq.

A growing body of legal opinion around the world agrees that the new court has a duty, as Eric Herring of Bristol University wrote, to investigate “not only the regime, but also the UN bombing and sanctions which violated the human rights of Iraqis on a vast scale”. Add the present piratical war, whose spectre is the uniting of Arab nationalism with militant Islam. The whirlwind sown by Blair and Bush is just beginning. Such is the magnitude of their crime. **JP**