

Iraq is a war of national liberation

Four years ago, I travelled the length of Iraq, from the hills where St Matthew is buried in the Kurdish north to the heartland of Mesopotamia, and Baghdad, and the Shia south. I have seldom felt as safe in any country. Once, in the Edwardian colonnade of Baghdad's book market, a young man shouted something at me about the hardship his family had been forced to endure under the embargo imposed by America and Britain. What happened next was typical of Iraqis; a passer-by calmed the man, putting his arm around his shoulder, while another was quickly at my side. "Forgive him," he said reassuringly. "We do not connect the people of the west with the actions of their governments. You are welcome."

At one of the melancholy evening auctions where Iraqis come to sell their most intimate possessions out of urgent need, a woman with two infants watched as their pushchairs went for pennies, and a man who had collected doves since he was 15 came with his last bird and its cage; and yet people said to me: "You are welcome." Such grace and dignity were often expressed by those Iraqi exiles who loathed Saddam Hussein and opposed both the economic siege and the Anglo-American assault on their homeland; thousands of these anti-Saddamites marched against the war in London last year, to the chagrin of the warmongers, who never understood the dichotomy of their principled stand.

Were I to undertake the same journey in Iraq today, I might not return alive. Foreign terrorists have ensured that. With the most lethal weapons that billions of dollars can buy, and the threats of their cowboy generals and the panic-stricken brutality of their foot soldiers, more than 120,000 of these invaders have ripped up the fabric of a nation that survived the years of Saddam Hussein, just as they oversaw the destruction of its artefacts.

They have brought to Iraq a daily, murderous violence which surpasses that of a tyrant who never promised a fake democracy.

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Amnesty International reports that US-led forces have “shot Iraqis dead during demonstrations, tortured and ill-treated prisoners, arrested people arbitrarily and held them indefinitely, demolished houses in acts of revenge and collective punishment”.

In Fallujah, US marines, described as “tremendously precise” by their psychopathic spokesman, slaughtered up to 600 people, according to hospital directors. They did it with aircraft and heavy weapons deployed in urban areas, as revenge for the killing of four American mercenaries. Many of the dead of Fallujah were women and children and the elderly. Only the Arab television networks, notably al-Jazeera, have shown the true scale of this crime, while the Anglo-American media continue to channel and amplify the lies of the White House and Downing Street.

“Writing exclusively for the Observer before a make-or-break summit with President George Bush this week,” sang Britain’s former premier liberal newspaper on 11 April, “[Tony Blair] gave full backing to American tactics in Iraq... saying that the government would not flinch from its ‘historic struggle’ despite the efforts of ‘insurgents and terrorists’.”

That this “exclusive” was not presented as parody shows that the propaganda engine that drove the lies of Blair and Bush on weapons of mass destruction and al-Qaeda links for almost two years is still in service. On BBC news bulletins and Newsnight, Blair’s “terrorists” are still currency, a term that is never applied to the principal source and cause of the terrorism, the foreign invaders, who have now killed at least 11,000 civilians, according to Amnesty and others. The overall figure, including conscripts, may be as high as 55,000.

That a nationalist uprising has been under way in Iraq for more than a year, uniting at least 15 major groups, most of them opposed to the old regime, has been suppressed in a mendacious lexicon invented in Washington and London and reported incessantly, CNN-style. “Remnants” and “tribalists” and “fundamentalists” dominate, while Iraq is denied the legacy of a history in which much of the modern world is rooted. The “first-anniversary story” about a laughable poll claiming that half of all Iraqis felt better off now under the occupation is a case in point. The BBC and the rest swallowed it whole. For the truth, I recommend the courageous daily reporting of Jo Wilding, a British human rights observer in Baghdad (www.wildfirejo.blogspot.com).

Even now, as the uprising spreads, there is only cryptic gesturing at the obvious: that this is a war of national liberation and that the enemy is “us”. The pro-invasion Sydney Morning Herald is typical. Having expressed “surprise” at

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the uniting of Shias and Sunnis, the paper's Baghdad correspondent recently described "how GI bullies are making enemies of their Iraqi friends" and how he and his driver had been threatened by Americans. "I'll take you out quick as a flash, motherfucker!" a soldier told the reporter. That this was merely a glimpse of the terror and humiliation that Iraqis have to suffer every day in their own country was not made clear; yet this newspaper has published image after unctuous image of mournful American soldiers, inviting sympathy for an invader who has "taken out" thousands of innocent men, women and children.

What we do routinely in the imperial west, wrote Richard Falk, professor of international relations at Princeton, is propagate "through a self-righteous, one-way moral/legal screen positive images of western values and innocence that are threatened, validating a campaign of unrestricted violence". Thus, western state terrorism is erased, and a tenet of western journalism is to excuse or minimise "our" culpability, however atrocious. Our dead are counted; theirs are not. Our victims are worthy; theirs are not.

This is an old story; there have been many Iraqs, or what Blair calls "historic struggles" waged against "insurgents and terrorists". Take Kenya in the 1950s. The approved version is still cherished in the west - first popularised in the press, then in fiction and movies; and like Iraq, it is a lie. "The task to which we have set our minds," declared the governor of Kenya in 1955, "is to civilise a great mass of human beings who are in a very primitive moral and social state." The slaughter of thousands of nationalists, who were never called nationalists, was British government policy. The myth of the Kenyan uprising was that the Mau Mau brought "demonic terror" to the heroic white settlers. In fact, the Mau Mau killed just 32 Europeans, compared with the estimated 10,000 Kenyans killed by the British, who ran concentration camps where the conditions were so harsh that 402 inmates died in just one month. Torture, flogging and abuse of women and children were commonplace. "The special prisons," wrote the imperial historian V G Kiernan, "were probably as bad as any similar Nazi or Japanese establishments." None of this was reported. The "demonic terror" was all one way: black against white. The racist message was unmistakable.

It was the same in Vietnam. In 1969, the discovery of the American massacre in the village of My Lai was described on the cover of Newsweek as "An American tragedy", not a Vietnamese one. In fact, there were many massacres like My Lai, and almost none of them was reported at the time.

The real tragedy of soldiers policing a colonial occupation is also suppressed. More than 58,000 American soldiers were killed in Vietnam. The same number,

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according to a veterans' study, killed themselves on their return home. Dr Doug Rokke, director of the US army depleted uranium project following the 1991 Gulf invasion, estimates that more than 10,000 American troops have since died as a result, many from contamination illness. When I asked him how many Iraqis had died, he raised his eyes and shook his head. "Solid uranium was used on shells," he said. "Tens of thousands of Iraqis - men, women and children - were contaminated. Right through the 1990s, at international symposiums, I watched Iraqi officials approach their counterparts from the Pentagon and the Ministry of Defence and ask, plead, for help with decontamination. The Iraqis didn't use uranium; it was not their weapon. I watched them put their case, describing the deaths and horrific deformities, and I watched them rebuffed. It was pathetic." During last year's invasion, both American and British forces again used uranium-tipped shells, leaving whole areas so "hot" with radiation that only military survey teams in full protective clothing can approach them. No warning or medical help is given to Iraqi civilians; thousands of children play in these zones. The "coalition" has refused to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency to send experts to assess what Rokke describes as "a catastrophe".

When will this catastrophe be properly reported by those meant to keep the record straight? When will the BBC and others investigate the conditions of some 10,000 Iraqis held without charge, many of them tortured, in US concentration camps inside Iraq, and the corralling, with razor wire, of entire Iraqi villages? When will the BBC and others stop referring to "the handover of Iraqi sovereignty" on 30 June, although there will be no such handover? The new regime will be stooges, with each ministry controlled by American officials and with its stooge army and stooge police force run by Americans. A Saddamite law prohibiting trade unions for public sector workers will stay in force. Leading members of Saddam's infamous secret police, the Mukhabarat, will run "state security", directed by the CIA. The US military will have the same "status of forces" agreement that they impose on the host nations of their 750 bases around the world, which in effect leaves them in charge. Iraq will be a US colony, like Haiti. And when will journalists have the professional courage to report the pivotal role that Israel has played in this grand colonial design for the Middle East?

A few weeks ago, Rick Mercier, a young columnist for the Freelance Star, a small paper in Virginia, did what no other journalist has done this past year. He apologised to his readers for the travesty of the reporting of events leading to the attack on Iraq. "Sorry we let unsubstantiated claims drive our coverage," he

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wrote. "Sorry we let a band of self-serving Iraqi defectors make fools of us. Sorry we fell for Colin Powell's performance at the United Nations... Maybe we'll do a better job next war."

Well done, Rick Mercier. But listen to the silence of your colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic. No one expects Fox or Wapping or the Daily Telegraph to relent. But what about David Astor's beacon of liberalism, the Observer, which stood against the invasion of Egypt in 1956 and its attendant lies? The Observer not only backed last year's unprovoked, illegal assault on Iraq; it helped create the mendacious atmosphere in which Blair could get away with his crime. The reputation of the Observer, and the fact that it published occasional mitigating material, meant that lies and myths gained legitimacy. A front-page story gave credence to the bogus claim that Iraq was behind the anthrax attacks in the US. And there were those unnamed western "intelligence sources", all those straw men, all those hints, in David Rose's two-page "investigation" headlined "The Iraqi connection", that left readers with the impression that Saddam Hussein might well have had a lot to do with the attacks of 11 September 2001. "There are occasions in history," wrote Rose, "when the use of force is both right and sensible. This is one of them." Tell that to 11,000 dead civilians, Mr Rose.

It is said that British officers in Iraq now describe the "tactics" of their American comrades as "appalling". No, the very nature of a colonial occupation is appalling, as the families of 13 Iraqis killed by British soldiers, who are taking the British government to court, will agree.

If the British military brass understand an inkling of their own colonial past, not least the bloody British retreat from Iraq 83 years ago, they will whisper in the ear of the little Wellington-cum-Palmerston in 10 Downing Street: "Get out now, before we are thrown out." **JP**