

Inside a city sleepwalking to war

In vain, I looked for signs of the storm to come

For Baghdad, it is night number 1,001, the very last few hours of fantasy. As UN inspectors prepared to leave the city in the early hours of this morning, Saddam Hussein has appointed his own son, Qusay, to lead the defence of the city of the Caliphs against the American invasion. Yet at the Armed Forces club yesterday, I found the defenders playing football. Iraqi television prepares Baghdad people for the bombardment to come with music from the Hollywood film, *Gladiator*. But the Iraqis went on with their work of disarming the soon-to-be invaded nation, observing the destruction of two more Al-Samoud missiles.

The UN inspectors, only hours from packing, even turned up to observe this very last bit of the disarmament which the Americans had so fervently demanded and in which they have now totally lost interest. With the inspectors gone, there is nothing to stop the Anglo-American air forces commencing their bombardment of the cities of Iraq.

So is Baghdad to be Stalingrad, as Saddam tells us? It doesn't feel like it. The roads are open, checkpoints often unmanned, the city's soldiery dragging on cigarettes outside the United Nations headquarters. From the banks of the Tigris river – a muddy, warm sewage-swamped version of Stalingrad's Volga – I watched yesterday evening the fishermen casting their lines for the fish that Baghdadis eat after sunset. The Security Council resolution withdrawn? Tony Blair calls an emergency meeting of the Cabinet? George Bush to address the American people? Baghdad, it seems, is sleepwalking its way into history.

How come I found a queue of Iraqis waiting outside the Sindbad cinema in Saadun Street last night, queuing for that ancient Egyptian clunker *Private Lives*, its posters displaying the ample size of its heroine? Talk to any Iraqi and they will tell you they

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adore – more than adore – Saddam. But they would, wouldn't they? And we've heard that for well over two decades. True, the local Baathist papers regale us with peace marches and peace protests around the world – as if Mr Bush is going to call back his quarter of a million men because Jordanians burnt American flags on Sunday.

The detachment is quite extraordinary, as if we are breathing here in Baghdad a different kind of air, as if we exist on a planet quite removed from the B-52s and Stealth bombers and cruise missiles and Mother of All Bombs, which will soon make the earth tremble beneath our feet. The very history and culture of the Arab world is about to be visited by a Western-made earthquake, the likes of which has never been seen.

Even the aftermath of the Second World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire will be made redundant in the coming hours. Yet on the banks of the Tigris stands a massive statue, bound in sacking and gauze, a monolith of epic proportions, waiting for the unveiling of another bronze likeness of Saddam Hussein.

In the fumes of Baghdad's traffic yesterday, among its old yellow taxis, brand new red double-decker buses and trucks, I searched for signs of the tempest to come. There were a few. Queues of cars outside gas stations, filling up for the last time, a clutch of antique shops closing down, a gang of workers were moving the computers from a ministry, just as the Serbs did before Nato visited Belgrade in the spring of 1999. Didn't the Iraqis know what was about to happen? Did Saddam?

I could only be reminded of that remarkable and very recent account by a former Cuban ambassador who was part of a 1990 delegation sent by Fidel Castro to persuade President Saddam of the overwhelming American firepower that would be sent against him if he did not withdraw from Kuwait. "I've received several reports like that," President Saddam replied. "It's our ambassador to the UN who sends them to me and most of the time, they finish down there." And here Saddam gestured to a marble rubbish bin on the floor.

Is the marble bin still being filled with similar reports? Yesterday, Iraqi state television told us yet again that President Saddam said, personally, that although Iraq had weapons of mass destruction in the past, they no longer existed today. It was America's own weapons of mass destruction and its sponsorship of Israel that threatened the world.

All day, a UN C-130 aircraft baked on the tarmac at Saddam International airport – there are two more UN transport aircraft in Cyprus – ready to take the 140 inspectors out of Iraq before Mr Bush and Mr Blair launch their blitz. No one questions the obvious: why did the inspectors bother to come? If the British, as the Attorney General claimed, didn't need UN Security Council resolution 1441 to wage war because they were justified under earlier resolutions, why on earth did they vote for it? Because they

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hoped President Saddam would refuse to accept them back or, as President Saddam put it rather neatly yesterday, “the inspectors came to find nothing”. This kind of argument claims no audience in Baghdad. The cynicism with which Iraqis treat the UN – and the American and British misuse of the UN – may only be paralleled by another kind of cynicism whose central figure is that one so ostentatiously adored in the streets of the city on the Tigris.

A group of foreign “peace activists” stood hand-in-hand along the parapet of Baghdad’s longest bridge, old men and young American Muslims and a Buddhist in a prayer shawl, smiling at the passing traffic, largely ignored by Iraqi motorists. It was as if Iraqis were less caught up in this demonstration than the foreigners, as if their years of suffering had left them complacent to the terrible reality about to fall upon them.

Then comes more news from the Revolutionary Command Council. Its latest decree – signed, of course, by its chairman, Saddam Hussein – announces the appointment of General Ali Hassan al-Majid as commander of Iraq’s southern zone, which includes Basra, America’s first target for invasion. General Ali Hassan is known as Chemical Ali for his gas attack on the Kurds of Halabja. What does this portend for the Americans? Or the Iraqis? Or is this now an honorary title for a force that will be rolled over by the lead American tanks?

So I went at dusk last night to the great eggshell monument which President Saddam erected to the half-million Iraqi dead of his 1980-88 war against Iran, whose cabinet basements are lined with the names of every lost Iraqi, inscribed in marble. “Hope comes from life and brings fire to the heart,” one of the lines from an Arabic poem says round the base. But the couples sitting on the grass beside the monument had not come to remember loved ones. They were courting students whose only political comment – aware of that “minder” hovering over my shoulder – was that “we have endured war so many times, we are used to it”.

So I am left with an heretical thought. Might Baghdad ultimately become an open city, its defenders moved north to protect Saddam’s heartland, the capital’s people left to discover the joys and betrayals of an American occupation on their own? I suppose it all depends on the next few hours and days, on how many civilians the Americans and the British manage to kill in their supposedly moral war. Will Iraqis have to construct another monument to the dead? Or will we? ◆