

Bubbles of fire tear into the sky

Pinpricks of fire as bombs and cruise missiles explode

It was like a door slamming deep beneath the surface of the earth; a pulsating, minute-long roar of sound that brought President George Bush's supposed crusade against "terrorism" to Baghdad last night. There was a thrashing of tracer on the horizon from the Baghdad air defences – the Second World War-era firepower of old Soviet anti-aircraft guns – and then a series of tremendous vibrations that had the ground shaking under our feet. Bubbles of fire tore into the sky around the Iraqi capital, dark red at the base, golden at the top.

Saddam Hussein, of course, has vowed to fight to the end but in Baghdad last night, there was a truly Valhalla quality about the violence. Within minutes, looking out across the Tigris river I could see pin-pricks of fire as bombs and cruise missiles exploded on to Iraq's military and communications centres and, no doubt, upon the innocent as well.

The first of the latter, a taxi driver, was blown to pieces in the first American raid on Baghdad yesterday morning. No one here doubted that the dead would include civilians. Tony Blair said just that in the Commons debate this week but I wondered, listening to this storm of fire across Baghdad last night, if he has any conception of what it looks like, what it feels like, or of the fear of those innocent Iraqis who are, as I write this, cowering in their homes and basements.

Not many hours ago, I talked to an old Shia Muslim lady in a poor area of Baghdad. She was dressed in traditional black with a white veil over her head. I pressed her over and over again as to what she felt. In the end, she just said: "I am afraid."

That this is the start of something that will change the face of the Middle East is in little doubt; that it will be successful in the long term is quite another matter.

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The sheer violence of it, the howl of air raid sirens and the air-cutting fall of the missiles carried its own political message; not just to President Saddam but to the rest of the world. We are the super-power, those explosions said last night. This is how we do business. This is how we take our revenge for 11 September.

Not even George Bush made any pretence in the last days of peace to link Iraq with those international crimes against humanity in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania. But some of the fire that you could see bubbling up through the darkness around Baghdad last night did remind me of other flames, those which consumed the World Trade Centre. In a strange way, the Americans were – without the permission of the United Nations, with most of the world against them – acting out their rage with an eerily fiery consummation.

Iraq cannot withstand this for long. President Saddam may claim, as he does, that his soldiers can defeat technology with courage. I doubt it. For what fell upon Iraq last night – and I witnessed just an infinitely small part of this festival of violence – was as militarily awesome as it was politically terrifying. The crowds outside my hotel stood and stared into the sky at the flashing anti-aircraft bursts, awed by their power. ♦