

COUNTDOWN

A dissenter's Diary

February - March 2003

by

Jeremy Fox

©Jeremy Fox
54 Crofton Road
London SE5 8NB
jf@foxjones.net

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Yesterday the UK government ordered tanks to Heathrow airport. A protective measure in response to a terrorist threat. That's what they told us. What tanks could possibly do to protect us is hard to imagine. Presumably they're not going to fire shells into the airport waiting-room. Designed for all terrain attack against opposing armies, it's hard to imagine what tanks could possibly achieve in a domestic setting except cause havoc. As far as we know, the UK hasn't been invaded. Hordes of scimitar-waving bedouin haven't been spotted charging on camels into Terminal Four (that's the British Airways terminal). What can Mr Blair and the quivering coterie of tight-lipped sycophants who surround him have in mind?

According to the media - who have it directly from the government - intelligence reports on the imminence of a terrorist attack are unequivocal. These reports are doubtless as well-founded as any, as thoroughly-researched and exhaustively checked as the one issued last week on Iraq which had been copied from an old student thesis. The latter, despite having been in cold storage for several years, tasted fresh enough to impress even the US Secretary of State, once its stale flavour had been masked with a pungent adjectival sauce.

Hardly worth recording that no attack occurred on Heathrow yesterday, nor on any other airport, nor anywhere in the UK for that matter. Officialdom will claim that's because the army forestalled the hostilities. The argument is identical to the one trotted out by those who press for war with Iraq. Saddam is quiet at the moment, but he remains a danger to the world. His weapons of mass destruction (a phrase rendered meaningless by overuse) have not been shown to exist. Nevertheless, Bush and Blair, the Pozzo and Lucky of modern politics, assert not only that they do exist but that they represent a direct and imminent threat to the two nations over which they preside. Supported by a fawning flock of mechanicals - thuggish on the US side, blustering on the British - they seize every opportunity to bang their war drum.

UN Resolution 1441 is the stick they use to beat down opposition to war. Everything the Iraqis do constitutes in the fevered brains of the world's leaders 'a material breach' of 1441. The inadequacies of a CIA-doctored twelve thousand page Iraqi report on their weapons program was a 'material breach'; missiles that 'might possibly' travel ten kilometres further than permitted is also a "material breach"; failure to produce any weapons of mass destruction that George and Tony know to be there, voilà another material breach. There's probably a material breach for every man woman and child in Iraq - which is just as well because when they find themselves in the flight path of an American cruise missile tipped with depleted uranium, our brave war leaders will be able to dismiss the the loss of life and the destruction of civilian habitat with another overused weasel phrase: collateral damage.

At the palace of Westminster, it's hard to find a senior politician, regardless of political hue, who isn't falling into line. Harder still in Washington. Virtually the entire political class of the West's 'axis of thuggery' has capitulated to war frenzy and to the bullying demagoguery of Congress and Parliament.

The only people who don't support the rush to war appear to be - most of the world's population. I can't remember a time when politicians were so profoundly at odds with public opinion.

In the UK, opposition to the war takes first place among the issues that divide the citizenry from the parliament. But it is not the only one. Private sector involvement in the national health service, in public transport and in education almost certainly lacks popular consent. One doubts whether anyone approves of the plan to concrete over large swathes of London's diminishing green belt other than developers, builders and financiers. By voting for Ken Livingstone as their mayor, Londoners have already expressed their distaste for partial privatization of the underground. Yet these are all policies of the national government. Worse still, and despite Churchill's reminder that 'the duty of the opposition is to oppose' - they are policies that her majesty's loyal opposition wholly and enthusiastically endorses.

If there is so little to choose between the UK's major parties, we must wonder whether voting any longer has a purpose. In the United States, where Bush lost the election but secured the presidency anyway, the same question arises. Seventy-five percent of the US electorate didn't vote for Bush. That's the same percentage that

didn't vote for Blair and New Labour in 2001. By making war in our name, these governments of doubtful legitimacy will trample on our rights as well as the rights and lives of those they intend attack. They will also be casting aside the ideals that form the basis of what we like to think of as western civilization, ideals seeded in the gymnasias of Athens and on Mount Sinai, and that succeeding generations of Europeans and others have nurtured in the unspoken belief that every contribution of art, of science and philosophy inched mankind forward towards a greater understanding of ourselves and of our common purpose. Two vicious "world" wars in the last century cast doubt on that enterprise. The nazis, who erupted from the same culture that produced Mozart and Beethoven and Goethe, showed us just how thin is our veneer of civility. We are still trying to digest the meaning of that ghastly nightmare which arose out of the crazed desire of a handful of men - and of one man in particular - for world domination. Now, at the beginning of the new millennium, another handful of men are embarking on a similar repellent crusade. The administration of George W. Bush, forty-third president of the United States of America, may go down as one of the nastiest and most corrupt in modern history.

February 14, 2003

One of the disappointments of the tense prolegomenon to war has been the abject deference of the BBC to the government line. Anti-Saddamites unfailingly get a daily hearing on Radio Four's Today programme. This morning Jack Straw enjoyed a turn, followed by the ludicrously ennobled "Lord" (Conrad) Black. Mr Straw gave out his usual script. It runs as follows. *We know Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction. That means he is a threat to humanity. Therefore he must disarm. The inspectors haven't found any evidence of weapons of mass destruction. The weapons must therefore, be hidden. Ergo, we must use force.* The argument looks strong until one examines its premises. First, if we know Saddam Hussein has WMDs, why has nobody been able to prove it? Colin Powell's pathetic presentation to the UN of uninterpretable photographs and garbled tape recordings impressed only those who didn't need convincing. The latest British intelligence document has been revealed as a fake. Second, even if Saddam Hussein is hiding "illicit" weaponry, he is not attacking anyone, nor threatening to do so. The country over which he presides is poverty-stricken, its military capacity slight, its ability to threaten the United States

and other “allies” a laughable fantasy. Interviewer James Naughtie - a part-time rotweiler - gave up the grandstand to Jack Straw with barely a whimper of genuine inquiry.

Conrad Black is a right-wing newspaper baron who surrendered his Canadian citizenship in exchange for a British peerage and a seat in our unelected second Chamber. So much for his democratic principles. His predictable contribution to the Today programme was to explain to listeners that people who disagreed with the Bush administration’s determination to go to war were benighted fools. If your lordship pleases.

The BBC knows that tomorrow - 15th February - one of the largest demonstrations in British history will take place in London against the war; the corporation also knows that the mood of the country is deeply antipathetic to the Blair government’s policy on this issue and to Blair’s obsequious pandering to the Bush administration; finally, it knows that half of Labour’s back benchers in parliament side with the people against the government. Yet the BBC made only passing reference to the mood of the country.

Two days ago, the BBC televised a special “debate” on the war, chaired by the ubiquitous David Dimbleby. Jack Straw again appeared as the protagonist on the government side, Daniel Perle - an American hawk - joined via satellite, and various other proponents of war and empire ringed the central arena. An array of muddled, fence-sitters filled most of the remaining chairs: the Saudi ambassador, Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy, and etc. Against the war all the BBC could come up with were Tariq Ali, a middle-ranking French official and Bianca Jagger, known largely for her surname. The anti-war contingent - whose collective voice represents the largest proportion of public opinion - received the least airtime. Daniel Perle and Jack Straw - the latter wearing a guilty smirk - received the most. Jerry Rubin, a self-important adviser to the Clinton Administration, who seems to get invited to everything, also had his say. The remaining “guests” were given no chance to speak. The occasion no more resembled a debate than the anodyne, tweedle-dum tweedle-dee, media-controlled encounters that take place every four years between US presidential candidates. All traces of intellectual effort had been excised. Instead of reasoning and argument, viewers were treated to a succession of insubstantial assertions and trite sound bites. No one picked up the only truly

interesting remark of the evening which came when Mr Perle admitted that the US had already decided to go to war with Iraq and that weapons inspectors, the United Nations, NATO, Europe and uncle Tom Cobbly were a collective irrelevance that could be swatted down like a summer fly. Once again the BBC failed its constituents.

An apparently unrelated event leads one to wonder whether the BBC might have traded its traditional independence for what Yorkshire people call muck. Only last week the government announced a handsome increase in the licence fee. Nudge nudge, wink wink: *you* keep the plebs down over the war, *we'll* see you don't go short. Tomorrow the BBC will televise one of the most exciting soccer matches of the season: the F.A. cup semi-final between Arsenal and Manchester United. The kick-off has been timed to coincide with the start of the anti-war demonstration. Keep them amused and they won't bother with what we're up to. Will they?

I seem to have adopted an abrasive tone in these first two diary entries, a reflection perhaps of the anger I feel about the drive towards war and about the government's erosion of democratic accountability. But I am also frightened by what the new American imperialism portends. What miseries await the world under this new yoke? How long will it last? How long before Americans find out that in subjugating the world, they have subjugated themselves? How long before they learn that their own freedom too has withered away, sold for a home in Mainsville and a shiny new car?

Tomorrow the demonstration, but I don't relish the prospect. Such events leave me uneasy, not because crowds are dangerous, readily moved to excess and inclined to panic - though all these things are true. I dislike them for deeper reasons, because they seem to me to turn participants into supplicants; and because they oblige us to subsume our individuality - which is what identifies us as human - in favour of something larger in size but infinitely smaller in spirit - a single idea, a mind-numbing mantra that we know doesn't begin to represent who and what we are. Demonstrations humiliate us, because we know that, like a potentate of old, the leader - Blair in this case - can shrug us off as he might shrug off a slight cold or a mosquito bite. Nothing obliges him to listen, nor if he hears, to heed. He can declare war without even a parliamentary debate let alone the support of the people. He believes he knows better than we do.

Of late, his voice has acquired a messianic tone, there is a flush about his cheeks; he perspires under questioning; his eyes reflect the manic gleam of a believer.

Tomorrow's demonstrations will be a disquieting reminder that government has run off with our democracy. The challenge - much greater even than the immediate issue of Iraq - will be to get it back.

February 17, 2003

I didn't feel humiliated, or that we were begging. On the contrary, I felt right from the start, that this was not a traditional demonstration, not the protest of a factional interest, or a group that felt itself neglected and misunderstood. Rather it felt like the beginning of a political movement. People of all ages and every race joined the throng: families with young children, parents pushing infants, pensioners in brogues, Palestinians in Arafat scarves, students with backpacks, muslims in mufti, firemen in uniform, bible-thumpers, leafleters, the anorak brigade, the eternally-fractured left (the Socialist Party, the Socialist Workers Party, the Socialist Party of Great Britain, the Communist Party, the New Communist Party...). Nobody complained of the freezing temperatures. Good humour prevailed. But there was anger too, against the government and against Bush.

For those of us who took the tube from Elephant & Castle to the starting point on the north side of the river, the march started early. The lift attendant - a tall young man of African descent - wished us well. "Don't let it be just for today," he said. "Look around you. We can make it better."

Arriving early, I found the main route already massed with marchers. At first, I kept in step with the crowd. Police spaced themselves thinly along the route, looking cold and not a little nervous. They could never have mastered a crowd of this size. Slipping into a urinal, I found relief beneath a portrait of Sir Joseph Bazalgette, "engineer of the London Embankment". Alas poor knight, could it ever have occurred to him that his life would be commemorated by a porcelain portrait in a public loo?

Emerging, I noticed Cleopatra's Needle opposite - a gift of Mohammed Ali Pasha, self-appointed viceroy of Egypt and avatar of the expanding British Empire.

Turning into Whitehall, we shuffled past other reminders of our imperial past: statues of Spencer Compton, 8th Duke of Devonshire, Field Marshall the Duke of Cambridge, Major-General Havelock, bible-thumping suppresser of the Indian Mutiny.

Here's how Havelock dealt with one of the mutineers, a "fine-looking young sepoy." . The words are those of Captain F. C. Maude who was carrying out Havelock's orders.

"I depressed the muzzle (of the nine-pounder) until it pointed to the pit of his stomach, just below the sternum. We put no shot in...The young sepoy looked undauntedly at us during the whole process of pinioning: indeed he never flinched for a moment. Then I...gave the order 'Fire!'. There was a considerable recoil from the gun, and a thick cloud of smoke hung over us. When this cleared away, we saw two legs lying in front of the gun; but no other sign of what had, just before, been a human being and a brave man. At this moment...six to eight seconds after the explosion...down fell the man's head. It must have gone straight up into the air...The pent-up feelings of the bystanders found vent in a sort of loud gasp, like Ah-h! Then many of them came...to inspect the remains of the legs."

Nowadays we wouldn't bother with all that ceremony, of course. Aerial bombardment, radioactive ordinance and cluster-bombs achieve far more with less involvement of personnel. Vultures see to the clean-up.

Impatient with the slow pace of the march, I slipped between the police cordons, and by snaking through back streets, succeeded in reaching somewhere near the head of the column where the going was faster and the way more open. En route, I passed a young woman so exquisitely poised, so fresh and beautiful, so sweetly oblivious to the human tide surging with passion and purpose a couple of blocks away, that she seemed to be from another, gentler universe. I watched her glide towards the National Gallery, dark curls bobbing in the breeze. I thought of Yeats:

*How can I, that man standing there,
My attention fix
On Roman or on Russian
Or on Spanish politics?*

Further on, an elderly man in heavy cloak and Russian fur hat stood beaming and nodding to the air. I took him to be mad, until I saw that he was wearing an earpiece connected to a mobile phone.

How silent those streets! They felt as if some great catastrophe had drained the city of its people, leaving only shades behinds, strange figures that floated in and out of buildings and round corners like figments of a dream, among whom I seemed to walk alone, ‘...*whistling to the air* ..’

Rejoining the march in Piccadilly, I judged by the faster pace that the front lay no more than a hundred yards ahead. Waves of sound rode through the ranks like gusts of wind over water. Thousands of banners formed a moving, parti-coloured wall. One urged Blair to “make tea not war” and pictured him wearing a teapot. Another showed Blair and Bush kissing like a pair of chimpanzees at Whipsnade. But these efforts at humour were swamped by banners expressing anger, fear, and frustration. An air of seriousness predominated; we were not in a laughing mood.

I spotted a line of three lobotomised middle-agers at a window of Prêt-à-Manger, munching on sandwiches and staring out with blank incomprehension. In the doorway, two women chatted.

“Where’s Sandra?”

“Gone to Harrods”.

Life continued. Shops were open, even if they did scant business, Blair was delivering a sanctimonious speech at the Labour Party conference in Glasgow, Manchester United and Arsenal were locking horns in the cup semi-final, France and England were warming up for their six-nations match at Twickenham, Scotland and Ireland doing the same at Murrayfield. Little Britain busied herself with little preoccupations. Our earnest anger, boisterous energy, solidarity, will to change the world, however powerful to us, could still fit into a few square miles of London, Glasgow, and Cardiff.

Passing a line of women queuing outside a port-a-loo on the edge of Hyde Park, I pointed them towards the regular facility, some thirty yards distant at the corner. Half followed my directions, the others regarded me suspiciously and stayed put. Fifty percent credibility.

Threading my way through the gathering, I came to a position near the stage from where I could see the speakers. For those who couldn't see them, a huge, lofted screen projected their image to distant parts. To the rear of the stage, a neon-lit electronic notice-board, informed us that we numbered half a million. By the end, the figure had risen to two million, a guestimate that made this demonstration something out of the ordinary, maybe the largest London had ever seen.

The speeches were uniformly disappointing. Most cheers went to Tony Benn, a moving tribute from a crowd whose members averaged less than half his age. Jesse Jackson came on last, and spoke more than anyone else though less impressively. No matter. We know him as a brave civil rights leader and if, like Moses, he lacks the gift of eloquence, we forgive him for what he is, and because we know - and he reminded us anyway - that he had stood side by side with Martin Luther King. Jackson's appearance reminded me that of the great figures of the last hundred years, those I admire most and who seem to me to have made the best contribution to humanity, all have darker skins than I: Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, the Mahatma. Yes, "the seditious Middle Temple lawyer posing as a fakir" turned out to be greater even than the man who offered that belittling description. We may remember Churchill for his courage, his bullish eloquence, his stubborn and ultimately successful challenge to Hitler. But I fancy history will bestow the larger laurel on Gandhi, who taught us more with fewer means, and etched not just his words but his life into our collective conscience. He also discovered a weapon which, at the service of a noble cause, can defeat the most destructive military hardware. Bush and Blair have nothing to fear from Saddam Hussein. War with Iraq won't interfere with their sleep. Public reaction is what will keep them awake at night, and the prospect of civil disobedience.

After Jesse Jackson, I had farewell to a charming Iraqi woman with whom I had shared the preceding three or four hours, and then retraced my steps. It was around five-thirty; the early evening dark, grey, chilly - my feet so cold that I had difficulty at first in retaining my balance because I could no longer feel them. In Piccadilly, six hours after I had passed through on my way to the park, the marchers were still arriving. Only at Trafalgar Square did I finally see the end of the column. I asked a group of stragglers if it mattered to them that they had missed the rally. No, it didn't matter. They just wanted to be part of the day.

Stopping at a pub in Whitehall, I fell into conversation with a group of fire fighters. They too had been on the march.

We talked for half an hour about Blair, the failures of New Labour, and the success of the demonstration. There were distractions. Two beautiful oriental women in tight needle cord were propping up the bar. Above their heads, a television was showing the England-France rugby match. "Something's gonna change in this country," one of the firemen told me. "Otherwise there'll be an insurrection."

February 21, 2003

An article on the Iraq crisis by Norman Mailer in today's Telegraph. Unexpectedly anodyne. Finally, after years of rebellion, Mailer has been tamed by the American way of life. He huffs and he puffs and does his best to break out of the shell of comfort to which fame, success, and awe-inspiring literary talent have entitled him. You sense his desire to reinvigorate his warrior past, to hit the Republican establishment that controls Washington and whose imperial ambitions and thuggish posturing he dislikes as much as anyone. Only he can't quite bring himself to press the button. He knows that America's most salient gifts to the world are not freedom, prosperity, or justice; but capitalism, marketing, environmental degradation, and trashy entertainment. He knows there's something rotten about the Bush administration's feverish drive for war. Still, he's American; and that little word still tells us more about his opinions than any amount of arcane analysis. In the depths of Mailer's prose, there's a big gold nugget of pride at being a yank. He may not like his nation very much, he certainly disapproves of its politicians and maybe even of the political system that produce them and that allows corporations to buy them, but he loves his country. Nothing wrong with that, I guess, unless the emotion ends up clouding your vision. I prefer the muscular, iconoclastic Mailer to the flabbier version on display in The Telegraph.

Blair has an audience with the Pope tomorrow. There will be a clash of insincerities. Under Bush's influence, Blair has acquired a manichean view of the planet. He believes Saddam Hussein is evil and needs to be rooted out. The Pope will argue for peace. Blair will listen because Popes are infallible, but he will also reflect that this Pope is an old man, infirm, barely able to articulate, and easily misunderstood, and that the papal message, like most messages purporting to emanate from God, requires interpretation. Subtly translated, it will run roughly as follows: war is

dreadful, but there are times when it becomes the sole path to peace. Seizing on this loophole, secure in the belief that war against Saddam will not be a common-or-garden war but a catholic fatwa sanctioned by the Pope, Blair will announce that he and His Holiness “agree on the basics” - which is politician’s baffle-gab for “ we disagree on the essentials but we’re not going to say so”.

On Radio 4 today a Kurd made an impassioned plea for an assault on Baghdad. He talked about the thousands of Kurds gassed, murdered and tortured on Saddam Hussein’s orders. Iraqis will thank the United States and Great Britain for removing Saddam Hussein; they will pour out onto the streets in gratitude. And so on.

Briefly, as he described the brutality of the Hussein regime, I found myself siding with the warmongers. Until I remembered how many civilians will die in the forthcoming war, how many will suffer the ravages of cancer and disfigurement, how many babies will be born twisted and deformed because the western definition of terrorism doesn’t include bombing civilians with depleted uranium warheads.

None of that worries the Kurds. They live in the north of the country and won’t be bombed. They call on God to rain destruction on their enemies, and this time, God’s own air force looks like doing just that.

February 24, 2003

Today, for the first time, journalists have changed their vocabulary. They have dispensed with expressions of uncertainty about whether there will be war. No longer do they begin their reports with “In the event of war...” or “Should a war prove necessary..” Now they talk of “When the war starts...”. And being an army of trivializers who mainly trade in pithy phrases and banal scoops, they don’t bother to pause over the implications of this concession to chaos and death. Rather they seem excited by the prospect of reporting weeks, months, maybe years of horror, than by calling to task the deranged politicians on both sides of the Atlantic who are about to bomb the impoverished citizens of a distant country in our name.

Yesterday a BBC journalist, in an hour-long programme of what can only be described as propaganda, made the madman’s case for attacking Iraq. Some of what he said and showed was true; but most of it - and particularly the material on the

poverty of the Iraqi people - ignored the ultimate responsibility of the West for the decline of what used to be the most broadly prosperous country in the Middle East. Nothing on the West supplying Saddam Hussein with chemical and biological weapons during the eighties; nothing on the support given the Iraqi dictator even after he had gassed thousands of Kurds in the north; nothing on the role of the West in encouraging the southern Shias and Kurds to rise up against the regime and then deserting them; nothing about the continuous allied bombing of Iraq since the end of the Gulf War (including over forty bombing raids officially recorded this year), nothing about the terrible birth defects caused by allied use of depleted uranium warheads during the Gulf War, nothing about the horrific effect of Western sanctions on civilians - the lack of food and medicines that has killed an estimated half a million children plus nobody knows how many adults. Nothing that might remotely suggest western culpability.

Today Bush made clear that the US has no interest in whether Saddam disarms or not. Americans are going to Baghdad. They're going to run the country. Democracy? Forget it. There are no democracies on the Arabian peninsular - and America's allies in the region don't want any. This is about oil. Bush and his gang want it, and they're going to get it. We should remember that the United States grew up on gangsterism and murder, on slaughtering native Americans and cheating them out of the land, on bootleggers killing each other and anyone who stood in their way, on whites killing blacks, on yankees killing Mexicans, on fighting wars, proxy wars and cold wars against ideological enemies, on killing presidents, on killing presidential candidates, on killing civil rights leaders, on killing war protesters. Murder, death, destruction, these are the primal themes and screams of American history. When did we last see an American movie in which nobody murdered or slugged or raped somebody? The culture is built on thuggery, wears thuggery like a badge, glories in thuggery, professes thuggery. Watch the forty-third president of the United States as he struts to the microphone. Narrow-eyed, lips curled, chest thrust forward, he looks as if he wants to take his dick out. Maybe he can't get it up and is blaming it on the world. Could that be Saddam's problem too? Neither of them look too content. Happy men don't make war. They smile, care for their families, work hard, make love. Men who can find no other way of asserting their manhood resort to squinting down gun sights. Maybe it's a dick thing.

March 3, 2003

“It’s worse than you think,” says Tony Blair. Seems he’s pushing Bush, not the other way round. That’s official. Blair admits to favouring war. Nobody wants war, he assures us; but war is better than the status quo. Paraphrased, this means war is better than peace - at least until Blair has occupied the place he feels he deserves in the history books. History will justify me, he trumpets. Was this a reference to Fidel Castro’s famous defence of the failed attack on the Moncada barracks? If so, it was certainly subconscious since it would be hard to imagine a larger gap in principles and beliefs between Cuba’s old communist warhorse and the tub-thumping right-winger who currently runs the UK.

Some truth in the old cliché that you can tell much about people from the company they keep. Blair’s closest international colleagues are Berlusconi, Bush and Aznar - the first a media baron whose opinions coincide with those of Mussolini, the second a repellent drunkard, oil bully, and usurper of the US democratic process, the third, a right-wing lame-duck with an 80 percent disapproval rating among the Spanish electorate.

March 5, 2003

I’ve been making points to myself in this diary about things I already know. Pretty well everything that can be said has been said. Facts hardly matter in this argument. We all have access to the same sources; and anyone who needs a convenient nostrum to bolster a position can find as many as they wish: Saddam has no WMDs; Saddam’s hiding thousands of tons of biological and chemical weapons; Iraqis favour US intervention; Iraqis live in terror of US bombs; regime change in Iraq will bring democracy; regime change in Iraq will cement US hegemony; bombing Iraq will/won’t kill fewer people than Saddam Hussein if he remains in power. And so on.

All nonsense. The arguments are not about facts, but about beliefs or, more accurately, about prejudices. Few facts are indisputable even in peacetime. During a build-up to war, they become tools of partisanship, instruments of propaganda, weapons with which to discipline doubters and belabour unbelievers. Belief, not

facts, will kick-start the machinery of war, after which events will take over and become for a time unstoppable, like lava flows of a volcanic eruption that burn or bury whatever stands in their way as they surge down the mountainside.

“There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune” says Brutus.
Yes, but it’s a tide that can’t be stemmed; and it carries Brutus not to fortune but to death, just as it had taken Caesar. Once you raise the dagger, chances are you’ll go ahead with the plunge; and then the tide takes over.

Yesterday Jack Straw issued the strangest and most threatening message to Europeans who oppose a US-led assault on Iraq. They would, he said, ‘reap the whirlwind’. Several interpretations of this menacing phrase suggest themselves:

- i) The Bush administration has instructed Straw to issue threats.
- ii) Straw is issuing threats on his own or on the government’s account.
- iii) Straw believes the White House to be out of control and that the only safe recourse is to acquiesce to US demands.
- iv) The US/UK axis has lost the argument but is signalling its determination to win the war.
- v) The British government is a department of the Federal District of Columbia.

Morality, bravery in the face of bullying, self-determination, political integrity, intellectual honesty, these are alien concepts to the men (yes, they are largely men) who control the British government. Lacking reason they issue threats, confronted by unpalatable truths they counter with spin, in place of thoughtfulness they offer vulgar, messianic passion under a sickly coating of fake sincerity. Almost everything about this government is false, and where it is not false it is simply nasty. A poor dissembler, Jack Straw wore an expression - as he spoke - that made me think of Mephistopheles - satanic, dissembling, meretricious. If anything should persuade waverers that the case for war remains unproven, it is Straw’s repellent performance before the cameras yesterday: the histrionics of a satrap in mental jackboots sent out by his boss to corral the herd.

March 6, 2003

Last night, Ian Duncan Smith appeared on Newsnight before an invited audience of disgruntled conservative heartlanders from Milton Keynes. Multimillionaire Kirsty Wark in the chair. In case we forget, IDS is the latest and most forgettable leader of a Conservative Party that its own chairperson has called “nasty”. Personally, I don’t think the Conservative Party any nastier than New Labour. The latter is right up there with the gangsters who currently control the White House; which is exactly where the Tories would be if they could find a way to get their Downing Street properties back.

Anyway, the subject turned inevitably to war, and IDS explained why he supported Tony Blair. Nothing remarkable about that. On all essentials the two leaders could hardly agree more. The problem is that their rationale for war is based fundamentally on misstatements, inaccuracies and - if we are less kind - on outright lies. I caught myself wondering - as IDS spoke - whether he truly believed what he was saying or whether he had simply not bothered to inform himself. Let’s look at some examples.

IDS: Saddam Hussein is still manufacturing chemical and biological weapons and he has thousands of tons of the stuff hidden in storage.

UN reports show that UNSCOM (the first wave of UN weapons inspectors who operated in Iraq between 1991 and 1998) destroyed most if not all of Iraq’s chemical and biological agents as well as the laboratories and equipment needed to make them. According to Scott Ritter - responsible under UNSCOM for detecting hidden materials - sensors can detect the manufacture of new quantities of such materials.

IDS: Saddam kicked out the UNSCOM inspectors in 1998.

In fact, Richard Butler, chief UNSCOM inspector, engineered a withdrawal of UNSCOM claiming - improperly according to Ritter - that the the Iraqis were hindering the inspection process.

IDS: Saddam has the capability to make nuclear weapons.

No UN weapons inspectors believe this, so where does IDS get his information?

IDS: Saddam is providing weapons to terrorists (he means Al Qaeda).

This is the line taken by US hawks and by Tony Blair. All available evidence shows it to be rubbish.

IDS: If terrorists armed by Saddam were to attack Milton Keynes, IDS would never forgive himself.

Is IDS real or a figment of Blair's imagination?

Nowadays, truth is the first casualty not of war, but of political office. That government and official opposition speak from the same microphone constitutes a clear and present danger to democratic principles; but that they broadcast identical apocrypha is more alarming still; especially when we, the people, don't believe them. Does the political elite care any longer whether it enjoys public trust? Or have we reached a stage in the development of capitalist democracy where what the electorate says or how it votes are of no account?

'Lying,' says Montaigne, 'is an accursed vice. Words are the tools through which we acknowledge and recognize our common humanity. If we understood the weight and horror of lying, we would think it more more worthy of the stake than other crimes....Once the tongue succumbs to the habit of lying, it's almost impossible to effect a cure.'¹

March 11, 2003

A woman called Clare Short - minister for international development in the Blair government - has just described Blair's policy on Iraq as "reckless". The gutter press (my term for news rags owned by right-wing billionaires), showed their disapproval of a politician prepared to say what she thinks by showering her not with reasoned dissent but with nasty epithets. By contrast, the country cheers her. Mutters can be heard in the ill-lit tributaries of Westminster's main thoroughfares about dethroning the leader. A television audience of blue-rinsers, chosen presumably because they were expected to applaud, slow handclaps the PM during

¹ Essays, Book 1, Chapter 9

a discussion on the impending war, while Blair shifts uncomfortably in his chair. He has the air of a man unable to digest the message conveyed to him on the breeze of public opinion, namely that people don't believe him. Behind that intestinal discomfort, a second message works insidiously to remind him that neither the press nor the spin doctors of Downing Street can dissuade the citizenry from forming its own opinions.

"We are fighting to get a second resolution at the United Nations" Blair and his acolytes insist. A second resolution is shorthand for UN authorization to bomb and invade Iraq. If they don't get it, Mr Bush of the United States and Mr Blair of the United Kingdom will attack Iraq anyway. Fuck world opinion, fuck the UN, fuck France and Russia and anyone else who disagrees. Attacking Iraq is where it's at. Further targets will be added to the list in due course.

Whence this hunger for military action?

The answer came this morning in a BBC news item. USAID² is putting out contracts for the post-war "reconstruction" of Iraq. Only US companies need apply because - according to the report - only US companies have the necessary capabilities. The war will, in effect, transfer vast resources from the public to the private sector, from US taxpayers, British taxpayers and Iraqi citizens who will foot the bill for the war, to US corporations who will pick up the profits.

What about British companies. Won't they receive a share of the spoils?

No.

No compensation for anyone who isn't American?

None, unless the prime minister ...but that's unthinkable, isn't it?

Confucius said: the superior person knows what's right; the inferior person knows what sells.

March 13, 2003

Jack Straw has produced a list of six actions that the UN should demand of Saddam Hussein if he is to avoid war. The first of these requires the dictator to humiliate himself on Iraqi television; the fourth that he should reveal the whereabouts of his mobile biological weapons laboratories of whose existence no shred of evidence has ever been produced. No one, least of all the British government, expects these

² United States Agency for International Development.

frivolous demands to be met. They are included to ensure non-compliance, and they belong in the same shredder as the forgeries and dodgy intelligence reports that officials have publicly offered as condemnatory evidence of the dictator's continuing refusal to disarm.

Why does the government bother? Such charades fool nobody, impress nobody, convince nobody. Can Blair and Straw be so bovinely arrogant as to believe that they can hoodwink Security Council members with such nonsense? Or do they believe that what matters is not the truth but the game, and that the latter is not won by the best case but by the loudest voice and the most egregious lie?

What remains clear is that the anglo-saxon axis desires conflict - the US administration for imperialistic motives, the UK government because the prime minister is a self-confessed believer. In what does he believe? In the infallibility of Anthony J. Blair, the UK's home-grown Ozymandias, whose colossal head a future archaeologist may one day discover buried in a Thames mud bank.

France has promised herself and the world a veto on any Security Council resolution to authorize military action. Warrior politicians here have responded venomously. Francophobia, a disease of the English ruling classes since the late middle ages, runs virulent in the mother of parliaments. True to form, the gutter press heaps vindictive bile on Jacques Chirac who has been speared more times than Saint Sebastian for having an opinion of his own. Straw's whirlwind awaits the French president. He is poisoning Europe, ruining the UN, making war inevitable when it could be avoided. This last charge - the opposite of the truth - richly epitomises the schoolboy tantrums that pass for statesmanship at the highest levels of British government. A dialogue of the deaf.

Chirac is winning few political friends here or in America, but amongst the non-permanent members of the Security Council - notably the six developing countries - he must be acquiring the unexpected status of a hero. All six stand between Scylla and Charybdis - the fury of their own people if they vote for war, US disfavour if they vote for peace. French obduracy may yet spare them from having to vote at all

A distant hope gleams like a pinpoint of light in the dark tunnel of conflict. Public distaste for the venture in Britain may induce a desire to remove from future prime

ministers and from the obsequious parliaments that sustain them, the right to declare war. A way exists to accomplish this painlessly: by removing questions of war and peace to a supra-national power, like the European Union. I used to be wary of the EU because I thought it lacking in democratic legitimacy. Now I see that democracy can't be satisfied simply through a five-yearly recourse to the ballot box. In stead of true legitimacy and accountability, modern elections offer no more than periodical dictatorships; dictatorships, moreover, largely financed by and subservient to corporations and rich individuals. Distinguishing between the parties has become so difficult because in essence they work for the same paymasters. Nor is this simply an issue of money. A deeply inegalitarian philosophy lies behind the management of modern capitalist states, one that rejects cooperation and mutual aid as a basis for human development in favour of competition. This neo-Darwinian *weltbild* lies behind the Bush administration's impatience with the shared decision-making ethos of the United Nations, and behind Blair's distaste for the multi-polar Europe of Chirac and Schroeder. And it also explains New Labour's enthusiasm for the marketisation of public services: competition yields efficiency, the best triumph and everyone benefits.

Unfortunately, little evidence exists to support these simplistic aphorisms. Competition is in effect a form of warfare. Invariably it ends with victor and vanquished, that is to say with triumph and trauma, with survival and extinction. Efforts that might otherwise be devoted to service, or productivity, or the generation of new ideas, are expended on defeating competitors by whatever means come to hand. If such efforts involve polluting the environment, exploiting the Third World, or using daisy cutters and cluster bombs, so be it. Meanwhile, what happens to the losers? In the private sector, they go bankrupt; in the public sector they fail their clients; among states, they suffer the humiliation of conquest, loss of control over their resources, and all too often a burning desire for revenge that passes like an inherited sore down the generations. Is there anything efficient or benign about any of these outcomes?

Bakunin was right, society is what matters, not the state. States are an imperial invention, a means of ranking cultures and skin colours, of asserting the superiority of some, the servility of others. In the hands of ambitious men, such distinctions become tools for empire building. If states were to be done away with, replaced by a federation of unified regions under a parliamentary system, wars would melt away.

That's the dream of the most committed European idealists. Kicking a little, maybe even screaming from time to time, I am drawn into their company.

One positive outcome of the present madness may be that others, like me, will prefer to vest in Europe the dubious authority to visit death and destruction upon the innocent. And if Europe proves too cumbersome, argumentative and dithering ever to use such authority, humanity will be the beneficiary.

March 17, 2003

A charming orchestral director who introduced himself as Gal telephoned from Israel. He wasn't looking for me, but we chatted nonetheless. He remarked that a quarter of the British armed forces are in the gulf waiting to strike Iraq. Did I think Tony Blair would survive? Not if there are heavy civilian casualties, I told him. It's nice talking to you, he said.

Hostilities are about to commence, but we go on with our lives. Even the citizens of Baghdad continue their daily round. What else can they do? Tomorrow a cluster bomb may account for them; but today they have to eat dinner.

Bush, Blair, Aznar - respectively general, lieutenant and corporal of the war effort, met yesterday in the Azores - a tiny Portuguese archipelago sufficiently remote to deter protesters from trying to get there. They called this war council 'a last chance for peace', another gem of linguistic grotesquery to add to the multiple distortions that have characterised the prolegomenon to slaughter. At the press conference, Bush stumbled over his lines even though he was clutching a script. He's prefers idiot cards. Blair pounded the lectern like an animal trapped in a cage - this one of his own making. Aznar must have said something, but corporals are too junior to have their opinions relayed by the anglo-saxon media. Within hours of their arrival, the members of this self-appointed triumvirate were on their way back home.

We shouldn't be too concerned at the shortness of the encounter. Bush's attention span is notoriously brief, and it's hard to imagine him sustaining an exchange of more than half an hour on anything other than the pennant race. On foreign soil, Aznar stays mute, a Lilliputian dwarfed by twin gnomes. Blair works in a

soundproofed box, hearing only his own voice. We may safely assume that what the three leaders told each other in private had all the fluffy consistency of a puffball.

News is just in that Robin Cook, the most principled of the generally unprincipled satraps in the Blair cabinet, has tendered his resignation. His resignation speech in the Commons drew a standing ovation from parliamentarians who agree with Cook but tomorrow will vote with Blair anyway for the sake of the party. Not one of them knows any longer what that party stands for - beyond the aggrandisement of Anthony Charles Lynton Blair. But when a new dispensation looks unpalatable it's a human failing to close one's eyes and conjure up the old.

Footnote. The oleaginous Peter Mandelson has begun to appear regularly on radio and television for the Blair defence. Uriah Heep made flesh.

A distressing late-night BBC documentary about Mordecai Vanunu pointed up the hypocrisy of the Bush/Blair case for war on Iraq. Vanunu is the Israeli who, some 16 years ago, revealed details of Israel's nuclear weapons program to the Sunday Times. Kidnapped by the Israeli secret service and jailed for espionage, he spent a dozen years of an eighteen-year sentence in solitary confinement. Every year, supporters nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize. Thus, in a nutshell, the schism that divides mother earth. Israel possesses a vast stockpile of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons - and leaders nasty enough to use them. Unlike Arabs, however, Israelis are honorary westerners; they get to keep their destructive toys and even to boast about them. "The Arabs have the oil, but we have the matches," says Shimon Peres - repeating a phrase of Ariel Sharon's. Evasive, belligerent, arrogant, secretive, he glowered at the interviewer. His message? Democracies have a right to murder, autocracies do not. Israel is a democracy. Therefore.

March 19, 2003

I listened to some of yesterday's pre-war debate. A melancholy experience. Blair was all fire and passion, confident of parliamentary victory, thanks to Tory support. Opponents spoke well but in subdued tones, knowing that no matter how forceful their arguments, the die had long since been cast. The US administration had decided on war and nothing, least of all cogent argument, would reverse that decision. The British army was already massed in the desert, and no way would it

come home without firing a shot. Once launched, events develop an unstoppable momentum, escaping the reach of those who watch from the shore.

Passion is always impressive, even though in politics it's invariably histrionic. One senses that Blair's conviction is an effigy, made of latex in Washington and pressure-inflated in Westminster to look like the real thing. Blair has whipped himself into a froth over the danger Saddam Hussein poses to the world; but he can't seriously believe it. Victory in the field will come quickly. Iraq has no air defences and an ill-equipped army whose weaponry and communications facilities have already been degraded by months of allied bombing. And if Saddam Hussein was going to pass chemical and biological weapons to terrorists, he's had twelve years since the end of the Gulf War to complete the task. Long before George W. Bush and his team found a way of cooking the US election, the horse, had there been one in the stable, would have noticed the door was open and duly bolted. So let's not pretend that by invading Iraq we will be pre-empting a made-in-Iraq terrorist attack on the West.

Since Blair knows all this, we have to wonder why is he so keen on war. The answer may lie in Jack Straw's slip of the tongue - my description - whereby he suggested that if we didn't back the American administration's war plans we risked reaping the whirlwind ourselves. Better to be on the side of the empire, than vainly trying to hold it back. Resistance is okay in the movies, but in real life Darth Vader remains the better bet. Life is ever uncertain, and survival means you have to bow to power, like a courtier before a king. The U.K.'s interests - in the Blair version - are best served by feeding the dragon, not by stamping on its tail.³

It's a recipe for living on our knees. Most people don't mind that, so long as they eat well, earn enough to live on, and drive a late model car. Unfortunately, they only account for about ten percent of world population. The remaining ninety percent do mind. They tend to be the ones, also, who furnish the best heroes because they don't or can't buy the dominant model. The myth-makers of history, the transforming figures of national and international culture, are all such: Jesus, Siddhartha Gautama, Mohammed, Socrates, Luther, Bolivar, and nearer our own time Gandhi, Mao, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela - rebels one and all.

³ As the dragon's proconsul, Blair expects in turn to receive the obeisance of others, hence his intemperate rants against the French. Neither Chirac nor France will easily forget the insults that Blair and his ministers have directed at them.

Blair shone in parliament yesterday in a speech marked by chronic psittacism- only because most of those who sit in parliament are dumbfoundingly mediocre. Both IDS and Kennedy have visibly shrivelled before the Blair juggernaut - not because the PM isn't vulnerable to attack but because these opposition buffoons have shown themselves contemptibly uninformed and bereft of argument. In truth, IDS doesn't want to argue (the Americans may well have got at him). Kennedy would like to dispute, but seems embarrassed by an awareness of his own lack of distinction.

Water under the bridge now. Within the next twenty-four hours, we'll be at war.

March 21, 2003

It's started. Before tripping off for a "European Summit" Blair recorded a statement for broadcast over the airways. He promised to remove the tyrant, resolve the problem between Israel and the Palestinians, and give succour to the world. None of these promises are in Blair's remit; the last pure fantasy. Or could it be megalomania? I remember hearing Blair's speech a couple of years ago to the Labour Party Conference in which he claimed, with all the conviction of someone who hasn't a clue what he's talking about, that we - meaning he - could solve the problems of Africa. He seems not to have caught up with the fact that the UK is a minor player. In Europe, perhaps, we could take our turn conducting the orchestra from time to time. That way we might contribute to alleviating African poverty, or Palestinian agony, or Israeli insecurity. As a co-belligerent of the United States, Britain sits among the second violins. Blair's promises lack credibility because he hasn't the means to carry them out.

Like everyone, I hope for a quick end to the conflict; but still I dread its conclusion. Our airwaves will fill with American braggadocio, with New Labour self-congratulation. Blairite triumphalism will distemper our breakfasts and send us to bed at night regretting our dinner. Military victory won't bring peace. More likely it will hasten the end of wars defined on territorial grounds. No nation will want to confront modern firepower in the hands of the US military.

Instead, the challenge will come from within; and 9/11 showed the way. Everyone who brought down the twin towers boarded their flight in the USA. They didn't use bombs or anthrax, they used box-knives. You protect yourself from that kind of attack by addressing its causes. They are easy to identify. Most can be found in people who believe the West - America in particular - oppresses them. The US has a nasty reputation in the Third World for sustaining and sometimes imposing thuggish dictators, for grabbing natural resources, for polluting local environments, for undermining or corrupting the public will, for trampling on cultures and sensibilities not their own. Bruisers like Cheney, Rumsfeldt, Wolfowitz and Perle - caricatures of the ugly American - seem to confirm all that is worst about the American view of non-Americans.

Before the commencement of WWII, Hitler suggested that Britain and Germany should form a partnership to impose and maintain the peace of the world. Brecht wrote:

*When the leaders speak of peace
The common folk know
That war is coming
When the leaders curse war
The mobilization order is already written out.*

Eight Brits killed last night, not one a minister's son. Blair sent his condolences. They died for.....our country? To ensure the survival of our way of life? In the name of freedom or democracy? No. They died because George W. Bush and his entourage wanted a war, and because Blair imagines himself statued for posterity in Parliament Square alongside Churchill . We are in the hands of dangerous little men.

March 24, 2003

A Russian spokesman commented today on Radio 4 that the US propaganda campaign in support of the war - a process of media control and transparent disinformation - was "remarkable only for its ineptness". Currently, the US administration is complaining that the Russians are selling Iraq electronic jamming equipment that confuses their missiles. This is warmongering for "some of our missiles went astray and we have to blame someone". Other examples of baffle gab? Try "the French are responsible for this war," or a priceless new one, fresh out this

morning, “The Jerusalem Post reports that US marines have overrun a chemical weapons factory on the road to Baghdad”. The Jerusalem Post? Proprietor Conrad Black, an extreme right winger who believes that freedom of the press should be limited to the views of people like himself. ⁴

What’s interesting about these absurd propositions is that the powers that be - our democratic representatives and their media minions - should bother to issue them in the first place; for they fool no one. We must look for the reason not in the veracity or otherwise of the statements, but in the political paradigm in which we live. Facts no longer enjoy the status of being verifiable by some objective measure acceptable to rational people everywhere. Instead they have become instruments of political will, assertions that acquire the force of truth not because they have been tried and tested on the anvil of experience or research or the considered application of analytical thought, but because politicians and others with access to the media repeat them over and over. This war is about WMDs, this war is about WMDs, this war is about WMDs; oh and about regime change, regime change, regime change, and about liberating the Iraqi people, liberating the Iraqi people, liberating the Iraqi people. And so on. Say it long, loud and often enough, using your unlimited access to the airwaves, and voilá, they are facts.

One such fact, now bending under the weight of evidence, is that once the war is underway, the Iraqi people will welcome their liberators with open arms and the regime will fall at once. Now that the invasion force has encountered significant resistance, this incontrovertible fact has quickly degraded to a nervous hope. On the way, embedded journalists (those travelling with the invading forces) managed to persuade two or three jolly-looking Arabs to dance in the dusty street of an unidentified desert hamlet and to shout cries of ‘welcome’. Hollywood would have made a much better fist of the scene. A lesson here for manufacturers: don’t market facts that can’t be produced to specification.

One predicted consequence of this war is already beginning to take shape: international condemnation is increasing - particularly in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Iraqi exiles are trickling back to their country, not in anticipation of the tyrant’s demise, but in order to defend their native land. Even as the invaders gain

⁴ “Journalists are over opinionated and inadequately supervised...” he once commented. He makes an exception for his bathetically untalented wife who poses as a columnist in his papers.

territory on the ground, the battle for Arab and world opinion moves in the opposite direction. Beneath the White House, the ground shakes with every bomb blast in Baghdad. If the war lasts much longer, Saddam Hussein may well go out in a blaze of glory and with the status of a martyr. He is a repellent animal, a disgrace to humanity. But when this is all over, Bush and maybe Blair too, could fall into a similar category: leaders prepared to bomb, kill, maim, and terrorize in pursuit of their objectives.

Jack Straw revealed last night, in a BBC edition of Panorama, that after 9/11 Blair knew he would put his premiership on the line in defence of whatever actions the US decided to take in response. Nothing could better demonstrate the prime minister's failure to understand that the overriding responsibility of a government is to defend the interests of the people it serves, not those of a foreign power.

Some ghastly photographs of Blair were shown in the program: face set in granite, eyes coopted to ignore what they saw and to project instead the megalomaniac vision within. Ice blue eyes, epoxy-hardened, impervious to influence, devoid of sensibility, of wisdom, of humanity. Blair's transformation since 9/11 has been startling. He looks tired, haggard even. Not so Straw. The Foreign Secretary has fought as hard as his boss for the White House policy of pre-emptive aggression, and yet he looks as calm and self-satisfied as ever. Skirmishes in the House or at the Security Council leave him glowing, his mouth curled in satisfaction at his debating skill, at the strength of his arguments. He struts vulture-like on the stage of world events. Nothing upsets him. He summons anger as easily as he orders coffee. Doubtless he sleeps well at night. He admires his own cleverness - a characteristic of mediocre intellects. Straw is the more sinister of the two; the more calculating. Of convictions, he appears to have none. Blair, by contrast, is all conviction - a fundamentalist bearing a message to mankind, ignorant of his own feebleness. He is infinitely the more dangerous.

March 27, 2003

The war has settled into disinformation, into claim and counterclaim. Iraqi propaganda - dispassionate, low-key - is proving curiously the more effective. Yesterday a bomb fell into a residential area. A US missile that killed fourteen

civilians and injured thirty said the Iraqis. Nothing to do with us, must have been a stray Iraqi SAM, the Pentagon countered.

A few more choice items from the news mongers at the BBC, ITV and Sky.

- A huge armoured column - at least 120 vehicles is making its way out of Basra towards Um Qasr. British and American jets are right now decimating them and the column has fragmented.

Later we learn that only three Iraqi tanks were involved.

- A massive uprising is underway in Basra against Saddam Hussein's regime.

According to the only news correspondent in Basra - he reports for Al Jazeera - the city is calm.

- Saddam may well be dead. Even when he appears on television, he still may be dead.

We have as much evidence for this as for the stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction that were the original excuse for killing Iraqis.

Interesting to note that the New York Stock Exchange has expelled Al Jazeera on the spurious grounds that it doesn't have enough room for so many reporters. Nobody in the UK reported that shining example of US democracy in action.

We did learn today that the Pentagon is considering the use of, wait for it, chemical weapons to forge a route into Baghdad. US chemical weapons aren't fatal apparently, so they're okay to use. One of the compounds is apparently the same as that used by the Russians to end the Chechen siege of a theatre in Moscow. Over a hundred hostages died on that occasion. According to the Pentagon, however, such deaths won't count as weapon-related fatalities if the US military employs the same chemical. Why not? Because the US will only resort to chemical warfare in order to save lives. It's the argument of the gun lobby. A weapon is as good or bad as the person who fires it. Saddam Hussein is bad; George Bush is American.

An argument rages between the US/UK authorities (ably supported by most of the media) and Al Jazeera, the Arabic news network. The West wants a sanitised version of the conflict put out on the air waves: interviews with western “experts” and politicians, shots of our brave soldiers cleaning their weapons or driving through desert, distant panoramas of spectacular explosions flashing red and orange in the night sky - oddly reminiscent of the millennium celebrations three years back with journalists interviewing journalists, flak-jacketed reporters speaking on camera over the thunder of battle and, of course, a few symbolic Arabs to add a little meaning and local colour to the enterprise.

Al Jazeera, by contrast, offers death and destruction, bodies ripped apart by bombs, public anger, the obscene ugliness and savagery of war. Some of those bodies are American and British. ‘Barbaric!’ roars the western press, ‘scandalous!’ bleat the politicians, ‘a breach of the Geneva Convention’, the pundits exclaim. Behind this manufactured outrage - made of the same multipurpose cloth the tabloids use to ejaculate on the sexual peccadilloes of celebrities - lies a deep-set and peculiarly virulent form of racism. It’s okay to show Iraqi prisoners being led away handcuffed and at gunpoint, but not for the Arabs to put US prisoners on the telly. What’s the difference? They’re Arabs. Compared with us, they’re little more than beasts. They lack individuality, human emotion. They’re fanatics too. Nine eleven and all that. We’ll win the war because we’re morally and intellectually superior. Nothing to do with having better weapons. We could do the job with box cutters.

A tacit *weltanschauung* floats under the scum of these ugly prejudices: might is right, we bring civilization to the natives, pax americana, God bless America, Ladies and Gentlemen - the president of the United States - loud and prolonged applause. America used to stand for a lot of fine sentiments and noble ideas. For a while, she stood as a beacon of enlightenment and justice in an unjust world. Not any more. The words remain, but arrogance, greed, and self-indulgence have drained them of content. The most overweight people on earth have allowed this to happen. Their vaunted democracy, admiration and envy of the world, slipped from their grasp while they were gorging on fries at MacDonalds.

Years ago, on my way to Paris by train, I found myself alone in a compartment with Samuel Beckett, literary hero of my teenage years. How could I engage him in conversation? The weather, or the efficiency of the Chemins de Fer wouldn’t do. It

had to be something smart, a clever aperçu, something that displayed my literary taste. What about a reference to one of his works? Several came to mind, but as soon as they reached the tip of my tongue they lost their flavour. What about another contemporary writer? What about Shakespeare? Hopeless. Everything I thought of turned insipid when reduced to the sad status of conversational gambit. Three hours proved insufficient for me to work out my opening remark; and as soon as the train pulled in at Gare St Lazare, the most famous and respected author of his time, hurried off, glad - it seemed to me - to have escaped the callow, spotty youth with whom he had shared the journey. From that failed encounter, I learned something: never let diffidence or fear of rejection paralyse an honest prompting of the heart.

My companions on the return trip were a young American couple evidently on their way back home from a tour of Europe. A fragment of their dialogue has remained lodged in my memory.

“Can’t wait to get back to air conditioning and soft toilet paper,” said one.

“Yeah,” replied the other. “Europe’s so primitive.”

This time I sat hoping *they* wouldn’t talk to *me*. They didn’t.

April 4, 2003

The war drags on. Comedians have grasped the nettle and squeeze laughter from the tragedy of others. Baghdad approaches. Saddam takes a walk about, acknowledging the cheers of a tiny downtown gathering. Blair waxes earnest on the airwaves; Bush grins and waves in front of troops who stayed at home in Texas. Everybody’s having a great time doing their own version of the cancan. Somebody saved Private Lynch, encouraging philosophers to emerge from under rocks to discuss the uncanny prescience of filmmakers. Spielberg is even more of a genius than we thought. He’s a wise man, a seer; he saw the future and turned it into box office. Now you understand. We’re all part of a big movie. Tinsel town has become tinsel world. The secret of life and death is - showmanship. War in Iraq; cluster bombs, chemical weapons, depleted uranium, suicide bombings, daisy cutters, minds and hearts (Hitler’s coinage that one), WMDs; part of the vocabulary of the age of entertainment.

Today Saddam Hussein Airport fell to the Americans who took it on themselves to rename it "Baghdad International Airport". Perhaps the war will soon be over. Not the hostilities though, nor the hatred, nor the desire for revenge. They will last for my lifetime, and our children's'.

April 10, 2003

Baghdad has fallen. Statues of Saddam Hussein bite the dust before the cameras. US troops rumble through the streets. Crowds fifty strong cheer them. One man hands a tiny bunch of flowers to a passing tank soldier in full view of the world's media. Where are the other five million citizens of Iraq's capital city? Civic order has collapsed - as it has in Basra; and so some are looting government offices, warehouses and stores. One suspects there are more looters on the streets than celebrants of the American victory.

What of the others? They are probably cowering at home, sullen and frightened. Relief at the demise of the Saddam dictatorship will be tempered by foreboding about the future - and the exigencies of day-to-day survival in a country where employment has collapsed, where civil servants no longer function, and where death haunts the streets. Part of the city's infrastructure has been bombed out of commission. Groups and individuals are already taking advantage of the general disorder to exact revenge on opponents. Renewed fighting has broken out in parts of the city - unleashing renewed American bombing.

An American military governor - Jay Garner - has been appointed to run the country, and suspicions exist that he will put Iraq at the disposal of the US private sector. Repression under Saddam may well be replaced by servitude under US corporations.

No doubt we are all glad to see the back of Saddam Hussein. His departure will be one of the few redeeming features of this nasty enterprise.

What now? Nobody knows. The two men who most influence what happens over the next few weeks and months - George Bush and Tony Blair - have no international experience and understand little or nothing of other cultures. Before this war began, Bush would probably have been hard pressed to find Iraq on a map.

Blair probably had someone look it up for him when - sometime before 9/11 - he heard noises from the US Republican Party that something would have to be done about Saddam. They are painfully ignorant, blind men poking a stick at a world they have never seen.

April 16, 2003

The war is supposedly over, but the search of Saddam continues; and for his WMDs also - the alleged cause of the conflict but of whose existence we still know nothing. The Americans have so far not managed to fake a “discovery”, though they have announced one several times. I attribute such failure to the naivety of young soldiers on the ground, to whom has fallen the initial task of search and destroy. They believe in the propaganda pumped into them by the military that the weapons exist and are ready to use. If they can't find them, they'll say so. Once the country has been pronounced safe, professional fabricators will fly in courtesy of the CIA and some decently credible evidence will be manufactured to justify the hostilities.

Just how spine-chillingly ruthless the drive for domination has become in the US military we discovered a few days ago when a US missile evaporated a Baghdad restaurant together with all its diners, staff and the people living over the store. Someone had told the Americans “on good evidence” that Saddam was enjoying a bite there with his mates. Now we know how to get rid of our enemies free of charge: give their address to the Americans and tell them Saddam's there. Or Osama. Or the villain of the month.

The rest of the world wrings its collective hands. A kid called Ali, with 60 percent burns and stumps for arms, has become the latest horror clip of world TV. Victim of a US bomb. “Saddam would have killed and injured even more”, say the apologists. Few buy this vomit-making argument. But the politicians repeat it nonetheless - as if repetition alone can transform a lie into truth.

The American Empire - as nasty, brutish, violent, savage, bloodthirsty, oppressive, murderous, fundamentalist, corrupt and generally hated as any in history - approaches its zenith. Ultimately it will crumble - as all empires crumble. Corruption, pillage, excess consumption, will erode its military discipline; it will grow fat and lazy; it will rot from within. Not yet though. Several generations may

be condemned to a degrading existence under the American yoke before the world breathes more freely.

The great museum of Baghdad has been gutted by looters. Artefacts as old as human civilization have been stolen or shattered. Reporters say almost nothing is left. Iraqis - tortured by Saddam, traduced by the UN and defeated by the US - have cut out their past as if it were a tumour.

December 5, 2003

A long gap because pretty well everything predicted by those who opposed the war have transpired. The predictable victory of the US and UK forces has produced no WMDs. So commonplace has the absence of such weapons become that no one bothers any longer to mention that they constituted the fundamental rationale for military action. Like a meal that has long since passed through the public gut, the *causus belli* has faded from consciousness, leaving behind only a vague memory of indigestion.

The US administration has behaved exactly as expected. A proconsul who reports directly to the White House rules the province. He in turn has appointed an Iraqi council consisting largely of right-wing satraps of corporate America whose role is to carry out his orders. Top of the legislative order for this ragtag clique of unelected lackeys was to pass a law, handed to them peremptorily by the proconsul, that would allow foreign (American) corporations to acquire any Iraqi asset that took their fancy and to export the fruits of their acquisition tax free.

Peace does not reign in conquered Iraq. Bombs continue to explode, occupying forces are ambushed pretty well every day, gun battles erupt on the streets of Baghdad, Mosul and Tikrit. Much premature dying: American troops, British troops, Spanish agents, Japanese businessmen, UN personnel, Iraqis: Iraqi clerics, Iraqi police, Iraqi irregulars, Iraqi men, Iraqi women, Iraqi children.

“The situation,” says Colin Powell, Secretary of State for the most powerful and corrupt regime on the planet, “is clearly improving.”

Most of us were taught at school that language had meaning. What, otherwise, would be the point of having so many essays corrected for spelling, punctuation,

grammar and clarity; all that labour of exegesis, those painstaking demands for clarity and precision, for saying and writing what we meant - even if Prufrock ultimately felt the effort to be in vain?

May 12, 2004

Hard to believe my last entry was five months ago. Nothing much has changed. The press has discovered - to no one's surprise but to universal outrage - that the US military is engaged in systematic torture and abuse of Iraqi prisoners. The British are said to have murdered around forty detainees. And today, news breaks that an American citizen - reportedly a kind-hearted man who travelled to Iraq as a good Samaritan (and if you believe that you may wish to know that I have a fine bridge for sale in Brooklyn) - has been beheaded on camera in an act of vengeance. "What barbarians!" cry the Americans. "See what we have to put up with?" Implying, of course, that no wonder a few US soldiers lose their cool and act badly from time to time when they are forced to operate in the midst such savage monsters. Beheading people on or off camera can't be recommended as a model of civilized behaviour. But then neither can killing 10,000 Iraqi civilians, torturing others, destroying a country's infrastructure, impoverishing its people, and stealing their assets - just a few of the accomplishments of the US-led invasion.

The British response? No one in the British government knew anything about abuses, murder or torture. No one in the British government takes responsibility for anything disgraceful. No one in the British government makes mistakes. No one in the British government is dishonest, prevaricating, or dissembling. Trouble is, such denials deceive no one; for most of us have long since ceased to believe what the Blair government says - about anything. Not that what the people think matters any more. We have become an irritating irrelevance - pawns in the messianic fantasies of power-struck politicians and the megalomaniac dreams of Texan oil thugs.