Comment: *War on Iraq*

So the invasion of Iraq was not about oil, whatever everyone in the Arab world believes. They might be excused for thinking so. After all, according to newspaper reports, the only government building in Baghdad which was not targeted by US bombs just so happens to be the head office of the Iraqi oil industry. Moreover, they say, this was the only building which US troops were assigned to guard, as soon as they got to Baghdad. There was no such guard for the library and museums which, for weeks before the invasion, American scholars had pleaded with the administration to protect: the mere academics predicted the looting which seemingly took the intelligence-loaded military planners by surprise. It beggars belief, of course, that the post-'liberation' anarchy extended even to stripping hospitals of sophisticated medical equipment, of no use to anyone outside surgical and intensive care units. Hundreds of ordinary people must simply have been driven crazy, if not by liberation from Saddam Hussein's evil regime, then by the ferocity of relentless bombing of their city.

True, the United States consumes an unconscionable quantity of oil; but relies very little on Middle Eastern sources. In geopolitical terms, on the other hand, if the administration in Washington thinks so far ahead, Middle Eastern oil reserves will matter increasingly to India and China; it might thus make sense for the United States to control access to these reserves by countries that will become superpowers, economically and perhaps also militarily, rivalling and perhaps threatening America three or four decades from now.

More plausibly, in a short term view, the US-led occupation of Baghdad was what should have happened in 1991. No one can explain quite why the coalition then encouraged Kurds and Shiites to rise against Saddam Hussein, and left them to be massacred by his largely intact elite troops. Perhaps 'intelligence' led Washington to underestimate the strength of the regime. Perhaps, in the event, Shi'ite Muslim victory opened the frightening prospect of theocracy and alliance with Iran. The lack of a United Nations mandate to cross deep into Iraq, beyond clearing Saddam Hussein's troops out of Kuwait, the reason given at the time for stopping, seems, in retrospect, quite hypocritical.

Continuing the War by other means, with twelve years of punitive sanctions and occasional bombing, did nothing to strengthen internal opposition to Saddam Hussein. On the contrary, the rationing of food and other resources which the regime introduced only subjugated people

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more than ever — never mind the effects on a generation of Iraqi children's health.

Such considerations have, of course, little or no bearing on the morality of this or any other war. An embarrassment for many young Catholics in the United States, admirers of Pope John Paul II's views on everything from Marian piety to sexual behaviour, has been his stand against the American war on Iraq. It has been the so-called 'liberals', survivors from the 1960s, who, though perhaps regarding the removal of Saddam Hussein as justifiable, agree nevertheless with the Pope's gloomy diagnosis of the long term effects of American involvement in the Middle East.

That the War had much to do with eradicating Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, never believed in the Arab world, is a claim treated with increasing cynicism in the West also. If these weapons were such a threat, people ask, why were they not used? Did they ever exist? That they are so carefully concealed that the regime could not get at them, once 'command and control facilities' had been 'decapitated', as has been suggested, is quite incredible, like so much else we have been told these last few months.

Thirty British servicemen and over a hundred Americans have been killed. More than 3,650 Iraqi combatants were killed, according to US military statistics, at least 2,320 in the battle for Baghdad. Twelve journalists died. No one has yet offered a figure for the civilian dead.

By the standards of recent conflicts, let alone old fashioned warfare, the loss of life is minimal, irreplaceable as each individual is and devastating the death for family and friends. In retrospect, however, for all the bluster and months during which to get ready, the Iraqi regime was plainly never in a position to put up serious resistance, let alone smart enough (or even willing) to inveigle the invaders into prolonged and bloody street-by-street fighting. Even those who regarded the war as necessary and justifiable, as well as those who opposed it, surely have to agree that the Iraqi regime never constituted a military threat to neighbouring countries, far less to Britain or the United States. What, after all, was the War really for?

Whatever it was for, it seems unlikely that, if some al-Qaeda operative means to smuggle a nuclear device, or a suitcase of anthrax spores, into America or the United Kingdom, the war on Iraq will have done anything to thwart his plans.

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