

BOMBING IRAQ



So, fed up with waiting, angry at being unable to bully or bribe the UN into supporting a second resolution, George Bush has launched a war on Iraq. He intended to do so all along. Forget that the Weapons Inspectors offered to deliver a peaceful solution within months. George had a score to settle and needed a war within days. He wasn't going to take 'yes' for an answer.

Britain, of course, is there with him - a 'coalition of the killing', acting outside international law, answerable only to the high priests of corporatism who drive Bush's foreign policy agenda. Together, they will have watched as, throughout Europe, trade unions had taken strike action to demonstrate their own opposition to a war in solidarity with the millions worldwide who have done the same. Bush's feigned interest in democracy gave way to a baser instinct.

Bomb and be damned; A slaughter not a war.

For Tony Blair, the optimistic scenario is that it will all be over by the time parliament gathers its ire. His hope is that within days Saddam will have gone, Iraq will be a US protectorate and the PM will return an all-conquering hero. In your dreams.

The debate in Parliament gave the prime minister a mandate for war which was largely dependent on support from the Tories. Over half of labour backbenchers opposed a war. At best, the government now has only half a mandate to go into Iraq and no plan at all about how to get out.

Flattening Iraq will be the first in a series of long drawn out wars over the next decade, fought out between the military state and the people. The US will have to occupy Iraq because it wants the oil. US companies backing Bush have already been allocated the contracts for military and civil reconstruction in post-war Iraq. They will need all the military protection the US can muster just to get the oil out. But this is a trap that could easily turn into America's next Vietnam.

Bush's advisers have made it clear that Iraq would then serve as the launch pad for regime change in other parts of the Middle East. Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority have already been flagged up for what the US refers to as the long overdue modernisation of Islam. It will be nothing of the sort. This will be a gift for terrorist movements.

In Britain, the first strike of the war may be on the right to strike. Bombing will bring bedlam to Britain's streets. People will take their own actions to disassociate themselves from a wretched and immoral war. Normal economic and social life will be disrupted on a scale we have not seen before. Government ministers may try to blame this on the hard left, but its origins lie elsewhere. Whatever actions take place will be as a result of Downing Street breaking the democratic contract between government and the governed.

If the government feels free to break international law in a war of aggression against Iraq, others will feel equally free to break domestic laws in order to oppose the war. Against the crime of slaughtering civilian men, women and children in Iraq, how do you judge spontaneous decisions not to run trains or deliver mail?

In the hierarchy of crime where would you then put the disruption of traffic, interference with banking and business, the closing down of academic institutions and public services that do not put people's lives at risk?

I do not invite this, but merely believe it is what will follow. My only hope is that those who feel propelled into protest action against the war understand the need for such action to be entirely non-violent. Mimic the aggressor and you become the aggressor. You can stake out a different moral high ground on peaceful (and no less effective) terms. This is what the anti-war movement must do.

If the government tries to rush through emergency legislation to criminalise and outlaw such protest, it will be a judgement on the government, rather than the people. The whole of my life has been lived within a presumption that is now being challenged - that government by consent implied a democratic contract, through the ballot box, that gave the government of the day conditional rights to govern, alongside the constraining knowledge that you could not govern against the will of the people. We are now entering a different landscape.

Bush's advisers have no difficulty about a future in which states are run by military administrations, with corporate rights overtaking civic rights. Domestically, the steady erosion of democratic openness and accountability will be justified against an increasingly manipulated 'fear of terrorism'. This will be the Brave New World of President Bush's pax Americana. The international anti-war movement that has suddenly burst into life can not only see this coming; it has emerged as the human superpower that is unafraid to challenge Bush's military ambitions.

In the days ahead, people will have to decide which vision to align themselves with; which one will hold open the door of democracy and which will slam it closed.