

Mesopotamia. Babylon. The Tigris and Euphrates

How many children, in how many classrooms, over how many centuries, have hang-glied through the past, transported on the wings of these words? And now the bombs are falling, incinerating and humiliating that ancient civilisation.



ARUNDHATI ROY

ON the steel torsos of their missiles, adolescent American soldiers scrawl colourful messages in childish handwriting: For Saddam, from the Fat Boy Posse. A building goes down. A marketplace. A home. A girl who loves a boy. A child who only ever wanted to play with his older brother's marbles.

On March 21, the day after American and British troops began their illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq, an "embedded" CNN correspondent interviewed an American soldier. "I wanna get in there and get my nose dirty," Private AJ said. "I wanna take revenge for 9/11."

To be fair to the correspondent, even though he was "embedded" he did sort of weakly suggest that so far there was no real evidence that linked the Iraqi government to the September 11 attacks. Private AJ stuck his teenage tongue out all the way down to the end of his chin. "Yeah, well that stuff's way over my head," he said.

According to a New York Times/CBS News survey, 42 per cent of the American public believes that Saddam Hussein is directly responsible for the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. And an ABC news poll says that 55 per cent of Americans believe that Saddam Hussein directly supports al-Qaida. What percentage of America's armed forces believe these fabrications is anybody's guess.

It is unlikely that British and American troops fighting in Iraq are aware that their governments supported Saddam Hussein both politically and financially through his worst excesses.

But why should poor AJ and his fellow soldiers be burdened with these details? It does not matter any more, does it? Hundreds of thousands of men, tanks, ships, choppers, bombs, ammunition, gas masks, high-protein food, whole aircraft ferrying toilet paper, insect repellent, vitamins and bottled mineral water, are on the move. The phenomenal logistics of Operation Iraqi Freedom make it a universe unto itself. It doesn't need to justify its existence any more. It exists. It is.

President George W Bush, commander in chief of the US army, navy, airforce and marines has issued clear instructions: "Iraq. Will. Be. Liberated." (Perhaps he means that even if Iraqi people's bodies are killed, their souls will be liberated.) American and British citizens owe it to the supreme commander to forsake thought and rally behind their troops. Their countries are at war. And what a war it is.

After using the "good offices" of UN diplomacy (economic sanctions and weapons inspections) to ensure that Iraq was brought to its knees, its people starved, half a million of its children killed, its infrastructure severely damaged, after making sure that most of its weapons have been destroyed, in an act of cowardice that must surely be unrivalled in history, the "Al-

lies"/"Coalition of the Willing" (better known as the Coalition of the Bullied and Bought) sent in an invading army!

Operation Iraqi Freedom? I don't think so. It's more like Operation Let's Run a Race, but First Let Me Break Your Knees.

So far the Iraqi army, with its hungry, ill-equipped soldiers, its old guns and ageing tanks, has somehow managed to temporarily confound and occasionally even outmanoeuvre the "Allies". Faced with the richest, best-equipped, most powerful armed forces the world has ever seen, Iraq has shown spectacular courage and has even managed to put up what actually amounts to a defence. A defence which the Bush/Blair Pair have immediately denounced as deceitful and cowardly. (But then deceit is an old tradition with us natives. When we are invaded/colonised/occupied and stripped of all dignity, we turn to guile and opportunism.)

Even allowing for the fact that Iraq and the "Allies" are at war, the extent to which the "Allies" and their media cohorts are prepared to go is astounding to the point of being counterproductive to their own objectives.

When Saddam Hussein appeared on national TV to address the Iraqi people after the failure of the most elaborate assassination attempt in history -- "Operation Decapitation" -- we had Geoff Hoon, the British defence secretary, deriding him for not having the courage to stand up and be killed, calling him a coward who hides in trenches. We then had a flurry of Coalition speculation -- Was it really Saddam, was it his double? Or was it Osama with a shave? Was it pre-recorded? Was it a speech? Was it black magic? Will it turn into a pumpkin if we really, really want it to?

After dropping not hundreds, but thousands of bombs on Baghdad, when a marketplace was mistakenly blown up and civilians killed, a US army spokesman implied that the Iraqis were blowing themselves up! "They're using very old stock. Their missiles go up and come down."

If so, may we ask how this squares with the accusation that the Iraqi regime is a paid-up member of the Axis of Evil and a threat to world peace?

When the Arab TV station al-Jazeera shows civilian casualties it's denounced as "emotive" Arab propaganda aimed at orchestrating hostility towards the "Allies", as though Iraqis are dying only in order to make the "Allies" look bad. Even French television has come in for some stick for similar reasons. But the awed, breathless footage of aircraft carriers, stealth bombers and cruise missiles arcing across the desert sky on American and British TV is described as the "terrible beauty" of war.

When invading American soldiers (from the army "that's only here to help") are taken prisoner and shown on Iraqi TV, George Bush says it violates the Geneva convention and "exposes the evil at the heart of the regime". But it is entirely acceptable for US television stations to show the hundreds of prisoners being held by the US government in Guantanamo Bay, kneeling on the ground with their hands tied behind their backs, blinded with opaque goggles and with ear-phones clamped on their ears, to ensure complete visual and aural deprivation. When questioned about the treatment of these prisoners, US Government officials don't deny that they're being ill-treated. They deny that they're "prisoners of war"! They

call them "unlawful combatants", implying that their ill-treatment is legitimate! (So what's the party line on the massacre of prisoners in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan? Forgive and forget? And what of the prisoner tortured to death by the special forces at the Bagram airforce base? Doctors have formally called it homicide.)

When the "Allies" bombed the Iraqi television station (also, incidentally, a contravention of the Geneva convention), there was vulgar jubilation in the American media. In fact Fox TV had been lobbying for the attack for a while. It was seen as a righteous blow against Arab propaganda. But mainstream American and British TV

reported by the Observer, is hard-headed pragmatism.) Clearly for the "Allies", the only morally acceptable strategy the Iraqi army can pursue is to march out into the desert and be bombed by B-52s or be mowed down by machine-gun fire. Anything short of that is cheating.

And now we have the siege of Basra. About a million and a half people, 40 per cent of them children. Without clean water, and with very little food. We're still waiting for the legendary Shia "uprising", for the happy hordes to stream out of the city and rain roses and hosannahs on the "liberating" army. Where are the hordes? Don't they know that television productions

and American banks, Arthur Anderson, Merrill Lynch, American Express, corporations such as Bechtel, General Electric, and companies such as Reebok, Nike and Gap could find themselves under siege. These lists are being honed and refined by activists across the world. They could become a practical guide that directs and channels the amorphous, but growing fury in the world. Suddenly, the "inevitability" of the project of corporate globalisation is beginning to seem more than a little evitable.

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Excuse me while I laugh. In the fog of war we're forced to speculate: Either Saddam is an extremely responsible tyrant. Or -- he simply does not possess weapons of mass destruction. Either way, regardless of what happens next, Iraq comes out of the argument smelling sweeter than the US government.

So here's Iraq -- rogue state, grave threat to world peace, paid-up member of the Axis of Evil. Here's Iraq, invaded, bombed, besieged, bullied, its sovereignty spat upon, its children killed by cancers, its people blown up on the streets. And here's all of us watching, CNN-BBC, BBC-CNN late into the night. Here's all of us, enduring the horror of the war, enduring the horror of the propaganda and enduring the slaughter of language as we know and understand it. Freedom now means mass murder (or, in the US, fried potatoes). When someone says "humanitarian shit upon, its children go looking for induced starvation. "Embedded" I have to admit, is a great find. It's what it sounds like. And what about "arsenal of tactics"? Nice!

In most parts of the world, the invasion of Iraq is being seen as a racist war. The real danger of a racist war unleashed by racist regimes is that it engenders racism in everybody -- perpetrators, victims, spectators. It sets the parameters for the debate, it lays out a grid for a particular way of thinking. There is a tidal wave of hatred for the US rising from the ancient heart of the world. In Africa, Latin America, Asia, Europe, Australia. I encounter it every day. Sometimes it comes from the most unlikely sources. Bankers, businessmen, yuppie students, and they bring to it all the crassness of their conservative, illiberal politics. That absurd inability to separate governments from people: America is a nation of morons, a nation of murderers, they say, (with the same carelessness with which they say, "All Muslims are terrorists"). Even in the grotesque universe of racist insult, the British make their entry as add-ons. Arse-lickers, they're called.

Suddenly, I, who have been vilified for being "anti-American" and "anti-west", find myself in the extraordinary position of defending the people of America. And Britain.

Those who descend so easily into the pit of racist abuse would do well to remember the hundreds of thousands of American and British citizens who protested against their country's stockpile of nuclear weapons. And the thousands of American war resisters who forced their government to withdraw from Vietnam. They should know that the most scholarly, scathing, hilarious critiques of the US government and the "American way of life" comes from American citizens. And that the funniest, most bitter condemnation of their prime minister comes from the British media. Finally they should remember that right now, hundreds of thousands of British and American citizens are on the streets protesting the war. The Coalition of the Bullied and Bought consists of governments, not people. More than one third of America's citizens have survived the relentless propaganda they've been subjected to, and many thousands are actively fighting their own government. In the ultra-patriotic climate that prevails in the US, that's as brave as any Iraqi fighting for his or her homeland.

Despite the pall of gloom that hangs over us today, I'd like to file a cautious plea for hope: in times of war, one wants one's weakest enemy at the helm of his forces. And President George W Bush is certainly that. Any other even averagely intelligent US president would have probably done the very same things, but would have managed to smoke-up the glass and confuse the opposition. Perhaps even carry the UN with him. Bush's tactless imprudence and his brazen belief that he can run the world with his riot squad, has done the opposite.



Beautiful Baghdad burns. Why?

continue to advertise themselves as "balanced" when their propaganda has achieved hallucinatory levels.

Why should propaganda be the exclusive preserve of the western media? Just because they do it better? Western journalists "embedded" with troops are given the status of heroes reporting from the frontlines of war. Non-"embedded" journalists (such as the BBC's Rageh Omaar, reporting from besieged and bombed Baghdad, witnessing, and clearly affected by the sight of bodies of burned children and wounded people) are undermined even before they begin their reportage: "We have to tell you that he is being monitored by the Iraqi authorities."

Increasingly, on British and American TV, Iraqi soldiers are being referred to as "militia" (i.e.: rabble). One BBC correspondent portentously referred to them as "quasi-terrorists". Iraqi defence is "resistance" or worse still, "pockets of resistance", Iraqi military strategy is deceit. (The US government bugging the phone lines of UN security council delegates,

work to tight schedules? (It may well be that if Saddam's regime falls there will be dancing on the streets of Basra. But then, if the Bush regime were to fall, there would be dancing on the streets the world over.)

After days of enforcing hunger and thirst on the citizens of Basra, the "Allies" have brought in a few trucks of food and water and positioned them tantalisingly on the outskirts of the city. Desperate people flock to the trucks and fight each other for food. (The water we hear, is being sold. To revitalise the dying economy, you understand.) On top of the trucks, desperate photographers fought each other to get pictures of desperate people fighting each other for food. Those pictures will go out through photo agencies to newspapers and glossy magazines that pay extremely well. Their message: The messiahs are at hand, distributing fishes and loaves.

As of July last year the delivery of \$5.4bn worth of supplies to Iraq was blocked by the Bush/Blair Pair. It didn't really make the news. But now under the loving caress of live TV, 450 tonnes of humanitarian aid -- a minuscule fraction of what's actually needed (call it a script prop) -- arrived on a British ship, the "Sir Galahad". Its arrival in the port of Umm Qasr merited a whole day of live TV broadcasts. Barfbag, anyone?

Nick Guttman, head of emergencies for Christian Aid, writing for the Independent on Sunday said that it would take 32 Sir Galahad's a day to match the amount of food Iraq was receiving before the bombing began.

We oughtn't to be surprised though. It's old tactics. They've been at it for years. Consider this moderate proposal by John McNaughton from the Pentagon Papers, published during the Vietnam war: "Strikes at population targets (per se) are likely not only to create a counterproductive wave of revulsion abroad and at home, but greatly to increase the risk of enlarging the war with China or the Soviet Union. Destruction of locks and dams, however -- if handled right -- might ... offer promise. It should be studied. Such destruction does not kill or drown people. By shallow-flooding the rice, it leads after time to widespread starvation (more than a million?) unless food is provided -- which we could offer to do 'at the conference table'."

Times haven't changed very much. The technique has evolved into a doctrine. It's called "Winning Hearts and Minds".

So, here's the moral maths as it stands: 200,000 Iraqis estimated to have been killed in the first Gulf war. Hundreds of thousands dead because of the economic sanctions. (At least that lot has been saved from Saddam Hussein.) More being killed every day. Tens of thousands of US soldiers who fought the 1991 war officially declared "disabled" by a disease called the Gulf

destructive impulse towards supremacy, stranglehold, global hegemony. The argument is being made that the people of Argentina and Iraq have both been decimated by the same process. Only the weapons used against them differ: In one case it's an IMF chequebook. In the other, cruise missiles.

Finally, there's the matter of Saddam's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. (Oops, nearly forgot about those!) In the fog of war, one thing's for sure -- if Saddam's regime indeed has weapons of mass destruction, it is showing an astonishing degree of responsibility and restraint in the teeth of extreme provocation. Under similar circumstances, (say if Iraqi troops were bombing New York and laying siege to Washington DC) could we expect the same of the Bush regime? Would it keep its thousands of nuclear warheads in their wrapping paper? What about its chemical and biological weapons? Its stocks of anthrax, small-

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While the "Allies" wait in the desert for an uprising of Shia Muslims on the streets of Basra, the real uprising is taking place in hundreds of cities across the world. It has been the most spectacular display of public morality ever seen.

Most courageous of all, are the hundreds of thousands of American people on the streets of America's great cities -- Washington, New York, Chicago, San Francisco. The fact is that the only institution in the world today that is more powerful than the American government, is American civil society. American citizens have a huge responsibility riding on their shoulders. How can we not salute and support those who not only acknowledge but act upon that responsibility? They are our allies, our friends.

At the end of it all, it remains to be said that dictators like Saddam Hussein, and all the other despots in the Middle East, in the central Asian republics, in Africa and Latin America, many of them installed, supported and financed by the US government, are a menace to their own people. Other than strengthening the hand of civil society (instead of weakening it as has been done in the case of Iraq), there is no easy, pristine way of dealing with them. (It's odd how those who dismiss the peace movement as utopian, don't hesitate to proffer the most absurdly dreary reasons for going to war: to stamp out terrorism, install democracy, eliminate fascism, and most entertainingly, to "rid the world of evil-doers".)

Regardless of what the propaganda machine tells us, these tin-pot dictators are not the greatest threat to the world. The real and pressing danger, the greatest threat of all is the locomotive force that drives the political and economic engine of the US government, currently piloted by George Bush. Bush-bashing is fun, because he makes such an easy, sumptuous target. It's true that he is a dangerous, almost suicidal pilot, but the machine he handles is far more dangerous than the man himself.

Despite the pall of gloom that hangs over us today, I'd like to file a cautious plea for hope: in times of war, one wants one's weakest enemy at the helm of his forces. And President George W Bush is certainly that. Any other even averagely intelligent US president would have probably done the very same things, but would have managed to smoke-up the glass and confuse the opposition. Perhaps even carry the UN with him. Bush's tactless imprudence and his brazen belief that he can run the world with his riot squad, has done the opposite. He has achieved what writers, activists and scholars have striven to achieve for decades. He has exposed the ducts. He has placed on full public view the working parts, the nuts and bolts of the apocalyptic apparatus of the American empire.

Now that the blueprint (The Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire) has been put into mass circulation, it could be disabled quicker than the pundits predicted.

Bring on the spanners.

Arundhati Roy is celebrated Indian author of international repute. Courtesy: The Guardian