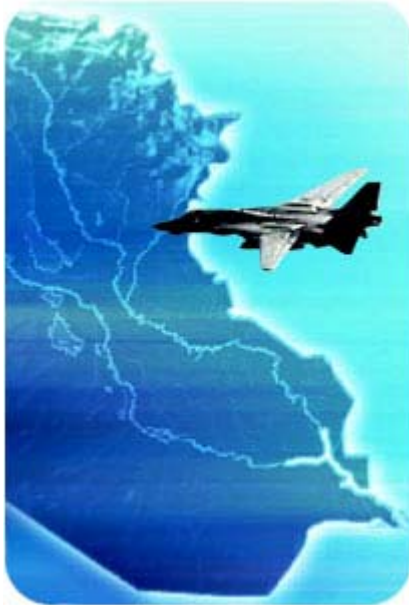


## KNEE DEEP IN IRAQ



By the day, the situation in the Middle East slides down a spiral of despair. Iraq is a mess. The Sharon Administration turns Israel into a rogue state. President Bush begins the trials of foot soldiers involved in photographing or conducting the torture and humiliation of Iraqi detainees, but not a General (or Secretary of State) is being lined up to take the rap for treatment that was policy rather than arbitrary.

If Saddam Hussein had bombed Kurds in the north, launched helicopter gunship attacks against civilian areas and then started to bulldoze their homes into rubble, the West would have been outraged. Bush and Blair would have listed this as justification for a war on humanitarian grounds. When it is done by Sharon, their indifference is overwhelming.

In Britain, ministers have finally released an estimate of the number of Iraqi civilians killed since "peace" broke out. The figure until March (ie, pre-Fallujah) is 10,000. At what point do we overtake Saddam? In what way do we audit the gains and losses for Iraqis of the war we have waged on them?

Military officials are proud to say that the water supply is beginning to operate again – but it worked properly until they bombed it. Coalition leaders repeat the mantra that Iraq will become a free and democratic country. It is a strange freedom which does not allow people to control their own oil supplies or their ports or take back their privatised industries. It is a strange democracy that does not allow people to elect a government that is hostile to the USA and brings terrorists and religious fanatics, masquerading as freedom fighters and who had no place in pre-war Iraq, on to the streets.

How quickly we forget that Iraq was a civilised, educated, secular society, even within the brutality of Saddam's regime. None of this justifies his tyrannies and cruelty. It is just a reminder of the damage we have done to a society in the war against its President.

It would be easy for the anti-war movement to get to this point, stop, gloat, define the situation as someone else's problem and sit back in relative comfort. The trouble is that the mess will not go away... and could get a lot worse. The routine response to this from Britain's War Cabinet is to say, "What is the alternative?" We have to come up with answers to this, even if they are unpalatable to Coalition leaders. There is no prospect of Coalition forces delivering a stable peace in Iraq. We started the war; we are an occupying army; we are seen as the protectors of US oil interests rather than Iraqi citizens, and the protectors of a puppet administration that will depend on the 180,000 US troops now permanently stationed in Iraq.

Britain has made some show of wanting a UN mandate and UN involvement, but the UN will not strap itself to the Bush bandwagon in this debacle. The only hope is for UN forces drawn from the international community to replace the UK and US presence in Iraq ... even if the UK and US have to pay

the cost of such replacements. The transition will be really difficult, but the longer we put this off the more certain will be the fact that Iraq 's future will be determined by the fanatics who finally drive the US out.

Domestically, the more immediate challenge is to refuse to make the situation worse. As one country after another withdraws its troops from Iraq , Britain will come under increasing pressure to commit troops to fill the gaps. The answer has to be a straight No.

Even those who supported the war on Iraq now know that Britain recoils in horror from the debacle of Bush's post-war occupation. The public would support further deployments only if it is in response to requests from commanders in Iraq , saying they need reinforcements to protect existing UK forces or to fulfil the international legal obligations they have to Iraqi citizens. There can be no question of extending the UK 's role or reach without a fresh and specific parliamentary mandate.

The Prime Minister has already given a commitment to stand “shoulder to shoulder” with George Bush, but neither Parliament nor the Party has given him a blank cheque to do this. Those who feel they were duped into supporting the war on what turns out to have been a false prospectus are acutely aware of the limits of the post-war mandate. The Prime Minister and the Government have no political authority to widen the UK 's area of territorial responsibility in Iraq , to extend the functional role of UK troops or to place UK troops under US command – all of which would require a specific parliamentary mandate.

Even those who cannot see a way out of the current mess in Iraq know that this is no justification for digging the hole deeper, diminishing further the political authority and credibility that the Government has in Parliament and in the country, discrediting further the credibility of the Labour Cabinet in the eyes of the Party. This is not just a question of how the Party judges its leader, but of how it judges the whole silent partnership that sleepwalks into further disasters.