

Editorial

War Crimes

On the 3rd April 2007, the Russian News Agency, Novosti, reported a statement by Yuri Baluyevsky, the head of the Russian Armed Forces General Staff. He warned that ‘Washington needs to think twice before launching a military campaign against Tehran, as such an attack would have global implications’. The General said that it might be realistic to anticipate that the Americans could inflict damage on Iran’s military and industrial potential: ‘but winning the war is unachievable – its reverberations would be heard across the world’.

General Baluyevsky said that when deciding upon military action against Iran, the US leadership should bear in mind the negative experience it had garnered in other countries of the region. He warned that if the US goes to war with Iran as well as Afghanistan and Iraq ‘the world may see America decline as the world’s mightiest and most powerful state’.

Other Russian spokesmen had previously warned of possible American air strikes on April 6th, Good Friday.¹ There have also been repeated warnings by critics of the regime in Washington, not so specific, but pointing up strong possibilities of such military initiatives.²

White House spokeswoman, Dana Perino, denied all these stories at a news briefing on Monday 2nd April. The news had been widely reported that the American aircraft carrier, *Nimitz*, with a supporting flotilla of lesser ships, was bound for the Persian Gulf to join other aircraft carrier strike groups already hovering there. The American military claimed that the presence of two major carriers in the Gulf was ‘intended to demonstrate US “resolve to build regional security and bring long term stability to the region”’.

Previously fifteen British sailors and marines had been detained by Iranian forces, when they were alleged to be operating in Iranian territorial waters.³ This allegation had been strenuously, even belligerently, denied by Tony Blair, although Craig Murray, the former Ambassador in Tashkent, who was victimised by the Foreign Office for undiplomatically speaking up for human rights in Uzbekistan, offered rather compelling testimony to show that arguments about the positioning of the frontier between Iraqi and Iranian territorial waters were somewhat metaphysical in nature.

Before his time in Tashkent, Mr. Murray spent several years in a basement in Whitehall, seeking to determine maritime boundaries for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. He had been personally responsible in the Embargo Surveillance Centre for getting ‘individual real time clearance for the Royal Navy to board specific vessels in these waters’. He says of the present dispute:

‘As I feared, Blair adopted the stupid and confrontational approach of publishing maps ignoring the boundaries dispute, thus claiming a very blurred situation is crystal clear and the Iranians totally in the wrong.’

Mr. Murray continues:

‘Tony Blair’s contempt for Middle Eastern lives has already been adequately demonstrated in Iraq and Lebanon. His lack of genuine concern for British servicemen is demonstrated by his steadfast refusal to meet even one parent of a dead British serviceman or woman killed in the wars he created.’

Apparently the boundary line between the waters of Iraq and Iran is based upon an extrapolation of the boundary which divides the Shatt Al-Arab Waterway. This boundary shifts with the shifting banks of the Waterway itself, so that manifestly its extension can be subject to important variations. As Murray tells us, the *Stars and Stripes* magazine (October 24th 2006) reports:

‘Bumping into the Iranians cannot be helped in the Northern Persian Gulf, where the lines between Iraqi and Iranian territorial water are blurred ... No maritime border has been agreed upon by the two countries, explained Royal Australian Navy Commodore Peter Lockwood, the Commander of the Combined Task Force in the Northern Persian Gulf.’

None of these considerations inhibited the rhetoric of Mr. Blair. President Bush, however, was even less restrained. He called the detainees ‘hostages’, a term which not even the British had evoked.

At the time of writing, although we are very agnostic about the anticipated Good Friday aerial bombardment of Iran, and although we remain hopeful of a diplomatic solution to the argument about the detention of British military personnel, it is clear that events are very mobile, and that rationality dawns very much in fits and starts among some of the senior personnel. Is there any evidence that the British diplomats and top military brass have been able to restrain Mr. Blair, or lock him in a cellar until the dispute is satisfactorily settled? Fortunately, he will soon be gone, but these contemporary crises do show that we remain in rather dire danger right up to the actual point of his departure.

For a long time we have tended towards the opinion that the extension of American hostilities into Iran was improbable for the very reason given by Yuri Baluyevsky. Even if the realities of the power balance may elude President Bush, it is perfectly evident that large numbers of senior American statesmen, not to say Generals and diplomats, have a greatly more realistic appreciation of the balance of military force. Long ago, we reported the judicious assessment of General Odom, of the effects of the American conquest of Iraq, which, he said, had strengthened America’s enemies, revived Al Qaeda, and made Iran the unchallenged power in the region.

Even if the weight of informed opinion in Washington may not be quite enough to cancel the aggravated imbecility of the man in the White House, there is the further weight of America’s allies. Saudi Arabia, in particular, is expressing open criticism of war talk against Iran. If the neo-cons were to succeed in unleashing the malnourished dogs of their wars on Tehran, they could wind up not only strengthening the Iranians, but fatally undermining their long-term Middle Eastern allies.

There was once a time when a famous strategist declared that ‘imperialism and

all reactionaries are paper tigers'. We took leave to doubt this presumption when it was fashionable in some places. But due to the exertions of Mr Bush, ably assisted by Mr. Blair, it almost begins to be true.

We are about to see the end of the Blair administration. The elections at the beginning of May 2007 give rise to dismal forecasts about the prospects for the Labour Party, and it is generally presumed that the Prime Minister will make his farewells shortly after those elections, while there may remain two or three supporters to whom he can bid goodbye. Our grief will not be measureless, and many people may even share in the sense of relief which will accompany Mr. Blair's departure.

But a judicious assessment of the events which have given rise to this dismal balance sheet will most probably reflect the wisdom of the title chosen by Judge Thomas of the Supreme Court of New Zealand, for his magisterial paper. We have been persuaded to publish this text, because it is not only 'an indictment of Tony Blair', but also because it documents 'the failure of the political process' which has given rise to the horrors in Iraq, and a major crisis of confidence in Government and democratic institutions more widely. Where does the writ of the democratic process run, when that process has been so widely travestied, ignored, and even violated?

The cogent case for impeachment of the Prime Minister was made in England by a group of British Parliamentarians, led by the spokesmen of the Welsh and Scottish Nationalist Parties. A debate was secured by Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party, and supported by a cross-Party coalition of members. One hundred and sixty-four signatures were obtained for Early Day Motion 1088, *Conduct of Government Policy in Relation to the War against Iraq*. Among these were thirty-three Labour members, sixty Conservatives and fifty-nine Liberal Democrats. Adam Price MP explained the thinking behind this motion:

'Three and a half years on and Iraq is mired in blood, and the shocking figures published recently show that the death toll has reached 655,000. Neither the Hutton nor Butler Inquiries addressed the question if the Parliament and country were misled into this bloody conflict. I believe that it is essential for the credibility of our democracy that we establish what combination of deception, delusion and ineptitude carried us down this fateful path.

This debate is not about revisiting old ground, it is an urgent attempt to restore the balance of power between Parliament and the Executive; and of the utmost contemporary relevance if we are to prevent such tragedies from happening again. It will probably be the first and last occasion to restore proper accountability of Government.'

He was supported by Alex Salmond, SNP Leader:

'This debate offers MPs a second chance – a chance to re-establish Parliamentary accountability over an executive who has led the country into a bloody quagmire – and a last chance to change strategy and direction on the disastrous course of events in Iraq.

If this motion carries – or indeed even if it records a substantial shift in opinion since the vote which took us to war – Mr. Blair's time in Downing Street will be numbered in days, not weeks or months.'

The text of the motion is based on Early Day Motion 1088:

‘That this House believes that there should be a select committee of seven honourable Members, being members of Her Majesty’s Privy Council, to review the way in which the responsibilities of government were discharged in relation to Iraq and all matters relevant thereto, in the period leading up to military action in that country in March 2003 and in its aftermath.’

But here we now have the considered opinion of a senior Judge from New Zealand, who, weighing every word, offers us conclusions and refreshing candour long missing in British official pronouncements.

‘I believe that the forty-five minute claim had to be a knowing lie’. How many British Ministers and senior public servants must have known this? How many Judges must have swallowed deeply, and found more decorous descriptions to cover it? And how many British people have pondered the implications in deep frustration? Deliberate lies at the head of Government annul the foundations of trust by the governed, and lower all official thinking to new levels of duplicity and hypocrisy.

Judge Thomas has laid down a powerful challenge. ‘The shortcomings in the political process are self-evident’, he says, ‘in that the Prime Minister was not constrained from committing the above political, immoral and illegal misdemeanours, nor has he been held accountable for them.’

Until accountability is reimposed, we cannot re-establish honest, political discourse. Evidently politicians have told lies before. But now we live with untruths that cannot be corrected, with falsehoods that have become official. Where the lie rules, logic itself gives way to unreason.

Ken Coates

Footnotes

1 Colonel General Leonid Ivashov, Vice President of the Academy of Geo-political Sciences, warned that ‘The Pentagon is planning to deliver a massive air strike on Iran’s military infrastructure in the near future’. Andre Uglanov reported in *Arguments and Facts* that he expected an onslaught from various bases, including Diego Garcia and the aircraft carriers currently deployed in the Persian Gulf. He cited Ivashov as anticipating an American attack, ‘or more precisely a violent action against Iran’.

2 See, notably, the recent statements by Seymour Hersh and Scott Ritter.

3 Since these words were written, a dramatic announcement was made by President Ahmadinejad at the end of a discourse on recent foreign policy developments. He ceremonially decorated the Revolutionary Guards who had captured the fifteen British sailors and marines, and then announced their imminent and unconditional release. They had been pardoned he said, in commemoration of the birthday of the prophet Muhammad, of Easter, and of the Passover. Kitted out with new suits presented by the Iranian authorities, the fifteen, laden with presents, were flown out of Tehran the next morning. Mr. Blair celebrated the return of the British captives with a number of ungracious remarks, implying but not alleging that other servicemen and women who had been killed that day owed their deaths to Iranian weaponry. The evidence for this proposition has not yet been produced, and it may well be found alongside the weapons of mass destruction which took Britain to war against Iraq four bloodthirsty years ago.