

The War

Eduardo Galeano

La Jornada; March 23, 2003
[translated by Alistair Ross]

Just think. In the middle of last year, when this war was still only gestating, George W. Bush stated that 'we have to be ready to attack in any obscure corner of the world'; ergo, Iraq is an obscure corner of the world. Does Bush believe that civilization began in Texas and his fellow Texans invented writing? Has he really never heard of the library of Niniveh, the tower of Babel or the hanging gardens of Babylon? Has he really never heard even one of the tales in the thousand and one nights of Baghdad?

Who elected him president of this planet anyway? I was never asked to vote in any such elections. Were you?

Would we elect a president who was deaf to the population? Would we elect a man incapable of hearing any but the echoes of his own voice? A man deaf to the ceaseless thunder of millions of voices in the streets declaring peace on war?

He has not even heeded a word of friendly advice from the German writer Günter Grass. Realising that Bush felt driven to demonstrate something very important to his daddy, Grass suggested that he see a psychoanalyst rather than bombing Iraq.

In 1898, president William McKinley declared that God had commanded him to seize the Philippines in order to civilize and christianize their inhabitants. McKinley said that he had spoken with God at midnight as he roamed the corridors of the White House. Over a century later, president Bush assures us that God is on his side in the conquest of Iraq. What time was it and where was he, we wonder, when he got the divine message?

We might also ask why the messages to Bush and to the Pope at Rome were so contradictory.

War has been declared in the name of the international community, which is sick of wars. And as per usual, war has been declared in the name of peace.

It's not about oil, they say. And yet, if Iraq produced radishes rather than oil, would anyone seriously suggest invading?

Have Bush, Dick Cheney and sweet Condoleeza Rice really all given up their top jobs in the oil industry? Why is Tony Blair so obsessed with the Iraqi dictator? Could it be because 30 years ago Saddam Hussein nationalized the British Iraq Petroleum Company? And how many oil wells is José María Aznar expecting to get when the spoils are divvied up?

The oil-drunk consumer society is deathly afraid of withdrawal symptoms. And Iraq is where the black elixir is cheapest, and possibly most plentiful.

In a peace demonstration in New York, one placard read: "Why is our oil beneath their sands?".

The United States says it expects a lengthy military occupation following its victory. US generals will be in charge of setting up democracy in Iraq.

Will this be a democracy like in Haiti, the Dominican Republic or Nicaragua? They occupied Haiti for 19 years and set up a military power base that eventually became the dictatorship of Francois Duvalier. They occupied the Dominican Republic for nine years and laid the foundations for the dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. They occupied Nicaragua for 21 years and founded the dictatorship of the Somoza family.

The Somoza dynasty, set on the throne by the Marines, lasted half a century before being swept away by popular fury in 1979. Then, president Ronald Reagan got on his horse and set out to rescue the country from the threat of the Sandinista revolution. Among the poorest of the poor, Nicaragua was a country with all of five elevators, and one escalator that didn't work. Nevertheless, Reagan proclaimed that Nicaragua was a menace; and as he spoke, TV screens showed a map of the United States with a red stain spreading from the south to illustrate the course of the imminent invasion. Can president Bush be copying the panic-rousing speeches of his predecessor? Can Bush be saying Iraq where Reagan said Nicaragua?

Newspaper headlines in the run-up to war: "The United States is prepared to resist attack".

Record sales of insulating tape, gas masks, radiation pills ... Why is the executioner more afraid than the victim? Is it only this climate of collective hysteria? Or does it tremble at the foreseeable consequences of its actions? And what if Iraqi oil sets fire to the world? Will this war not be just the vitamin shot that international terrorism was looking for?

We are told that Saddam Hussein succours the fanatics of Al Qaeda. What is this - his very own viper's nest? Islamic fundamentalists loathe him. Can we say that a country is satanic where people watch Hollywood movies, many schools teach English, the Muslim majority do nothing to prevent Christians walking about sporting crucifixes and it is not uncommon to see women wearing trousers and daring blouses?

There were no Iraqis among the terrorists who demolished the twin towers of New York. Almost all of them were from Saudi Arabia, the US's number one client in the world. Another Saudi is Bin Laden, the villain that the satellites track as he flees on horseback across the desert and the first to step forward whenever Bush requires his services as professional ogre.

Did you know that in 1953 president Dwight D. Eisenhower said that "preventive war" was invented by Adolf Hitler? He said: "...frankly, I wouldn't even listen to anyone seriously that came in and talked about such a thing".

The United States makes and sells more arms than any other country in the world. It is also the only nation to have dropped atomic bombs on civilian populations. And traditionally it has always been at war with somebody.

Who is it that threatens world peace?
Iraq?

So Iraq does not heed United Nations (UN) resolutions? And what about Bush, who has just dealt the most resounding blow ever to international legality? And what about Israel, the leading specialist in ignoring UN resolutions?

Iraq has ignored 17 UN resolutions, Israel 64. Will Bush bomb his most loyal ally?

Iraq was devastated by the war waged by Bush senior in 1991 and has been starved by the blockade following it. What weapons of mass destruction can so thoroughly ruin a country?

Israel, which has been usurping Palestinian land since 1967, has an arsenal of nuclear weapons that guarantees its impunity. And then Pakistan, another faithful ally and furthermore a notorious hotbed of terrorists, flaunts its own nuclear warheads. But the enemy is Iraq, because Iraq "could possess" such weapons. If it did indeed possess them, as North Korea claims to do, would they be so keen to attack?

And what about chemical and biological weapons?

Who sold Saddam Hussein the chemicals he needed to make the poison gases that asphyxiated Kurds, and the helicopters they were launched from? Why won't Bush let us see the receipts?

In those years of war against Iran and war against the Kurds, was Saddam any less of a dictator than he is now? Donald Rumsfeld himself visited him on a mission of friendship. Why are we so concerned about the Kurds of Iraq and not about the much greater number of Kurds murdered in Turkey?

Defence Secretary Rumsfeld has announced that his country will use "non-lethal gases" against Iraq. Will these be the kind of non-lethal gases that Vladimir Putin used last year in a Moscow theatre, killing over a hundred hostages?

There were a few days there when the United Nations covered up Picasso's Guernica with a curtain so that Colin Powell would not be put off his bugle calls by such nasty scenes.

What size of curtain will they use to cover up the butchery in Iraq, in the form of blanket censorship imposed on war correspondents by the Pentagon?

Where will the souls of the Iraqi victims go? According to reverend Billy Graham, president Bush's spiritual adviser and celestial surveyor, paradise is none too roomy - no more than fifteen hundred square miles. The chosen will be few. Now guess which country has bought up all the entrance tickets?

And one last question, borrowed from John Le Carré:

- Will they kill many people, daddy?
- No-one you know, dear. Just foreigners.