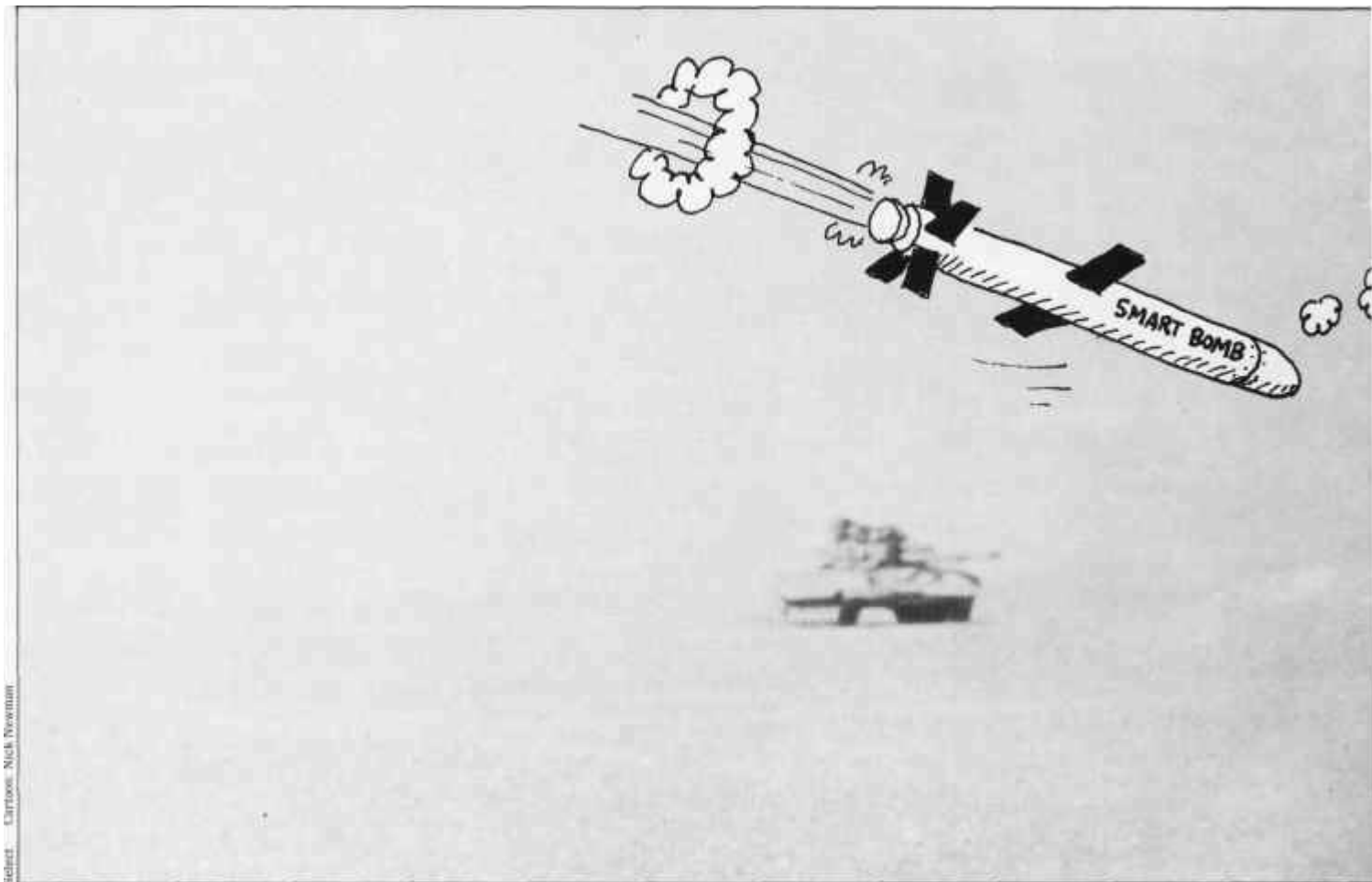


Eric Hobsbawm on irresponsibility in the Gulf

Follies Of War



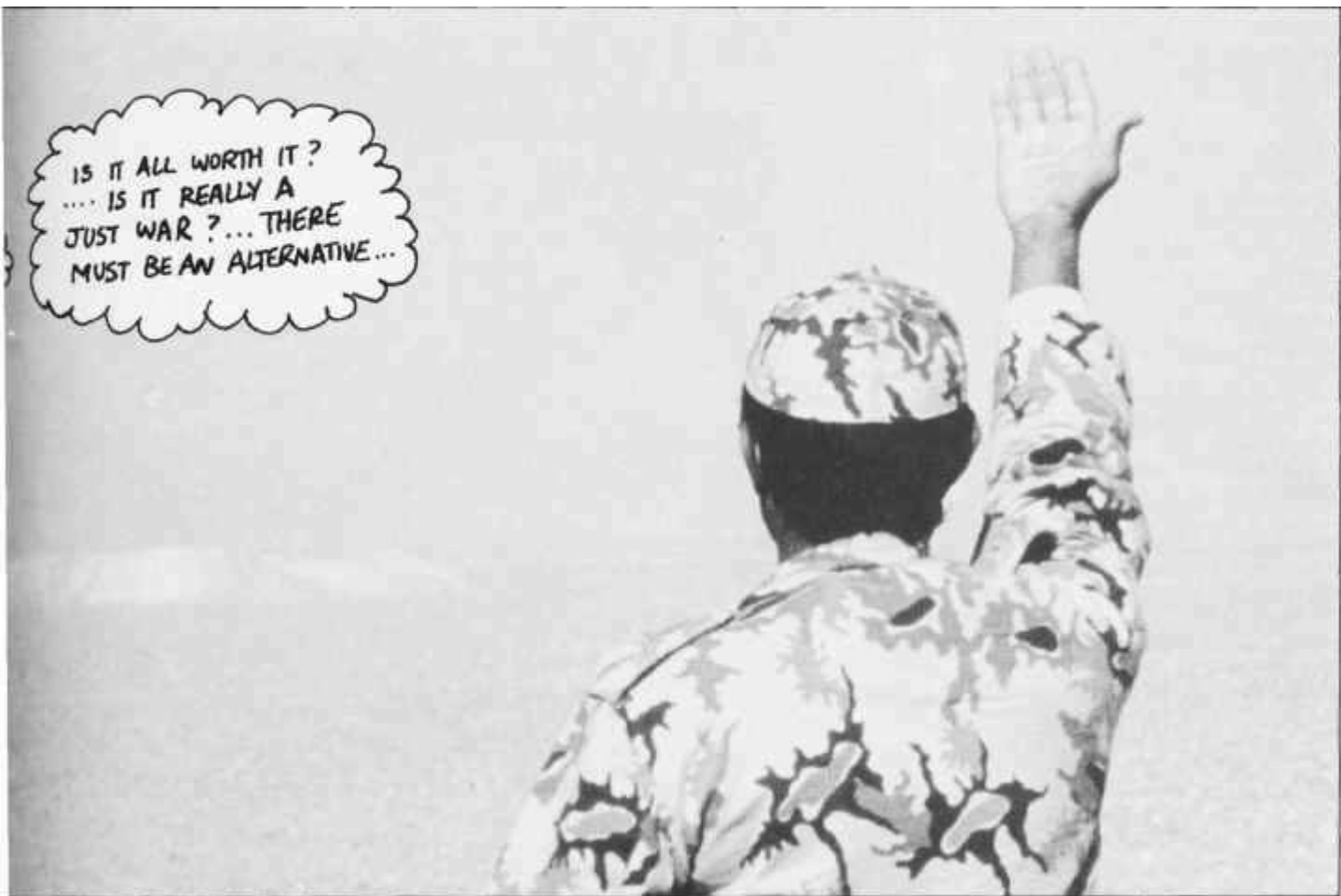
Saddam and George Bush have both told us that God is for them. Heaven has not issued any press releases, unless the Pope (who is against the Gulf war) knows something we don't, but if it does, God will certainly disclaim responsibility for the most irresponsible war of the century. Irresponsible, but not pointless. It would have been better to avoid a war, but it was right to resist an indefensible aggression by a regime in whose favour nothing can be said. Saddam will lose the war and deserve to. If he has become a hero to the Muslim masses outside, and probably to a lot of Third World non-Muslims, it is not on his merits, but because the United States, with gratuitous and superfluous aid from Britain, has cast him for the part.

This is an early consequence of the crazy manner in which the United States conducts its (and our) affairs. For the present situation is due not only to the Magoo-like myopia of Washington and its incompetence in the affairs of any part of the globe not actually State-side, startling though these are. After all, days before the invasion surprised President Bush, his ambassador, presumably not speaking just for herself, told Saddam in so many words that Washington gave him the green light on Kuwait. The last time Iraq threatened Kuwait, in 1966, the Brits flew 6,000 troops into the principality where they sweated quietly for a few summer weeks until, the point having been taken, no more was heard about Iraq's 19th province.

But the basic trouble in the Gulf is that the United States is exclusively geared to fight a major world-scale war, and its forces can't fight any other, not even against enemies the size

of Grenada and Panama. There are three reasons for this. Wealth and technological superiority are by far its greatest military assets, dying is not popular among either American soldiers or civilians, and until Gorbachev came along, a world war against the Soviets was the only one for which the Pentagon prepared. But this is precisely the kind of war least suited to either deterring or repelling regional aggressions. Of course during the cold war both Saddam and Bush would have been deterred by the prospect that a Gulf conflict would escalate into global nuclear war. To this extent the 'deterrence theory' has ceased to work.

So a world-war type of war is now underway in the Gulf and has apparently already overpowered the clear and limited UN objectives. Its technological arsenal slowly lumbered into place in the desert, while Saddam had five months to prepare his defences. Its strategy is designed to minimise allied deaths at all costs. The logical result is that in a month of war more high explosive has been dropped on Iraq than was used in the whole of world war two. Pretty well the entire post-biblical civilian infrastructure of the unhappy country has been smashed, and we hear rather less about the miracles of computer-game warfare and surgically exact bombs winning wars without killing people. The war on the ground, without which Kuwait cannot be freed, is still weeks away. Meanwhile, Saddam can claim that he alone has resisted the greatest military power in the world plus allies for longer than any Arab states ever resisted Israel, or anybody. The United States has succeeded in turning a politically-isolated, murderous tyrant into a heroic myth before the liberation of Kuwait has even begun, while waging total war against the



civilian society of Iraq, whose citizens are no more responsible for the war than you or me. No doubt we shall be told that this was exactly what General Schwarzkopf planned.

The noises we hear about the need to extend the war aims are mainly excuses for not knowing quite how to get Saddam out of Kuwait without exposing allied soldiers to Iraqi machine guns. They have no bearing on postwar peace and stability in the area or stopping some other middle-sized gangster swallowing a weaker neighbour. For, like the Falklands war (only on a bigger scale), this can only be a one-off operation. Never again will the United States find itself, at the outset of an entirely unexpected war, with enough hardware to fight the only kind of war it knows how to. Ten years of Reagan armament which allowed it to, also bankrupted it; without the USSR as enemy, not even the United States will permanently keep up this level, and if they wanted to, they could no longer afford it. The 'new world order', whatever it is, will require a less clumsy and more cost-effective defence.

Not that this war will bring a 'new world order' even in the Middle East. How could it? The place will still be flooded with more arms than any other part of the globe, even if Iraq has none. The war will leave all the multiple tensions of the region just where they were before, or worse. The Middle East, adjoining the Muslim parts of the USSR, will remain as before the chief danger to world peace.

The war cannot even realise Washington's ambition to be recognised as the world's only superpower and global policeman. (This, rather than oil, is the real subtext of the conflict.) No state is strong enough to play this role solo. The United

States is now too poor for it, and has the wrong kind of armed forces for the job of global hired security guard. And there is no sign that the Japanese and the Germans (not to mention the Russians) want one.

Was it necessary? In theory not, in practice probably yes, given folly and stubbornness on both sides; though this does not excuse either. Will it achieve any purposes that justify its cost in countries destroyed, the dead and the maimed, misery for some millions of Third World migrant workers now without jobs and bankruptcy for their countries, plus the erosion of the standards of humanity in Britain and the United States? No. But we are stuck with it until it is won in a manner suitable to Bush, whether or not the UN conditions have been met. So are the other countries which support it, even if they have been less keen to play soldiers.

All we and they can do is to resist the degeneration of a justified action of international collective security into a United States' imperial ego-trip, to stop the affair getting further out of hand, and in doing so to prevent the UN, the *only* available base for a world order, from falling into lasting discredit. We can remind ourselves that, whatever the hype, Saddam is no greater a world danger than Galtieri's Argentina was, and that the freedom and democracy at stake in this war is not ours but the Third World's. And that every man, woman and child who is killed during this conflict, by bomb, epidemic and starvation, is just as much a casualty of war as a marine or a pilot. And there will be plenty. •

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