

Jon Snow talks to Denis Healey about the Gulf war

## Voice of Reason

Denis Healey is a Labour MP and a former defence secretary and chancellor of the exchequer

**Denis, great Atlanticist, a man with a vivid war experience, former defence secretary, it's an unlikely position to find you in over this war, isn't it?**

I don't think so. Anybody who's actually been in a war is very reluctant to see other people stumbling into an unnecessary one. That's one thing Ted Heath and I have in common.

**Some would argue that the US has had its way. The fact that there isn't a common European voice, and the old Atlantic Alliance has stood true between Britain and the US, has meant that war was inevitable.**

There is a lot of truth in that. The most depressing element in the whole situation is that Bush changed his objectives every week or two, and the British government followed every twist and turn in American policy, right up to the present. We don't seem to have any influence on American policy, and yet without us I think American policy would not appear credible in Europe.

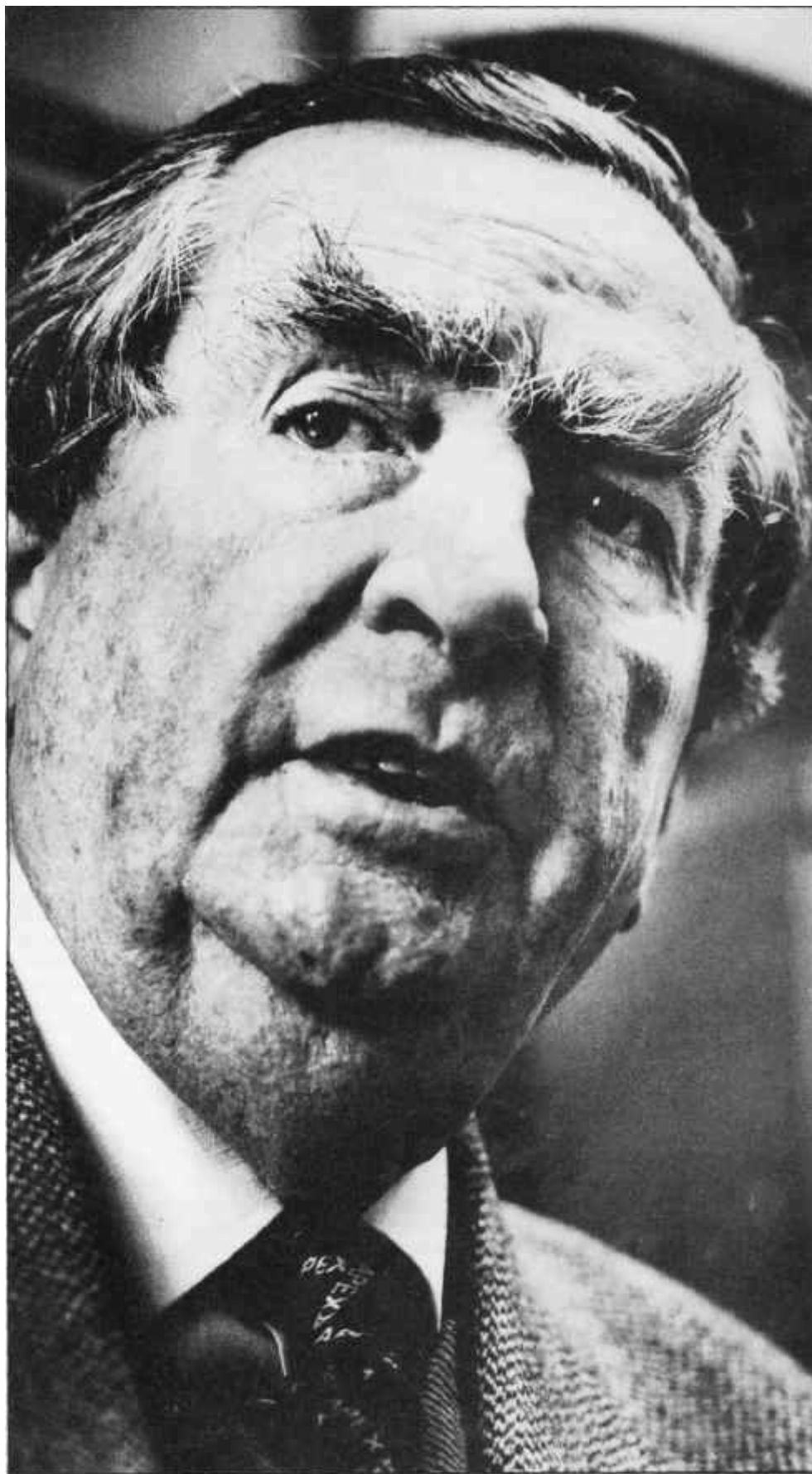
**But if we look at what we now know to be the case - which is that Saddam Hussein has an enormous war machine, that he was a tremendous threat in the region - how, without going to war, and through the mere sustaining of sanctions, do you reduce that threat?**

My own belief, which is shared, oddly enough, by the head of the CIA, William Webster, is that sanctions would have eroded his military capacity so much that, given another nine months or so - assuming we had used that period for more flexible diplomacy, which we notably failed to do - then we could either have got him out by negotiation, or we could have promoted a situation inside Iraq in which he couldn't fight. There is no question that fighting a war to eject him from Kuwait is going to make all the problems of the Middle East more difficult to solve.

**But those who advocate war as the solution are pointing to the fact that even after three or four weeks of war, only 20% of his military machine had been destroyed...**

This is quite an argument against thinking that you can dispose of Saddam Hussein by bombing his country back into the stone age, isn't it?

**But your difficulty, surely, is that even if sanctions had worked for a year or even two years, you would still be left with that formidable monster of a regime...**



90% of his currency comes from the export of oil, and that's been completely shut off. He isn't able to buy spares for his tanks or his aircraft. There is a big question mark over whether he's got sufficient chemicals to produce enough kerosene to go on fighting the war. We'd have been much better off corralling him, punishing him, because after all, far from gaining economically he's lost very, very heavily. He's lost almost all his hard currency. Keeping him in quarantine is much wiser than producing a situation in which you might put Iran back in control of the Gulf, after eight years in which the whole of the outside world, including the Soviet Union and the US, built up this great military monster in Iraq, in order to prevent Iran from running the Gulf. And we've got a further problem if Iraq is effectively destroyed as a functioning state. The risk is that the Turks, who've begun to develop a very active policy, will try to grab the northern part of Iraq. They'll come to blows with the Kurds, who'll want their own state, and see this as a chance for getting it; the Iranians will no doubt try to grab the Shia part of Iraq in the south; and the Syrians will want their bit as well. Everything will be infinitely worse.

**Your scenario before the war then was: sanctions, leading to a position where sooner or later you could negotiate the issues involved. Presumably you also believed that it might be possible to negotiate some form of multilateral disarmament in the region?**

We're going to have to try to do that anyway. One of the problems with fighting the war is that the Americans and the British have been offering more and more arms to the Saudis and the Gulf states. The Israelis have exploited their position, getting promises of more arms, both from the US, and recently from Germany. So the arms race is racing merrily ahead, and most of the regimes to which we are giving arms are just as uncertain in their ultimate allegiance as Iran under the Shah, or indeed Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

**What do you think the war has done to the possibility of a kind of a global settlement in the Middle East, particularly as far as the Israelis are concerned?**

It has made everything much more difficult. According to the Israelis, when Shamir saw Bush in Washington he was able to get, as the price for no pre-emptive attack on Iraq, a promise that the US would not actually support a conference on the Middle East when the war was over. And, of course, a lot of

people now think that the US is actively going to oppose such a conference. In recent days there's been increasing evidence that the European countries, including Britain, are extremely disturbed about this.

**Do you think Mubarak, and some of what are described as the moderate leaders in the region, will survive the war long-term?**

It is very difficult to say. The moment the fighting is over, the internal strains will become more pressing. There is no doubt that the presence of half a million white faces including women, Jews and black men in the American army in Saudi Arabia, is imposing great strains on the present regime. Don't forget that it is only five years since King Fahd issued a fatwah to the effect that the earth was flat, and that anybody that said it was round was insulting the Muslim religion. But one thing I've learnt through life is don't predict when a revolution will take place, or who will run it. When I was Defence Secretary and, to my shame, trying to sell tanks to King Idris in Libya, I was pretty sure that he'd be overthrown in an army coup, and I tried to identify the colonel who was likely to be the leader of the coup. I decided that it would be a Colonel Shelhi, a very intelligent man and a great admirer of Colonel Nasser. After the coup I heard from my ambassador there that Shelhi had been woken by his batman on the morning of the coup with the words, 'Excuse me sir, the coup has begun.' And Shelhi turned over and said, 'Don't be silly, it's tomorrow.'

**You can now afford in the late summer of your political life...**

Late spring...

**...you can afford to take this high moral ground...**

It is not high moral ground, it is hard-headed political ground. I haven't argued morality, I've tried to argue what is likely to happen to the Middle East as a result of the war.

**Let's plunge you back into your office in the Ministry of Defence. As secretary of state for defence you could never have afforded a position like this.**

I wouldn't have supported it. It was I who decided to remove our troops from the Gulf, because I thought they'd become more of an irritant than a stabilising factor.

**This now brings you to the extraordinary position, 20 years on, in which you are essentially at the same table as your old adversary Edward Heath...**

Well, he was my old comrade-in-arms in the good old days of the prewar popular front. He and I fought shoulder to shoulder against appeasement, and against Lord Hailsham. However, in some respects Heath goes further than I do. Heath, I think, wrongly believed that it was possible as early as last autumn to negotiate the peaceful withdrawal of Saddam Hussein from the Gulf. I don't think that was true then, though it could have become so as Saddam Hussein faced continued sanctions. But now, of course, Saddam has got into another mode. He has said many times that he doesn't believe American public opinion will withstand the return of a lot of body bags. And there is no doubt that the visit of Cheney and Powell to the Gulf convinced them that to fight a land war at this time would risk over-straining the support among the American people. This seems to be the view that President Bush has accepted. But it is far from clear, given the surprisingly small effect of this continuous bombardment on Iraq's military potential, that even another month will seriously reduce it.

Then you run into the appalling problem that the Americans were conscious of from the word go, and that is Ramadan in the middle of March, and whether the Muslims will fight. Assuming they do, then the following month the sandstorms begin, when it is very difficult to fight, especially in chemical warfare kit. And then you run into the haj, the pilgrimage, when millions of Muslim pilgrims from all over the world, including Iraq, Iran and Jordan, will flood into southern Arabia. And if King Fahd refuses to have them there, then he can no longer present himself as the guardian, on behalf of the Muslim world, of the holy places.

**Do you think the Labour Party had any alternative but to travel the course it has taken?**

The Labour Party course has been deliberately misrepresented both by the government and by much of the press. When they spoke in the debate just before the war, Neil Kinnock and Gerald Kaufman said that a vote for the adjournment would not be a vote for war, that we believed that sanctions should be given longer. I listened to the BBC headlines the next morning, and they said, 'Yesterday parliament gave overwhelming support to the government's handling of the Gulf crisis.' I believe that the opposition should have insisted on having a vote on a motion in which the government could have asked for support, and we would have put

down an amendment saying that we thought that sanctions should have been given longer. As it was I think we upset a lot of our own supporters, and others in the country, without any real gain in the long run. But we all made clear, including me, that once the fighting started we'd support our troops.

**Why do you think so few people in your kind of position have actually stuck their heads above the parapet and cried 'No'?**

Quite a lot have. If you read the correspondence columns of the papers, you will find a remarkable range of people with diplomatic and military experience taking the same sort of view as I do. I'm bound to say that I meet a lot of people who praise me for speaking up, but don't speak up themselves. But don't mistake my position. Now that we're in the war we've got to bring it to a successful conclusion in a way which gives the best possible chance of lasting peace and security in the area.

**That brings us to the very critical question of the balance of power at the end of all this. At the beginning it appeared as if those who wanted to flog Europe for being an inadequate political animal were going to win, that political union had been put off still further...**

First, can I make two points about the way in which the political constellation has changed since the beginning of August. At that time I was strongly in favour of sanctions, and I supported the dispatch of American troops to Saudi Arabia, according to Bush, to deter an attack on that country; though I would not myself have acceded to an American request to put British ground troops there, and I think many people in the Ministry of Defence argued strongly against that. But the purpose of the operation was completely transformed by Bush's decision to double the number of troops, which was clearly the first step towards a war this year. That is the point at which the coalition began to show strain.

Now two things have happened since then. The end of the cold war gave us real hopes that the Gulf operation could be the seed, round which a new role for the UN would develop. But I am afraid, since then, the Soviet Union has begun to face disintegration and is unlikely to be a major player. The US still wants its verbal support because it is cover for American policy in the Middle East, but that's all it is. Secondly, the moment the decision to go to war was taken in Washington in November, the UN really faded out of the picture. Perez de Cuellar was quite justified in saying that,

once the US got its cover for the action, the UN hasn't been consulted, they haven't even been informed until well after decisions have been taken, and actions have followed. It looks more and more like a cover for a *pax americana*. But the Americans have only been able to perform this leadership role because other people are paying, without demanding control of the operation. The Americans haven't allowed the Saudis, or the lower Gulf states, or the Germans or Japanese to say how they



should run the war, or what the objectives should be.

Now the result of all this has been, contrary to some of the nonsense in the British press, a revival of feeling in Europe, that Europe must play a constructive role. And, to pay him credit, I think once Mrs Thatcher had gone Douglas Hurd took advantage of the new leadership to drop the demand for a war crimes tribunal, and he has tried very hard recently to develop a common approach to the postwar situation with France, Germany and Italy, the three key countries. He has also insisted that we will not keep troops on the ground when the war is over, and that a solution must be found by the local governments and not imposed on them by the US and/or Britain. This does give Europe the possibility of a role, perhaps in bringing the war to an end, when unwise forces in Washington may want to continue the war too long, and also to play a role in clearing up the mess afterwards, although it is going to be a terrifying mess.

**Part of that mess may well reside in the South. Do you detect beyond the immediate Islamic world, a deepening of suspicion, and possibly even hatred towards some nations in the North, particularly towards the Americans?**

They see it as imperialism really. Among the non-aligned countries of the Third World, that's a very common view. And it is being expressed in the most unlikely places. For instance, you find the chief of staff of the Pakistani army, which has forces in Saudi Arabia, saying that the war was a Zionist plot, and the Moroccan government, which has troops in the Gulf, supporting a general strike against the war. The conflict, especially if the Americans handle the consequences unwisely, could produce a tremendous anti-Western backlash, particularly in the Muslim world.

My final point is this: the saddest thing about the war is that it shows a gross lack of proportion. For Europe, infinitely the most important thing is to help eastern Europe to have a social market economy, and to have some sort of pluralistic democracy. They cannot achieve it without aid on a much greater scale than is contemplated at the moment by anyone except the Germans. The Germans, who are so widely attacked for not coughing up more for a war on which they weren't consulted, are the only Western country making real sacrifices, not only to integrate East Germany, which is costing them 150 billion Dm this year, but also to help Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and even the Soviet Union.

**What about Iraq's first usage of the word 'withdrawal' on February 15?**

It was very carefully calculated to maximise support for Iraq in the Middle East, since all the conditions for an Iraqi withdrawal look not only reasonable but also desirable to ordinary Arabs. I think President Bush made a great mistake in unilaterally rejecting it out of hand, and an even greater mistake in appealing to the Iraqi army to overthrow Hussein. Of course an offer to withdraw was unacceptable accompanied by all those conditions. But it was the first time Saddam Hussein had ever offered to withdraw his troops from Kuwait. So the coalition should have given a reasoned reply, welcoming the offer to withdraw and saying that all the other issues are open for discussion once the withdrawal has taken place and a ceasefire is in operation. In my opinion, an increasing number of European and other governments will now press the US to take this line.