

The Grand Illusion

Is this war really worth the cost?

Michael Gilson takes issue with Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Fred Halliday

Two highly respected writers and commentators have recently supported the Gulf war project as a moral and political necessity: Hans Magnus Enzensberger, the poet and critic, and Fred Halliday, Professor of International Relations at the LSE and a noted authority on Middle Eastern politics. Their reflections pose a challenge and demand some response from those of us who, with the same unease and questioning which they both in quite different ways show, oppose the war.

Enzensberger (*The Guardian*, February 9) believes that to describe Saddam Hussein as Adolf Hitler 'is not merely journalistic license... but is actually deadly accurate'. Both were enemies of humanity. German historians and Middle East experts pursue 'illusions' if they imagine they can 'explain' either figure, for 'we are not confronted with a German or an Arab phenomenon, but with a human one'. Since 'no conceivable policy... can match such an enemy', millions of lives may have to be spent to deny Saddam 'his wish to unleash war'. And even if we succeed this time, the one who inherits his mantle may succeed the next. The cause is therefore somehow both utterly hopeless - for neither history nor the sacrifice of millions will help - and yet necessary. The tone is apocalyptic, but the apocalypse is coming whatever we do. We must act, but next time... Enzensberger invites us to a ghastly repetition of the *corsi e ricorsi* of humanity's blind tragedy.

Having excoriated the foolish historians and orientalist, however, Enzensberger nonetheless contradicts himself by rhetorical resort to a vague history. There is, he says, a social precondition for the emergence of such monsters: they cannot come into existence without the 'collectively humiliated' masses who follow, boundlessly adoring and

blind, German or Iraqi alike. These are the masses who 'yearn for destruction'. In other words, there *are* historical conditions. Reflection as to what those conditions are, how they have arisen and are perpetuated, and what courses of political, cultural and economic action could be taken which might, just might, help to eradicate them are polemically excluded. Enzensberger's whole position, which seems to cry out for such examination, leads only to an overstrained nihilism.

Fred Halliday's approach and language are quite different (*The Guardian*, February 11). He criticises those against the war for the following reasons. First, there is no evidence whatever that Saddam could have been forced out; sanctions were simply not credible faced with such a despot. Second, that the war has the justification of driving back an aggressor state which refused all opportunities to retreat. And third, Saddam is not 'anti-imperialist', he is a murderous neo-fascist and should not be sentimentally indulged. Much of the liberal and left intelligentsia is either cultural relativist or feebly-mindedly post-modern agnostic. 'There are many who will conclude that, by a slim margin', the arguments for war are stronger, 'even if it is conducted by an unsavoury set of powerful states'.

The problem is that on his own terms 'many' may conclude quite the reverse, however much they share his view of the Iraqi regime. Halliday makes it admirably clear that talk of the 'international community' is fraudulent; 'Resolution 678 is a travesty of the UN'. He also sees that the Western-led coalition cannot ensure peace or a new order because it 'is not willing to address' the very factors such as dictatorship and maldistribution of wealth and power which led to war in the first place. There is no reason to believe

(and here he is surely absolutely right) that there will be a new deal on Palestine which will seriously answer Palestinian claims. And, again no doubt rightly, we need no more have illusions about the motives of those leading the coalition than we did about Stalin, Churchill or Roosevelt - the second world war analogy.

If all this is true, it is quite unclear to me in what the 'slim margin' consists, and what price it is worth paying for the war we should, on balance, want.

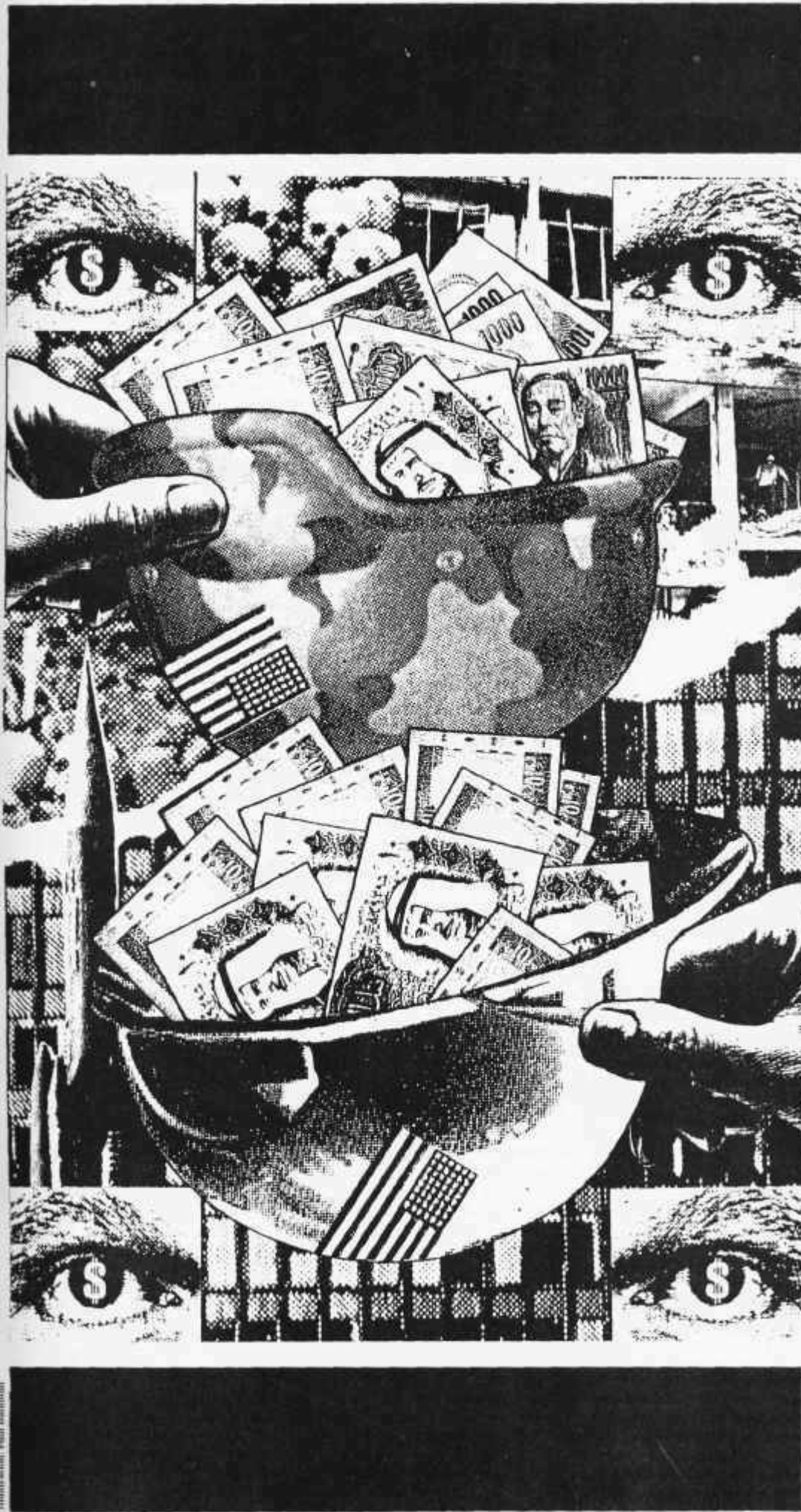
There are surely three basic questions proponents as well as opponents of the war must consider: At what price, to whom? With what benefit, to whom? And, following on from the first two, how are the Arab societies in whose region the war is being fought affected?

Even if it is true that Saddam is Hitler and human evil incarnate, or, less dramatically, that the Iraqi regime is akin to fascism and must be destroyed, is the benefit simply self-evident - that international law will be asserted as the Kuwaitis regain their autonomy over the grave of their oppressor? And is any question of price and means (the two go together of course) simply obscene because no human, social, economic or political price is too high to pay for such a benefit?

Both the reasons for the war and the possible consequences have been mired in confusion from the beginning. As the conservative Senator Nunn said, in the fateful debate giving the president the powers he (and the pro-Israeli members of Congress so fervently) sought, Bush had not given him compelling reason for committing huge American forces to combat.

From the first days of August, the president has had trouble even articulating the war aims, as not a few American commentators pointed out before 'supporting our boys', prayer breakfasts, and a patriotism that may be more anxious than it yet seems, silenced them. He fluctuated between varying combinations of the defence of Saudi Arabia, the restoration of the Kuwaiti government and state integrity, the key strategic American interest in the Gulf, the oil supply, freedom and international law, and the much hinted-at wholesale destruction of a ruler and a Middle Eastern power recently supported but now suddenly discovered to be evil. The gentleman protests too much, methinks. Was this simple confusion, a plurality of aims growing day by day, Bush's notorious verbal debility? Or was there a wider, opportunistic yet deeply felt and unreflective vision of 'American leadership of the Free World', a vision intoxicating in its sweep but one which could not possibly be presented as compatible with the UN terms ostensibly legitimating the entire operation?

Consider the scene some time last August. The president is taking the key decision as to whether to increase his forces in the Gulf and to switch from a



defensive to an offensive posture. He knows that that switch will almost certainly mean war. Sanctions cannot possibly 'work' in the time he can allow for maintaining half a million men in combat readiness thousands of miles from home and for keeping his public opinion with him.

His enthusiastic chief of staff, Colin Powell, backed by his air force generals, is saying 'can do'. Technophilia is rampant and they have the weapons. They promise a quick and clean victory to a chief executive whose aides are strong at crisis management and poll analysis but who have no conception at all beyond those imperatives. The reward of that victory is not just 'the liberation of Kuwait'. It is the far greater one of effective American 'leadership' throughout the Middle East. Bush and Baker are cold war products. The 1950s language of good and evil forces, of worldwide pacts, bases and influence is their natural speech. The implications would have been clear, even self-evident.

Imagine those insistent voices: 'Here indeed is a window of opportunity Mr President, take it. Iran is weak. Egypt is ours. Syria hates Iraq. Turkey is in our pocket. The Gulf states will do exactly as they are told. The Saudis will have no choice. Israel will love it. We will control the flows of oil. The cold war is over and we have won. But we have a major domestic and international economic crisis; the Europeans and the Japanese are a competitive problem; even some Americans say we are no longer a world power. The Gulf will change that. The Brits will instantly assert their Atlantacist identity - Thatcher loves the idea anyhow and it will be a blow against the EC. They will do what they are told. The Europeans will come on board. Our wishes for a strong and interventionist Nato will be strengthened in this difficult period after the demise of the Warsaw pact. We can use the UN. And we can have bases and a permanent presence in the Middle East if we wish. Cut them off and kill them. Take it, Mr President.'

'War simplifies'. How attractive such a view would seem, dressed in more sophisticated and tough analytical clothes. A just cause and it promises later electoral success, provided everything is thrown at the enemy and his swift defeat is assured. That is not in doubt, because no one can actually imagine that 'we' are not going to 'win', though nobody ever analyses exactly what 'winning' would in fact mean out there in the real world of the Middle East, beyond the political and economic leverage it will give the United States.

Here is the cause of the plethora of explanations George Bush finds for the enterprise. What he *cannot* do, of course, is articulate clearly his true reasons of state, reasons which make perfect sense in an administration context and obey all the rules of *realpolitik*, including the rule that you should have God on your side. The destruction of the

Ba'athist regime, the armed services, the manufacturing and industrial sectors, the infrastructure, the energy supply and the capacity for sustaining any normal level of social life in Iraq 'in order to restore the sovereignty of Kuwait' could go ahead.

Only two dimensions of cost seem to have received any systematic consideration early on - body bag numbers, and money.

If the air force chiefs could guarantee a quick kill and low casualties, both president and Pentagon could avoid the 'Vietnam nightmare', losing public support in a long drawn-out struggle far from home. They gave that guarantee.

The problem of money was James Baker's responsibility. If he could get contributions from Japan, the Germans, and above all, the rich Arab states, then the war could more than pay for itself, as well as unambiguously showing the world whose new world order it would be. Baker could, and did. And fast. Giving a brilliant object lesson in the art of applying intense pressure, and with quite as much skill as the masterly early rounding-up in the UN, the secretary of state gathered the necessary billions. The American budget has not been harmed, and the Republicans have even been able to fight off 'peace dividend' talk while relaunching some of their cherished defence projects such as the immensely costly B-2 warplane.

The administration demonstrated the same speed and foresight in recognising that those who control the monopoly of the means of destruction can translate that into the monopoly of gain. They saw, long before anyone else, that there was another war to fight, what *Le Monde* called in a headline on the front page on February 8 'la bataille des plans de paix'. The paper's inside financial page heading was more precise: 'La victoire des industriels Americains'. This war is against America's allies, Britain proudly at their head, for the vast economic contracts for the reconstruction of Kuwait (and no doubt, in time, of Baghdad itself). 'Vast' here means loose estimates of between \$40 to \$60 billion.

The 'slim margin' Fred Halliday suggests favours war is a very fat margin for Caterpillar, Bechtel, Fluor Daniel, Brown and Root, Foster Wheeler etc. Readers of the *Financial Times* will have noted reports on the forming of major and powerful consortia. They will also certainly have noticed the virtual exclusion of non-American business. The *Financial Times*' headline 'US and UK groups battle it out for contracts' on February 11 is the title of a report which notes that 'British engineers say US project managers traditionally prefer to operate with other US companies.' Quite.

The same paper on the same day also reported that American manufacturers were urging the Bush administration to 'ease the US domestic recession by taking more vigorous steps to promote exports'. The link is clear. We can only

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wish good luck to the chairmen or directors of Morgan Grenfell, Amec, John Brown Engineering, the Crown Agents, Department of Trade and Industry officials *et al*, who were trying desperately and belatedly to hustle the Kuwaiti government-in-exile in Taif, picking over the bones left by their voracious American allies.

Both Western countries make *explicit* use of their military contributions for political advantage in the no doubt ferocious bargaining over business. Bodies for business. Meanwhile, the air attacks continue.

The war therefore has tremendous financial as well as political rewards for America. The stakes in the arms trade are scarcely less hallucinatory vast. No one, least of all James Baker or Douglas Hurd, is proposing any halt to the trade in so-called 'conventional' weapons amidst all the piety about nuclear, biological and chemical arms.

One of America's first reactions was to talk of the need the Gulf states would have for 'additional security'. The West and the Soviet Union have for years, with the enthusiastic help of local rulers made the entire region one of catastrophically high expenditure on arms. Britain has its 'sale of the century' with the Saudis, which used to be reported as worth some £20 billion over 20 years or so. Iraq is said to have been spending something like 25% of its GDP on arms, and others are not far behind. Now the West will have an almost monopoly position, providing the Chinese, Brazilians and local armaments industries do not take too much of the trade.

These policies, socially and economically crippling to Arab societies, will be enthusiastically continued in *another* arms race started in the name of the very regional 'stability' they will necessarily undermine. One day a specialist will be able to track the flows of capital associated with the whole episode. Tracing the dollars on an international basis has been an issue from day one. Israel presents a bill-claim for \$13 billion; the Turks have already been more than vigilant and need recompense; Egypt is already forgiven its \$7 billion arms debt but needs more; Syria has had its funds unblocked by the EC; the US is getting its war subsidies; the Soviet Union is tied by its need for help; the air is thick with pay-offs and promises, massive promises, every one of which has its own complex politics contradicting most or all of the others.

To find out who is paying the price and who benefitting, *cherchez la monnaie*.

What are the losses and benefits to 'the Arabs' (a term which, depending on the user, frequently includes the Iranians, and sometimes the Turks)? In the arguments of those for and against the war, this must surely be a major concern of both sides. We know that Western armaments, engineering and construction industries gain. We know

America's hoped-for political goals. We know oil-rich regimes purchase their safety and others a dubious new credibility in Western eyes. There *must* be some benefits to the Arab people themselves. Are there?

Some aspects are immediate and obvious. Kuwait has been shattered by the Iraqi regime. Iraq is being terribly battered. Jordan is crippled. The expulsion of 700,000 Yemenis from Saudi Arabia devastates the south Arabian economy. The Palestinians are hammered. The human cost is terrifying.

Yet in a curious way 'the Arabs' seem even less of a real presence than before. The abyss between us and them is even greater, whether or not they are 'on our side'. They have vanished into a sandstorm of media blitzes on Baghdad, the technologising of war, the false immediacy of 'real time', the pseudo-actuality of 'live from Amman-Riyadh-Dahran', and a demonised Saddam Hussein (to which mystification writing such as Enzensberger's unfortunately contributes).

They' are more of an absence, and a puzzle, than ever. The wheeling and dealing of regimes is presumably not very mysterious. What is striking to me is the degree of bafflement expressed by many here (of any level of education and experience) over different Arab reactions to what, at the time of writing, is the invasion and occupation of Iraq by air and the bombing of a celebrated capital, Baghdad, as well as an important city, Basra.

How many 30-second sound bites have been spent treating outrage in the streets of some other Arab cities as inexplicable? Or apparent Iraqi solidarity in the face of aerial attack as unexpected or astonishing? How often has a peculiarly Arab sense of honour and face been evoked, as though American, British and French politics know nothing whatever of these strange notions?

What is bewildering about 'the Arabs' seems, in a paradoxical way, to be that this undifferentiated 'they' are in fact behaving as 'we' might expect them to behave if 'we' were in such a position. But because they are supposed to be utterly other and not-us - the barbarians outside the city - and because we the powerful *cannot* imagine the situation of being the victims of such a war, this normality is perceived as incomprehensible.

I have been asked a thousand times for the deep cultural explanation of all sorts of profound differences between 'us and them' in the last few months. Now, as that dubious creature, a Middle Eastern specialist (*pace* Enzensberger), I have virtually a vested interest in talking about historical and sociological specificities. They certainly exist. But on nearly all occasions the answers have actually seemed to me *not* to require any special insight into unique cultural peculiarities. Rather, they appear to demand a relatively straightforward attempt at a political reading of the situation rather than the citing of some supposed mental or

cultural condition.

'Saddam Hussein' in 'Baghdad', attacked by the world's greatest power and its allies, becomes a vessel into which any amount of grievances, frustrations and wretchedness can be poured. Denied political and civil space in most Arab societies by undemocratic regimes of various kinds, many people make of such an image a confused but powerful instrument of criticism of their own rulers, never mind the powers which they associate with colonial history and contemporary world dominance. Is that incomprehensible, even when we, and many Arabs when the sounds of war are not deafening them, recognise the vile-ness of his regime and the total horror of the invasion and occupation of Kuwait?

Informed in majestic neo-colonial language and with disingenuous grace by the British foreign secretary that they 'have a part to play' in the settlement of their own affairs, is a sense of humiliation and a wintry smile from those who remember other foreign secretaries and other assurances so difficult to grasp? Is it not in fact much more extraordinary that our minister appears to find such a statement positively generous and reassuring and has no sense of its presumption? The Syrian foreign minister who, after meeting Douglas Hurd, evoked the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 in which the British and the French secretly carved up the Middle East between them (later using the League of Nations to give them the so-called Mandates as a cover), was

not making some arcane and irrelevant allusion. A minimum of historical awareness and a willingness to confront our own past is what is needed to teach us that, quite as much as knowledge of 'Arab culture'.

We have no idea of how this will all end; or rather, how it will continue in its effects over several decades and with any number of unintended consequences. The complex processes set in train with such a blithe disregard of consequence and so little consideration of effect, will of course work their way out in many dimensions. The very fact that they are so unknown and cost so high in human lives seems to me to be a point against the arguments of Enzensberger and Halliday. There is no proportionality between crime, real and appalling crime, and punishment any more. The actual agenda now established by the Americans and their subsidiaries, does *not* direct itself to the issues either Enzensberger or Halliday identify. The price and the benefit are not right and just; even in the deeply disturbed and complex world of our calculations we can see that.

At this stage, almost overwhelmed by the deluge of war, there is perhaps nothing to say that is not banal. It does seem likely to me that a North-South divide will be greatly deepened; that the still weak but nonetheless unmistakable pressures towards democratisation in some of the Arab societies will be lost, not least

because the war and the allies will put such a premium on harsh social and political controls in what many will see as potentially revolutionary situations. And I doubt that this time round Arab public opinion will separate the action of Western governments so clearly from Western peoples as they seemed able to do after Suez.

What would the effects of sanctions have been? The question has become practically irrelevant, but not politically or morally so. I am convinced that it was the course to follow. In British terms, Heath and Healey are right. With all its uncertainties and lack of guarantees, such a policy had many practical chances of being effective against Iraq's economy and of causing political and economic isolation. That in turn might have given wider diplomatic and political options a chance. In that space, a realistic attempt to produce serious Israeli-Arab negotiations could have at least begun the process of denying figures such as Saddam their greatest propaganda card. And the West *might* have begun to re-evaluate its use of such monsters.

Who knows? But I am as sure as I can be that the uncertainties and multiple complexities, the appalling human and social cost, and what is in my view the cynicism of this war, will demand a far higher price for a far more dangerous **future**.©

Michael Gilson is professor of contemporary Arab studies at Oxford University

'Nobody ever analyses exactly what 'winning' would in fact mean in the real world of the Middle East'



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