

Dave Hill on Gulf gullibility

Word Wars



While digesting my daily dose of Gulf wallpaper the other week, I chanced upon a Radio 4 telephone spat between an editor from ITN and Nicholas Soames MP, a Tory backbencher. ITN film reports from the ruins of Baghdad, fronted by Brent Sadler, had got Soames' goat. He complained that Sadler and the ITN crew were compiling their material under the supervision of Iraqi minders and subject to the distortions of the Iraqi censors. Soames spluttered like a malfunctioning Scud: not only was this biased journalism, he fumed, but 'frankly, disloyal'.

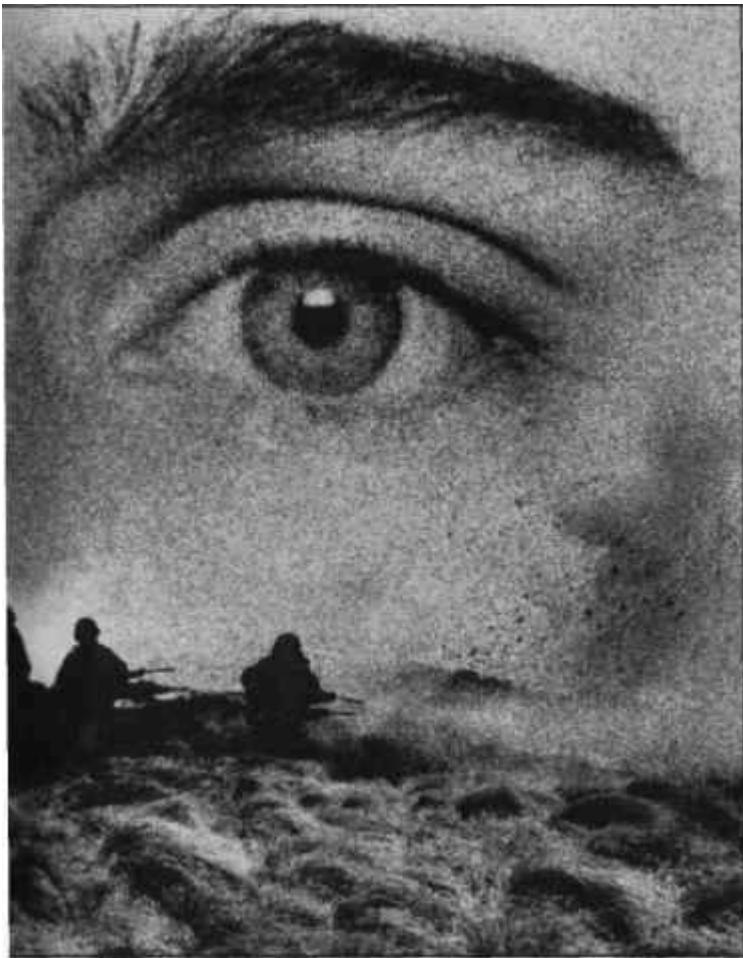
This kind of chauvinism is, of course, perfectly normal coming from sections of today's Conservative Party, except that it is normally directed at the 'Anti-British Broadcasting Corporation'. But what struck me about this particular outburst, emerging as it did in the midst of the most media-intensive

war in history, was its implicit assumption about the gullibility of the British public.

After all, ITN's bulletins have made no attempts to deceive us about the influence of Iraqi minders over Sadler's reports. And while it has doubtless occurred to the company's editors that such a policy goes some way to covering their asses in the event of attack by 'patriotic' critics, the benefit to the viewer is no less valuable for that.

We know the context in which the reports are compiled and can exercise our judgement accordingly. In the view of Nicholas Soames, though, such a capacity for reasoned assessment is, apparently, almost non-existent. Conclusion? ITN is carrying Iraqi propaganda and the public is being deceived.

Only a complete media illiterate could leap to such a conclusion. Just because we appear to be gorging ourselves on war coverage



doesn't mean to say that we swallow it whole. Gone are the days when concerned voices, from purblind Right or knee-jerk Left, could get away with glib diatribes about 'media brainwashing'.

As for propaganda, well, half a century back, the Blitz generation didn't believe even their own government's pronouncements half the time. With the mass media now part of everyday life and with arguments about bias and balance commonplace, the modern British subject is not likely to succumb to some Saddam sucker punch thrown by the third party from the corner of the living room.

Maybe that is the problem for Soames and his kind. Deep down they fear we aren't believing 'our' own information sources either. And not without cause. Opinion polls which have consistently reflected large majorities in favour of Britain's military role in the Gulf,

have also found widespread ambivalence about the true motives for it.

Despite the leading coalition partners' endless trumpeting of their unimpeachable moral purpose - all that pious flannel about 'the liberation of Kuwait' - those believing the true purpose to be ensuring the flow of oil, has been measured at over 40%.

There is another, concomitant, reason for suspecting widespread scepticism about 'official' versions of the war and it lies in the proliferation of global media networks. In his book *Gotcha! - The Media, The Government And The Falklands Crisis*, Robert Harris noted the dismay of Ministry of Defence officials at the readiness of British tv to report the enemy's view of the war, even using Argentine footage.

Partly, this was because broadcasters realised that the Argentinian version of events was often more reliable than the British. The

same suspicions, particularly in relation to civilian casualties, doubtless apply to footage from Baghdad.

More mundanely, it was also because the supply of pictures and information from the frontline was so meagre that tv companies had precious little material with which to fill their programmes. One consequence of all this was that when a Commons Defence Committee later met to disentangle the many grievances, John Nott - the defence secretary who 'mised' the commons about the circumstances of the sinking of the General Belgrano - explained: 'In a few years' time, with satellites, the task of censorship will become an impossible one.' In other words, if broadcasters no longer have to depend on 'official' sources, how can we control what the public sees and hears? The answer in 1991 is: not as easily as 'we' would like.

On the face of it, those policing information from the Gulf war have less problems with the great bulk of the British press. With no editors and only a handful of high-profile journalists opposing the conflict, and with the majority of newspapers dutifully baying for Iraqi blood, Fleet Street could hardly be more acquiescent. And yet the same disjuncture between messages sent and opinions received must apply as much here as with the electronic media.

The fact that the gung-ho tabloids have wrapped themselves in the Union Jack does not mean that they are accurately reflecting the public mood. It is a matter of common wisdom that such newspapers cannot be trusted. Perhaps all they are really reflecting is their public's depressing penchant for horror-show kitsch and spectacularly well-told lies.

Such factors are important to bear in mind when considering the apparently unassailable support for John Major and Britain's role in this enterprise. The inconsistencies in public opinion point to the existence of a substantial section of opinion character-

ised by a cynicism almost as profound as that which lurks beneath the celestial rhetoric of George Bush.

For while there are many for whom the decimation of Baghdad is guided by a fine and noble sense of justice, many others find themselves with effectively no alternative but to support 'our government'/'our boys'/'freedom' or whatever other option is put before them, in spite of their doubts about the validity of the whole bloody exercise.

On the face of it, then, John Nott's fears about the consequences of the end of wholesale censorship have not yet been borne out. What has come to his rescue is an altogether subtler kind of ideas and information-limitation whose effectiveness is, if anything, enhanced by the fact that it cannot easily be explained in terms of conspiracies and blunt propaganda.

For, while editorial priorities and earth-shrinking technologies can and do work against the interests of the war's officialdom, the degree to which even the less servile sections of the media provide a platform for coherent dissenting views is incredibly limited.

Amid the avalanche of Gulf War coverage, the historical backdrop to Saddam's brutal rise has barely been drawn. The double-dealing of the United States (Saddam's sneaking ally in the desperate Iran-Iraq war) has hardly been mentioned. Meanwhile, an almost entirely supine parliamentary opposition has confirmed that the political culture which is supposed to ensure our much-vaunted freedom of opinion has stagnated to the point of inertia.

Everyone, in the end, has decided to fight a 'patriotic' war. So while the type of tv reporting that so upsets Nicholas Soames may add to a sense of doubt already nagging away in many British minds, when the opinion pollster calls it is reduced to the level of painful anecdote. When saying 'no' feels like a trip down a dead-end road to treason, what else is there to say but 'yes'?