

Prime Time War

Like most other Californians, I spent a lot of casual time watching George Bush kick ass in the Middle East. We had to watch: the war took over tv. Even high-rating programmes were cancelled, which is something in this town. But it was casual because, after all, LA is casual city. And the fight with Iraq became a very *Californian* kind of war. It got good word of mouth. There was none of the strange stuff you had in Texas, for instance, with people going to army-surplus stores, and buying gas masks, in case a stray Scud made it over here.

Nothing like that in LA. We just decided the war was great television; much better than the shows it replaced. It was what the networks here call a hardware hour; a ton of wonderful, lethal technology. (Ours, that is. Fortunately, theirs was lousy, though some of it came from California.)

After Iraq, even in the West Coast winter sun, you can feel that something has fundamentally changed. Now, the Pentagon knows what's needed for a genuinely popular war. Here are the new rules. You engineer international support, though not, of course, an international power of veto. You vet, pool, and censor the press. You pick an enemy who isn't a joke - as Panama was - but one who isn't too damn mean either. No more Vietcong. In this sense, Iraq was ideal. It was a fright movie: threatening, but not serious.

Commercially, of course, we had one or two rough moments. Restaurants reported empty seats when the show reached its end-of-episode cliffhangers. But there's only a certain number of storylines you can write into a Middle Eastern war. You can't have nudity, or sex, or even kissing. So the novelty wore off, and it was business pretty much as usual.

The war's reception is very good news for President and Pentagon. George Bush has proved, unexpectedly, to be as good a manager of the media as his old mentor, Ronald Reagan, who now lives up the road in Bel Air. Both of them must have watched California with especial satisfaction. If a war played well here, it probably did reasonable business in the rest of the country. In terms of box office, Washington has finally come back from its last big flop, in Vietnam.

From the President's own point of view, war is Christmas and Thanksgiving rolled up in one. It's a bonanza of presidential approval. And, of course,

it's a media gift for the White House. Watch the screen closely as we cut from dithering domestic President of 1990 to resolute Commander-in-Chief of 1991. For months, the White House has had consistently great press. Acres of it. Congress got no attention at all.

We saw some protestors - a testament to the American way and they were just as they should be, wonderfully ineffective. It was an ideal scenario; though we had little trouble in LA itself. About mid-war, the city ran into a real protest shortage. The media were desperate for dissidents. In between generals, protestors are a useful filler. They spark a lot of lively letters and phone calls, usually along the lines of, well, if Saddam were drilling out *their* kneecaps, these creeps would sing a different song.

But, by the end of the war, there was just one lone demonstrator outside the Federal Building on Wilshire Boulevard. He had a sign saying 'The Washington Destruction and Reconstruction Company is Looking for Business'. (Make allowances here for the West Coast. Predictably, the best placard came from New York: 'George, we're sorry we called you a wimp. We promise not to do it again'.)

In the postwar euphoria, Californians generally are feeling pretty good about themselves, about their country, and about other countries too. The day Bush announced his ceasefire, the *LA Times* announced 'We're on top of the world'. It was a line with a certain ambiguous resonance: maybe we're in debt, maybe production's going down, but one thing is sure - no one's going to mess with our military.

Californians like to think that their state is where the future starts. If that's even partly true, the new world order is going to be wonderful for Washington, and less enticing south of Texas. Now we know that war gets great ratings, it looks like open season on anyone down there who gets a little out of line. Future Daniel Ortigas will have a much shorter political life.

Saddam Hussein happened to be both an ideal enemy and a consistently evil man. But nastiness is not absolutely necessary: it's something we can always add to the media mix. After Iraq, the White House isn't likely to waste time on all those Contras, freedom fighters, and demands for true democracy. It now has the option of prime-time war.*

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