
THE LEFT AND THE GULF WAR

Tom Saunders

During the Gulf War the pseudo left gave one of the most spectacular displays of its ability to get things wrong. They thought they were on a winner. Here was a chance to relive the Vietnam antiwar movement. But of course that fell flat when the Americans creamed the Iraqis in a matter of weeks, with the minimum of US body bags.

A number of reasons were put forward for opposing UN action to boot Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait.

To begin with much was made of US hypocrisy. Obviously, talk of defending Kuwait from aggression is pukemaking when it comes from the mouths of those responsible for aggression in Vietnam and more recently in Grenada and Panama. It also rings hollow when you consider the cases where the US has turned a blind eye to other countries aggression, eg, in East Timor and Palestine.

However, the trouble with opposing US action on the basis of hypocrisy is that you end up being hypocritical yourself. While calling for international action against Indonesian or Israeli aggression you fail to do so in the case of Iraq. Some 'peace movement' people tried to disguise their hypocrisy by talking about how horrible the regime was in Kuwait, how the country was just an artificial creation of colonialism or how it had provoked Iraqi action by nicking its oil from border wells. But of course these arguments are silly. Iraq's aggression was against the people of Kuwait and not just the government – they were murdered, tyrannised and their economy wrecked and plundered. Among those most severely affected were the immigrant workers who were forced to flee the country. About half the countries in the world are 'artificial creations of colonialism'. So does that mean that aggression against any of them is OK? And abolishing the border is a curious way to resolve a border dispute.

The USA and other powers have been accused of being hypocrites because they helped to arm Iraq in the past. In the case of the Americans military assistance was minimal. But to the extent that it is true it would seem to be an argument for insisting that

those responsible help clean up the mess they helped create. You could draw a parallel with World War II in Europe. The fact that the Nazi monster was able to unleash its aggression was very much due to the follies of French and British foreign and defence policies in the prewar years.

We are also told that the war was not about liberating Kuwait. It was about protecting oil supplies, dismembering Iraq and supporting Israel. It is probably true that if Kuwait had exported broccoli rather than oil the Americans would have done nothing. The Americans obviously did not see it as in their national interest for a large proportion of the world's oil supply to be in the hands of a character like Saddam Hussein. (It is a feeling that most people with a motor vehicle can share.) And also they could not allow their national interest to be seriously stomped on because of the wider implications for their position in the world. But having said this, all you can conclude is that the Kuwaitis are lucky that they export oil rather than broccoli, and that we should demand collective security for all countries regardless of their strategic importance to major powers.

There was some talk at the time about the USA having plans to dismember Iraq. This of course proved to be untrue.

However, this did not deter our intellectually flexible peace warriors. They switched to denouncing the Americans for wanting to bolster the Iraqi regime against the spread of Iranian influences in the Shiite regions, and for being more concerned about their relations with the Turks than they were about the rights of Kurds in northern Iraq. The Yanks can't win!

As for any assistance to Israel from this whole affair, it mainly came from Saddam Hussein. It was he who delivered them the sympathy vote with his scuds. He also detracted attention from the Intifada and provided the Palestinians with a chance to shoot themselves in the foot by supporting him. They have a bad habit of looking to 'strong leaders' to restore Arab dignity.

We were constantly told that war was not necessary, that there could have been a negotiated settlement. Negotiations about what? The whole world demanded that Iraq get out of Kuwait. All that remained was for them to do it.

Talks for the sake of it prior to the fighting would simply have delayed conflict, while talks accompanied by a ceasefire once the

shooting had started would simply have protracted the war by allowing the Iraqis to regroup and resupply their forces.

Some people wanted to negotiate a face saver for Saddam Hussein such as an oil well or an island or two, or making it look as if his withdrawal from Kuwait was linked to a conference on the Palestinian problem. But this scenario (assuming Saddam was interested) would still have to be underpinned by the threat of military action, be it the continuation of the blockade or some stronger measure. Face savers are to make it easier for someone to back down when threatened with military force. If there is no military pressure there is no need to back down and face saving ceases to be an issue.

Of course, the 'peace movement' opposed the blockade or any other military pressure. However, this did not stop some hypocrites who opposed the naval blockade, from breast beating about how it had not been given time to work, once the shooting started.

But why reward aggression through a facesaver? It would only have encouraged further aggression down the track once the Americans had packed up and gone home.

Then there were the proponents of the the most abject pacifism who say that going to war is just bad – 'fighting for peace is like fucking for virginity' to quote their terribly clever catchcry. In fact attempts to avoid war can actually promote it. It sends a message to aggressors that their aggression will be unanswered. Hence it encourages war at two points – it encourages the initial act of aggression and it encourages further ones that lead to a bigger war than would have resulted from resisting the initial aggression in the first place.

Saddam Hussein would not have invaded Kuwait if he had foreseen the response. His perception was that the other Arab countries did not have the strength to react and that the only power outside the region strong enough to take action, namely the US, did not have the stomach for it. This conclusion about the USA is understandable given its obvious decline during the 70s and 80s when it proved to be a paper tiger.

If the world had stood idly by, Saddam Hussein would have eventually invaded Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. Military intervention would then have to be bigger and bloodier

than if Saddam had been nipped in the bud. He would have declared himself the saviour of the Arab nation. Of course his actions would actually be a blow against Arab unity, as Saudis would be sure to resent being ruled by Iraqi thugs and the Syrians would feel the need to prepare to fend off their Iraqi 'brothers'.

The left (and George Bush) believed that the victory in the Gulf brought an end to the Vietnam syndrome. If anything, the US has actually reduced its ability to move independently in military matters in the future. The diplomacy that preceded the armed conflict has created an expectation that such matters should get the nod from the UN or at least the support of a large number of countries. Also the constant talk about Iraqi aggression and the sanctity of national sovereignty will make US aggression politically harder not easier. Furthermore the Gulf war reveals America's decline as a world power – they felt they had to muster international public opinion before they could act and they had to rely heavily on Saudi Arabia and Japan for funding.

It should also be kept in mind that the U.S. military still has a publicly stated 'Vietnam syndrome' policy of only intervening where they are sure of a quick victory and minimum casualties.

Finally we must not forget that the left has a 'thing' about the Americans. This affects its thinking on many questions, the Gulf War included. The Americans are seen as the source of all evil in the world. The USA is the headquarters of 'imperialism' – a notion that has lost its original scientific meaning and is now closer to the Ayatollah's 'Great Satan'.