

Climbing out of the rat-hole

By now the world is familiar with the incredible images of the former president of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, being extracted from his coffin-like rat-hole uttering the immortal words that he was willing to negotiate.

One would like to know what, exactly, he thought he could negotiate. It shows just how much he had lost the plot, and not only his country.

To anyone with the slightest hint of claustrophobia, the idea of being trapped in such a confined, black space is terror enough, never mind what he inflicted on Iraqis for three decades.

That would include war crimes, crimes against humanity, and possible genocide. The conservative estimate of the number murdered by his regime is 300 000, but is likely much higher.

Those are the victims of chemical warfare, rampant torture, rape rooms, and war, to start.

Leaving aside the rights and wrongs of the American invasion, it is hard to fathom why this tyrant was a hero in the Middle East.

He was held up as a symbol of defiance against the West, an Arab leader who

challenged what is seen by a huge chunk of the world as America's imperialism and arrogance, a country of hypocritical values and unjust powers.

No leader, though, should be afforded any credibility if they brutalise, repress, terrorise and murder their people whether they are black or white, Arab or American.

Imperfect as our system is, we wouldn't put up with mass graves or genocide in Britain.

The ingrained, unshakable intellectual, cultural and moral superiority Europeans feel over Americans, and the vulnerability Arabs suffer, has in part given both groups a rallying point; but the rhetoric has often been as surreal as the juxtaposition of a humiliated, desperate despot to the once grand and garish leader with ultimate power.

Abdel Rahman al-Rashed, the editor of the Arabic daily *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, put it most poignantly when he wrote: "The night Saddam was arrested was another night of defeat for Arab propaganda that has become accustomed to spreading illusions while basing itself on ghosts, certain that none will discover the truth."

"His end is the end of one of the false heroes that fill the pages of our history," added al-Rashed, before noting somewhat fatalistically: "We know that when one lie falls, another is born. We anticipate a new chapter of fraud."

Saddam was a classic bully, never mind psychopath.

Once confronted with his own mortality he did not do what he had championed his people and the rest of the Arab world to do – defy the invaders, fight till every last drop of blood is spilt, die honourable and proud.

What did he do for his people with the second largest oil reserves in the world? Not much. Build schools, a fabulous health-care system, eradicate poverty?

Not even before sanctions.

With Saddam gone, will this opportunity offer a "new impetus" for peace as Kofi Annan said this week?

Can Saddam Hussein's capture change the rhetoric into a reality of peace and stability, maybe even act as the oft-talked-about democratic domino effect?

Will the Middle East be able to crawl out of its rat-hole and take responsibility?



HEIDI KINGSTONE

ON THE AGENDA

It's time for that part of the world to acknowledge the mismanagement of its governments and the rampant corruption within.

It's time for them to shake off the traditional hatreds and grievances, and seize what could be a unique opportunity to look at, and build, a new future.

It's time to change the debate, which presently concentrates on victimisation.

The Arabs, deeply aware of these failures, need something other than the only two options of political Islam and nationalism.

Perhaps this is over-optimistic. However, putting Saddam on trial could act as a catharsis, at least for Iraq.

In Nuremberg, after World War 2, they televised the trials.

Saddam has nothing to negotiate, but with any luck the Iraqis could negotiate a better future.