

The only game in town

On the AGENDA



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We are all now more familiar with the geography of Iraq than our own countries. I can find the Shia holy city of Najaf, the dusty KDP capital of Irbil, and Saddam's home town near Tikrit in my sleep, upside down, in Arabic or English, easier, faster and with more accuracy and agility than I can find the white cliffs of Dover – even when I'm there.

This, too can be said for 90% of the British population who were none too familiar with Iraqi topography only a few weeks ago. I imagine I could sleepwalk through the suburbs of Baghdad and find my way to any of Saddam's palaces.

War, whether you're for or against, is the only game in town. And whether you're for or against is the hot question. When an estimated one million people came out to the streets of London to protest against the oncoming war it seemed that there wasn't a person in the country who could be found shouting bombs away!

This was confirmed in a recent *Times* poll which found that people were against conflict before it started. In a classic manoeuvre, mirrored in the US as well, now that British military is in action public opinion has shifted, and about 56% back Blair's stance on the war (with about 37% against).

Countries swing behind their boys in uniform once war has begun, and once the fight has begun no matter how bad it gets they support it. Perhaps this is one of Britain's imperial legacies.

There has never been more media coverage. In the UK this has actually increased public support for its gung-ho approach, despite the terrible scenes of bombings, injuries, death and overwhelming suffering.

Ironically, it is next to impossible to find anyone you talk to who supports

the war.

In the newspaper world, only the Labour supporting *Daily Mirror*, a tabloid once owned by Robert Maxwell, has gone out on a limb in its anti-war campaign, and is taking a big risk. Last week it published an article by Robin Cook, the former foreign secretary, who resigned over the war on a point of principle.

He wrote to say that he had had his fill of "this bloody and unnecessary war" and wanted troops to come home. He was the one who beat a hasty retreat when he realised he had misjudged the mood of the people.

Casting back to 1956, the *News Chronicle*, which targeted Britain's working class, leftwing population, attacked the government for supporting the British position over Suez. Its readers abandoned it in droves, and it no longer exists.

Even the left-leaning *Guardian*, openly critical of the war and government, has reined in that outright dismay. Then you have the rest of the spectrum.

Truth, they say, is the first casualty of war, and this war is no different. Realities have perspectives, as do journalists, and total objectivity cannot exist. So the argument rages with different levels of intensity of the West's "demonisation" of Saddam Hussein.

But does he really have weapons of mass destruction? Is he really such a bad guy? Is this an American jihad against the Muslim world? Four million Iraqis have left Iraq over the last two decades out of a population that is just over 20-million, that's almost one in five. Many have terrible tales to tell of torture and worse.

At the recent Arab League conference the overwhelming Arab opinion, which was not officially stated, was that the Americans had to be ruthless when dealing with Saddam. Of the 45 countries that support American action, the 10 not specified were all Arab states.

By some accounts Saddam has murdered over 100 000 Iraqis, excluding the million plus killed in wars he initiated.

Don't trust the Americans on any of this. Go to Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International and read their damning accounts of Saddam's decades of brutality. Once the Americans win this victory, and it seems they will, sooner rather than later, and after the fog of war has dissipated, the full extent of Saddam's totalitarian regime will become clear. What will also become clear is that few wanted to live in such dire circumstances.