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COOK: BRING OUR LADS HOME

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Let's send Rumsfeld and his hawks to war instead

By Robin Cook

This was meant to be a quick, easy war. Shortly before I resigned a Cabinet colleague told me not to worry about the political fall-out.

The war would be finished long before polling day for the May local elections.

I just hope those who expected a quick victory are proved right. I have already had my fill of this bloody and unnecessary war. I want our troops home and I want them home before more of them are killed.

It is OK for Bush to say the war will go on for as long as it takes. He is sitting pretty in the comfort of Camp David protected by scores of security men to keep him safe.

It is easy to show you are resolute when you are not one of the poor guys stuck in a sandstorm peering around for snipers.

This week British forces have shown bravery under attack and determination in atrocious weather conditions. They are too disciplined to say it, but they must have asked each other how British forces ended up exposed by the mistakes of US politicians.

We were told the Iraqi army would be so joyful to be attacked that it would not fight. A close colleague of US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld predicted the march to Baghdad would be "a cakewalk".



HAWK: Rumsfeld

We were told Saddam's troops would surrender. A few days before the war Vice-President Dick Cheney predicted that the Republican Guard would lay down their weapons.

We were told that the local population would welcome their invaders as liberators. Paul Wolfowitz, No.2 at the Pentagon, promised that our tanks would be greeted "with an explosion of joy

and relief".

Personally I would like to volunteer Rumsfeld, Cheney and Wolfowitz to be "embedded"

alongside the journalists with the forward units.

That would give them a chance to hear what the troops fighting for every bridge over the Euphrates think about their promises.

The top US General, William Wallace, has let the cat out of the bag. "The enemy we are fighting is different from the one we'd

war-gamed".

War is not some kind of harmless arcade game. Nobody should start a war on the assumption that the enemy's army will co-operate. But that is exactly what President Bush has done. And now his Marines have reached the outskirts of Baghdad he does not seem to know what to do next.

It was not meant to be like this. By the time we got to Baghdad Saddam was supposed to have crumpled. A few days before I resigned I was assured that Saddam would be overthrown by his associates to save their own skins. But they would only do it "at five minutes past midnight". It is now long past that time and Saddam is still there. To compensate yesterday we blew up a statue of Saddam in Basra. A statue! It is not the statue that terrifies local people but the man himself and they know Saddam is still in control of Baghdad.

Having marched us up this cul-de-sac, Donato Kumsreid has now come up with a new tactic. Instead of going into Baghdad we should sit down outside it until Saddam surrenders. There is no more brutal form of warfare than a siege. People go hungry. The water and power to provide the sinews of a city snap. Children die.

You can catch a glimpse of what would happen in Baghdad under siege by looking at Basra. Its residents have endured several days of summer heat without water.

In desperation they have been drinking water from the river into which the sewage empties. Those conditions are ripe for cholera.

Last week President Bush promised that "Iraqis will see the great compassion of the US". They certainly do not see it now. They don't see it in Baghdad. What they see are women and children killed when missiles fall on market places. They don't see it in Basra. What they see is the suffering of their families with no water, precious little food, and no power to cook. There will be a long-term legacy of hatred for the West if the Iraqi people continue to suffer from the effects of the war we started.

Washington got it wrong over the ease with which the war could be won. Washington could be just as wrong about the difficulty of running Iraq when the fighting stops. Already there are real differences between Britain and America over how to run post-war Iraq.

The dispute over the management of the port of Umm Qasr is a good example. British officers sensibly took the view that the best and the most popular solution would be to find local Iraqis who knew how to do it. Instead the US have appointed an American company to take over the Iraqi asset. And guess what? Stevedore Services of America who got the contract have a chairman known for his donations to the Republican Party.

The argument between Blair and Bush over whether the UN will be in charge of the reconstruction of Iraq is about more than international legitimacy. It is about whether the Iraqi people can have confidence that their country is

being run for the benefit of themselves or for the benefit of the US.

Yesterday there was a sad and moving ceremony as the bodies of our brave soldiers were brought back to Britain.

The Ministry of Defence announced that they were to be buried in Britain out of consideration for their families. We must do all we can to ease the grief of those who have lost a husband or a son, cut down in their prime.

Yet I can't help asking myself if there was not a better way to show consideration for their families.

A better way could have been not to start a war which was never necessary and is turning out to be badly planned.

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