

# Lessons from the Iraq war

by Michael O'Connor

This article will look at the recent war in Iraq from but from three distinct perspectives:

- the lead-up to the decision by the coalition of the willing to go to war;
- the war itself; and
- the implications for Australia's defence policy.

Let me state first that a decision to go to war is one of the most difficult for a democratic government to make. If it does not have the support of its electorate at the outset, it must either win that support or be defeated at the next election. One of the great myths of democracy is that governments cannot act without the support of the electorate at the time of acting but, against that, it must bear the consequences. That will demand leadership of a high order if the government is convinced that its decision is the correct one.

Personally, the government did not initially persuade me that its decision was correct but I accepted that:

- it was privy to more information than I had, and probably information that could not be revealed for sound security reasons;
- it and it alone had the responsibility for making the decision. Interventions by the Opposition, by assorted church leaders, the so-called peace movement and others were useful but could not override the government's responsibility; and
- most of the arguments against the war were invalid, superficial or dishonest. Many were based upon culpable ignorance.

That said, the American, British and Australian governments could, I believe, have been more persuasive if they had been more frank with their peoples. Australian governments generally are far too secretive and distrusting of their electorate.

Incidentally, those bishops and other clerics who claim some moral authority but purport to extrapolate from the traditional just-war principles to judgements about professional political and military matters are acting outside their own competence. Their statements have no more validity than those of any other layperson lacking both information and expertise.

The outcome of the war invalidated most of the anti-war arguments and certainly removed the only reservation that I had entertained. This was the just-war principle that the end result of the conflict should not be worse than if the war had not occurred. Incidentally, that is a judgement that very few people around the world — and certainly no non-military professionals — would have

been qualified to make before the event.

There were a number of key characteristics of this conflict that contain important lessons not merely for military professionals but the whole world, not least the anti-war movement. These characteristics include:

- greatly increased weapons accuracy at all levels of combat;
- the fundamental military irrelevance of weapons of mass destruction;
- the ability to fight day and night with great precision;
- real-time intelligence with rapid response capabilities;
- greatly improved mobility; and
- rapid and accurate communications.

Coupled with these characteristics of the coalition forces was the serious degradation of the Iraqi armed forces that resulted from such factors as:

- outdated weapons and systems arising in part from economic sanctions but more particularly from outdated dogmas;
- outdated and incompetent tactics, especially those relying on static defence;
- the loss of effective command and control;
- the reliance on poorly equipped, motivated and trained conscript forces;
- an inability to contest the coalition's air supremacy;
- poor intelligence; and
- a desperate resort to terrorist tactics that are strong on bravado but worthless against well-trained and armed professional troops.

The rapid victory of the coalition forces in what was one of the shortest and least lethal wars in history signals some radical changes in the generally accepted international security system. If planners and observers in those countries that were not part of the coalition fail to recognise or come to terms with these changes, they risk at best irrelevance or at worst punishment for behaviour that increasing numbers of countries will regard as unacceptable, if not criminal.

In part, the changes are a product of the substantial shrinking of the world that arose from the communications revolution that has transformed the transmission of information, of goods and of people. Related to this is the recognition that no one, not even a New Zealander, is immune from the threats posed by rogue states or sub-national groups of fanatics or criminals. Because few can claim to be isolated from the

rest of the world, no one can be so self-indulgent as to tolerate lawless behaviour.

As the 17th century English poet, John Donne, wrote in his *Devotions*: 'No man is an Island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main' and 'Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.'

In the 17th century, it was possible for people to ignore oppression in other parts of the world. In the 21st century, Donne's strictures are no longer avoidable.

This is particularly applicable to the peace movement whose commitment to the welfare of humanity is undeniable but whose understanding of the dynamics of international peace and security is grotesquely obsolete. Especially, this is true in respect of the principle of inviolable national sovereignty, another 17th century construct whose applicability in the modern world is due for modification in the light of not just current abuses but also of the growing ability to deal with those abuses.

Related to this is the role of sub-national actors such as terrorists and organised crime groups, which can pose a threat to national security and which are all too often protected by national governments for any one of a number of reasons.

The interception over Easter of a North Korean merchant ship smuggling a large quantity of heroin into Australia has focused attention on the role of rogue states in large-scale criminal activity. This is not the first occasion on which North Korea has supported terrorism or the narcotics traffic as a matter of state policy. With the same country on the point of developing nuclear-armed ballistic missiles and also heavily involved in the export of missile technology to other rogue states, it is clearly throwing out a serious challenge to the world community that goes beyond the issue of Korean reunification or regime protection. The Pyongyang regime continues to demonstrate its total disregard for any rules of international behaviour or of sensitivity to ordinary diplomatic negotiations.

While there is now a substantial and growing body of international law that attempts to set the bounds of acceptable behaviour, the capacity for enforcement of that law is in practice almost non-existent. The United Nations Security Council has been granted authority under Article 1 of the UN Charter: 'to maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace'.

In practice, the UN Security Council has, over the 58 years of its existence, demonstrated a consistent inability to perform its duty. The reasons don't matter although one key factor is the predisposition to avoid authorising the use of force. What does matter is that its most recent failure over Iraq has cast doubt on the organisation's desire and ability to do its job. With the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a number of rogue states and

sub-national criminal organisations, the problem is no longer one to be ignored. Either the UN Security Council does its job properly or it will be bypassed. Those who would leave responsibility with the UN must now show how the world body can be made to meet its responsibilities. Buck-passing to the UN is not good enough.

What the Iraq war showed also is the role that can be played by a small group of UN members that are prepared to show strong leadership to the community of nations. Too many commentators seemed to forget that the US, Britain and Australia are members in good standing of the United Nations. The leadership they showed was an example to the rest of the world community. This was perhaps more significant in the case of Britain and Australia, which are hardly dominant world powers. As in all things, leadership is a trait to be valued in any community.

The security relationship between the US, Britain and Australia is one of long standing and certainly one to be valued by others. It was disappointing that two other members — Canada and New Zealand — of what might be called the Old Firm backed away from supporting action that was important to their future security and to their standing in the world. That was their choice but an opportunity was missed.

The Iraq conflict demonstrated another crucial factor — the sheer dominance of American military power based upon advanced technology and superior professional skill. US military technology is now possibly two generations ahead of any competitor. While British systems are perhaps one generation behind, they and the Australians make up for the some of the disparity with better training and doctrine. In the context of using military force for what is effectively large-scale law enforcement, that superior training and doctrine is very important.

What is clear, however, is that Australia is not in good shape to play any more than a token role. In the Iraq conflict, the British force was 45,000 strong. A proportional Australian commitment would have been 15,000 instead of the 2,000 actually committed. We could not have committed 15,000 and even the 2,000 strong contingent was barely sustainable. As with our initial commitment of 5,500 to East Timor just 400 nautical miles from Darwin, we have become unduly bemused by government propaganda to believe that we have a first-class defence capability. We do not. We depend too heavily upon the high professionalism of our people but we do not have enough of them and we do not support them with adequate equipment.

The clear message from the events of the past twelve months or so is that Australia has made the right choice in adapting its national security policy to current realities rather than obsolete notions of international law enforcement. In this, the government has shown strong strategic leadership. It now remains for it to reorganise and properly develop its organisational capacity to play a role commensurate not only with its potential and its rhetoric but also with its duty to provide before everything else for Australia's security.