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As British bombs rain down daily on Iraq, the Blair intelligentsia worries about Martin Amis turning 50

6 September 1999

Following the "moral crusade" in the Balkans, there were calls for heretics to apologise. It was reminiscent of the hysteria surrounding the death of Diana Spencer and, like the froth on a cappuccino, blew away once reality was restored. The crusaders have now fallen silent, many realising they were gulled and lied to.

George Robertson's great deception - that Nato's "clear-cut aim" was to "avert an impending humanitarian catastrophe" - is a prime example. No one doubts now that the bombing precipitated the humanitarian catastrophe which, as General Clark has confirmed, was "entirely predictable".

In its place, also entirely predictable, is the catastrophe of 180,000 Serbs driven from their homes, the most vulnerable terrorised and murdered by ethnic Albanian gangs, whose hero in Downing Street is silent, too. Such double standards, in which too many journalistic reputations are invested, do not make headlines. The tragedy is that people in this country are left with little understanding of the meaning of the Kosovo adventure - that of great power unrestrained by any rival, seeking a strategic and economic supremacy unimaginable a generation ago. The attack on Serbia logically followed events that received almost no acknowledgement here: the passing by the US Congress of the Nato Participation and Nato Facilitation Acts, which allow the greatest expansion of military influence since the second world war; and Nato's 22 billion colonising of eastern Europe and its Partnership for Peace drive into Slovenia, Albania and Macedonia.

As this latest posse is mounted, the notion of "humanitarian war" ought to be mocked by those paid to keep the record straight. But it remains a propaganda success. Noam Chomsky, our greatest unraveller of accredited lies, addresses this in his powerful new book, *The New Military Humanism: lessons from Kosovo*. The Nato action, he writes, "has excited passion and visionary exaltation of a kind rarely witnessed . . . opening the gates to a stage in world history with no precedent, a new epoch of moral rectitude under the guiding hand of an 'idealistic New World bent on ending inhumanity'." Promoted by the "new" Democrats of Bill Clinton and "new" Labour of Tony Blair, backed by broadcasters from the BBC to CNN and much of the powerful, liberal-minded press, the new military humanism, like the Third Way, is a euphemism for the rehabilitation of an imperialism that dares not speak its name.

Chomsky shows how the US and Britain wilfully ignored opportunities for a peaceful resolution and the establishment of an autonomous Kosovo. Then, having bombed thousands of innocents into oblivion, they accepted less than they had demanded at Rambouillet in March. He compares the new military humanism of a Kosovo littered with unexploded cluster bombs with the old humanism deployed in Laos. Ten thousand people die there every year and 20,000 are maimed, most of them children, from American bombs dropped in the 1970s, up to 30 per cent of which failed to explode on impact, suggesting "either remarkably poor quality control or a rational policy of murdering civilians by delayed action". Like the assaults on El Salvador, Nicaragua and Colombia (the latter currently in progress), this was a "secret war", meaning it was well known but suppressed.

This suppression is institutional in Britain. (The "secret" of the brutal expulsion of the indigenous people of Diego Garcia, a British colony in the South Atlantic, currently a staging point for US bombers, comes to mind.) While 82 per cent of the British people rely on television as a main source of information, less than 4 per cent of broadcasting examines "conflict and disasters" - the same proportion as that covering cookery in exotic locations, according to independent research.

There is a touch of F Scott Fitzgerald about these surreal political times, said to be non-ideological (by Blair) but, in truth, more reactionary than at any time since the 1930s. While British bombs fall almost every day on civilians in Iraq, and the British arms industry helps prop up those guilty of criminal negligence in the Turkey earthquake, the issue for the Blair intelligentsia is what is to become of Martin Amis now that he is 50. In his 1988 study *Vain Conceit*, the literary critic D J Taylor wondered why the English novel so often degenerated into "drawing-room twitter" and why the great political themes of the day were shunned by writers, unlike their counterparts in, say, Latin America. Where, he asked, were the George Orwells, the Upton Sinclairs, the John Steinbecks? Last week Radio 4's twittering Saturday Review made his point by reining in Roddy Doyle's new novel for entering the "dangerous area" of class politics.

The same can be said about a journalism devoted to what Time magazine calls "the eternal present" - a moving belt of unconnected, unexplained, trivialised, sanitised and obligatory heart-rending events: "products" for consumers in the media's digitalised supermarket. With a few honourable exceptions, this was how the recent "just war" was reported. In noting this, Phillip Knightley, author of *The First Casualty*, raised forbidden questions. "Did the media actually cause the war in the Balkans?" he asked. "Did they prompt the intervention? Did they make it worse?"

And does their complicit silence now beckon the next one?

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