

ALR

MARGINS

War Of Words

Our new editorial column will feature a range of guest writers over coming months.

The London *Guardian's* Hugo Young recently observed that the debate over the Gulf war in Britain was fatally impoverished in comparison with the vigorous war of opinions in the United States that preceded Congressional approval for the use of force in the Gulf. Young is on record as supporting the US position in the Gulf. What concerned him was the prevention of the very possibility of debate about the vital issues involved by the bellicosity of the British media.

In Australia, of course, there has been another impediment to a real debate over the Gulf crisis: the existence of a Labor government in Canberra has stifled the possibility of partisan discussion in the parliamentary arena. Yet it has to be said that the electronic media—ironically, perhaps, because of its reliance on packaged news grabs from the US networks—has been less bellicose than in any recent conflict (if one can distinguish bellicosity from sentimental patriotism about 'our boys in the Gulf').

Of course, this has not been a universal phenomenon. Talkback radio has been its usual splenetic self. And the 'quality' dailies such as *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* have given full rein to their conservative think-tank 'commentators' to rationalise as huffily as possible what they take to

be the motivations of the White House. At the same time, however, the supposedly crass and populist commercial networks have been giving full vent to the very public unease which has become our own homegrown, if belated, public debate on the Gulf.

One notable characteristic of this debate in Australia, as elsewhere, is that while the pro-war party has espoused a reasonably consistent perspective, the anti-war lobby is extraordinarily divergent in its views. Of course, this diversity is in many ways a good thing. Yet it needs to be admitted that not all of the arguments put forward by people in the anti-war lobby are congenial to those with a concern for consistent Left principles in international affairs.

The strongest sentiment in the anti-war camp has been a sincere and thoroughly sensible horror at the destruction of human life and the environment wrought by war. This has led many in the anti-war lobby to stress horror of war in general as the central tenet of the anti-war case. Yet, particularly on the Left, such arguments only go so far. Few on the Left would countenance, for instance, urging the ANC or the Filipino NPA to give up their admittedly bloody armed struggles on pacifist grounds.

Again, many in the anti-war lobby stress the unloveliness of the Kuwaiti regime and the arbitrariness of political boundaries in the Middle East to lessen the 'problem' of Iraq's annexation. Yet by the same logic the entirety of Eastern Europe, other than the USSR—none of whose states had any real legitimacy other than as colonies of the USSR—could have been regarded as up for grabs by Western military power over the four decades after 1945.

Nor are Middle Eastern states somehow any less legitimate than nations in general, as often seems to be implied. After all, colonialism has determined the national boundaries and political heritage of nearly all of Africa, much of Asia,

and most of Latin America—probably of two-thirds of the population of the world, in fact. Or again, if it is the undemocratic nature of the Kuwaiti regime which is seen somehow to lessen its legitimacy, could not this equally serve to justify another US adventure against Cuba?

Finally, some in the anti-war lobby seek to refute the US position by downplaying the integrity of the UN's role—arguing that it has become a 'tool of US interests'. To veterans of the 1930s who remember the great struggle by the Left behind 'collective security' to repel the advance of Hitler's war, this has a bitter ring. In fact, there has never been such diverse and wide-ranging international support behind any effort to repel national aggression, ever. The real problem isn't that this was an 'American crusade'; rather, that the tenuousness of that international alliance behind sanctions strengthened the hand of those who supported expulsion through war sooner, rather than by sanctions later, lest the alliance collapse.

Why was the alliance tenuous? Ultimately, because of the lack of a community of interests between the Western and Arab members of the coalition, other than a dependence of the latter on the former. In short, the Arab governments alongside the West in the Gulf do not have support on the streets for so doing.

A real and durable international alliance against the annexation of Kuwait and in favour of sanctions would have required, among other things, a new deal for the Middle East in which Western behaviour in the region and neo-imperialism were not perceived as synonymous. This, of course, is more than the US will currently stand for. It would, however, provide a better and worthier goal for the anti-war camp than some of the arguments which have, from time to time, been mouthed in its name.

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