



The King, the President and the Prime Minister

Sold on war, they sold us war – but did they know Who was selling?

PHOTO: PA

Jon Garvey brings ‘a tale for our times’ – and wisdom from ancient times

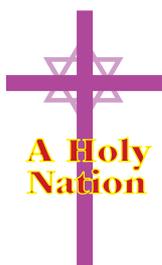
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Months after the Gulf War, several things seem obvious to all, although some are not too readily admitted by everybody.

- There were no substantial weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, negating the principal reason given for the conflict – Britain and the US went to war on a false pretext. Worse, our war was unjustifiable both in terms of International Law and the Christian tradition of Just War.
- Saddam Hussein’s regime was toppled, but not destroyed. Enough elements remain for Iraq to look increasingly like Vietnam as time passes. Not only are our young men and women risking their lives for an indefinite period, but conditions for the people of Iraq have not improved, and arguably cannot. Regime change was never a justifiable reason for a war of aggression, but it also increasingly seems to have failed in its aims.
- Internally there is little ground for democratic consensus, and both Muslim extremists and Baath party loyalists are well aware of this and can perpetuate anarchy with minimal effort. Externally, the world community, alienated by the coalition’s jingoism, is unwilling to put its weight behind any one solution.
- The Iraqi people are far from persuaded of the war’s benefits. As coalition forces are put on the defensive by security issues, any trust the population had (never high, given

the effects of sanctions and air attacks since the first Gulf War) is rapidly evaporating. The depressing number of “friendly fire” incidents reinforces the impression that the well-being of Iraqis is not high on our agenda. We may add to this the claim (hard to refute) that the war was actually waged to gain access to Iraq’s oil, the unholy scramble of US companies for lucrative contracts, and the failure to dispel the prevalent Arab notion that this is another example of the US/British “Great Satan” trying to conquer Islam by force.

- This last point has quickly been harnessed by Muslim extremists. These are a minority in Islam overall, but their view of the world situation, if not their methodology, is widespread in the Muslim world. Your Muslim neighbour is unlikely to approve the World Trade Centre atrocity, but is likely to sympathise with the frustrations that led to it. Such sympathies are sharper in Muslim countries, and so the Gulf War – intended to disarm terrorism – will have provided a stream of new recruits for Al Qa’ida and Hamas.
- The war has not only rendered terrorism *politically* more likely, but will have made weaponry *practically* easier to obtain. It is known that international Islamic terrorists are involved in the current attacks on coalition forces. If they have been able to get *into* the country and find support, then weaponry can be got *out* of the country, and



into the hands of terrorists in Israel, in Afghanistan, and especially in Britain or the US. This possibility was voiced at high level before the war, but discountenanced by both Mr Bush and Mr Blair.

In summary, the war has not fully delivered its stated aims. Many would regard it less charitably as a disaster for Iraq, and even more as a disaster for the reputations of Britain and America.

Leaders on a limb

The most surprising thing is that this was predicted, not just by a few cautious voices, nor even by the prophets of the Lord, but by a clear popular majority. This is remarkable because people are generally more belligerent than their governments. Joe Average felt that the first Gulf War should have been pursued to Baghdad itself.

But before the recent war, people from cleaners to political commentators were asking, "What has this to do with us?" Very few, of course, penetrated Saddam Hussein's biggest war secret – that he had no war secrets. Ordinary people perceived that Hussein and Bin Laden were unlikely bedfellows, and that it was the latter – or his ideological allies – who was the main threat.

Parliament's cautious approval for war assumed that 'Mr Blair must know something he couldn't tell us'. What has emerged since, especially in the Hutton enquiry, is that he didn't. He, and presumably Mr Bush, seem to have trusted their doubts about their own intelligence services. This in itself need not be a fault. Churchill did the same before and during World War II, and saved the civilised world. But the fact that two major world leaders went out on a limb for a discredited cause requires godly consideration. Despite anti-Bush jokes, neither he nor Blair are idiots. Blair is noted for keeping a close eye on public opinion, and yet on this one occasion flew in its face and is consequently struggling for his political life. Why?

Events from the Lord

We will do better not to look for the answer in the personalities or agendas of our political leaders, but in the purposes of God.

In 1 Kings 12, the prophet tells how the Kingdom of Israel was divided after Solomon's death. His son Rehoboam, offered loyalty by the people in return for a more

relaxed regime, foolishly followed the advice of his young (New Labour?) courtiers and promised an even tougher rule. As a result 11 of the 12 tribes rebelled against the House of David – and remained in rebellion against both David and the Lord until they were scattered across the world. Big consequences indeed.

Yet rather than have us concentrate on the foolishness of the king, or on the disloyalty of the Israelites, the writer says this: "This turn of events was from the Lord, to fulfil the word the Lord had spoken to Jeroboam son of Nebat through Ahijah the Shilonite." Ahijah's prophecy had condemned Solomon for leading Israel into idolatry, and said that the Lord would divide the kingdom, but retain one tribe for the sake of his covenant with David.

In other words, whether or not Rehoboam's actions were characteristic of him is less relevant than that God ordered events for his own purposes. This is entirely consistent with Proverbs 21.1: "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a water-course wherever he pleases." If it doesn't sit well with contemporary theological notions of the sovereignty of free will, then perhaps the Bible doesn't agree with those notions. All it says is, "Let God be God." But the discerning believer will prefer not to argue with God, and instead look for parallels with our current situation. If our political leaders act in ways that appear to deny common sense as well as political judgement and morality, should we not be asking what God is doing through these events?

If we ask this question in the light of 1 Kings 12, we shall first look to see if Britain and the USA are in any way guilty of the kind of idolatry found in Solomon's kingdom – and if our leaders have encouraged it in the way Solomon did by precept and example. Almost any article in PT will suggest the answer to these questions.

We then need to look at the end of the matter. Israel's rebellious tribes, and subsequently the more loyal tribe of Judah, were eventually destroyed for their abandonment of true faith by nations more idolatrous than themselves.

God does not change, so we and our leaders need to heed this warning. But there is always room for repentance both for individuals, who fear themselves going down with the sinking ship, and even for nations themselves. Let us pray for both.

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