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Braveheart goes to Washington

>by **Heather Mallick**

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Such a spectacle it was on TV at this week at a U.S. Senate subcommittee hearing on the Iraqi oil-for-food inquiry that those who were abed and did not see it shall think themselves accursed.

So said Shakespeare's Henry V about the sluggards who held their manhoods cheap and missed out on the battle of Agincourt. I hope you will not dismiss as exaggeration my saying this about British MP George Galloway's appearance this week to defend himself against a lazy and cowardly American smear of his ethics. American politicians do drone on, especially hacks like Minnesota's mumble-mouse Republican senator Norman Coleman, who looks, as do all politicians who've had surgery and skin-sanding, like Frankenstein's monster, something manufactured.

But even the feeblest British MPs of any stripe don't mumble. Britons, despite decades of eating their own education system, still speak in complete sentences with immaculate grammar. They select syntax that assassinates and have an icy grasp of their facts.

Furthermore, Mr. Galloway is a Scot. They thunder well. It was like Braveheart going to Washington, like listening to comedian Billy Connolly go on one of his genuine rants. Scots go for the jugular.

This is why all British prime ministers sweat and tremble at Question Period. These senators were dumb enough not to know that a fusillade of words was aimed at their heads, words that would shame and frighten them, as you could see from their nervous smiles.

I haven't seen such mass destruction since John Dean, in calm and icy style, told a Senate committee in 1973 that he told Nixon there was a cancer on the presidency. And Nixon fell.

Mr. Galloway, in attempting to get food and clothing for Iraqi children during the UN sanctions against Iraq, had not made money, not a penny. The senators, using recycled libel from the 2003 London *Daily Telegraph* said he had, basing their story on documents so phony that the *Telegraph* was reduced to pleading in British court that it was in the public interest to publish false documents because they were, um, of interest to the public. Mr. Galloway won £150,000 in damages and costs of £1.2 million. The *Telegraph* is appealing, doubtless on the grounds that they had a migraine that day and the front page had this Big Empty on it.

Mr. Galloway said a number of things.

- "I have met Saddam Hussein exactly the same number of times as Donald Rumsfeld met him [twice]. The difference is that Donald Rumsfeld met him to sell him guns."
- "I know that standards have slipped over the last few years in Washington but for a lawyer you are remarkably cavalier with any idea of justice."
- "Sen. Coleman, in everything I said about Iraq I turned out to be right and you turned out to be wrong and 100,000 have paid with their lives, 1,600 of them American soldiers sent to their deaths on a pack of lies." He then added that 15,000 U.S. soldiers were wounded, some crippled for life, and I'll bet that's news to Americans, if it reaches them which it won't.

Despite Vince Foster's suicide note saying Washington ruined people for sport, Mr. Galloway comes from a public world so cruel that the Beltway looks like a bucket-and-spade sandbox. He is such a firebrand that he has become a pariah in Britain's élite, so much so that the papers are trying to draw and quarter him.

As journalism critic Roy Greenslade points out, Mr. Galloway joins three other British men in public life in having endured this: labour leader Arthur Scargill who was falsely accused in the '80s of taking bribes from Libya in a case so similar to this one that one sees the hand of MI6; London Mayor Ken Livingstone who survived attacks from Tony Blair's New Labour because he was brave (and he kept pet newts, always calming); and finally socialist leader Tony Benn who is personally indestructible.

People have been driven to suicide by lesser public attacks than those Mr. Galloway has suffered. But the man was calm and clearly resting on the knowledge that his good brain would not let him down. He knew that the "Mariam Fund" he'd set up to help a four-year-old Iraqi girl with leukemia had already been vetted by the British government and was clean. He had every fact to hand and a good soundbite for the entire hearing, "the mother of all smokescreens."

The historian Simon Schama, clearly nauseated, wrote this month on the difference between American and British elections. "After the messianic acclaim and the stifling sanctimoniousness of American politics, getting back to Britain was like coming up for air."

It's not that Brit politicians don't lie. But they get as good as they give. British politics is bloody and cruel. Truth speaks to power and tells it to piss off. American reporters are astounded by this, Schama says. In the U.S., "oppositional politics (such as it is) is mired in a tarpool of tepid glutinous reverence."

Truth hasn't spoken to power in Washington since 2000. Mr. Galloway's appearance was a bloodbath. If Gore or Kerry had done this, the Democrats would have won.

Without notes, Mr. Galloway delivered the longest and most effective "FU" I have ever heard in public. He called the sanctions "infanticide masquerading as politics," said the war was lie piled on lie, and flatly denied taking money from Saddam, daring them to prove it, which they cannot.

Furthermore, he said many of the Iraqis murdered by the sanction-to-starve-Iraq policy were too young to even know they were Iraqi. And then came the war with uncountable deaths. And for what? So Americans firms could loot Iraq.

It took a Scottish orator with a temper to shrivel the Republicans

this week. Now you Americans, go and build your own.

Heather Mallick's column is in The Globe and Mail each Saturday. It appears on Sunday in rabble.ca.

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