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# The scribe who came in from thinking clearly

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No one can know how George Orwell would regard the possibility of war with Iraq. He hated dictatorships and abuses of human rights, but he hated war, too.

What we do know is that Mr. Orwell revered truth in language and despaired of those who deformed it, a tragic example of which appeared in this newspaper yesterday from the dyspeptic pen of novelist John le Carré.

Writers should revere words. They should use them precisely, carefully and in ways that are true to their meaning. They should also be vaguely acquainted with facts.

What would Mr. Orwell therefore make of Mr. le Carré's description of the Bush administration as a "junta"? Not to be pedantic about it, but the Oxford Dictionary defines "junta" as a "political clique" that takes power after a "revolution or coup d'état".

You might disagree with everything Mr. Bush has done, and everything he espouses, but he came to power in an election and as such does not lead a "junta."

Mr. le Carré says a "splendid new generation of U.S. nuclear weapons is in the pipeline". Actually, the United States and Russia are dramatically reducing their stockpiles of nuclear weapons. The United States is building (unwisely in my view) a non-nuclear system against ballistic missiles. Here, Mr. le Carré is obviously confused.

Mr. le Carré suggests the war on terror provides a convenient excuse for the "Bushies" not to talk about Enron, ecology, abrogated international treaties and "why they

continue to support Israel in its continuing disregard for UN resolutions". Wrong on all counts. These have all been explained by the "Bushies" many times, even if Mr. le Carré, like many Americans, does not agree with the arguments.

Mr. le Carré, ever careful with words, asserts that the "American public is not merely being misled. It is being threatened, bullied, browbeaten and kept in a permanent state of ignorance and fear" leading to a "carefully orchestrated neurosis".

In the mid-term elections, the Republicans made only tiny gains, hardly the results one would have expected from a browbeaten bunch of neurotic citizens. Mr. le Carré obviously does not follow American debates closely, or like all polemicists, he hears only what he wishes to hear.

If he did follow matters, he would hear, yes, jingoism and militancy in the air, but he would also hear doubts, debates, analyses, disagreements. A good case can be made that the most telling reason why the Bush administration agreed to proceed via the United Nations was domestic public opinion. (It was most assuredly not because Canada's Jean Chrétien told Mr. Bush to use the United Nations.)

Mr. le Carré asserts that the United States arms countries "to the teeth," but if circumstances change and they are no longer friends and allies, "you nuke them." What would Orwell make of that assertion? The United States has used two atomic weapons – against Japan in the Second World War, hardly a country the U.S. had "armed to the teeth." It has never used nuclear weapons since, despite a prodigious nuclear arsenal.

"I would love to see Saddam's downfall –

just not on Mr. Bush's terms and not by his methods." Fine. But nowhere in Mr. le Carré's screed does he explain how the world should proceed to achieve an objective he would "love" to see realized. This is the bankruptcy of polemicists everywhere: to know what they are against, without offering any constructive alternative.

"Mr. Bush has an arm-lock on God," Mr. le Carré writes. Obviously, Mr. le Carré dislikes the role religion plays in American public life, especially for political purposes. He is not alone in that distaste, but where is the mention of Saddam Hussein's use of religion? His building of mosques, including one with the Koran written in his own blood? His appeals to Mohammed. His insistence that all Islam is under attack.

When Mr. le Carré writes that, "If Saddam didn't have the oil, he could torture and murder his citizens to his heart's content," he is passing over lightly the evidence of those people Saddam did have "tortured and murdered," to say nothing of the hundreds of thousands who died in the war against Iran. To compare other countries such as Saudi Arabia (which has its own admittedly spotty human-rights record) to Iraq is unfounded.

A serious debate is being held about what is the correct way of proceeding with Iraq. There are reasonable arguments on all sides, including those against military action. It is a depressing reminder, however, of the "treason of the intellectuals," or the cynicism of characters in spy novels, when, to make a political case, words are deformed, facts are systematically twisted, moral equivalence implied between a dictator and a democratically elected leader; and, worst of all, when a writer loses respect for the meaning of words.