

WHAT DID YOU DO IN THE WAR, DADDY?

With Australia going to war with Iraq, how might we explain the reasoning for this to a naïve person, say one's child, in times to come?

"Well," I might say, "you see I had very little to do with it. It was the leaders who decided things. I just watched TV, really, I had no say in it."

"So what did you see, and what did you think?"

"See, it was a scary time. Eighteen months before, terrorists hijacked and flew planes into the tallest buildings in New York and the Pentagon, and they wanted to fly one into the White House and kill Mr Bush, probably. Then anthrax was sent to kill people around America. Though that probably came from within America, and nothing had been heard about it since, so the Americans probably silently dealt with that. But fear of germs was in the air.

"Anyhow we had helped America defeat the Taliban and the al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, but they killed many of our young Australians in a bar in Bali. So everyone was still scared, and Mr Bush pointed out Iraq. It was ruled by Saddam Hussein, a tyrant who terrorised his people, and poured chemicals and germs on those whom he did not like. The leaders said that he would do it to us soon, and drop atom bombs too. Or at least he would give them to terrorists to do it."

"Did you believe that he had to be attacked?"

"I simply did not know. Many people did not know, and asked Mr Bush, and his friend Mr Blair, and our own John Howard for proof. Eventually they showed us some pictures on TV, but I did not know what they meant. Perhaps we had to attack, and perhaps there was no need. It was a matter of trusting our leaders."

"Did you trust them?"

"You could not really trust them. It turned out some of the pictures on TV were old, not current, as the leaders said. You could not trust the secret services, because they had been caught out by the terrorists. Then the leaders tried to hide that America had given Iraq anthrax to use against the Iranians and had supported the Taliban against the Russians.

"You had to wonder, too, to what extent Mr Bush had it in personally for Saddam Hussein. One of the terrorist planes probably wanted to hit the White House, where he himself could have been killed. Mr Bush may have wanted to kill whoever did that, and if he could not get Osama bin Laden, he would get Saddam Hussein."

"See, the Bush family liked to show themselves off as tough. George W. may have wanted to show his father that he was every bit as tough as him, even tougher. The older Bush did not want American troops in body bags when he fought Saddam. George W had a tougher stomach for that, and his ground troops would finish the job his father had left undone.

"And our own leaders?"

"Well, we already knew that Mr Howard could fib to get the population going with fear, in order to elect him, the tough guy that he appeared to be. He said that the people fleeing Afghanistan and Iraq and coming to Australia were bad, though they came from the very countries that we fought because the rulers were bad. War fears were good for his re-election. He said he could not think of retiring as he promised because of this Iraqi business.

"Isn't going to war always wrong?"

“Well, not if you pre-empt a Hitler. And no matter how Australians hated war, and how they mistrusted their leaders, you could not know that this time they were not right. Many demonstrated against war, but I just did not know whether it was better to pack off all the soldiers for home, than not going to war.

“But it was a worry them not informing us what casualties we could expect, how many civilians would be killed, and what chances there were of weapons of mass destruction being launched by a Saddam who had nothing to lose anymore. Or whether terrorists would retaliate on us for attacking Iraq.

“But you know, to the end there was a suspicion that the threat of war was really a bluff to make Saddam open his arsenal so we could get rid of it without war. That is what Tony Blair seemed to mean by saying, ‘We have to be prepared to go to war, in order to not go to war.’ Even the appearance of irrationality by Mr Bush could have been planned, in order to make the bluff more credible. That is a known political ploy. It was called MAD – Mutual Assured Destruction in the Cold War.

“So what did you do in the war, daddy?”

‘Oh, I watched television.’”

Paul Valent is a psychiatrist specialising in traumatology.