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If Tony Blair had spent more time listening to the advice of reasonable people, he might not have been so quick to involve the UK in an illegal invasion of Iraq.

I am pretty awful at chess - a Croatian friend who coerced me into a game, against my will, said he would be disappointed if his three-year-old could not beat me.

However, I did play a bit as a kid and I remember one important lesson, which I wish I had put into practice in real-life situations more often. It is that you must bend over backwards to see your adversary's perspective and so predict their response. That perspective invariably became evident only a nanosecond after my hand and chess piece parted company and disaster became unavoidable. In fact, even grandmasters have seconds who can advise from a different perspective. In real-life confrontations, however, the only predictable thing is that the response will be unpredictable.

A scene from the great Mel Brooks movie *The Producers* encapsulates my feelings when real-life disasters strike, as they do all too often to me.

In it, Zero Mostel is facing ruin after a hilarious fraud has backfired, and his accomplice, Gene Wilder, has entered a catatonic trance uttering, "No way out, no way out, no way out!" As we sink deeper and deeper into the mess we have made of Iraq, I wonder if Tony Blair is praying for a way out. Of course, Osama bin Laden would point out that he prays the wrong way - but then what would one expect of a "designer Christian"? (a term I credit to my son Dave). The new perspective is epitomised by a bizarre moment in a press briefing when a US spokesman complained in "injured" tones that Iraqis dressed as Iraqis had shot at US soldiers and that this was not fair because - even if they were soldiers dressed as civilians - they were acting like terrorists. How Iraqis in Iraq fighting invaders can be terrorists is not clear.

The fine mess Blair and Bush have got us into reminds me of a notorious moment in 1967 when the US was mired in an equally stupid war in Vietnam.

On CBS-TV's *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, Pete Seeger sang an anti-war song containing the line "Waist deep in the Big Muddy and the Big Fool says to push on" that was cut from the broadcast by network censors. Such dissenting voices helped eventually to bring the US to its senses and extract itself from the Vietnamese quagmire. We need to hear similar US voices now.

Coincidentally, *Nature* in April published details of the Agent Orange spraying strategy that has affected some 4 million Vietnamese. Their plight should be addressed. The Vietnamese must be a truly forgiving nation because, given the devastation of their population and countryside during that war, they have more right than most people in other countries to complain.

If only Blair had spent more time playing chess, he might have waited that extra 45 minutes and pondered the advice he was given before making the decision to invade. Joseph Rotblat, the 1995 Nobel peace prizewinner, penned a letter, co-signed by a dozen or so other UK laureates and published in *The Times*, that pointed out that "a preventive war... may indeed lead to a relatively swift victory in the short term. But war is characterised by surprise, human loss and unintended consequences. Even with a victory, we believe that the medical, economic, environmental, moral, spiritual, political and legal consequences of a US-UK led preventive attack on Iraq would undermine, not protect, UK security and standing in the world..." When the advice of reasonable people conflicts with your own inclinations - be careful. Had Blair taken this advice and that of the majority in the UK, including many Middle East experts, our troops would not now be floundering waist deep in Iraqi quicksand being urged to "push on".

Praying may allow Blair to absolve himself from any personal guilt, convince him that God is on his side and, at least subliminally, that it is actually all God's fault, but why God cannot solve the problem by himself and save a lot of lives and us all a lot of trouble is a complete mystery to me.

However, Blair should spare a thought for those of us who still espouse free thought and have no mystical source of solace. Despite our freedom to dissent, he has made us unwilling accomplices in the UK's illegal invasion of Iraq

without UN sanction. As I watch the news, night in night out, the vision of Wilder murmuring "No way out, no way out, no way out" dances before my eyes...

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