

2003

THE CHICKEN

Besides its hi-tech precision weapons and extremely advanced forms of telecommunication, the US army also has chickens at its disposal. Cooped together in cages and placed on military vehicles, they function as a detection system for deadly poison gases. If a chicken pops its socks, the instructions warn, then grab your gas mask without hesitation.

If the chicken is symbolic of the military, technological and strategic superior power of the allied forces in Iraq, then I fear the worst for the aftermath of the war. A large proportion of the first shipments of thousands of chickens to arrive in Kuwait over recent months turned out to have died on the way. From the report it was possible to deduce that many had suffocated in the boxes they were dispatched in, while others had succumbed to hunger and dehydration. 'During our training we didn't learn anything about chickens,' a commander in the 7th Regiment told the press.

Moreover, nor was it the chicken that propelled 'the art of war' to a new climax during the Gulf War. After all, the chicken is extremely sensitive to stress and big variations in temperature – and these are part and parcel of a war in the desert. The chickens were frequently victims to sudden cardiac arrests. And this invariably led to serious panic among the soldiers, who scrambled desperately for their gas maskers fearing a chemical attack.

Last March 11th, United Poultry Concerns (UPC), an American association of chicken-lovers, took up the pen in fury in an open letter to President Bush. 'We regard the use of chickens to detect deadly chemicals more likely to cost human lives than to save them,' wrote UPC chairwoman Karen Davis. 'Moreover we find it a disgrace that a cheap chicken is used to cut costs on sophisticated technological detection systems.' To this day, Bush has not responded to this letter.

The Iraqis on the other hand, regard the chicken as a biological weapon. Since 1999, millions of Iraqi sheep and cattle have died from foot and mouth disease, and thousands of farmers have gone bankrupt. Evil tongues in Iraq, but also in the United States, allege that the CIA has had a hand in the spread of the deadly virus in Iraq. Moreover, on the insistence of UN weapon inspectors the vaccine laboratory in Baghdad was dismantled in 1993. Until that point, the laboratory was one of the most successful in its league, and its exports to the whole of the Middle East ensured that foot and mouth disease there was more or less eradicated.

While the war in Iraq is raging and the media are telling us everything about new technology, precision weapons and the morale of the allied troops, the silent chicken continues its progress through the desert. The destruction of vaccine laboratories has already cost millions of human and animal lives. Viewed from this perspective, the triumphant entrance of the American chicken into Baghdad sheds a new light on a war that was already so questionable.