ing presence have seemed to outweigh the benefits. Victory in Iraq means that America can now leave on a high, rather than in apparent flight. Qatar is a better HQ; and their going may show that Americans are not, after all, appropriative imperialists.

There is a pay-off for the Saudis, too. Popular dislike of the war obliged the country's rulers to be less helpful than America would have liked—though the true extent of Saudi co-operation, like that of other Arab countries, remains murky. The American pull-out will ease the pressure on the ruling family, and (if it really wants to) let it make political reforms without looking like an American stooge.

Yet there may be also a threat to the Saudis. Since September 11th, the kingdom's less savoury aspects, such as its role in financing Islamic extremism, have tested American patience. The idea of cutting the country adrift has hitherto looked riskier than sticking with it. But Mr Hussein's demise changes that calculation. This week, when Mr Rumsfeld insisted that the two countries are still best friends, he was uncharacteristically diplomatic. If nothing else scares the Saudis, that should. ■

Georgia's state flag

Phew

ATLANTA

Another new flag—and a rough baptism for the new governor

GEORGIA's state capitol is built mostly of handsome marble—except for the dreary, dimly lit basement which houses a small exhibition of historic flags flown by the state's regiments. Several of the flags boast the controversial blue-on-scarlet Confederate battle cross. Now it seems that Georgia may at last get a state flag that does not include that particular symbol.

On April 25th, the state legislature finally approved an official state flag without the cross. This decision came only after two six-hour-long debates and one mass walk-out. And it is still subject to a referendum next year.

Most Georgians do not get particularly exercised about the state flag, any more than they do about the state bird (the brown thrasher). But, for many rural whites, the Confederate cross is a symbol of their "heritage". Hence the bumper-stickers with slogans such as "If I had known this, I would have picked my own damn cotton."

On the other side of the argument, many blacks see the battle cross as a symbol of enduring racism. This is not that surprising, since the symbol was deliberately added to the flag by conservative whites in 1956 as a protest against desegregation. Blacks, whose power within the southern Democratic Party has increased dramatically since those days, have been trying to get rid of the battle cross for years.

In 1999 the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People began threatening to boycott states still flying the Confederate flag. Since then South Carolina has taken its flag down, though Mississippi has voted to keep its own flying. In 2001 Roy Barnes, Georgia's Democratic governor, persuaded the legislature to pass a new flag with a much shrunken battle cross. That decision may have cost him his governorship: last November, rural whites voted in Sonny Perdue, a little-known Republican state senator, who promised a statewide referendum on the flag.

In January, Mr Perdue duly suggested a pair of yes-or-no votes for March 2nd 2004, the day of Georgia's presidential primary. The first would decide whether to keep the 2001 flag; the second would decide whether to replace it with the 1956 flag or its predecessor (itself based on the Con-

An earlier foreign war

They fought Franco, in Abe's name

NEW YORK

The last survivors of a different American intervention

AS THE first American soldiers began to come home from Iraq, a tiny group of veterans of another, long-ago military intervention met in New York on April 27th. The volunteers of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade embarked for Spain two-thirds of a century ago to fight against Francisco Franco and his version of the fascism of the 1930s. Of the 2,800 who served with the brigade, 800 died in action. Only 90 are still alive. The 17 who made it to their 67th reunion recollected battles called Brunete, Jarama, Teruel and the Aragon offensive.

They got no help from the American government. Like the governments of Britain and France, Franklin Roosevelt's administration preferred to stay on the sidelines of a civil war in which Nazi Germany backed Franco and communist Russia helped his Republican opponents. To reach the front, the Abraham Lincoln volunteers—most of them communists—had to get on a boat to France and then trudge across the Pyrenees after France had closed its border with Spain to would-be fighters.

Those at the reunion had not changed their minds. Richard Dreyfuss, a relatively youthful guest speaker, declared that no label is nobler than "premature anti-fascist". There were songs of protest in several languages, including a rendition of the communist "Internationale" that brought many of the audience to their feet with fists raised. Clarence Kailin was unemployed when he left Wisconsin for Spain in February 1937, eager to help defeat fascism. "It wasn't the phoney kind of fight for democracy that Bush talks about," says Mr Kailin, who served with the brigade for nearly two years before a machinegun bullet shattered his right elbow.

Black and white Americans fought side by side in Spain, a mingling of the races it took years for the American army to imitate. Some of the blacks who, after distinguishing themselves in Spain, went on (like many of the brigade's survivors) to serve in the second world war found themselves in black-only units—or working in the kitchens.

Unlike the men and women who fought in Iraq, the fighters in Spain got a faint welcome when they returned home. In 1938, New York City's policemen stopped veterans who wanted to lay a wreath for their fallen comrades. Even so, in the second world war several battle-hardened Abraham Lincoln men worked in the OSS, the precursor of the CIA. In 1996, Spain gave its citizenship to all the brigade's survivors.

The Spanish Republicans' battle-cry—*No pasaran!*, "They shall not pass!"—has a new application for the modern left: the war against globalisation. Abe Osheroff helped to plan the 1999 demonstrations in Seattle. Speaking at an earlier reunion, in 2001, another veteran, Moe Fishman, tried several times to say "globalisation", but stumbled. "It was so much easier to say when we called it imperialism," he explained.

Early pre-emptionists