Targeting Iraq: U.S. hypocrisy and media lies

by Sharon Smith

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No credible evidence has emerged to link Iraq with the terrorist attacks on the U.S., yet speculation on this subject has been a recurrent theme, prominently featured throughout the media’s "crisis coverage" since September 11. Within hours of the attacks on the World Trade Center, the warmongers began lining up to seize the opportunity provided by the attacks to drag their hawkish agendas from the margins to the mainstream of political discussion. Media outlets have been only too happy to comply.

The media have contributed directly to the anti-Iraq hysteria. The Weekly Standard featured a "WANTED" sign, above sinister-looking photos of Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. On October 22, the New York Post carried the screaming headline, "Heads up, Hussein, you're next," and an op-ed piece declaring, "Saddam is a Hitler, a Stalin, a Pol Pot.... It's now time to go full speed ahead and see that Saddam departs- from Iraq if not from this earth." On October 18, Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen was equally vitriolic, writing, "Saddam and his bloody bugs have to go."

Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz was among the first of the hawks to take to the airwaves to call for a war against multiple targets, including Iraq, in retaliation for September 11. For the most part, the mainstream media neglected to mention Wolfowitz's public statements before September 11 calling for the U.S. to strike Baghdad as soon as "we find the right way to do it." The Pentagon's Defense Policy Board-a group of hard-line conservatives whose careers peaked long ago, from Henry Kissinger and James Schlesinger to Dan Quayle and Newt Gingrich-shuttled former CIA director James Woolsey off to Britain to gather evidence of a link between Osama bin Laden and Iraq.

Ostensibly on a mission to construct a "legal case against Iraq," Woolsey came up short on evidence-and what little he had was exceedingly thin. Woolsey's claim that Mohammed Atta, one of the alleged September 11 hijackers, had met with Iraqi intelligence officials in Prague last year was later denied by the Czech officials who were Woolsey's main witnesses to the meeting. "Czech officials say they do not believe that Mohammed Atta...met with any Iraqi officials during a brief stop he made in Prague last year," wrote reporter John Tagliabue in the October 20 New York Times. A week later, Czech Interior Minister Stanislav Gross reversed that statement, saying that the meeting had in fact taken place between Atta and an Iraqi agent in April 2000. Furthermore, security experts in Germany were following up on a claim by Israeli intelligence sources that Iraqi agents gave Atta anthrax spores at the meeting, which he then carried in his luggage to the United States.

Woolsey has put forward a number of claims, thus far without substantiation. He has claimed that Iraq provided fake passports for all 19 September 11 hijackers. He also claims to have intelligence reports that Osama bin Laden sent an al Qaeda delegation to Baghdad on April 25, 1998, to attend Saddam Hussein's birthday party-and that Saddam Hussein's son agreed to train al Qaeda recruits and establish a joint force. Another bit of intrigue that Woolsey has been
exploring while in Britain involves a convicted Kuwaiti terrorist known as Ramzi Youssef, whose real name is Abdul Basit. Woolsey claims that Youssef is an Iraqi agent who kidnapped Basit and stole his identity. Woolsey's sleuthing has made him something of a laughingstock among British police and intelligence, who are "bemused" by his activities, according to one British official. But Woolsey's own lack of credibility hasn't stopped the mainstream media from quoting him extensively to whip up anti-Iraq hysteria. The Wall Street Journal, for example, opened its op-ed page to him on October 18 to postulate both that Iraq had ties to the bin Laden network and was the likely perpetrator of the anthrax attacks.

While in Britain, Woolsey also met with the Iraqi National Congress, the opposition coalition pieced together and funded by Washington. "We ought to seriously consider removing Saddarn's regime if he has been involved in any terror in recent years against us," declared Woolsey on October 26.

I think some day-hopefully soon-[Iraq] will come to the same conclusion that Admiral Yamamoto did after Pearl Harbor, which was to remark that Japan had awakened a sleeping giant. If the American government chooses, based on the information it has, to take military action against any other state outside of Afghanistan, I believe that the world will see our reaction in that case will be ruthless, relentless and devastating. In the American vernacular, you ain't seen nothing yet.

Major media outlets have advanced the theory of former United Nations (UN) weapons inspector Richard Butler that Iraq is the number one suspect behind the anthrax attacks. Butler's case, as laid out in an op-ed piece in the New York Times on October 18, amounts to the following bit of psychobabble:

I found one rule of thumb to have merit: The vigor with which Iraq conspired to defeat any given step toward arms control was a good indicator of how interested Mr. Hussein was in the weapons system at issue. I concluded that biological weapons are closest to President Hussein's heart because it was in this area that his resistance to our work reached its height.

In response, another former UN weapons inspector, Scott Ritter, argued that Butler is "irresponsible to speculate about a Baghdad involvement" in the anthrax attacks. "Under the most stringent on-site inspection regime in the history of arms control, Iraq's biological weapons were dismantled, destroyed or rendered harmless during the course of hundreds of no-notice inspections," wrote Ritter in the London Guardian the next day. No U.S. major media outlet bothered to feature Ritter's countervailing viewpoint.

In fact, much of the evidence about the anthrax attacks points at a source much closer to home. "Anthrax probe shifts to homegrown hate groups," announced the New York Post on October 25, a story that received little attention elsewhere in the mass media. The Post said, "Ultra-right-wing organizations-including a particular West Coast group-have become a key focus of the massive federal investigation into the murderous anthrax attacks." The organizations in question all either obtained or attempted to obtain deadly anthrax from several U.S.-based laboratories before the recent attacks, according to the report. And on October 26, the International Herald Tribune reported that the spores found in Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle's office had been treated with a chemical additive that only three countries are believed to be capable of making: the U.S., the former USSR, and Iraq. However, [a] government official with direct knowledge of the investigation said that the sum of the evidence at hand-involving not just the coatings, but also genetic analysis of the bacteria and
other intelligence-suggested that it was unlikely that the spores were originally produced in the former Soviet Union or Iraq. The source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, declined to discuss the implications of that conclusion.

And, as Douglas Valentine wrote recently in CounterPunch:

[I]f the FBI is looking for motive and method (meaning modus operandi), the CIA must rate as a prime suspect in the anthrax black valentines that are currently being sent across the country. The motive, of course, is to keep the threat of terrorism alive and widespread, so more assaults can be made on our civil liberties, thus strengthening the national security elite. The method of sending envelopes packed with poison, as we know, was developed and perfected by the CIA.

Hawks vs. doves?

The hawks have been undeterred by the lack of substantiated evidence connecting Iraq either to September 11 or to the anthrax attacks. Woolsey has been explicit in this regard. In his Wall Street Journal editorial, he argued against those demanding proof of Iraq's complicity: "If we define the problem in such a way as to require proof (and make it proof beyond a reasonable doubt) of state involvement in the September 11 attack itself, we will quite likely define ourselves out of being able to understand who is at war with us."

The Journal's editors carried this logic even further in an adjoining editorial, arguing:

We already know [Saddam Hussein] has the motive to strike the U.S., after his Gulf War humiliation. And we know he has the means.... We know a sworn enemy of America, a man who called us "the Great Satan," has biological weapons. Are we supposed to wait until we know beyond a reasonable doubt that he used them, or until more people are killed, before we do anything about it?

An open letter to Bush signed by, among others, Richard Perle, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, and William Bennett, stated:

It may be that the Iraqi government provided assistance in some form to the recent attack on the United States. But even if the evidence does not link Iraq directly to the attack, any strategy aiming at the eradication of terrorism and its sponsors must include a determined effort to remove Saddam Hussein from power.

Pundits have made much of the division in the Bush administration between the "hawks" grouped around Wolfowitz and the "doves" grouped around Secretary of State Colin Powell. Clearly, there are disagreements over strategy. If the Wolfowitz gang had gotten its way, the U.S. would have initiated an all-out war against Iraq when it began bombing Afghanistan in early October. Powell successfully argued that the first phase of the new "war on terrorism" should focus exclusively on Afghanistan. The appearance that Powell's levelheaded approach has won out greatly benefited the Bush administration's war aims, both domestically and abroad.

Key to Powell's strategy is that the U.S. maintain the appearance of an "international coalition," similar to U.S. strategy in the buildup to the Gulf War a decade ago. The hope is that the coalition will provide the moral authority of a united "international community" weighing in on behalf of U.S. war aims. However, in order for this strategy to succeed, the U.S. must maintain its fragile coalition with Arab and Muslim nations whose own shaky and corrupt regimes face massive popular opposition to U.S. policy in the Middle East-including the continued bombing...
and sanctions against Iraq since the end of the 1991 Gulf War. In addition, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates are Iraq's biggest trading partners (with Russia dose behind).

The hawks do not share the desire to maintain the international coalition. As Woolsey argued, "[I]s a large coalition that doesn't move against a state that is at war with us better for the nation as a whole than a small coalition that moves effectively against a state that is attacking us?" Conservative columnist Robert Novak was even more explicit: "There is a strong feeling among American conservatives that an attack on Iraq is essential to protect U.S. national interests and that keeping Arab states as members of the antiterrorist coalition is neither possible nor desirable."

There is friction, to be sure, but the differences between the hawks and doves within the Bush administration have certainly been exaggerated. There are no doves-only warmongers-in-the Bush administration. The division lies between those arguing for an immediate strike against Iraq and those who prefer to wait until later. The Powell/State Department wing of the Bush administration has made sure to fan the flames of anti-Iraq hysteria even while postponing any decision about striking Iraq until after the U.S. finishes destroying Afghanistan. Powell made these two messages clear on CNN on October 21, when he said of the anthrax attacks, "I don't put it past Iraq," and then proceeded to warn, "It would be wise for all of us to take a deep breath and let our investigative agencies figure this out before we...get the country all excited."

When National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, who is part of the Powell wing, was asked by the Arab satellite television network al-Jazeera to deny that Iraq is a target in a second stage of the war, she replied, "We worry about Saddam Hussein. We worry about his weapons of mass destruction that he's trying to achieve. But for now, the president has said his goal is to watch and monitor Iraq. And certainly, the United States will act if Iraq threatens its interests."

Striking Iraq has never left the Bush administration's agenda-or Clinton's, for that matter. In 1998, Clinton signed the Iraq Liberation Act into law. The act states, "It should be the policy of the United States to seek to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and to promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace the regime." The U.S. has bombed the "no-fly zones" over Iraq regularly for the last 10 years, killing many hundreds of Iraqi civilians. And the U.S.-sponsored sanctions against Iraq have killed well over a million people since the end of the Gulf War.

Long before September 11, the Bush administration was looking for a reason to escalate the bombings. In August, Rice warned on CNN's Late Edition, "Saddam Hussein is on the radar screen for the administration," and said Bush was already considering "military force in a more resolute manner and not just a manner of tit-for-tat with them every day." The war against terrorism may provide the U.S. with just the excuse it has been looking for, with the mass media dutifully whipping up anti-Iraq hysteria to justify it.

Within days of the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration issued a public warning: If any link were found between prime suspect Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network and Iraq, the U.S. would not hesitate to strike Iraq. On October 7, U.S. Ambassador to the UN John Negroponte issued a "stern warning" to Iraq: "Don't try to take advantage of the situation or there will be a price to pay." Two days later, Negroponte notified the UN Security Council that the U.S. "may find that our self-defense requires further actions with respect to other organizations and other states." On October 11, after the outbreak of the anthrax attacks, Bush singled out Saddam Hussein as the potential perpetrator: "After all, he gassed his own people. We know he's been developing weapons of mass destruction...and so we're watching him very
carefully," Bush said. On October 15, Democratic Senator Joe Lieberman called on Bush to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq as phase two of its war on terrorism. Lieberman argued that "the pursuit of coalition" should not stop the U.S. from targeting Iraq or insisting that Syria and Iran renounce support of "terrorism."

On October 21, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Richard Myers was asked on ABC's This Week whether he had "started to prepare targets in Iraq." He replied, without responding directly to the question, "This is a global war on terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. Afghanistan is only one small piece. So of course, we're thinking very broadly. I would say, since World War Two, we haven't thought this broadly about a campaign.

Manufacturing support

According to a Reuters/Zogby poll released on October 25, almost three-quarters of Americans would like to see the U.S. expand its war to Iraq (with 56 percent "strongly" supporting attacking Iraq). The results of a Harris poll released on October 17 show a similar margin of support, with 71 percent of respondents agreeing that the U.S. should use military action to remove Saddam Hussein from power as part of the war on terrorism. An October 6 Newsweek poll showed that a 60 percent majority opposes ending economic sanctions against Iraq.

Throughout the last decade, opinion polls have consistently showed strong majority support for U.S. hostility toward Iraq. A Gallup poll taken in February 2001 asked the open-ended question, "What one country anywhere in the world do you consider to be America's greatest enemy today?" Iraq topped the list, with 38 percent of respondents choosing it (China was a distant second, chosen by 14 percent). This broad support for U.S. policy on Iraq has translated into strong majority support for the U.S.-sponsored economic sanctions that have been in place since just prior to the Gulf War in 1991. In a Gallup poll taken on February 19-21, 1999, 83 percent of respondents answered that "the United Nations should continue [economic] sanctions until Saddam Hussein complies with all UN resolutions." In that same poll, 74 percent support using military force to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq-margins virtually identical to those after the September 11 attacks.

It is no exaggeration that the U.S. mainstream media has played the central role in demonizing Iraq in the eyes of the majority of Americans. Nor is it the slightest exaggeration to say that the news media have knowingly collaborated with the Pentagon and the State Department in fabricating the lies used to justify the decade-long sanctions that have killed more than a million Iraqis and the nearly continuous bombing of Iraq. Most people in the U.S. have no idea of the atrocities have been committed against the people of Iraq in their name. Instead, they get straight-faced reporting of George W. Bush's televised statement on October 11, responding to reports of "vitriolic hatred for America in some Islamic countries." He said, "Like most Americans, I just cannot believe it because I know how good we are."

Media complicity should not be too surprising, given the role they played during the 1991 Gulf War. In the buildup to that war, the U.S. media aided the Pentagon's disinformation campaign and increased the anti-Iraq hysteria, for instance, erroneously reporting that soldiers had dragged babies out of their incubators during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990- a charge that was later proven false. Once the war began, news reporters, often dressed in Army fatigues and surrounded by army vehicles, were complicit in the government's efforts to conceal the actual number of Iraqis killed and the annihilation of Iraq's infrastructure. That war's round-the-clock coverage managed to leave out the most important facts.
First, between January 16 and February 27, 1991, some 88,000 tons of bombs—the equivalent of seven Hiroshimased atomic bombs—were dropped on Iraq. As author Geoff Simons observed, "For the period of the war, Iraq was subjected to the equivalent of one atomic bomb a week; a scale of destruction that has no parallels in the history of warfare." Second, between 100,000 and 200,000 Iraqis were killed during the more than six weeks of carpet bombing, with 300,000 to 700,000 injured, according to British MP Paul Flynn, writing in the Guardian in 1991. Third, U.S. bombs missed their targets nearly 75 percent of the time; even the much-touted "smart" bombs hit their targets only about 60 percent of the time. Fourth, the U.S.-led forces deliberately destroyed the entirety of Iraq's infrastructure, having a "near apocalyptic impact" on the country.

No major media outlet covered, for example, the "Highway of Death," when U.S. warplanes bombed thousands of Iraqi soldiers, mostly conscripts, burning them alive as they tried to flee; nor were U.S. viewers informed that U.S. troops used plows attached to tanks to bury thousands of Iraqi soldiers alive. When the U.S. bombed a civilian air-raid shelter on February 13, killing 1,500 civilians, many of them women and children, the U.S. claimed the shelter was a cover for a military outpost—which the media obediently gave plenty of spin. After the Gulf War, news commentators such as NBC's John Chancellor lamented that Saddam Hussein was "slaughtering" his own people. Yet, as Norman Solomon has argued, "Chancellor managed to not use the word 'slaughter' during the six weeks that U.S.-led forces were killing as many as 30,000 Iraqis per week."

The mass media has continued to function as the U.S. government's mouthpiece in the decade since the Gulf War, keeping alive the notion that Saddam Hussein poses a threat to world security while systematically downplaying the consequences of U.S. policies on ordinary Iraqis. As Sam Husseini has argued, "Dying Iraqi children are dubbed 'propaganda points for Saddam' and U.S. missile strikes are called 'pinpricks.'"

One frequently repeated assertion is that Saddam Hussein "ejected" UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) weapons inspectors at the end of 1998 (presumably to hide a renewed buildup of weapons of mass destruction). In reality, UNSCOM head Richard Butler removed the inspectors at the behest of President Clinton days before the U.S. and Britain began the Desert Fox bombing of Iraq on December 16, 1998. Saddam Hussein had ejected the weapons inspectors in August 1998, accusing them of spying on behalf of U.S. intelligence and demanding an end to U.S.-imposed sanctions, but Iraq accepted inspectors back unconditionally in mid-November and cooperated fully thereafter.

As it turned out, Iraq's claims of UNSCOM espionage were proven true—although this fact quickly disappeared from media discourse. The Boston Globe, which broke the story on January 6, 1999, reported that a U.S. official had asked the paper to withhold the details of UNSCOM's role in spying for the U.S. because it "would compromise U.S. intelligence activities in Iraq." The Globe reported that, beginning in February 1996, "U.S. intelligence agencies, working under the cover of the United Nations, carried out an ambitious spying operation designed to penetrate Iraq's intelligence apparatus and track the movement of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein." The U.S. supplied the UNSCOM team with "eavesdropping equipment, including commercial scanners and U2 spy photographs," according to the Globe. The report concluded,

It remains unclear whether the United States used the intelligence it gathered from the operation to select its targeting during Operation Desert Fox, the four-day bombing operation
that ended Dec. 19. But key figures and organizations under scrutiny by the United Nations—the Special Security Organization, the Republican Guard Headquarters, and the Iraqi Intelligence headquarters—were blown up during the operation.

More than 1,000 newspapers carried stories about the Operation Desert Fox bombing during the week of December 15-22, 1998, but only ten percent made any mention of "civilian casualties."

Sanctions of mass destruction

The Iraqi death toll has continued to mount since the end of the Gulf War, now topping one million. In the last decade, more than 500,000 Iraqi children under the age of five have died because of the sanctions, imposed by the U.S. under the auspices of the UN. The scale of the killing can easily be appreciated through simple mathematics: Fully 5,000 Iraqi children—roughly the same number of the total killed in the September 11 attacks—die each month due to starvation and disease caused by the sanctions. Yet major media outlets rarely acknowledge the massive Iraqi death toll. "Baghdad claims the economic sanctions have had a devastating impact on civilians, especially children," said National Public Radio's Linda Wertheimer on June 17, 1999—as if the "claims" were suspect in a typical example of reporting.

On the few occasions when the media has reported the actual death toll of the sanctions, it has done so through the lens of the U.S. State Department—literally. On May 12, 1996, then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was asked by Leslie Stahl on 60 Minutes, "We have heard that half a million children have died. I mean that's more children than died in Hiroshima. And—you know—is the price worth it?" Albright replied, "I think this is a very hard choice, but the price—we think the price is worth it."

Most media reports on Iraq simply ignore the human casualties of the sanctions. On October 2, MSNBC featured an "eyewitness report" live from Baghdad by reporter Ned Colt. Colt confidently told viewers that Iraq was doing well economically and that, using oil money, Saddam Hussein had rebuilt entirely Iraq's infrastructure—including water and sewerage treatment facilities. Colt's written report, on October 5, informed readers that the UN's "oil-for-food" program "has helped millions of Iraq's most vulnerable— the very old and the very young—survive. In three years, the caloric intake of those receiving food aid has almost doubled to 2,200 calories daily, just below the optimum amount suggested by the United Nations." And, he added, "[H]undreds of millions of dollars every year go toward food and medicine." That cheery description contradicts the situation reported by the International Committee of the Red Cross last year: "Deteriorating living conditions, inflation and low salaries make people's everyday lives a continuing struggle, while food shortages and lack of medicines and clean drinking water threaten their very survival." Iraq's collapsed health system and badly damaged water sanitation system pose the "gravest threat," the report said.

The mass media also routinely claim that responsibility for the suffering of Iraqis lies with Saddam Hussein, not the sanctions—particularly since the implementation of the "oil-for-food" program in 1996, which allows Iraq to sell a limited amount of oil for cash. "Some U.S. officials say that Iraq is undermining the program to use the suffering of its people as a public relations tool. Humanitarian supplies are stockpiled instead of distributed, they charge, and Iraq has not used all the money available to buy more," wrote the Los Angeles Times on October 19. But George Sommerwill, a UN spokesperson, said, "the government of Iraq is cooperating." Hans von Sponeck, former UN humanitarian coordinator for Iraq, argued in January 2001 that the Iraqi government distributes more than 90 percent of available supplies each month. The
problem is not with Iraq, but with the UN committee that enforces the sanctions, which "must certify that none of the commodities purchased with the money had a dual military use. Since most items needed to rebuild the infrastructure-or, in many cases-to provide health care-can have some dual use, about $4 billion in contracts, some going back to 1998, has been put on hold by the committee," said the Los Angeles Times. Not just equipment, but a wide range of basic supplies and medicines-from antibiotics and pain killers to cleansing agents such as chlorine and pencils for schools-have been banned because they can allegedly serve a dual military use.

Iraq will not be able to rebuild its shattered infrastructure until the sanctions end. Today, nearly half of the Iraqi people do not have access to safe drinking water. As Yusef Ahmed Abdullah of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization explained, "If you feed the population, but the water is contaminated, people will eat, get diarrhea, and die. At the same time, there are no medicines, so you get more mortality, even though you're distributing food. [If] you don’t have electricity, you don’t have water and sanitation, you don’t have health."

Bombs away

The U.S. and Britain declared northern and southern Iraq to be "no-fly zones" at the end of the Gulf War in 1991, banning Iraq from flying any aircraft, including helicopters, in these parts of the country-ostensibly to protect Iraq's oppressed Kurdish and Shia populations from Saddam Hussein. U.S. and British warplanes have patrolled these areas ever since, dropping bombs on a regular basis. Between December 1998 and the summer of 2000 alone, the U.S. flew more than 20,000 sorties into Iraq-more than in NATO's seven-week carpet bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. "After eight years of enforcing a 'no-fly zone' in northern [and southern] Iraq, few military targets remain," wrote the Wall Street Journal in October 1999. "We're down to our last outhouse," said one U.S. official. "There are still some things left, but not many," said a Pentagon source. Journalist John Pilger has written that one UN report covering a five-month period showed that 41 percent of those killed through U.S. bombing were Iraqi civilians.

This is the longest U.S. bombing campaign since the Second World War, yet it rarely qualifies for even a mention from U.S. media outlets. When it does, the media dutifully repeats the Pentagon's claim that U.S. bombs are dropped in "self-defense." CNN's report of bombs dropped on Iraq on October 13, for example, issued the patented Defense Department phrase that the strikes were carried out "in response to hostile Iraqi threats against coalition pilots and aircrews conducting routine monitoring of the southern no-fly zone."

On June 19, U.S. and British war planes bombed an Iraqi soccer field at Tel A'fer, killing 23 people-the vast majority of whom were children under the age of 17. Voices in the Wilderness activists documented the bombing, saying the soccer field was strewn with bomb debris, including two pieces with English writing. On June 20, CNN merely repeated Defense Department denials of the bombing, including its accusation that "Iraqi claims of casualties from an air strike in the northern no-fly zone may have resulted from one of Iraq's own surface-to-air missiles."

As Pilger has shown, U.S. and British claims that the "no-fly zone"-righteously dubbed "Operation Provide Comfort"-is a humanitarian gesture are a sham:

Pilots patrolling the so-called no fly zone in the north of the country have spoken angrily about how they have been ordered to return to their base in Turkey in order to allow the Turkish air force to bomb the Kurds in Iraq-the very people [the U.S. and] the British are meant to be
"protecting"...

Last December [2000], more than 10,000 Turkish troops invaded northern Iraq, killing untold numbers of civilians and fighters of the Kurdistan Workers Party, the PKK. British and American aircraft "protecting" the Kurds did nothing to prevent the invasion; indeed, most patrols were suspended to allow the Turks to get on with the killing.

Human Rights Watch noted:

It appears that in return for Turkey's support for Operation Provide Comfort, the U.S. has agreed not to publicly criticize what Turkey does with its own Kurdish citizens, located directly across the border from the zone protected by U.S. warplanes.... [E]lements within the U.S. government possess detailed knowledge of the full scope of Turkish abuses as well as the key role played by U.S. weapons.

Imperialism's double standard

The U.S. double standard, as evidenced toward its NATO ally Turkey, underlies its entire Iraq policy. As sanctions specialist Eric Herring said of the no-fly zone:

They have no desire for the Shi'ite majority to take control or for the Kurds to gain independence. Their policy is to keep them strong enough to cause trouble for Saddam Hussein while ensuring that Saddam Hussein is strong enough to keep repressing them. This is a direct descendent of British imperial policy from the First World War onwards [and is about the control] of Iraqi oil.... Divide and rule was the policy.

The two regions designated to be under U.S. and British control in the no-fly zone, happen to be where Iraq's main oil reserves are located—constituting 10 percent of the world's known reserves.

Hawks in the Bush administration have insisted that the great mistake of the first Bush administration was not "finishing off" Saddam Hussein at the end of the Gulf War. But the U.S. had dear reasons for not doing so at the time. After urging Iraqis to rebel against Saddam Hussein at the war's conclusion, Bush ordered U.S. troops to stand by and do nothing while Iraqi troops ruthlessly put down the rebellion. Leaving Saddam Hussein in power in Iraq gave the U.S. the excuse it needed to continue to use the Gulf as a military staging area throughout the 1990s. "The massive military presence in the Gulf today" writes Nafeez Ahmed, "legitimized by the no-fly zones over Iraq purportedly established to monitor Saddam's treatment of his people and ensure their protection, in fact plays the role of continuing the war against the Iraqi people." The U.S. had no intention of supporting a democratic rebellion in Iraq, particularly one that might result in Shi'ite Muslims coming to power, as they had in the Iranian Revolution of 1979. New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman reported in July 1991 that the Bush administration would have preferred a coup by Iraqi generals to overthrow Saddam Hussein, "and then Washington would have the best of all worlds: an iron-fisted Iraqi junta without Saddam Hussein."

Indeed, the U.S. had no problem backing the rule of Saddam Hussein until 1990. As one former Reagan administration official put it, "Hussein is a bastard. But at the time he was our bastard." The U.S. even helped turn the eight-year Iran-Iraq War in Iraq's favor-knowing that Iraq was using chemical weapons against Iran, yet supplying a wide range of arms to Iraq while preventing arms from reaching Iran. Nor was the U.S. deterred when, in March 1980, Saddam
Hussein launched mustard- and nerve-gas attacks against Kurds in Halabja. As Geoff Simons wrote,

In the months following the Halabja massacre the U.S. government issued licenses for the delivery of biological products to the Iraqi Atomic Energy Agency. for the delivery of electronics equipment and machine tools to an Iraqi missile design center, a bomb plant, a missile factory, defense electronics factories and a weapons manufacturing complex. In July Bechtel secured a $1 billion deal to provide Iraq with a petrochemicals complex that the Iraqis intended to use in the production of mustard gas weapons, fuel-air explosives and rocket propellants.

The Reagan administration also opposed the introduction of sanctions against Iraq after the scale of the Halabja atrocity became public. After the Halabja massacres, the U.S. granted licenses for dual-use technology exports at a rate 50 percent greater than before, including missile technology and chemical-biological agents. Between 1985 and 1989, the U.S. approved 17 licenses for exports of bacterial and fungal cultures to Iraq (anthrax among them).

These friendly relations came to an end not because of Saddam Hussein's flagrant human rights abuses, but because, as Nafeez Ahmed argues,

[In February 1990, Saddam made a speech before an Arab summit that certainly seemed to show that his days of subservience to the West could be ending. Condemning the ongoing U.S. military presence in the Gulf, Saddam warned: "If the Gulf people and the rest of the Arabs along with them fail to take heed, the Arab Gulf region will be ruled by American will," and that the United States would dictate the production, distribution and the price of oil, "all on the basis of a special outlook which has solely to do with U.S. interests and in which no consideration is given to the interests of others."

Only then did the U.S. take issue with Saddam Hussein's "weapons of mass destruction" and human rights abuses, labeling him the "new Hitler." A leaked Pentagon draft document stated the real concerns behind the U.S. condemnation of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990:

In the Middle East and Southwest Asia, our overall objective is to remain the predominant outside power in the region and preserve U.S. and Western access to the region's oil.... As demonstrated by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, it remains fundamentally important to prevent a hegemon or alignment of powers from dominating the region.

This is the guiding principle behind U.S. Middle East policy. Righteous indignation about human rights abuses and preserving the sanctity of international law are merely the selling points for bloody U.S. interventions that are motivated by economic interests, not morality. George Bush's declaration as he was bombing Iraq, "What we say goes," far more accurately depicted U.S. motivation in the Gulf War than did its stated concern for Kuwait.

In the name of enforcing UN resolutions on Iraq, the U.S. has committed the most flagrant violations of international law against the Iraqi people, through both war and sanctions. Ironically, some of these are the same laws violated by Saddam Hussein. For example, UN General Assembly Resolution 32/84 (December 12, 1977) condemns weapons of mass destruction, which are defined as "atomic explosive weapons, radioactive material weapons, lethal chemical and biological weapons." Depleted uranium ordnance and fuel-air explosives, widely used by the U.S. during the Gulf War, certainly fits this category. Similarly, the deliberate destruction of Iraq's civilian infrastructure-including electricity, water treatment plants, sewerage systems, agriculture, industry, and hospitals-violates the Geneva Convention's Article
52, which states, "Civilian objects shall not be the object of attacks or reprisals." And the massive civilian death toll was the result of bombing raids that were "indiscriminate, in that they failed to distinguish between military and civilian objects," according to Middle East Report. This deliberate bombing of Iraqi civilians-which is a dear violation of the Nuremburg Charter banning the "wanton destruction of cities, towns, or villages"-is otherwise known as a "crime against humanity."

As Mushahid Hussain has argued, "This gap between what America says at home-liberties, rule of law, democracy-is rarely practiced in American foreign policy." This is true of imperialist ventures historically. As Frank Furedi wrote in The New Ideology of Imperialism, "The moral claims of imperialism were seldom questioned in the West. Imperialism and the global expansion of the Western powers were represented in unambiguously positive terms as a major contributor to human civilization."

Should the U.S. military once again go to war against Iraq, expanding the "war against terrorism" will be nothing more than a convenient excuse to justify it. Defense Policy board member Newt Gingrich candidly stated in Newsweek's September 26 issue the real reasons why the U.S. would attack Iraq- a week before the anthrax scare surfaced. Gingrich said the U.S. should strike against Iraq simply because bombing Afghanistan is not an adequate U.S. response to September 11 :"There's a feeling we've got to do something that counts- and bombing caves is not something that counts."

And once again, the Iraqi population will pay the price.

Sharon Smith is a contributor to Iraq Under Siege: The Deadly Impact of Sanctions and War, edited by Anthony Arnove, (South End Press, 2000).