

## ***COLLATERAL DAMAGE***

By Michael Ventura

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With U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan's unprecedented end-run around American machinations, the Iraq crisis is perceived (as of my deadline) to be over. But America still insists on the right to dictate terms, and is still poised to bomb Iraq. Iraq's Saddam is a grotesque man, but that does not change two facts which our news industry has gone out of its way *not* to report: that Iraq cannot defend itself against us; and that Iraq is being threatened for doing precisely what we and its neighbors do, stockpiling weapons of mass murder. (If that's a reason to bomb, we'd best begin by bombing ourselves. Our arsenal has many more such weapons of mass murder. From the A-bomb at Hiroshima to Agent Orange in Vietnam, we too, like Saddam, have shown our willingness to use them.) Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said, "We are talking about using military force, but we are not talking about a war. That is an important distinction." It won't be important to civilians on whom our bombs will fall. Our government calls civilian casualties "collateral damage," as though that makes it morally defensible. Clinton claims his planned four days of round-the-clock bombing would kill "only" 1,500 Iraqis. Everybody knows that's a lie, but even if it wasn't: Imagine our reaction if Saddam, or anyone else, said he'd kill "only" 1,500 Americans. Where is the moral difference?

So as our government prepares, *in our name*, to bomb a country that cannot fight us back, it is well to remember...

Remember that nowhere in the Constitution is there *any* provision for the president to order our military, on his own authority, into *any* war-like action. Only Congress can legally commit us to war. According to our own laws, we are witnessing preparations for a criminal act.

An all-too-familiar crime. Congress did not declare war on the American Indian nations. President Franklin Pierce did not have a declaration of war when he sent troops to Nicaragua in 1854. Nor did President Woodrow Wilson, ordering troops into Mexico in 1916. We had no declarations of war for: troops sent (secretly) to Russia to fight Lenin's government; long brush-war in Haiti in the 1920s, or in Nicaragua in the 1930s; Korea and Lebanon in the 1950s; the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the 1960s; Granada and Panama in the 1980s; nor the Persian Gulf in 1991. These actions spread devastation among often defenseless civilian populations, and all were illegal by our own laws. This is one reason why many consider us a criminal nation. (Remember that Iraq's Saddam Hussein had to do this only once, in Kuwait, to be considered criminal. Israel's incursion into Lebanon in the 1980s was far bloodier than Iraq's in Kuwait, causing thousands of civilian casualties, but we do not call Israel criminal.)

*There is absolutely no way for a country to claim the high moral ground in any conflict in which it is violating its own laws.* Why can't America now abide by its laws and congressionally declare war? Because then it would be much harder to gloss over the fact that Iraq hasn't threatened us or (in this case) anyone else; and that Iraq is stockpiling the same weapons that we and our allies stockpile. We're threatening to bomb a country

that can't defend itself against us, only because it hasn't done what we've told it to. No other offense has been proved or even suggested.

And remember, if you can bear to remember... during 1991's Gulf War it was not widely reported that *over half the population of Iraq was under 18*. Half of the tens of thousands of civilians whom we killed then (yes, that many) were children. *That is "collateral damage."* Kids still comprise an unusually large percentage of the Iraqi people. More "collateral damage." And for what? Our leaders admit air strikes can't cripple Iraq's capacity to make weapons; can't depose Iraq's government; can't change the balance of power. President Clinton himself says so. Yet still he threatens violence. Constitutionally illegal violence.

And we should remember, if we're not too embarrassed to remember... In 1991, marvelous claims were made for our "smart bombs." Boy, our bombs were *smart*, our bombs would go *exactly* where we wanted, with hardly any "collateral damage" at all. These claims went unquestioned by America's news industry. Years later *The New York Times* unearthed Pentagon assessments that those bombs weren't so smart after all. In fact, our "smart" bombs were barely more accurate than the old "dumb" bombs. Our military knew this at the time. They lied about this most crucial of issues, just as they'd lied in Vietnam. Now our military tells us their new "smart bombs" are even smarter. This time they'll work, we're assured. But given military lies about 1991's bombs, no rational person has any reason to believe them now.

And we should remember, whether or not we're shamed by the memory... Beginning with our military actions in Grenada and Panama, the Pentagon instituted (and the American news industry accepted) unprecedented censorship and control of what Americans were allowed to learn about our wars. They did not want a repeat of Vietnam, where the government (usually) lied and reporters (usually) told the facts. In the Gulf War of 1991, this was taken to totalitarian (yes, totalitarian) lengths. For the first time in our history, reporters weren't allowed to see *any* action without direct military supervision. So there was *no way* to know, at the time, anything the military did not want us to know. When, in the coming years, it was revealed that our military actually lied a great deal during the Gulf War, it was too late for the truth to do any good.

Is there anything more shameful in the history of journalism than our acquiescence to the military's stifling of America's constitutionally guaranteed free press? *By the military's own later admission*, this censorship had nothing to do with protecting information that could aid the enemy. After victory in the Gulf War was declared, when General Norman Schwarzkopf gave his briefing to the American people, he said: "Once the air campaign started we knew he [the enemy] would be incapable of moving to counter [our] move, *even if he knew we made it.*"

The emphasis is the general's. In other words, press censorship was unnecessary from a military standpoint. The enemy couldn't have acted on sensitive information "even if he knew." The censorship had nothing to do with the enemy. Its goal was twofold: to keep the American people ignorant of the bloody realities of the war (for instance, that the "smart bombs" weren't so smart, and that half the civilian casualties were children, facts our military knew); and to keep the record of that war in the possession of the military, so that no one else (possibly not even the American civilian government) would ever know its complete history.

One of the architects of this totalitarian policy was then-Chief of Staff Colin Powell, the man many would like to see in the Oval Office. As Steve Erickson has written, "Wave goodbye to your country with the hand that isn't throwing it away."

The press bent over for this treatment in 1991, and the American people applauded. And thousands of civilians, more than half of them children, died.

What was it all for?

What is it for now?

It is *not* to eradicate the dictator Saddam Hussein. Yes, he is horrific. But we are spending billions to prop up the bloody reign of Indonesia's even more horrific President Suharto, who has massacred tens of thousands in his (unprovoked, illegal) conquest of East Timor (ever even heard of it?); and who has killed or tortured his local political opposition. Indonesia is the world's fourth largest country and one of the props of the international corporate structure. Suharto's policies have been profitable for America. So we don't vilify or attack Suharto, we give him billions and look the other way. Clinton doesn't call Suharto "Hitler," he calls him on the phone to chat policy - which makes our moral posturing in Iraq just that, a pose, a charade, a lie.

We assert our presence in the Persian Gulf for its oil. It is a matter of money. Period. Everybody knows this, as the recent "town meeting" in Ohio proved; but nobody in authority will admit it, as that meeting also proved.

We are lying, endangering civilians, risking the deaths of children, subverting our own Constitution, shaming ourselves before history... for money. And power. And for no other reason.

But that, God help us, is not all. Not nearly. For there is another question that TV's talking heads never address, a question that hasn't rated a newspaper headline: *How did Saddam Hussein get the capacity to make biological weapons?* The answer is buried in two unemphasized paragraphs in a long story in February 26th's *New York Times*. Saddam purchased the deadly germs in the 1980s from the American Type Culture Collection, a private company in Rockville, Maryland - germs that had come from Fort Detrick, Maryland, where we're engaged in germ warfare "research." The Reagan administration approved the sale.

We sold them the hateful stuff.

Sit with that awhile. Take it in. Contemplate the nature of your government, first to produce abomination; then to sell it to Iraq; then threatening to bomb Iraq for keeping what it purchased from us.

The evil is ours.

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