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The Rot at the Center of the Empire **by Jacob G. Hornberger**

The announcement that the U.S. government had relied on fake and false evidence in the attempt to secure approval of its invasion of Iraq was, by and large, met by a collective yawn from the American people, especially the members of Congress. It's just one more example of the depths of moral depravity to which our nation has fallen.

Think about it: After months of enumerating a long laundry list of alternating justifications for invading Iraq and killing lots of people and after looking for every conceivable technical violation of UN resolutions to justify an invasion, it turned out that the federal government had cited and relied on fake and false evidence to persuade the American people and the UN Security Council that an invasion was necessary — an invasion that killed thousands of Iraqis, including both ordinary soldiers and civilians.

Of course, federal officials are playing the innocent. One U.S. official said, “We fell for it.” Yeah, sure! The most advanced intelligence service in the history of the world fell for what UN inspectors were able to ascertain were faked and forged documents.

Of course, given the administration's almost desperate attempt to find a “smoking gun” that would convince people to support the killing of thousands more innocent Iraqi people in order to effect a “regime change” in Iraq, one possibility is that U.S. officials simply didn't look too hard or too closely at the fake evidence before citing it as another excuse to invade Iraq.

For its part, the FBI was considering “the possibility that a foreign government [was] using a deception campaign to foster support for military action.”

Oh? Foreign governments do that sort of thing? Only foreign governments?

Another possibility, of course, is that agents of the U.S. government knowingly, intentionally, and deliberately manufactured the fake and false evidence. Uncompromising defenders of the federal government would say,

The federal government, unlike foreign regimes, should be presumed innocent of any wrongdoing until proven guilty. Anyone can make a mistake. I'm sure that that's what happened here. Surely the U.S. government would never knowingly, intentionally, and deliberately manufacture fake and fraudulent evidence on which an important issue such as war might turn, especially a war that was being planned by the neo-cons as far back as 1998.

Oh? The federal government doesn't engage in such misconduct? Give me a break! At the risk of employing a French expression (which I assume Congress has not yet made illegal), "Au contraire!"

After all, didn't the feds knowingly, intentionally, and deliberately obstruct justice in an official federal court proceeding in which they were desperately attempting to convict Randy Weaver, an innocent man? Didn't they perjure themselves and hide and destroy official documents in that federal proceeding with the specific hope and intent that the jury would convict Weaver? Didn't they lie about using incendiary devices at Waco?

And if they would do that against Randy Weaver or the Branch Davidians, why shouldn't we assume that they would do it against Saddam Hussein? Aren't the political stakes much higher in the case of Iraq than they were in the cases of Ruby Ridge and Waco?

In the 1960s, my father was the U.S. magistrate in my hometown of Laredo, Texas, which was one of the major ports of entry from Mexico. Whenever the feds arrested someone, they would bring him to the U.S. magistrate for a preliminary hearing and the setting of bail. After the suspect was indicted, he would appear before a U.S. district judge for arraignment and trial.

At the international bridge, everyone entering the United States was subject to a complete search by U.S. Customs officials. In the 1960s, many long-haired, anti-war hippies were being arrested at the bridge for possession of marijuana.

My father related to me that one day the U.S. district judge (who ordinarily was considered very pro-government) called him into his office and said, "Jack, I'm becoming increasingly concerned about the dropsie cases." What he was referring to was the increasing practice of U.S. officials to "drop" some marijuana into the cars of long-haired, anti-war hippies who they "knew" were guilty of smoking dope at sometime in their life.

The reason for the federal judge's concern was that he knew that average Americans, virtually all of whom had attended public schools, would never believe that their federal officials would engage in such misconduct or that they would ever lie, especially after having sworn to uphold and defend the Constitution and especially after swearing to tell the truth with their hand placed on a Bible. The federal agents knew that in a swearing match between a Customs agent in a federal uniform and crew cut and a long-haired, anti-war hippie, the jury would always assume that it was the federal agent who was telling the truth.

Both the federal judge and the U.S. magistrate knew differently. They knew that when federal officials are out to get someone they feel is deserving of punishment, they oftentimes stop at nothing to secure his punishment, including lying, committing perjury, falsifying documents, and obstructing justice.

Vietnam War lies

Recall the matter of Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers. Ellsberg was a high official in the Pentagon and the RAND Corporation, which did studies for the Pentagon, during the Vietnam War. He discovered a secret internal Pentagon history of America's involvement in the Vietnam War that detailed the many lies that had been told to the American people — lies that had been used as the justification for sending tens of thousands of American GIs to their deaths, not to mention the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese who were being killed.

One of the biggest lies concerned the false and fake report of the North Vietnamese "attack" at the Gulf of Tonkin, which was used as the means to circumvent the constitutional requirement of a congressional declaration of war before the president may wage war.

Ellsberg secretly copied the documents and released them to the *New York Times*. The federal government immediately secured an injunction against the publication of the Pentagon Papers. Even worse, they actually indicted Ellsberg for treason and, perhaps worst of all, they broke into his psychiatrist's office in the hope of finding evidence to destroy him in the public eye.

Fortunately, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the publication of the documents and a federal judge dismissed the charges against Ellsberg on the basis of the government's misconduct. When the truth was revealed, the American people were finally able to force their government, including the Pentagon, to withdraw all U.S. forces from Vietnam.

It is impossible to estimate how many lives were saved by the courage of Daniel Ellsberg. It is impossible to estimate how many more lives would have been lost by the rot at the core of the American empire, a rot that protects lies, obstruction of justice, and other such wrongdoing.

Indifference to federal wrongdoing

Unfortunately, every time federal wrongdoing emanating from the rot is exposed, many Americans seem to take it with a grain of salt. They brush the disclosure aside, almost as if they would have preferred never learning about it. The attitude seems to be: Do whatever you think needs to be done, but just don't tell me about it because I don't want to be responsible for the moral consequences.

Thus, when Americans learned that the feds had subjected African Americans to syphilis experiments, their reaction was predictable: "This is terrible. We just have to make sure it never happens again." It was the same when they learned that the feds had subjected Americans to radiation, chemical, and biological experiments.

It was the same after the feds gassed their own people at Waco. It was the same after the feds killed Randy Weaver's wife and young son at Ruby Ridge and then engaged in their deliberate pattern of perjury and obstruction of justice in their attempt to wrongfully convict Weaver, whom the jury ultimately adjudged not guilty of the serious crimes that the feds had accused him of.

Or consider that American jurors will quickly and without thinking convict an American businessman of paying bribes to foreign officials to circumvent ridiculous regulations. But when federal officials use U.S. taxpayer money to engage in a public spectacle of bribery and blackmail of foreign countries in a desperate attempt to win their support or their vote, Americans are indifferent.

One of the best examples of the moral numbness and blindness that afflicts Americans has been the federal government's horrific conduct against the Iraqi people, both before and after the end of the Persian Gulf War in 1991.

Before the war, the U.S. government furnished chemical and biological weapons to Saddam Hussein, with the express intention that he use them against the Iranian people.

Let that sink in: Federal officials entered into a partnership (or conspiracy, if you prefer, given that federal officials kept the agreement secret for many years) with Saddam Hussein in which the

U.S. government agreed to (and did) furnish Saddam with U.S.-made weapons of mass destruction and he, in turn, agreed to (and did) use those weapons against the Iranian people. (See [“Sanctions: The 12-Year War against the Iraqi People.”](#))

When U.S. Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.) asked U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld about the germ transfers to Saddam Hussein, Rumsfeld innocently replied, “I have never heard anything like what you’ve read, I have no knowledge of it whatsoever, and I doubt it.” Rumsfeld added that he would ask the Defense Department and other agencies to search their records for evidence of the transfers.

How in the world could a high U.S. official not know or even forget about transferring weapons of mass destruction to Saddam Hussein, especially given that Rumsfeld himself played a key role in the foreign policy shift to Iraq in the 1980s and was even assigned by the first Bush administration to cozy up to Saddam Hussein?

Oh, it just couldn’t be that Rumsfeld was lying to Senator Byrd when he played the innocent, could it? U.S. federal officials don’t lie. They don’t commit perjury. They don’t use fake and false evidence. They don’t furnish weapons of mass destruction to brutal foreign dictators. They don’t teach dictators how to torture their own people. They don’t engage in obstruction of justice. Only corrupt foreign officials do those kinds of things.

A long war against Iraq

After the Persian Gulf War, instead of simply entering into a peace treaty with Iraq that would have brought hostilities to an end, the feds employed the method that was used at the end of the Korean War (another war waged without the constitutionally required declaration of war from Congress): Keep the tensions and hostilities going as long as possible, which provides a constant and continual threat justifying ever-increasing budgets for the military-industrial complex.

Thus, year after year the feds have engaged in continual illegal bombing attacks against the people of Iraq (enforcing the so-called no-fly zones in the absence of any UN resolution authorizing either the zones or the attacks) and in enforcing what is arguably the most brutal and comprehensive set of economic sanctions in history.

The horrible significance of those economic sanctions is twofold: Not only have they contributed to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children, but year after year federal officials have

been even more indifferent to those deaths than they were to the deaths of the Branch Davidian children, whom they gassed, or to the death of Randy Weaver's boy, whom they shot in the back.

What kind of government would react with indifference to a failed and destructive policy of economic sanctions that it knows is contributing to the deaths of multitudes of innocent children? What kind of government would employ a policy that squeezed the life out of children in the hope of persuading their parents to oust their ruler from office? What kind of government would subject its own soldiers to radiation without any warning?

Indeed, what kind of government would put its own citizens in harm's way by leaving such a policy in effect after being warned by terrorists after the 1993 World Trade Center attack that that policy would motivate more terrorist attacks against Americans?

The rot within our midst

There is a rot at the center of the American empire, and the rot has been there a long time. Unfortunately, it is a rot that the American people simply do not want to confront. It's just too painful to confront the possibility that the root of their woes lies with the rot at the center of their empire.

It was the same in the Soviet Union. Most Russians who worked for the Soviet government were the same as Americans who work for the U.S. government — they were honest, hard-working, ordinary people who believed in their country, worked hard at their jobs, and were busy raising their families.

But at the core of the Soviet system was a rot, and that rot attracted a certain type of vermin that thrived off the rot. And no matter how devoted and hard-working the ordinary Soviet worker was, his dedication and labor could not eradicate the rot at the core of the Soviet empire. The problem was a systemic one.

One of the worst consequences of this kind of rot is not only that it diminishes the moral consciousness of people in a society but also that it causes them to live what might be called the "life of the lie." The affliction enables them to easily recognize wrongdoing by foreign regimes but precludes them from recognizing the wrongdoing of their own government.

Thus, if it was the Soviet government incarcerating Russian citizens for the rest of their lives without a trial and without even being permitted to speak to an attorney, Americans would be outraged.

If it was the Soviet government torturing criminal suspects or prisoners of war, Americans would be outraged. If it was the Soviet government using innocent children as an instrument of foreign policy, Americans would be outraged.

If it was the Soviet government spying on and monitoring the activities of the Russian people, Americans would be outraged.

If it was the Soviet government secretly spying on UN Security Council members, Americans would be outraged.

If it was the Soviet government waging a war of aggression against Afghanistan or Czechoslovakia, Americans would be outraged.

But if it's the U.S. government contributing to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children through the most brutal set of economic sanctions in history; sacrificing American GIs and killing thousands of Iraqis in a "liberating" war of aggression of Iraq; arresting and incarcerating U.S. citizens for the rest of their lives without a trial and without being permitted to even talk to a lawyer; and torturing both POWs and criminal suspects, all of a sudden the conscience of all too many Americans disintegrates into mush. Thus, for example, while people consider it evil for Saddam Hussein to have used chemical weapons against the Iranian people, they feel it was just an "honest mistake in foreign policy" for U.S. officials to have furnished those weapons to him with the express intention that he use them against the Iranian people.

Neither Saddam Hussein nor Osama bin Laden nor North Korea nor Iran nor the Islamic world is the biggest threat to the liberty, health, safety, and welfare of the American people. Instead, that threat lies with the cancerous rot that continues to grow at the center of the American empire — a rot that in fact comes with empire. Until Americans finally confront that uncomfortable truth, they will continue to suffer the consequences. Unfortunately, it might take a catastrophe before they decide to do so.

Jacob Hornberger is founder and president of The Future of Freedom Foundation. A version of this article, together with pertinent links, was originally published on [March 14, 2003](#), on The Future of Freedom Foundation's website. Send him [email](#).

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