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## **Iraqi Sanctions: Were They Worth It?** **by Sheldon Richman**

In May 1996 Madeleine Albright, who was then the U.S. ambassador to the UN, was asked by *60 Minutes* correspondent Lesley Stahl, in reference to years of U.S.-led economic sanctions against Iraq,

We have heard that half a million children have died. I mean, that is more children than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?

To which Ambassador Albright responded,

I think that is a very hard choice, but the price, we think, the price is worth it.

That remark caused no great public outcry, although, according to journalist Matt Welch, some students protested when Albright spoke at college campuses. The following January Albright was confirmed by the U.S. Senate as President Clinton's secretary of state. In her opening statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which was considering her appointment, she said,

We will insist on maintaining tough U.N. sanctions against Iraq unless and until that regime complies with relevant Security Council resolutions.

Apparently no member of the committee asked her about her statement on *60 Minutes*. (A PBS *NewsHour* report showed highlights of the hearing, but no questions about her statement were broadcast.) Albright was confirmed.

Why bring this up now? Albright has just published her memoirs, *Madam Secretary*, in which she clarifies her statement. Here's what she writes:

I must have been crazy; I should have answered the question by reframing it and pointing out the inherent flaws in the premise behind it. Saddam Hussein could have prevented any child from suffering simply by meeting his obligations.... As soon as I had spoken, I wished for the power to freeze time and take back those words. My reply had been a terrible mistake, hasty, clumsy and wrong. Nothing matters more than the lives of innocent people. I had fallen into the trap and said something I simply did not mean. That was no one's fault but my own [page 275].

In the paragraph before this one she complains about the *60 Minutes* report:

Little effort was made to explain Saddam's culpability, his misuse of Iraqi resources, or the fact that we were not embargoing medicine or food.

When one reviews the facts, it is clear that Albright's explanation is woefully inadequate. First, it contains an apparent contradiction. She says food and medicine were not embargoed, but then she says Saddam Hussein could have avoided the suffering "simply by meeting his obligations." Does that mean more food and other vital things would have been available had Hussein done what the U.S. government wanted? If so, weren't American officials at least partly responsible for the harm done to the Iraqi people? (More on this below.)

### **Iraq's food-rationing program**

Saddam did not use the sanctions as an excuse to let the Iraqi people starve. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* reported that he maintained an elaborate food-rationing program, presumably to hold the loyalty of the Iraqi people, which the sanctions were intended to dissolve. He did such a "good job" of creating dependence on the government for food that current American administrators in Iraq find the Iraqis reluctant to give up the program even though Saddam is gone and the sanctions are over.

As John Tierney wrote in the *New York Times* on October 12,

To Saddam Hussein, a culture of dependency was not a social problem but a political plus. Father Saddam, as he liked to be called, provided citizens with subsidized homes, cheap energy and, most important, free food. After international sanctions were imposed on Iraq in 1990, he started a program that now uses 300 government warehouses and more than 60,000 workers to deliver a billion pounds of groceries every month — a basket of rations guaranteed to every citizen, rich or poor.

American and Iraqi authorities are now struggling to get out of the grocery-delivery business without letting anyone go hungry.

*Washington Post* reporter Rajiv Chandrasekaran observed before the war,

The handouts have kept food on the table for ... most ... Iraqi families, who can no longer afford to purchase wheat, rice and other staples at market prices because of debilitating U.N. economic sanctions imposed after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

Chandrasekaran continued:

The ration program is regarded by the United Nations as the largest and most efficient food-distribution system of its kind in the world. It has also become what is perhaps Hussein's most strategic tool to maintain popular support over the last decade.

The United States and other Western nations had hoped the sanctions, which devastated Iraq's once-prosperous economy, would lead Iraqis to rebel against their leader or, at the least, compel him to fully cooperate with U.N. inspectors hunting for weapons of mass destruction. But Hussein has held firm in large part by using food to stem discontent with the pain of sanctions, employing a massive network of trucks, computers, warehouses and neighborhood distributors to provide basic sustenance for every Iraqi.

Albright is clearly being disingenuous. Contrary to what she writes, food was initially embargoed, along with everything else but medicine in 1990 after Iraq invaded Kuwait. Although the embargo on food ended in April 1991, Iraq was hampered in importing it because Iraqi oil couldn't be exported. Iraq was heavily dependent on oil exports and food imports: no exports, no imports. According to Richard Garfield of Columbia University, "Iraq's legal foreign trade was cut by an estimated 90% by sanctions."

### **The "oil for food" program**

The UN's "oil for food" program, started in 1996 after Saddam dropped his opposition, was supposed to remedy shortages of food and other needed goods. But it didn't fully, because the oil proceeds were not available in their entirety. Counterpunch.org reported in 1999,

Proceeds from such oil sales are banked in New York.... Thirty-four percent is skimmed off for disbursement to outside parties with claims on Iraq, such as the Kuwaitis, as well as to meet the costs of the UN effort in Iraq. A further thirteen percent goes to meet the needs of the Kurdish autonomous area in the north.

With the remaining limited amount of money the Iraqi government could order "food, medicine, medical equipment, infrastructure equipment to repair water and sanitation" and other

things. But — and here's the rub — the U.S. government could veto or delay any items ordered. And it did.

As Joy Gordon reported in the November 2001 *Harper's*,

The United States has fought aggressively throughout the last decade to purposefully minimize the humanitarian goods that enter the country.... Since August 1991 the United States has blocked most purchases of materials necessary for Iraq to generate electricity, as well as equipment for radio, telephone, and other communications. Often restrictions have hinged on the withholding of a single essential element, rendering many approved items useless. For example, Iraq was allowed to purchase a sewage treatment plant but was blocked from buying the generator necessary to run it; this in a country that has been pouring 300,000 tons of raw sewage daily into its rivers.

Moreover, for Albright to say that food and medicine were not embargoed is to evade the fact that critical public-health needs could not be addressed because of the sanctions. Preventing a society from purifying its water and treating its sewage is a particularly brutal way to inflict harm, especially on its children. Disease was rampant, and infant mortality rose, at least in part because of the sanctions.

And let's not forget that destruction of Iraq's infrastructure was a deliberate aim of the U.S. bombing during the 1991 Gulf War. In his book *Terrorism and Tyranny*, James Bovard documents that the civilian infrastructure was deliberately targeted and that the health risks to the Iraqi people were anticipated.

No wonder two UN humanitarian coordinators quit over the sanctions. As one of them, Denis Halliday, said when he left in 1998,

I've been using the word "genocide" because this is a deliberate policy to destroy the people of Iraq. I'm afraid I have no other view.

"Genocide" seems to be an overstatement, but that should not allow us to think that the sanctions imposed no serious hardship. (Hans von Sponeck was the other coordinator who resigned under protest.)

### **Death by sanctions**

It is interesting that Albright, in making her infamous statement to Lesley Stahl, did not question the 500,000 child-death figure. It is almost certainly an exaggeration, if not an outright falsehood. (Some guesstimates went even higher.) Matt Welch, writing on reason.com, supplies evidence that this estimate was derived either by flawed survey methods or by taking the word of the Iraqi government at face value. (See his "The Politics of Dead Children," Reason Online, www.

reason.com, March 2002.) Some of the claims were accompanied by cautious language about what the deaths were actually attributable to, but that language was often ignored by the more polemical opponents of sanctions.

Nevertheless, there is every reason to believe the number of deaths was substantial. In 1999 Richard Garfield, a professor of clinical international nursing at Columbia University, put the likely mortality figure at 227,000 for children under 5 from August 1991 to 1998, most of them directly or indirectly attributable to the sanctions. (Welch notes that Garfield has raised his “likely” estimate to 350,000.)

Garfield wrote,

The underlying causes of these excess deaths include contaminated water, lack of high quality foods, inadequate breast feeding, poor weaning practices, and inadequate supplies in the curative health care system. This was the product of both a lack of some essential goods, and inadequate or inefficient use of existing essential goods.... Despite a steep rise in mortality rates, most Iraqi children survive under the social, economic, and political crises of the 1990s in Iraq but experience profound limitations on their health and well being (“Morbidity and Mortality among Iraqi Children, Summary of General Findings,” March 1999, posted at Fourth Freedom Forum, [www.fourthfreedom.org/php/t-si-index.php?hinc=garf-sum.hinc](http://www.fourthfreedom.org/php/t-si-index.php?hinc=garf-sum.hinc)).

Do U.S. officials really wish to assert their moral authority by claiming that “only” 227,000–350,000 children died rather than 500,000?

### **Moral responsibility**

Something should also be said about culpability for whatever deaths and other hardship occurred because of the sanctions. Champions of the economic warfare against Iraq attempt to blame all the deaths on Saddam Hussein. They argue that if he had complied with U.S. and UN demands there would have been no dire consequences. Therefore, those who imposed the sanctions are not blameworthy. Does this argument hold water? No, it doesn't.

Saddam Hussein was long portrayed as a cruel dictator (which he of course was), willing to use poison gas against “his own people” (although one wonders if he regarded the Kurds as “his people”). If they believed their own rhetoric, why would the American officials put the Iraqi people at the mercy of such a man by imposing sanctions that would make it difficult to get enough food, medicine, pure water, sewage treatment, and the like? Weren't the officials concerned that he would let thousands of people suffer and die and then blame the deaths on the sanctions?

I submit that in such circumstances, the enforcers of the sanctions are partly responsible for the deaths. Imagine a desperate criminal holed up in a house with hostages. If the police

announce that no food will be permitted in unless the criminal surrenders, and if the criminal refuses, leading to the starvation of the hostages, aren't the police partly at fault? There is no absolution in saying that the hostages would still be alive if the criminal had surrendered. (If Waco comes to mind, it should.)

Albright now writes that her answer to Stahl was "crazy" and that she regretted it "as soon as [she] had spoken." Yet she did not take back her words between 1996 and September 11, 2001. According to Matt Welch, in a speech at the University of Southern California shortly after 9/11 she "quietly" expressed regret for her statement, claiming it had been taken out of context. (She does not make that point in her book.) But neither her office nor the Clinton administration issued a prominent retraction to the American people or the world. Could that be because her initial answer was sincere and that her belated apology was issued with her legacy in mind? We can be sure of one thing: word of her original response spread throughout the Arab world. Maybe even among some of the 9/11 terrorists.

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**This article was originally published in the January 2004 edition of *Freedom Daily*.**