



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Iraqi Sanctions and American Intentions: Blameless Carnage? Part 1

by James Bovard

President Bush's advisors assured Americans that U.S. troops would be greeted as liberators — with flowers and hugs — when the United States invaded Iraq. That promise turned out to be one of the biggest frauds of the Iraqi debacle.

One major reason for the animosity to U.S. troops is the lingering impact and bitter memories of the UN sanctions imposed on the Iraqis for 13 years, largely at the behest of the U.S. government. It is impossible to understand the current situation in Iraq without examining the sanctions and their toll.

President Bush, in the months before attacking Iraq, portrayed the sufferings and deprivation of the Iraqi people as resulting from the evil of Saddam Hussein. Bush's comments were intended as an antidote to the charge by Osama bin Laden a month after 9/11 that "a million innocent children are dying at this time as we speak, killed in Iraq without any guilt." Bin Laden listed the economic sanctions against Iraq as one of the three main reasons for his holy war against the United States.

Most Western experts believe that bin Laden sharply overstated the death toll. A United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) report in 1999 concluded that half a million Iraqi children had died in the previous eight years because of the sanctions. Columbia University professor Richard Garfield, an epidemiologist and an expert on the effects of sanctions, estimated in 2003 that the sanctions had resulted in infant and young-child fatalities numbering between 343,900 and 529,000.

Regardless of the precise number of fatalities (which will never be known), the sanctions were a key factor in inflaming Arab anger against the United States. The sanctions were initially imposed to punish Iraq for invading Kuwait and then were kept in place after the Gulf War supposedly in order to pressure Saddam to disarm.

Sanctions wreaked havoc on the Iraqi people, in part because the Pentagon intentionally destroyed Iraq's water-treatment systems during the first U.S.-Iraq war:

- A January 22, 1991, Defense Intelligence Agency report titled “Iraq Water Treatment Vulnerabilities” noted,

Iraq depends on importing specialized equipment and some chemicals to purify its water supply, most of which is heavily mineralized and frequently brackish to saline.... Failing to secure supplies will result in a shortage of pure drinking water for much of the population. This could lead to increased incidences, if not epidemics, of disease.... Unless the water is purified with chlorine, epidemics of such diseases as cholera, hepatitis, and typhoid could occur.

- The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency estimated in early 1991 that “it probably will take at least six months (to June 1991) before the [Iraqi water treatment] system is fully degraded” from the bombing during the Gulf War and the UN sanctions.

- A May 1991 Pentagon analysis entitled “Status of Disease at Refugee Camps,” noted,

Cholera and measles have emerged at refugee camps. Further infectious diseases will spread due to inadequate water treatment and poor sanitation.

- A June 1991 Pentagon analysis noted that infectious disease rates had increased since the Gulf War and warned, “The Iraqi regime will continue to exploit disease incidence data for its own political purposes.”

George Washington University professor Thomas Nagy, who marshaled the preceding reports in an analysis in the September 2001 issue of *The Progressive*, concluded, The United States knew it had the capacity to devastate the water treatment system of Iraq. It knew what the consequences would be: increased outbreaks of disease and high rates of child mortality. And it was more concerned about the public relations nightmare for Washington than the actual nightmare that the sanctions created for innocent Iraqis.

Pentagon intent

A *Washington Post* analysis published on June 23, 1991, noted that Pentagon officials admitted that, rather than concentrating solely on military targets, the U.S. bombing campaign “sought to achieve some of their military objectives in the Persian Gulf War by disabling Iraqi society at large” and “deliberately did great harm to Iraq’s ability to support itself as an industrial society.”

The bombing campaign targeted Iraq’s electrical power system, thereby destroying the country’s ability to operate its water-treatment plants. One Pentagon official who helped plan the bombing campaign observed,

People say, “You didn’t recognize that it was going to have an effect on water or sewage.” Well, what were we trying to do with sanctions — help out the Iraqi people? No. What we were doing with the attacks on infrastructure was to accelerate the effect of the sanctions.

Col. John Warden III, deputy director of strategy for the Air Force, observed,

Saddam Hussein cannot restore his own electricity. He needs help. If there are political objectives that the UN coalition has, it can say, “Saddam, when you agree to do these things, we will allow people to come in and fix your electricity.” It gives us long-term leverage.

Another Air Force planner observed,

We wanted to let people know, “Get rid of this guy and we’ll be more than happy to assist in rebuilding. We’re not going to tolerate Saddam Hussein or his regime. Fix that, and we’ll fix your electricity.”

The *Post* explained the Pentagon’s rationale for punishing the Iraqi people:

Among the justifications offered now, particularly by the Air Force in recent briefings, is that Iraqi civilians were not blameless for Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait. “The definition of innocents gets to be a little bit unclear,” said a senior Air Force officer, noting that many Iraqis supported the invasion of Kuwait. “They do live there, and ultimately the people have some control over what goes on in their country.”

A Harvard School of Public Health team visited Iraq in the months after the war and found epidemic levels of typhoid and cholera as well as pervasive acute malnutrition. The *Post* noted,

In an estimate not substantively disputed by the Pentagon, the [Harvard] team projected that “at least 170,000 children under five years of age will die in the coming year from the delayed effects” of the bombing.

The U.S. military understood the havoc the 1991 bombing unleashed. A 1995 article entitled “The Enemy as a System” by John Warden, published in the Air Force’s *Airpower Journal*, discussed the benefits of bombing “dual-use targets” and noted,

A key example of such dual-use targeting was the destruction of Iraqi electrical power facilities in Desert Storm.... [Destruction] of these facilities shut down water purification and sewage treatment

plants. As a result, epidemics of gastroenteritis, cholera, and typhoid broke out, leading to perhaps as many as 100,000 civilian deaths and a doubling of the infant mortality rate.

The article concluded that the U.S. Air Force has a “vested interest in attacking dual-use targets” that undermine “civilian morale.”

Infant mortality rates

In 1995, a team of doctors (including a representative of the Harvard School of Public Health) visited Iraq under the auspices of the UN Food and Agricultural Organization to examine the nutritional status and mortality rates of young children in Baghdad. They concluded that the sanctions had resulted in the deaths of 567,000 children in the previous five years. (Most subsequent studies implicitly concluded that this study sharply overestimated the mortality toll in the first years of the sanctions.)

CBS correspondent Lesley Stahl relied on this estimate in 1996 when she asked U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright,

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

Albright answered,

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

Albright’s words echoed like thunder through the Arab world in the following years.

At the behest of the United States and Britain, the United Nations maintained a de facto embargo on Iraq through 1996, when an “oil for food” program was approved. Saddam and the UN had wrangled for five years over the conditions under which Iraq would be permitted to resume oil exports. The “oil for food” program gave the UN Security Council veto power over how every cent of Iraqi oil revenues would be spent. The de facto blockade on the Iraqi people made many common illnesses far more lethal.

The *Detroit News* noted, “Many diseases — including cancer — cannot be treated in Iraq.” The *Washington Post* noted in December 2002, shortly after the Bush administration proposed new restrictions on antibiotic imports by Iraq,

As a practical matter, the most modern and effective medicines already are hard to come by here, even some of those used to treat routine illness.

One Baghdad pharmacist groused that he “cannot get atropine or inhalers for asthmatics or insulin for diabetics.”

The infant/young-child mortality rate in Iraq rose from 50 per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 133 per 1,000 in 2001 (meaning that more than 13 percent of Iraqi children die before the age of five). Iraq had by far the sharpest rise in infant/young-child mortality of any nation in the world during that period, according to UNICEF. Professor Garfield declared,

It is the only instance of a sustained increase in mortality in a stable population of more than 2 million in the last 200 years.

Sanctions advocates claimed that the punitive policy would spur discontent and eventually undermine Saddam’s rule. However, a *Harvard International Review* analysis noted,

Sanctions seem to have bolstered Saddam’s domestic popularity. He uses the sanctions to demonize the West and to rally support for his leadership; they have been a convenient scapegoat for internal problems. The rations system he has established in response to the sanctions has tightened his control of Iraqi citizens’ everyday lives, making them totally dependent on the government for mere survival and less likely to challenge his authority for fear of starvation.

*James Bovard is author of **Lost Rights** (1994) and [**Terrorism and Tyranny: How Bush's Crusade is Sabotaging Peace, Justice, and Freedom**](#) (Palgrave-Macmillan, September 2003) and serves as a policy advisor for The Future of Freedom Foundation.*

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