



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

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Saddam as the Twentieth Hijacker

by James Bovard

The 9/11 commission reported in June that there was no “collaborative relationship” between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda, and thus that Bush’s Enemy No. 1 had no role in the 9/11 attacks. Far from finding any partnership between the two, the report noted that bin Laden “at one time sponsored anti-Saddam Islamists in Iraqi Kurdistan.” This report effectively nuked a key justification for the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

President Bush responded to the revelation by asserting, “The reason I keep insisting that there was a relationship between Iraq and Saddam and al-Qaeda is because there was a relationship between Iraq and al-Qaeda.” But the evidence showed that though al-Qaeda had repeatedly approached Saddam’s regime about working together, the Iraqi government had effectively rebuffed their proposals.

The Bush administration cannot brush aside the 9/11 commission’s report. A commission whose chairman was appointed by Bush and whose ground rules were dictated in large part by the White House has found that the Bush administration’s claim regarding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq was baseless. And after more than 900 American soldiers have died in Iraq, this cannot qualify as a harmless error.

It is vital to recognize how persistently and intently Bush exploited Americans’ fears on the Saddam–al-Qaeda link to justify his preemptive assault against Iraq.

In a memo President Bush sent on March 18, 2003, notifying Congress that he was launching the war against Iraq, he declared that he was acting

to take the necessary actions against international terrorists and terrorist organizations, including those nations, organizations, or persons who planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001.

Bush invoked this justification even though his administration had never offered a shred of evidence tying Saddam to 9/11. But the Saddam–al-Qaeda link was the key to the

administration's exploitation of the ignorance of the American people. Bush and team continually threw out new accusations and then backed off, knowing that few people were paying close enough attention to recognize that previous charges had collapsed like a row of houses of cards.

As much as Bush may have personally disliked Saddam, he still needed pretexts to rally public support to attack a nation 6,000 miles away that appeared to pose no threat to America. In the first months after 9/11, there was little mention of Iraq in the public pronouncements by Bush and his top officials. But in his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, Bush stunned many people by announcing that Iraq, along with Iran and North Korea, was part of an "axis of evil."

Conflating Saddam and Osama

Since the war on terrorism had stratospheric support levels in the polls from the American people, the best way to sanctify a war against Iraq was to redefine it as part of the war on terrorism. Bush, commenting to the press on September 25, 2002, compared al-Qaeda and Saddam:

Al-Qaeda hides, Saddam doesn't, but the danger is, is that they work in concert. The danger is that al-Qaeda becomes an extension of Saddam's madness and his hatred and his capacity to extend weapons of mass destruction around the world.... You can't distinguish between al-Qaeda and Saddam when you talk about the war on terror.... They're both equally as bad, and equally as evil, and equally as destructive.

Bush had barely made the accusation before the White House began spinning his comments. White House press secretary Ari Fleischer "tried to play down the specificity of Bush's charge, saying the president was talking about what he feared could occur," the *Washington Post* reported.

On the following day, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced that the United States possessed "bulletproof" evidence linking Saddam and al-Qaeda. But it was apparently a bullet that could never be exposed to sunlight. (An earlier alleged link between Iraqi agents and hijacker Mohamed Atta meeting in Prague had long since collapsed, with the story disavowed by both the Central Intelligence Agency and the Czech government.)

On October 7, 2002, Bush, speaking to a selective audience of Republican donors and others in Cincinnati, laid out his logic:

We know that Iraq and the al-Qaeda terrorist network share a common enemy — the United States of America. We know that Iraq and al-Qaeda have had high-level contacts that go back a decade. Some al-Qaeda leaders who fled Afghanistan went to Iraq. These include one very senior al-Qaeda leader

who received medical treatment in Baghdad this year, and who has been associated with planning for chemical and biological attacks.... And we know that after September the 11th, Saddam Hussein's regime gleefully celebrated the terrorist attacks on America.

The fact that some Iraqis cheered the carnage on September 11 was offered as evidence that Saddam could team up with al-Qaeda for a second 9/11.

On November 1, 2002, at a Republican campaign rally in New Hampshire, Bush denounced Saddam:

We know he's got ties with al-Qaeda. A nightmare scenario, of course, is that he becomes the arsenal for a terrorist network, where they could attack America, and he'd leave no fingerprints behind.

The link between Saddam and al-Qaeda then took a three-month recess, returning in the 2003 State of the Union address, when Bush declared that "Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of al-Qaeda." Then he reached for the ultimate hot button:

Imagine those 19 hijackers with other weapons and other plans, this time armed by Saddam Hussein. It would take one vial, one canister, one crate slipped into this country to bring a day of horror like none we have ever known.

Three days later, when Bush was directly asked by a journalist at a White House press conference, "Do you believe that there is a link between Saddam Hussein, a direct link, and the men who attacked on September the 11th?" Bush replied, "I can't make that claim." Yet that did not stop him from continually implying it.

The bevy of new allegations were based on nothing more than guesses and hunches. The *Los Angeles Times* revealed,

The Bush administration's renewed assertions of links between Iraq and al-Qaeda are based largely on the murky case of a one-legged al-Qaeda suspect who was treated in Baghdad after being wounded in the war in Afghanistan.

Abu Musab Zarqawi, a terrorist group leader, spent time in Baghdad after the U.S. forces attacked Afghanistan but there was no evidence that he conspired with Saddam's regime while there. *Time* noted of Bush's message on Saddam and al-Qaeda,

If there was no visible evidence to link the two, he just used that fact to argue his point: the danger is everywhere, even if we can't see it; the threat is growing, even if we can't prove it. The

Administration's argument for war is based not on the strength of America's intelligence but on its weakness.

Shaping public opinion

Unless someone followed Bush's rhetoric on a full-time basis, he would miss the switching off and on of the Saddam–al-Qaeda connection. But it was not necessary for administration officials to continually assert the link — as long as they mentioned it often enough to plant the seeds and fan the fears in Americans' minds.

In the first weeks after 9/11, fewer than 10 percent of Americans suggested to poll takers that Saddam was the source of the terrorist attacks. However, after the constant accusations and insinuations by the Bush administration, the number soared.

A February 2003 poll found that 72 percent of Americans believed that Saddam was “personally involved in the September 11 attacks.” A January 2003 poll found that almost half of Americans believed that one or more of the 9/11 hijackers were Iraqi — even though not a single hijacker hailed from that country. Seventy-three percent believed that Saddam “is currently helping al-Qaeda.”

Bush played the Saddam-9/11 link like a master violinist. A *Christian Science Monitor* analysis published on March 14, 2003, noted,

In his prime-time press conference last week, which focused almost solely on Iraq, President Bush mentioned Sept. 11 eight times. He referred to Saddam Hussein many more times than that, often in the same breath with Sept. 11. Bush never pinned blame for the attacks directly on the Iraqi president. Still, the overall effect was to reinforce an impression that persists among much of the American public: that the Iraqi dictator did play a direct role in the attacks.... The White House appears to be encouraging this false impression, as it seeks to maintain American support for a possible war against Iraq.

After the 9/11 commission staff report came out, White House chief spokesman Scott McClellan was asked whether the Bush administration had misled the American people. McClellan replied, “I guess I don't look at polls and look at it in those terms. In terms of this administration, we laid out the facts very clearly for the American people.”

McClellan's reply epitomizes how the Bush administration will never admit any of its deceptions. The unjustified, unnecessary war against Iraq should be a lasting warning to Americans not to trust government officials who claim the need to kill in the name of peace.

*James Bovard is author of the forthcoming [**The Bush Betrayal**](#) as well as [**Lost Rights**](#) (1994) and [**Terrorism and Tyranny: Trampling Freedom, Justice and Peace to Rid the World of Evil**](#)*

(Palgrave-Macmillan, September 2003) and serves as a policy advisor for The Future of Freedom Foundation.

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