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Editorial

OUR HERODS

ON MAY 23RD OF THIS YEAR the British Defence Minister Geoff Hoon was questioned in the House of Commons about the pattern of Anglo-American attacks on Iraq. He replied:

Between 1 August 1992 and 16 December 1998, UK aircraft released 2.5 tons of ordnance over the southern no-fly zone at an average of 0.025 tons per month. We do not have sufficiently detailed records of coalition activity in this period to estimate what percentage of the coalition total this represents. Between 20 December 1998 and 17 May 2000, UK aircraft released 78 tons of ordnance over the southern no-fly zone, at an average of 5 tons per month. This figure represents approximately 20 per cent of the coalition total for this period.¹

In other words, over the past eighteen months the United States and United Kingdom have rained down some 400 tons of bombs and missiles on Iraq. Blair has been dropping deadly explosives on the country at a rate twenty times greater than Major. What explains this escalation? Its immediate origins are no mystery. On 16 December 1998 Clinton, on the eve of a vote indicting him for perjury and obstruction of justice in the House of Representatives, unleashed a round-the-clock aerial assault on Iraq, ostensibly to punish the regime in Baghdad for failure to cooperate with UN inspections, in fact to help deflect impeachment. Operation Desert Fox, fittingly named after a Nazi general, ran for seventy hours, blasting a hundred targets.

The fire-storm continued through the following year, unhindered by NATO's Balkan War. In August 1999 the *New York Times* reported:

American warplanes have methodically and with virtually no public discussion been attacking Iraq. In the last eight months, American and British pilots have fired more than 1,100 missiles against 359 targets in Iraq. This is triple the number of targets attacked in four furious days of strikes in December . . . By another measure, pilots have flown about two-thirds as many missions as NATO pilots flew over Yugoslavia in seventy-eight days of around-the-clock war there.²

In October American officials were telling the *Wall Street Journal* they would soon be running out of targets—‘We’re down to the last out-house’. By the end of the year, the Anglo-American airforces had flown more than 6,000 sorties, and dropped over 1,000 bombs on Iraq. By early 2001, the bombardment of Iraq will have lasted longer than the US invasion of Vietnam.

Yet a decade of assault from the air has been the lesser part of the rack on which Iraq has been put. Blockade by land and sea have inflicted still greater suffering. Economic sanctions have driven a population, whose levels of nutrition, schooling and public services were once well above regional standards, into fathomless misery. Before 1990 the country had a per capita GNP of over \$3,000. Today it is under \$500, making Iraq one of the poorest societies on earth.³ A land that once had high levels of literacy and an advanced system of health-care has been devastated by the West. Its social structure is in ruins, its people are denied the basic necessities of existence, its soil is polluted by uranium-tipped warheads. According to UN figures of last year, some 60 per cent of the population have no regular access to clean water, and over 80 per cent of schools need substantial repairs.⁴ In 1997 the FAO reckoned that 27 percent of Iraqis were suffering from chronic malnutrition. UNICEF reports that in the southern and central regions which contain 85 percent of the country’s population, infant mortality is twice that of the pre-Gulf War period.

¹ *Hansard*, 24 May 2000.

² Steven Lee Myers, ‘In Intense But Little-Noticed Fight, Allies Have Bombed Iraq All Year’, *New York Times*, 13 August 1999. For this and much else besides, see Anthony Arnove’s introduction to the collection edited by him, *The Siege of Iraq*, London 2000, pp. 9–20.

³ Peter Pellett, ‘Sanctions, Food, Nutrition and Health’, in *Siege of Iraq*, p. 155.

⁴ UN Report on the Current Humanitarian Situation in Iraq, March 1999.

The death-toll caused by deliberate strangulation of economic life cannot yet be estimated with full accuracy—that will be a task for historians. According to the most careful authority, Richard Garfield, ‘a conservative estimate of “excess deaths” among under five-year-olds since 1991 would be 300,000’,⁵ while UNICEF—reporting in 1997 that ‘4,500 children under the age of five are dying each month from hunger and disease’—reckons the number of small children killed by the blockade at 500,000.⁶ Other deaths are more difficult to quantify but, as Garfield points out, ‘UNICEF’s mortality rates represent only the tip of the iceberg as to the enormous damage done to the four out of five Iraqis who do survive beyond their fifth birthday’.⁷ In late 1998 the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq, former Assistant Secretary General Dennis Halliday, an Irishman, resigned from his post in protest against the blockade, declaring that the total deaths it had caused could be upwards of a million.⁸ When his successor Hans von Sponeck had the temerity to include civilian casualties from Anglo-American bombing raids in his brief, the Clinton and Blair regimes demanded his dismissal. In late 1999 he too resigned, explaining that his duty had been to the people of Iraq, and that ‘every month Iraq’s social fabric shows bigger holes’. The so-called Oil-For-Food sanctions, in place since 1996, allow Iraq only \$4 billion of petroleum exports a year, when a minimum of \$7 billion is needed even for greatly reduced national provision.⁹ In a decade, the US and UK have achieved a result without parallel in modern history. Iraq is now, Garfield reports, the only instance in the last two hundred years of a sustained, large-scale increase in mortality in a country with a stable population of over two million.¹⁰

What justification is offered for exacting this murderous revenge on a whole people? Three arguments recur in the official apologetics, and are relayed through the domesticated media. Firstly, Saddam Hussein

⁵ ‘The Public Health Impact of Sanctions’, *Middle East Report*, no. 215, Summer 2000, p. 17. Garfield is Professor of Clinical International Nursing at Columbia.

⁶ UNICEF, ‘Iraq Survey Shows “Humanitarian Emergency”’, 12 August 1999.

⁷ ‘Public Health Impact of Sanctions’, p. 17.

⁸ See *Siege of Iraq*, pp. 45, 67.

⁹ See Haris Gazdar and Athar Hussain, ‘Crisis and Response: A study of the Impact of Economic Sanctions in Iraq’, Asia Research Centre, London School of Economics, December 1997.

¹⁰ ‘Changes in Health and Well-Being in Iraq during the 1990s’, *Sanctions on Iraq—Background, Consequences, Strategies*, Cambridge 2000, p. 36.

is an insatiable aggressor, whose seizure of Kuwait not only violated international law, but threatened the stability of the entire region; no neighbour will be safe till he is overthrown. Secondly, his regime was stockpiling weapons of mass destruction, and was about to acquire a nuclear arsenal, posing an unheard-of danger to the international community. Thirdly, Saddam's dictatorship at home is of a malignant ferocity beyond compare, an embodiment of political evil whose continued existence no decent government can countenance. For all these reasons, the civilized world can never rest until Saddam is eliminated. Bombardment and blockade are the only means of doing so, without improper risk to the citizens of the West.

Each of these arguments is utterly hollow. The Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, a territory often administered from Basra or Baghdad in pre-colonial times, was no exceptional outrage in either the region or the world at large. The Indonesian seizure of East Timor had been accepted with equanimity by the West for the better part of two decades when the ruling family fled Kuwait. Still more pointedly, in the Middle East itself, Israel—a state founded on an original process of ethnic cleansing—had long defied UN resolutions mandating a relatively equal division of Palestine, repeatedly seized large areas of neighbouring territory, and was in occupation not only of the Gaza strip, the West Bank and the Golan Heights, but a belt of Southern Lebanon at the time. Far from resisting this expansionism, the United States continues to support, equip and fund it, without a murmur from its European allies, least of all Britain. The final outcome of this process is now in sight, as Washington supervises the reduction of the Palestinians to a few shrivelled bantustans at Israeli pleasure. The lesson is not that aggressive territorial expansion is a crime that cannot be allowed to pay. It is that to carry it off a state must act in the interests of the West as well: then it can be astonishingly successful. Iraq's seizure of Kuwait was not in the West's interest. It posed the threat that two-fifths of the world's oil reserves might be controlled by a modernizing Arab state with an independent foreign policy—unlike the West's feudal dependencies in Kuwait, the Gulf or Saudi Arabia. Hence Desert Storm.

So much for expansionism. As for the deadly threat from Iraqi weapons programmes, there was little out of the way about these either. So long as the regime in Baghdad was regarded as a friend in Washington and London—for some twenty years, as it crushed Communists at

home and fought Iranian mullahs abroad—few apprehensions about its armaments drive were expressed: chemical weapons could be used without complaint, export licences were granted, extraordinary shipments winked at. If nuclear capability was another question, it was not from any special fear of Iraq, but because since the sixties the United States has sought, in the interests of big-power monopoly, to prevent their spread to lesser states. Israel, naturally, has been exempted from the requirements of ‘non-proliferation’—not only stockpiling a large arsenal without the slightest remonstrance from the West, but enjoying active support in the concealment of its programme.¹¹ Once the Iraqi regime had turned against Western interests in the Gulf, of course, the possibility of it acquiring nuclear weapons suddenly moved up a routine US agenda to the status of an apocalyptic danger. Today, there is no stitch left on this scarecrow. On the one hand, the nuclear monopoly of the big powers, always a grotesque pretension, has collapsed—as it was bound to do—with the acquisition of weapons by India and Pakistan, with Iran no doubt soon to follow. On the other hand, Iraq’s own nuclear programme has been so thoroughly eradicated that even the super-hawk Scott Ritter—the UNSCOM inspector who boasted of his collaboration with Israeli intelligence, and set up the raids that triggered Desert Fox—now says there is no chance of its reconstitution, and that the blockade should be dropped.

Lastly, there is the claim that the domestic enormities of Saddam’s regime are so extreme that any measure is warranted to get rid of him. Since the Gulf War ended without a march on Baghdad, Washington and London have not been able to proclaim this officially, but they let it be understood with every informal briefing and insider commentary. No theme is more cherished by left-liberal camp-followers of officialdom, eager to explain that Saddam is an Arab Hitler, and since ‘fascism is worse than imperialism’, all people of good sense should unite behind the Strategic Air Command. This line of argument is, in fact, the *ultima ratio* of the blockade. In Clinton’s words, ‘sanctions will be there until the end of time, or as long as Saddam lasts’.¹² That the Ba’ath regime is

¹¹ Mordechai Vanunu, the technician at Israel’s Dimona nuclear facility who exposed his country’s nuclear weapons programme, was kidnapped in Rome in 1986 with the complicity of the Italian government, and has been held in an Israeli jail ever since, suffering over eleven years of solitary confinement.

¹² See Barbara Crossette, ‘For Iraq, a Dog House with Many Rooms’, *New York Times*, 23 November 1997.

a brutal tyranny no one could doubt—however long Western chancelleries overlooked it while Saddam was an ally. But that it is unique in its cruelties is an abject fiction. The lot of the Kurds in Turkey—where their language is not even allowed in schools and the Army’s war against the Kurdish population has displaced countless thousands of people from their homelands—has always been worse than in Iraq, where—whatever Saddam’s other crimes—there has never been any attempt at this kind of cultural annihilation. Yet as a valued member of NATO and candidate for the EU, Ankara suffers not the slightest measure against it, indeed can rely on Western help for its repression. The kidnapping of Öcalan¹³ supplies a fitting pendant to that of Vanunu, accompanied by soothing reportage in the Anglo-American media on Turkey’s progress towards responsible modernity. Who has ever suggested an Operation Urgent Rescue around Lake Van, or a no-fly zone over Diyarbakir, any more than a pre-emptive strike on Dimona?

If the fate of its Kurds has attracted most attention abroad, Ba’ath oppression has certainly not spared the Arab populations of Iraq either. But what of the firm Western ally on its southern borders? The Saudi kingdom makes not even a pretence of human rights as understood in Harvard, or elections as conceived at Westminster, not to speak of the condition it accords women, which would not pass muster in mediaeval Russia. Yet no state in the Arab world is more toasted in Washington. In killing and torture, Saddam was never a match for Suharto, whose massacres far exceeded any in Iraq. But no Third World regime was more prized by the West than the Indonesian dictatorship, from its bloody inception on down through the years when Saddam’s rule was declared such an iniquity that its removal was a moral imperative for the whole ‘international community’. In 1995, while American and British air power were pounding the outlaw in Baghdad, Clinton and Gore were receiving a trusty friend from Djakarta with open arms.¹⁴ In London,

¹³ Care of the Italian PDS, Greek PASOK, American CIA and Israeli Mossad.

¹⁴ Suharto—‘the aging, military-backed leader of Indonesia, and a man who also knows a good deal about how to keep dissenters under control’—was a star attraction, reported the *New York Times*. ‘When he arrived at the White House on Friday for a “private” visit with the President, the Cabinet room was jammed with top officials ready to welcome him. Vice President Gore was there, along with Secretary of State Warren Christopher; the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. John Shalikashvili; Commerce Secretary Ronald H. Brown; the United States trade representative, Mickey Kantor; the national security adviser, Anthony Lake, and many

Blair was despatching arms to the Indonesian dictatorship up until 1998 and, on the very eve of Suharto's fall, welcomed his regime at the Euro-Asian Summit in London—while naturally barring the Burmese junta, whose scale of victims may be modest by comparison but whose attitude to foreign investors is less enlightened.

But if not a single one of the standard arguments for the bombardment and blockade of Iraq stands up, there is still the most widespread fall-back of all: the shrug of dismissive admission—so what? Other states may be no less expansionist, seek nuclear weapons more effectively, maltreat or kill larger numbers of their citizens. But who cares? Not all injustices can be cured at one stroke. An evil elsewhere is not mended by a failure to do good here. Even if we only do the right thing once, isn't it better than not doing it at all? Rather double standards than none. Such is now the orthodox casuistry among loyal factotums, columnists and courtiers of the Clinton and Blair regimes, to be heard on those occasions when denial of inconvenient—that is: Saudi, Israeli, Indonesian, Turkish or any other—realities becomes impossible. 'We need to get used to the idea of double standards', writes Blair's Personal Assistant for Foreign Affairs, ex-diplomat Robert Cooper, quite openly.¹⁵ The underlying maxim of this cynicism is: we will punish the crimes of our enemies and reward the crimes of our friends. Isn't that at least

others. "There wasn't an empty chair in the room," one participant said. "No one used to treat the Indonesians like this, and it said a lot about how our priorities in the world have changed." The *New York Times* left no doubt about what these were. Suharto, it went on, was 'sitting on the ultimate emerging market: some 13,000 islands, a population of 193 million and an economy growing at more than 7 percent a year. The country remains wildly corrupt and Mr. Suharto's family controls leading businesses that competitors in Jakarta would be unwise to challenge. But Mr. Suharto, unlike the Chinese, has been savvy in keeping Washington happy. He has deregulated the economy, opened Indonesia to foreign investors and kept the Japanese, Indonesia's largest supplier of foreign aid, from grabbing more than a quarter of the market for goods imported into the country. So Mr. Clinton made the requisite complaints about Indonesia's repressive tactics in East Timor, where anti-Government protests continue, and moved right on to business, getting Mr. Suharto's support for market-opening progress during the annual Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Osaka in mid-November. "He's our kind of guy," a senior Administration official, who deals often on Asian policy, said'. See David Sanger, 'Real Politics: Why Suharto is In and Castro is Out', *New York Times*, 31 October 1995.

¹⁵ *The Post-Modern State and the World Order*, London 1996, p. 42.

preferable to universal impunity? There is a short answer to this: ‘punishment’ along these lines does not reduce but breeds criminality—by those who inflict it. The Gulf and Balkan Wars are copy-book examples of what happens to the moral blank cheque of a selective vigilantism.

The two cases are not identical, since there were no strategic minerals in Yugoslavia. But if their origins differ, a single ideology embraces both. Cooper sets it out with admirable clarity. On the one hand, he explains without inhibition that ‘the reasons for fighting the Gulf War were not that Iraq had violated the norms of international behaviour’—annexations by other states, he notes, could be tolerable enough—but the West’s need to keep a tight grip on ‘vital oil supplies’. On the other hand, he continues, the West should not confine itself to such clear-cut cases of material interest, but range more widely. ‘Advice to post-modern states: accept that intervention in the pre-modern is going to be a fact of life’, he writes. ‘Such interventions may not solve problems, but they may salve the conscience. And they are not necessarily the worse for that.’¹⁶ Here is the script for Kosovo, written three years in advance of the NATO blitz. The cost of ‘conscience’ was, quite predictably, more death and destruction—not to speak of definitive ethnic cleansing—than the ostensible occasion for ‘salving’ it.

In fact the phrase itself, however damning, needs some adjustment to capture the realities of Western intervention in the Balkans. ‘Credibility’ was soon being given as the key, officially expounded reason why NATO had to persist for months with an air assault that its Secretary-General initially promised would be a matter of hours. ‘Saving face’ would be as good a way of putting it. The outlook behind this posture was graphically expressed by the British Prime Minister in confidential memoranda to his aides. *Touchstone issues*. There are a clutch of issues—seemingly disparate—that are in fact linked. They are roughly combining “on your side” with toughness and standing up for Britain’. Blair goes on: ‘We really cannot think we have any chance of winning the “Standing Up for Britain” argument if we appear to be anti-defence’, just as ‘asylum and crime’ may ‘appear to be unlinked to patriotism, but they are; partly because they are toughness issues; partly because they reach deep into British instincts’. The remedies? ‘Kosovo should have laid to rest any

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 40–45.

doubts about our strength on defence' (sic), and 'we are taking tough measures on asylum and crime'. Refugees from the Balkan War, beneficiaries of one kind of toughness, can now enjoy the fruits of another, as they are kicked out of the United Kingdom: 'On asylum we need to be highlighting removals—also if the benefits bills really start to fall, that should be highlighted'. The thoughts of Britain's pipsqueak bombardier conclude with the peerless instruction: 'I should be personally associated with as much of this as possible.'¹⁷ We might be in the Palazzo Venezia in the twenties.

For all the devastation it has caused, without hope of durable solution, the upshot of intervention in the Balkans pales besides the balance-sheet in Iraq. There, the result has been a veritable Massacre of the Innocents. Let us take the vanity of our leaders at its word. Clinton and Blair are personally responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of small children, callously slaughtered to save their joint 'credibility'. If we take a low-range figure of 300,000 children under five, and enter a provisional estimate of the premature death-toll among adults at another 200,000, we arrive at one of the largest mass killings of the past quarter century. Moderate figures like Dennis Halliday put the total much higher, at a million or more. By comparison, the Gulf War itself was a small affair: not more than 50,000 dead. Saddam's bloodiest crime—the one that enjoyed Western complicity—was his attack on Iran, which cost his people 200,000 casualties, the Iranians even more. The genocide in Rwanda wiped out some 500,000. It is sufficient to say that the number of infants and adults destroyed by the siege of Iraq appears to be in that league. If we want a more exact political accountability, Clinton—in power since 1992—can be apportioned nine-tenths of the dead, Blair—in office since 1997—a third. Since without America and Britain, the blockade would have been lifted long ago, the role of other Western leaders, craven though it is, need not be reckoned.

¹⁷ Memoranda from 'TB' of December 1999 and April 29 2000, published by *The Times*, 16 July and 27 July 2000. 'On crime we need to highlight the tough measures', the Prime Minister reiterates obsessively: 'something tough with immediate bite', to show the government is 'in touch with gut British instincts'. Once again, 'this should be done soon and I, personally, should be associated with it'. The two documents offer a poignant inventory of the mental equipment of Britain's ruler. The phrase describing him above was coined by Alexander Cockburn: *Counterpunch*, 16–30 May 1999.

In 1964, within a few months of the Wilson government coming to power, Ralph Miliband warned the sixties generation, many elated by the end of thirteen years of Conservative rule, and willing to take any signs of reform at home as the tokens of a progressive administration, that it was a fatal mistake to lose sight of Labour's foreign policy, already quietly docked into Washington. That, he predicted, would be likely to define the whole experience of the regime. Within a year he was proved right. Wilson's support for the American war in Vietnam, once Johnson had dispatched the US expeditionary force in 1965, exposed to view the full extent of the political rot within Labourism. The miserable end of Old Labour after a decade of barren office was written in advance, in this futile, servile collusion with a vicious imperial war. In the United States, the struggle against the Vietnam War finished off Johnson and in the end, indirectly, Nixon too; in Britain, it ensured Wilson, Callaghan and their colleagues the complete disdain of anyone of spirit under twenty-five, not to speak of disillusioned elders.

The siege of Iraq is not another war in Vietnam. Its scope, means and target are of a lesser scale. But there is another difference too. This time, Britain is not just lending diplomatic and ideological support to American barbarities, it is actively participating in them as a military confederate. The record of Old Labour, shameful as it was, is little beside this odium. What would Miliband be saying of New Labour, as its jets take off for yet another bombing raid on the shattered and famished remnant of a Third World society, whose children are dying like flies at the behest of Blair's machine? Prevailing political discussions of the government appear never to have heard of them. They revolve tranquilly round such questions as the value of its 'New Deal' jobs programme, Working Families Tax Credit or projected health spending, just as in America talk turns to the effects of Earned Income Tax Credit, extra cents on the minimum wage, or notional pension schemes. The issues themselves are not unimportant. But as hangdog pretexts for tolerance of the Clinton or Blair administrations, they are niceties. Too many children have been dispatched by these Herods, safely beyond the ken of Anglo-American 'gut instincts', for them to have any weight. These contemptible regimes need to be fought, not wistfully propitiated.