

# Deadly silence

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [October 25, 2000](#) issue

As the first national election of the 21st century draws to a close, neither of the two major presidential candidates has given any attention to a shameful part of our foreign policy, one which history will record as both a failure and a murderous blight on our national conscience. George W. Bush and Al Gore refuse to acknowledge the obvious: the sanctions against Iraq are immoral and unsuccessful.

Those sanctions are finally collapsing. France, Russia and Jordan have already defied the UN blockade by sending planes to Baghdad with medical personnel, supplies and food. Other nations will soon follow because there is a growing world awareness that, as former UN relief official Denis Halliday has said, we are destroying an entire society. It is as simple and terrifying as that.

Jordan's cultural and information minister Mahmud Al Kayed described his country's mission to Baghdad—the first by an Arab state since the sanctions were imposed—as a humanitarian effort to deliver medicine, medicine badly needed in a nation where even routine immunizations are nonexistent. Kathy Kelly of Chicago-based Voices in the Wilderness makes frequent blockade-defying trips to Iraq. She reports that in Basra, a city in southern Iraq, there is often no electricity by day, little refrigeration equipment, a shortage of blood bags and little chlorine to purify water. Disease is rampant and infrastructure ruined.

Meanwhile, Al Gore and George W. Bush concentrate on winning support from senior citizens who, they presume, are more concerned with the price of their own prescription drugs than with Iraq, where over 1 million people have died as a result of the sanctions (according to the World Food Organization and UNICEF). Children under five account for 600,000 of these deaths.

The Catholic peace organization Pax Christi USA is gathering signatures for an ad in the *New York Times* that will make this case prior to the election by asking, "How many more Iraqi children must die?" The sanctions have blocked needed medical supplies from the people of Iraq, while damage to almost all of Iraq's infrastructure, a deliberate military policy during the gulf war, has not been repaired. According to

Pax Christi, raw sewage flows in the streets. Broken water purification systems increasingly contaminate the water.

Economic sanctions were imposed on Iraq in 1990 during the administration of candidate George W. Bush's father, and continue under the administration of candidate Al Gore's boss, Bill Clinton. In a CBS interview with Leslie Stahl, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was asked: "We have heard that a half million children have died [as a result of economic sanctions against Iraq]—more children than died in Hiroshima . . . Is the price worth it?" Albright's response: "I think this is a very hard choice, but we think the price is worth it."

Worth it? In a world where weapons of mass destruction continue to proliferate at an alarming rate, the people of Iraq, already badly beaten in the gulf war, have been singled out for a particularly vicious punishment. As the Pax Christi ad puts it, "The sanctions themselves have become a weapon of mass destruction." Until the recent air flights into Baghdad began, the only way to reach Iraq was a tedious ten-hour trip across the desert, along the "highway of death" where UN troops in the gulf war destroyed much of Iraqi military ground forces. Medical personnel who have made that trip have returned to report the anger and frustration of well-trained Iraqi doctors who know they could be saving lives but are unable to do so.

As the major force in conducting the gulf war, the United States is the 900-pound gorilla at the UN table. With a single collective nod of the head, the UN could lift the sanctions. And yet, while millions of advertising dollars are being spent to discuss issues in the presidential campaign, the suffering of Iraqi civilians is not on either the Bush or Gore campaign agenda. In one of those sad ironies of history, the U.S. president who takes office in January will appoint a United Nations delegate to work on its "Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World." This is more than irony; it is blatant hypocrisy.

An editorial in the *Chicago Tribune* asks, "How will history judge Iraqi policy?" Its author claims that part of the blame for Iraqi suffering rests with Saddam Hussein's refusal to allow UN inspectors unfettered access to monitor the dismantling of weapons. But after issuing that well-worn caveat, the *Tribune* calls the sanctions policy "increasingly a humanitarian and diplomatic disaster. It's morally unsustainable and years hence, if historians view it as murder, let no one say they didn't know."

When 600,000 deaths could have been prevented with adequate medical attention, the responsibility for an obviously unworkable policy lies with those who had the power to act, but did not do so.