

Before the shooting starts: A fabricated case?

by [George Hunsinger](#) in the [October 9, 2002](#) issue

As I have listened to the discussions about Saddam Hussein and Iraq, some disturbing questions have arisen. As an ordinary citizen with no special expertise in foreign policy, I am unable to get to the bottom of them. As a skeptic, however, who remembers how the Gulf of Tonkin incident of 1964 was made the pretext for the horrific escalation of military action in Vietnam, I think they are worth posing.

Did Saddam Hussein gas the Kurds? He is regularly accused of doing so, but the story may not be true. A little-known Army War College study, written by Stephen Pelletiere and Lieutenant Colonel Douglas Johnson, came to the conclusion that he did not. Throughout the Iran-Iraq war, Pelletiere served as the CIA's senior political analyst on Iraq, and Johnson has taught at the U.S. Military Academy. Their study investigated what happened at Halabja, where gas was used by both sides.

Saddam, the authors concluded, did not use poison gas against his people. While hundreds of civilians died in the crossfire, what felled them was the kind of gas used by Iranians. The Iranians, however, insisted that the gas came from the Iraqis. Their story prevailed in the U.S.

Jeffrey Goldberg wrote damningly about Iraq's role at Halabja (*New Yorker*, March 25), but when asked by the *Village Voice* why he had ignored the War College study, he explained that he trusted other sources. Why ignore significant evidence to the contrary?

The *New York Times* has recently disclosed that the Reagan administration, which supported Iraq against Iran, acquiesced in the use of gas (August 17). According to retired Colonel Walter P. Lang, who was senior defense intelligence officer at the time, "The use of gas on the battlefield by the Iraqis was not a matter of deep strategic concern."

Dilip Hiro says that while Saddam may have gassed civilians, conclusive proof was lacking at the time. “That is where the matter rested for 14 years—until ‘gassing his own people’ became a catchy slogan to demonize Saddam in the popular American imagination” (*Nation*, August 28).

Did Saddam attempt to assassinate former President Bush? U.S. intelligence sources allege that Saddam attempted to assassinate the president in April 1993 when he was visiting Kuwait. However, Seymour Hersh concluded that this intelligence was “seriously flawed,” and that the administration’s “evidence” was “factually incorrect” (*New Yorker*, November 1, 1993). A homemade bomb had been found miles away in a van, not in the hotel where Bush was staying. Evidence that remote-controlled devices were used was discredited by independent U.S. experts. It was clearly against Saddam’s own interests, Hersh observed, to involve himself in such a plot.

Why did the UN arms inspectors leave Iraq? From 1991 to 1998 UNSCOM arms inspectors worked throughout Iraq. Did they leave because they were kicked out by a ruthless tyrant who had something to hide, as we are constantly told, or were there other reasons?

The *Washington Post* reported that the “United Nations arms inspectors helped collect eavesdropping intelligence used in American efforts to undermine the Iraqi regime” (January 8, 1999). According to Swedish diplomat Rolf Ekeus, who ran the UNSCOM operation, the inspections were “manipulated.” The U.S., he said, had spies posing as inspectors. They were keen, for example, on tracking Saddam’s movements, which “could be of interest if one were to target him personally.”

The U.S. took punitive measures against alleged Iraqi arms violations. Illegal bombing forays in 1993 and 1996 were followed by a heavy four-day U.S. bombing campaign in December 1998. Since early 1999, unauthorized air strikes have occurred on an almost weekly basis. UNSCOM arms inspectors withdrew, in part, because they did not want to be bombed by U.S. and British aircraft.

Scott Ritter, the former UNSCOM inspector, has stated: “In terms of large-scale weapons of mass destruction programs, these had been fundamentally destroyed or dismantled by the weapons inspectors as early as 1996, so by 1998 we had under control the situation on the ground.” In briefing the incoming Bush administration, former Secretary of Defense William Cohen said: “Iraq poses no threat to its

neighbors.”

The situation would seem to be complex. First, by 1998, as a result of the arms inspections, Iraq was virtually disarmed. Second, Saddam, who seeks weapons of mass destruction, may still have a residual arsenal, though of doubtful reliability. Finally, the arms inspections were tainted by Western intelligence abuses. One need not whitewash Saddam to recognize the complicity of the U.S. If new arms inspections are to be instituted (as seems desirable), credible guarantees must be given to allay legitimate Iraqi fears about spying.

Who is responsible for the devastation wrought in Iraq by the economic sanctions? “History’s biggest concentration camp” is what Jim Jennings, president of Conscience International, a relief organization, has called Iraq under the sanctions. The sanctions regime, he pleads, is “punishing the people of Iraq in a way that I think most American people, if they could see and understand what is really going on there, would find totally unacceptable in a moral sense. It’s cruel, inhumane, it’s unconscionable.”

Whose fault is it that half a million children have died in Iraq since the economic blockade was imposed? Whose fault that the water is contaminated, the hospitals are desperate, the agriculture is ruined and the transportation a shambles? Could Saddam help his people, if he cared, instead of using his money to buy weapons?

By selling smuggled oil, Iraq currently obtains a sizable income. Some of it undoubtedly goes for weapons. But is that the whole story?

The U.S. has blocked billions of dollars of imports needed for relief and rehabilitation. According to Denis Halliday and Hans Von Sponeck, both of whom resigned in protest from the UN humanitarian program in Iraq: “The death of 5,000 to 6,000 children a month is mostly due to contaminated water, lack of medicines and malnutrition. The U.S. and the UK governments’ delayed clearance of equipment and materials is responsible for this tragedy, not Baghdad.”

While not easy to sort out the sanctions issue, it seems clear that Saddam alone is not to blame. As Princeton University’s Richard Falk has stated: the U.S. and the UK “bear a particularly heavy political, legal, and moral responsibility for the harm inflicted on the people of Iraq.”

How important is oil as a motive for this war? It is one thing for the U.S. to target Iraq because Saddam supposedly harbors weapons of mass destruction (though according to just war principles and international law that is by no means sufficient). It is quite another if the goal is to seize control of Iraq's oil.

At least one cautious administration supporter, Anthony H. Cordesman, senior analyst at Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies, is quite candid: "Regardless of whether we say so publicly," he admits, "we will go to war, because Saddam sits at the center of a region with more than 60 percent of all the world's oil reserves."

What does this mean? Are weapons of mass destruction the pretext while oil is really the prize? Would Americans back this war if they believed it was really about oil? Would they agree that the appalling military, diplomatic and human costs are worth it?

For the oil industry, "regime change" in Baghdad will not be meaningful unless it is followed by political stability. To develop the oil reserves, according one analyst, "you need two to three billion dollars, and you don't invest that kind of money without stability." Even if Saddam can be toppled easily (which is by no means certain), "stability" would almost certainly require a puppet regime and a prolonged, costly military occupation, not democracy for the Iraqi people. Again, is that really what Americans want?

Why the outrage at Iraq now? Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz has recently conceded, perhaps unwittingly, that any plausible threat from Iraq is perhaps a decade away. "It's too dangerous to wait ten years for them to hit us," he said. "September 11 was nothing compared to what an attack with chemical and biological weapons would be. We have a problem. We're not going to wait forever to solve it."

But without waiting forever, it might be better to solve other problems first. The "regime change" engineered in Afghanistan, for example, is already coming back to haunt us. As former Canadian diplomat Peter Dale Scott has pointed out, Afghan drugs, virtually eliminated under the Taliban, are not only back, but will be used to fund worldwide terrorism. "Thanks to the U.S. intervention," he writes, "Afghanistan will again supply up to 70 percent of the world's heroin this year. . . . It is estimated that the 2002 crop will be about 85 percent of the record-breaking 4,500 metric tons

harvested in 1999.” Besides spreading misery to our society, this harvest will generate an increase of funds for terrorists around the globe.

Wayne Morse (D., Ore.) was one of only two senators who voted against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. He saw what was coming when few did. Three years later he said: “We’re going to become guilty, in my judgment, of being the greatest threat to the peace of the world. It’s an ugly reality, and we Americans don’t like to face up to it. I hate to think of the chapter of American history that’s going to be written in the future in connection with our outlawry in Southeast Asia.”

Will another such chapter be written on Iraq?

George Hunsinger's article arguing against a U.S. preemptive strike on Iraq, "Iraq: Don't Go There," appeared in the August 14-27 issue of the Century.