

'High Noon' charade in Baghdad was aimed against Iraq's rebirth

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

On July 5, the intrepid Mark Silver, heading up the United Nations team of inspectors—charged with tracking down the plethora of weapons of mass destruction that somehow 42 days of U.S.-led bombings raids failed to destroy in Iraq—pulled his white U.N. jeep to a stop and initiated a sit-in in front of the Agriculture Ministry in central Baghdad. His mission: to gain access to the government building which supposedly harbored voluminous files documenting the vast weapons programs of the man George Bush calls “a bully, a dictator, a merchant of death.” Reams of files reportedly sat in the ministry’s cabinets, containing information on formidable weapons systems as well as foreign suppliers, without which Iraq’s inexorable drive for military hegemony could not proceed. Mark Silver’s task, ennobled by his U.N. mandate, was to stand up to (or rather sit out) the intransigent Iraqis, and to force George Bush’s *bête noire* to back down.

I was, by chance, in Baghdad at the time, and had the unexpected opportunity to follow this lurid replay of Gary Cooper’s “High Noon” from such close quarters that, had Gary pulled his gun, I would have smelled the smoke. As it turns out, not only did Gary not pull his pistol from his revolver, but he packed up and slipped away 17 days after starting his showdown, with his tail between his legs. There was no romantic horseback ride to cast a silhouette against a setting sun, no admiring barmaid to issue wistful sighs and choke back tears as our hero disappeared on the horizon, accompanied by woeful strains of music. There was only the hapless Mark Silver, fuming in his U.N. jeep, heckled by Iraqi protesters and made the laughingstock of the Arab world.

What the liberal media did not tell you

What really happened in the Iraqi theater of George Bush’s war for the new world order during July has little or nothing to do with the script authored by the U.S. State Department. Those of us, like my husband and myself, in Iraq at the time on a humanitarian relief mission, who had the chance to glimpse behind the scenes, saw what Cable News Network (CNN) and the major networks could not—or would not—report.

No doubt, something of what made the evening news or the tabloid headlines had an ounce of truth in it. True, George Bush was flexing his muscles in front of the mirrors of the mass media, trying to inject a bit of potency into his limp election campaign. True, as a few media dared to report, the documents George wanted to lay his hands on were likely those relating to the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro’s “agricultural” credits to Iraq, documents which, if published by the Iraqis, would have killed (and would still kill) Bush’s aspirations for a second term.

But something bigger was at stake: the worldview and consequent policy outlook—what the Germans would call the *Weltanschauung*—of the Anglo-American oligarchy, which the outgoing U.S. President embraces.

Let us first look at the facts, then delve into the deeper political and cultural implications.

Standoff at the Agriculture Ministry

On the last day of June, the Memorandum of Understanding, signed by the U.N. and Iraq to regulate relief operations, ran out. Iraq did not renew the memorandum. Furthermore, Iraq held firm in its rejection of the U.N.’s formula for oil sales: It would not pump and sell \$1.6 billion worth of oil, as the U.N. had proposed, in order to generate the funds required for further subversive U.N. operations in the country. According to the U.N.-proposed deal, Iraq would have been allowed to sell oil, but the revenues would have gone first to Kuwaiti reparations, then to funding the U.N.’s activities. Only with what might remain could Iraq then purchase sorely needed medicine and food. That, too, would be supervised by the U.N.

Iraq said “No thank you,” which meant, as the *New York Times* whined on July 23, “the U.N. relief action throughout Iraq is now in disarray and could soon be compelled to stop.”

A few days later, on July 5, Bush ordered the U.N. inspection team to symbolically occupy the Iraqi Agriculture Ministry. That the demonstrative act served policy aims of the U.S. in first person, was eloquently confirmed by the American “U.N.” person Karen Jansen, who boasted to the press she would have been proud to have taken part in Desert

Storm. As for David Kay, the American crack expert on nuclear weapons provided by Washington to the U.N., his CIA credentials were long since a matter of public record.

The composition of the motley crew of U.N. inspectors showed they were U.S. representatives at best, or CIA operatives at worst. This fact became such an embarrassment to those precious few non-American U.N. personnel who still bear loyalty to their discredited organization, that they penned a protest against their being used as pawns in a U.S. chess game against Iraq. It was their falling out of rank (little, if at all, reported in the western media) which contributed to the decision on the part of Washington to call off the sit-in.

In addition, the political climate in Iraq was heating up, rivaling the summer temperatures of 50°C (122°F). Whether or not the demonstrations of thousands of Iraqis which took place at the ministry every day were merely tolerated or even organized by the government is a moot point, because literally every Iraqi citizen was ready to mobilize against this blatant intrusion of national sovereignty on the part of the hated U.N. The Iraqi leadership stood firm, asserting, through Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, that, since it had nothing to hide, it would gladly allow a team of “neutral” U.N. inspectors (i.e., persons from countries not deployed by the anti-Iraq war forces) to inspect the ministry.

Squirming in their swivel chairs, the British and American strategists responded by deploying warplanes to burn down grain fields in northern Iraq. Their alibi was that the planes, sent out on “U.N.” missions, had become the targets of Iraqi anti-aircraft defenses, and that they had to set fires on the ground to deflect the Iraqis’ heat-seeking missiles.

This act of wanton destruction only fueled the fires of discontent in Iraq, and the demonstrations in front of the Agriculture Ministry swelled to tens of thousands shouting, “Go home, bald eagle!” and “Down with Bush!” American flags and Bush effigies were burned with gusto.

At this, the U.N. team complained that the lives of its members were in danger. Demonstrators, they said, were a security risk to the team. Tires of U.N. vehicles had been reportedly slashed. The Iraqi government, concerned about the escalation of tensions, promised tighter security, with the deployment of plainclothes agents, but warned U.N. personnel not to travel alone on the streets.

When, on July 22, the U.N. team pulled up its tents and went home, it claimed it was doing so for fear something might happen to its members. Iraq’s agriculture minister retorted in a press conference, that the Baghdad authorities were doing everything possible to safeguard the U.N. teams. But, he added, “We cannot control the emotions of our people. If they demonstrate here, it is an expression of protest. People demonstrate in Los Angeles, in New York, in Paris, why not here? This is a question of democracy.”

No sooner had the U.N. squatters left, than the international press began floating scenarios for punitive measures against Saddam: to teach him to respect the U.N. dictates,

surgical strikes could be launched. Or Saddam himself could be killed. U.S. government spokesmen vied for television coverage to expound their wisdom on what targets should be hit, etc. While Bush and Baker (on a Mideast tour to firm up the anti-Iraq coalition for further strikes) foamed at the mouth with threats of air raids against military targets and government buildings, pundits like National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, Rep. Les Aspin (D-Wis.), Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), and others went on Meet the Press to debate the need to shut down Iraq’s electricity grid, its infrastructure, to finally rein the unruly adversary in.

The truth will come out

My husband and I took the pulse of the population and government circles. We asked quite frankly what they thought the United States would do. Would they try renewed bombings of Baghdad? Or would they attempt an assassination of the bogeyman Saddam Hussein? No one took the threats of an assassination against the President seriously. Despite the fact that BBC had aired a report that Saddam had been killed, the mere suggestion of a hit against him—albeit by crack Israeli anti-terrorist squads—elicited only a bemused shrug of the shoulders. Saddam Hussein, rumored in the western press to fear such an assault, turned up in a neighborhood of Baghdad to inaugurate a new housing project, in the full light of day, surrounded by cheering citizens. His actions did not appear to be dictated by fear. The possibility of air attacks, however, they considered real. Yet, whereas we would have expected such anticipation to be accompanied by anxiety or outright alarm, we found that citizens as well as government spokesmen responded with classical *sang froid*. Certainly, we were told, the Americans can bomb Baghdad, or destroy our infrastructure again, but that means nothing. We will not capitulate, was the message. If the United States destroys us again, they said, we will rebuild again. And they who said so, were quiet, calm, and composed.

Anyone who was in Baghdad at the time, as we were, could have easily figured out what was really going on. If CNN and other media were to spend one-hundredth of the film footage they shoot on documenting the reality of postwar Iraq, they, too, could give viewers a glimpse of the reality which is determining Iraqi political decisions and shaping the attitude of Iraqi masses. The simple truth is the following: The war of 30-plus states against this country of the developing sector, waged with a superpower arsenal, was utterly futile. This is not to belittle the unspeakable suffering caused to millions of Iraqi civilians; we know first-hand, having helped arrange for war-injured Iraqi children to receive medical and surgical help in Germany and the United States which the embargo prevents them from receiving at home, just what a toll that hideous war took on Iraqi families. Yet, in the broader picture, of Anglo-American strategic war aims—to “bomb Iraq back to the Stone Age” and thwart its industrial

development—it must be said that Bush’s genocidal binge was a failure.

The most important developments in Iraq, in those sultry days in July, were not the farcical theatrics staged by Bush’s U.N. stooges in front of the Agriculture Ministry. Far more significant was what was going on—and is going on—in every neighborhood of Baghdad and other cities, to rebuild the country. What we witnessed, and surely would not have believed unless we had seen it with our own eyes, was the fact that the country has put itself back together piece by piece, in a reconstruction effort that staggers the imagination. This phenomenon—not the documents in the Agriculture Ministry or imaginary arsenals of nuclear bombs—is what sent George Bush off his rocker, though he would be the last to admit it.

Anyone who, like my husband and I, has visited Iraq several times since the official end of the war, is bowled over by the reconstruction. Of the 134 bridges hit during the war, many of them in crucial urban locations, 120 have been completely rebuilt and the remaining few are under construction. The water supply, devastated by targeted bombings of purification and distribution facilities, has been restored. Electricity works in the entire country. Not only the infrastructure, the nerve system of the economy, but its bone and muscle, have also been rehabilitated. As an impressive exhibit in Baghdad documents, factories destroyed 30-100% by U.S.-led bombings, have been rebuilt and are producing. Aluminum, cement, and other construction materials are being mass produced domestically, fueling the process of reconstruction. Furthermore, brand-new factories are being built, in the pharmaceutical and food processing fields. Vast infrastructure projects have been launched, foremost among them the “third river” between the Tigris and the Euphrates, which is to host over 85 bridges. This river, designed to cleanse the neighboring land of salt deposits, to render it arable, in a few years will be capable of providing further irrigation to vastly expand the agricultural capacity of the country. The river will flow from Baghdad down to the Gulf, 160 meters wide at its narrowest point.

How has this been possible? We spoke with Minister of Housing and Reconstruction Mahmoud Dhiyab al-Ahmed, who made the central point: Reconstruction is virtually completed, now Iraq is building up new production capacity (see interview, p. 33), and doing so despite the embargo.

Building out of the embargo

More precisely, as Saddam Hussein made clear in an address delivered on July 17, the 24th anniversary of the Baath revolution, Iraq is building its way out of the embargo through its reconstruction and development program. He stated: “We still believe that the blockade will not be lifted through a resolution, even if Iraq had done everything it could do in addition to what it had already done. *The blockade will eventually disintegrate*. Its effect and influence will be weakened after it is

driven to collapse by the arms and brains of the righteous sons of Iraq, through their scientific and economic achievement, and those sons of the Arab Nation who support them and back them with true faith” (emphasis added).

This decision to build its way out of the embargo, constitutes a continuity with state economic policy since the revolution. As Saddam Hussein stressed in his anniversary remarks, the crucial concept behind the country’s growth has been that “oil in itself will not be the Arabs’ wealth.” Diametrically opposed to the oil policy followed by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, Iraq has maintained sovereign control over its nationalized oil, using its revenues to develop its own productive capabilities. The advanced infrastructure of the country has been the precondition for in-depth economic development, carried out by a skilled labor force. Thus, although the war crippled the economy by devastating the infrastructure, the country possessed the ability to rebuild it. As Saddam Hussein put it, Iraq would gain true freedom and sovereignty only if “we convert our oil to become part of our wealth, and when we no longer regard it as others have done—namely, our whole wealth—and until such a time when we convert it to become part of our strength, not our whole strength. There is no means to achieve this other than work. . . . As such, you find us, despite the burden of the blockade, and the continuous engagement by the foreigner and his agents and puppets, in the course of creating work opportunities in a continuous and progressive manner by means of constructing colossal projects.”

It became clear to us in Baghdad, watching the charade outside the Agriculture Ministry, that what Bush was trying to destroy, with threats of renewed air strikes, was not a single building or even weapons installation, but Iraq’s *capacity to develop*. Unfortunately for Mr. Bush, Patriot missiles cannot easily hit such a target, which represents a cultural as well as political phenomenon. So Bush could launch Desert Storm II, III, and so on, but Iraq would bounce back. By rebuilding its economy, it also was recreating the basis for its defense, which, as the Iraqi leadership has stressed, is not a military but an *economic* question. The frustration felt in Washington and London is expressed in the array of hysterical press outbursts claiming that Saddam’s brother, the Ambassador to the U.N. in Geneva, is an evil genius spiriting in billions of secret funds to finance the recovery program. The tragic irony here is that what is said of Iraq cannot be said of the United States itself. Its entire infrastructure and labor force have been destroyed—without there having been a shooting war, and no one in the White House seems to have an inkling of what has to be done to reverse the state of affairs. Ironically, Iraq’s economic policy thinking is healthier than that of the sole superpower—a point which is not lost on the Iraqis themselves. With a historically informed sense of the long-term perspective, they are confident that such a superpower, if it does not rectify its ways, will further degenerate, losing its allies and its power.