
Conference Report

What the Iraq War Hath Wrought

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

What would you have done, had you been in Germany in 1932 when the specter of dictatorship stalked the country? Presidential pre-candidate Lyndon LaRouche recently emphasized that this is the question individuals and political forces outside the United States must ask themselves today, in the wake of the catastrophic “permanent war policy” launched with the U.S.-led war against Iraq. It was at the center of a debate in Potsdam, outside Berlin, on May 6, among persons who have been involved in Iraq—including two former United Nations officials, the German Hans von Sponeck and the American Scott Ritter. Other speakers at the meeting, organized by the Einstein Forum, were British author Sarah Graham-Brown, American researcher Joy Gordon, and Israeli writer Amos Alon.

Scott Ritter, a Republican and former U.S. Marine, who was a UN weapons inspector in Iraq from 1991-98, argued that the current U.S. Administration—by waging an illegal war in violation of the UN Charter, which the United States signed; and by motivating its aggression with “lies and deceit,” including forged documents purporting to show that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction—is on its way to becoming an imperial power. By usurping the rights attributed by the U.S. Constitution to the Congress, to decide in matters of war and peace, the Administration, Ritter charged, is leading the United States through a transformation, from a republic to a dictatorship. Ritter compared the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq to Hitler’s invasion of Poland in 1939, and identified the central issue: “If the world does not confront the United States” on its illegal war of aggression, “then it is certifying the legitimacy of this illegitimate action, and is saying, essentially, that international law no longer exists.”

As a further example of violation of international law, the former UN inspector mentioned the U.S. demand that UN sanctions on Iraq be lifted. They cannot be lifted, he explained, without ascertainment by UN inspectors that Iraq is free of weapons of mass destruction. As to claims that the United States is doing that job itself, he said, “The U.S. military have no mandate; you need the UN.”

Von Sponeck: What Went Wrong?

Hans von Sponeck was one of the first Germans to serve in the United Nations, and worked in various posts for 32

years, including in the UN Development Program (UNDP), before taking charge of the oil-for-food program in Iraq in 1995. He resigned that charge in 2000, in protest against the impact of the UN sanctions on Iraq's civilian population.

In von Sponeck's presentation to the Potsdam conference, he demanded that the past 13 years of the sanctions regime be reviewed and understood, to identify what went wrong, and what the UN could have done but did not do. First, he said, the UN Security Council had oversight responsibility to monitor the impact of its policies—the sanctions—but it did not do so. No members of the UNSC visited Baghdad, nor did they interact with inspectors. On the contrary, the United States and United Kingdom tried to prevent him and others from going to the UNSC; they “humiliated and ridiculed us, and rejected our statistics,” he said. Furthermore, the UN conducted no analysis of the overall human condition in Iraq under sanctions. When he proposed that wheat grown in Iraq be purchased in the oil-for-food program which he directed, von Sponeck was told that only Australian wheat would be bought. When he presented reports on the impact of the U.S. and U.K. air strikes (under the “no-fly zone” regime), he was told by those two governments to stop reporting. This, despite that fact that every UN resolution related to Iraq has ritually repeated that the country's territorial integrity must be protected.

One major problem with the oil-for-food program, von Sponeck explained, was that the Office for Iraq Program which ran it, was created outside the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA), and deliberately so, in order to allow the United States and Britain to control it. Financial policy and practice was “morally indefensible,” von Sponeck charged; the \$1.3 billion for the program was not only inadequate, but 13¢ of each dollar was allocated for “compensation” of firms and governments which had lost business in Iraq! The distribution of funds was also inequitable, as the Kurds, representing 13% of the population, ended up with 90% of what the oil revenues purchased. Most important, he stressed, nothing was allocated for Iraq's running costs—that is, payment of civil servants, infrastructure, and especially education. The lack of funds for education violated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose Article 26 specifically guarantees the right to education and the full development of the human person.

Effect of the Sanctions

Just how the sanctions worked, and what devastating impact they have had on the Iraqi people, were detailed by Joy Gordon of Fairfield University. Prior to the imposition of sanctions in 1990, Iraq had consistently invested its oil revenues into development of infrastructure. It boasted a very high standard of living, with an advanced health system, education, and other infrastructure, so that, for example, 90% of the population had guaranteed access to safe water. The World Health Organization had documented high levels of vaccina-

tion, of adult literacy including among women, and general availability of water and electricity.

With the sanctions, all that changed, dramatically. Professor Gordon paid special attention to water, as a factor affecting public health, and showed how the handling of the sanctions regime by the United States undermined Iraq's ability to produce safe water—deliberately, she argued. She cited a report by the Defense Intelligence Agency *prior* to the 1991 war, predicting that the collapse of the water system, through sanctions, would lead to a reduction in food production, and that the unavailability of chlorine would cause an explosion of cholera, typhoid, and other water-borne diseases. In March and July 1991, UN personnel confirmed that this is precisely what happened.

The mechanism for preventing the import into Iraq of items vital to maintain a functioning water system, was the “661 Committee” (named after UNSC resolution 661 which introduced sanctions), which enforces sanctions and grants humanitarian exemptions. The Committee, whose meetings are secret, consistently blocked the delivery of chlorinators, pipes, water tanks, and equipment to dig wells. One member alone could block contracts, and the United States led the way in preventing the import of these items. Thus, perhaps water pipes would be allowed in, but the generators to run water treatment plants were not. Chlorine was not allowed in, on grounds it had a “dual use” as a weapon.

Gordon also addressed the fact raised by von Sponeck, that inadequate funds were allocated for the oil-for-food program. The amount available between 1996 and 2003, Gordon said, was \$24 billion—\$180 per Iraqi per year. This is one-half the per-capita annual income of Haitians. The funding to buy food for dogs used in de-mining operations was two and a half times that amount.

Gordon noted that UN agencies had issued scenarios, in December 2002 and January 2003, regarding the recent war's impact. Considering that 60-80% of the population were dependent on government food rations, any disruption could lead to famine. Some 1.2 million children under the age of five who suffered severe malnutrition as a result of years of sanctions, could die if food supplies were stopped. Now, with water treatment facilities and the overall water system—including electricity generation—bombed and not functioning, massive epidemics of water-borne diseases must be expected. First reports of cholera in Basra confirm this.

In *Harper's* magazine of November 2002, Gordon wrote an article entitled “Cool War: Economic Sanctions as a Weapon of Mass Destruction.” The material presented at the Potsdam seminar made clear, that this was no exaggeration.

The political question was: How can the international community organize to stop the rogue forces in Washington and London wielding this and other weapons threatening humanity? Von Sponeck asked how to translate the will of 95% of the world's people who opposed the war—the “second superpower”—into the upholding of international law?