

IRAQ

'Terror Bombing', Starvation and Mechanical Force

US Prescription for Good Governance

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The lessons of the eight years that have passed since the Gulf War are that American designs on Iraq, if they do not collapse at the moment of conception, will, at their moment of fruition, only engulf the entire region in a phase of violent instability. Since the well-being of Israel is a fixed and immutable basis of US policy in the region, the continuing denial of Iraq's sovereignty is a necessary component.

'TERROR BOMBING' is a phrase that was introduced into the vocabulary of warfare by Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris - a terminological innovation for which the chief of Bombing Command in the Royal Air Force during the second world war is justly famous. Not one to rest content with verbal creativity, Harris endowed the concept with body and substance through a series of destructive incendiary air raids on civilian populations in Germany, culminating in the destruction of Dresden. It was an example that the US emulated with great success in Japan, until closing out the argument in its own way, at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Harris had learnt his craft on the training grounds of Britain's colonial possessions. As a young squadron leader in the RAF, he provided a memorable description of an air campaign in Iraq in 1924: 'The Arab and Kurd... now know what real bombing means in casualties and damage; they now know that within 45 minutes a full-sized village (*vide* attached photos) can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured by four or five machines.' To maximise the salutary yield of aerial bombing, said the man who was known in later life as 'Bomber' Harris, it was essential that casualties should be of sufficient scale to produce "a real as opposed to a purely moral effect".

A colleague of Harris in the Iraq operations of the 1920s had a rather more benign account of his experiences: "Air control is a marvellous means of bringing these wild mountain tribes to heel. It is swift, economic and humane, as we always drop warning messages some hours before we start to 'lay eggs' on their villages, so that they can clear out... An eastern mind forgets quickly, and if he is not punished for his misdeeds straight away, he has forgotten all about them, and feels his punishment is not merited if delayed."

The ways of imperialism may have changed over the years, though in their

overt and tacit rationalisation, the recent air raids on Iraq show that the more things change, the more they remain the same. By modern canons of political correctness, which even the leaders of the imperial nations have to abide by, it is simply impermissible to stigmatise an entire people in the manner of the air power enthusiasts of the 1920s. The substitute rationale is the demonisation of an individual - first it was Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt and then Yasser Arafat of Palestine. Towards the latter part of his career as the embodiment of theological evil, and prior to his domestication by the west, Arafat had to share the limelight with Muammar al-Gaddafi of Libya. And just as Gaddafi was subdued towards the late-1980s, Saddam Hussein of Iraq presented himself to the west as little less than the devil incarnate.

During the war hysteria of November 1997, which was the prelude to the attacks just over a year after, Edward Said, the distinguished Palestinian scholar and political analyst, made an observation that would appear commonplace to a sensitive audience: "a morbid, obsessional fear and haired of the Arabs has been a constant theme in US foreign policy since World War II." This, in Said's view, fuses with another uniquely American sensibility in determining policy towards the west Asian region: an obsessive morality and a 'puritanical zeal' which decrees "the sternest possible attitude towards anyone deemed to be an unregenerate sinner".

These generalisations are particularly appropriate in the context of the recent air strikes. To recapitulate some of the rhetoric emerging from Washington and London during the recent air strikes, Saddam Hussein had proven himself "a serial breaker of promises", "a threat to his people, the region and the world", and "an enemy of civilisation". The only language he understood was "the language of force" applied in a "devastating and sustained" manner.

The didactic qualities of air power are

of course an old theme in imperialism's civilising mission. The pontiff of modern American conservatism, columnist George F Will, put the point well as the first bombs began falling on Baghdad during the Gulf War of 1991. More than a punitive purpose, said Will, the bombs embodied an educational mission, which invited the Arab people to participate in the potential rewards of a civilisation that was capable of such awesome technological prowess. Iraq has now suffered a second visitation of that technological prowess. But the underlying sensibilities were perhaps best expressed by the coarsened American sailor who daubed a 'Happy Ramadan' message on the side of a cruise missile just as it was loaded onto a bomber aircraft. It was a gesture that revealed all the hollowness of official protestations from the US, that the bombing of an Arab nation was being carried out in a manner that was 'sensitive to Islam'.

Consistently, official pronouncements on Iraq in the US have ranked high on moral posturing, though not on subtlety or finesse. From literally a few days of UN Security Council resolution 661, which laid out the terms of the ceasefire in the Gulf, American officials have brazenly put forward their own agenda - to ensure the removal of the Saddam Hussein regime. But the UN could not call for the collective self-effacement of the ruling clique in an autonomous nation - even if it was a nation defeated in the modern world's only 'holy war', which united all permanent members of the Security Council in common cause. The US has hence utilised every ambiguity of phraseology and leveraged its own position as the arbiter of global economic well-being, to introduce fresh conditionalities at every stage into the ceasefire resolution.

A flavour of this American stratagem was conveyed by US secretary of state Madeleine Albright in a lecture at Georgetown University in March 1997. Albright was at pains to affirm that American policy towards Iraq was part of a "broad commitment to protect the security and territory of friends and allies in the Gulf. From the beginning of Operation Desert Storm until the present, said Albright, American policy towards Iraq had been "consistent, principled and grounded in a realistic and hard-won understanding of the nature of the Iraqi regime". And as if these virtues had not been enough, it had also been bolstered by "bipartisan support at home, and general approval in the region". Albright learnt the hard way, while travelling the circuit of Arab capitals in November 1997, that her presumptions were grossly misplaced. There was little approval in the Arab world for the

American policy line towards Iraq, which had long since gone beyond rational calculation into the realm of theological vindictiveness. But that realisation was still far away as Albright unburdened herself of opinions at Georgetown University. An American audience poses few inconvenient questions, which made it easy for Albright to stitch together a perfectly bizarre logical concatenation.

It was far from clear, said she, that an Iraq which complied with all the Security Council demands on weapons of mass destruction would merit the lifting of the punishing regime of trade sanctions it had suffered since 1990. Before these were to be considered, said the American secretary of state, Iraq needed to "prove its peaceful intentions", which it could only do by "complying with all of the Security Council resolutions to which it is subject". But was it really "possible to conceive of such a government under Saddam Hussein"? An evaluation of Iraqi conduct revealed to Albright that "Saddam Hussein's intentions will never be peaceful". Clearly, the ceasefire resolution, which was objectively, even if unreasonably, phrased, has been transformed into an instrument

for the US's own unilateral agenda in Iraq and the region. And it is logical in the context of stated American policy, to read the recent airstrikes - carried out without a reference to the UN, on the basis of an extremely specious report from UN weapons inspector Richard Butler - as an element of broader strategy, rather than merely as punitive forays.

Stirring at the basis of the regime of 'air control' is the notion that explosive force applied from the air can influence political events on the ground. Various official spokesmen made it apparent during the recent airstrikes, that their ultimate aim was to weaken Saddam Hussein's key constituencies - such as the Republican Guard military units - and if possible, to goad them into a decisive coup attempt. This resurrects a military doctrine that was applied in all its variants in the Vietnam operations, only to fail every test of military efficacy. One of the principles that was applied was that of 'interdiction' bombing to choke off the corridors of guerrilla operation in Vietnam. The large number of civilian casualties that resulted only made the US more permissive as far as 'saturation bombing' was concerned. And then, even if the base inhumanity of the

carpet bombing in Vietnam were overlooked, the results in purely military terms were dismal. In 1967, US secretary of defence Robert McNamara summed up the lessons learnt from the application of the various bombing doctrines: "As to breaking their will, I have seen no evidence in any of the many intelligence reports that would lead me to believe that a less selective bombing campaign would change the resolve of the North Vietnamese leaders or deprive them of the support of the North Vietnamese people."

Sir Robert Thompson, a veteran of Britain's colonial wars of the 1950s, developed upon this assessment. The single most important feature of guerrilla warfare in a predominantly rural setting, he pronounced, "is its immunity to the direct application of mechanical and conventional power". This was a chastening appraisal, but it only provoked the political theorist Samuel Huntington to add what he thought was an important qualification: "If 'the direct application of mechanical and conventional' power takes place on such a massive scale as to produce a massive migration from countryside to city, the basic assumptions underlying the doctrine of revolutionary war no longer

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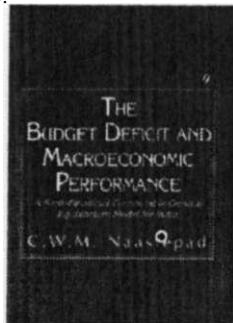
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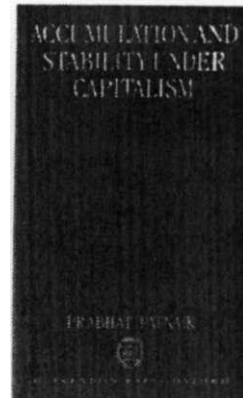
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operate. The Maoist-inspired rural revolution is undercut by the American-sponsored urban revolution."

This was the doctrine and the sensibility that underwrote the US's massive campaign of chemical warfare in Vietnam - perhaps the greatest unaccounted war crime of the post-second world war period. The lethal toxin Agent Orange was dumped on Vietnam in massive quantities, to strip its jungles of all foliage. In the fevered imagination of American technological jingoism, this would expose the population that was otherwise sheltered in the jungles to the application of "mechanical and conventional power". On the ground, "an accelerated pacification programme" was inaugurated as a complementary measure. Entire villages were cleared and their residents herded into urban centres under American supervision. "Forced-draft urbanisation and modernisation", said Huntington in the exultation of discovery, would rapidly bring the country "out of the phase in which a rural revolutionary movement can hope to generate sufficient strength to come to power".

The US went through a prolonged process of learning in Vietnam. By those standards, the mission of air power in Iraq is relatively uncomplicated. Unlike Vietnam then, Iraq is a highly urbanised and industrialised society, whose civilian infrastructure is vulnerable to the application of "mechanical and conventional power" in a manner that rural hamlets are not. The 1991 bombing campaigns by the US and its allies did a comprehensive job of demolishing the country's infrastructure. But the political events that have followed this application of mechanical power have not conformed to American expectations. The regime remains in place, still able to summon up the residual defiance to beat back Richard Butler's crude efforts to penetrate its innermost recesses, still able to cock a snook at the western powers by challenging and engaging the aircraft patrolling the 'aerial exclusion zone' illegitimately imposed towards the northern and southern reaches of Iraq.

The US is the long-term loser from this uneasy stalemate. Popular opinion in the Arab world is now alienated, and friendly regimes have been undermined by a tide of resentment at the continuing suffering in Iraq. Unsurprisingly, assassination has presented itself to the fevered American imagination as a quick and painless way out of the limbo - an aspiration that the American media gave free vent to during the crisis over the UN weapons inspections in November 1997. The following sampling of media comments, liberally paraphrased from the magazine *Mother Jones*, conveys a sense of the pathological

blood-lust that Iraq seems to excite in US policy circles:

Newsweek, on November 17 ran a story headlined 'Take him down'. It left little room for ambiguity - either about the target of this exhortation or about the inexorable direction of the force of gravity - the headline was run right next to a photograph of Hussein and a downward-plunging arrow.

Thomas Friedman, foreign affairs columnist for the *New York Times* (November 6), invoked a divine purpose for the American military's technological prowess: "Saddam Hussein is the reason God created cruise missiles ...So if and when Saddam pushes beyond the brink, and we get that one good shot, let's make sure it's a head shot."

George Stephanopolous, a former intimate of the American president and now a TV news analyst, argued on ABC's 'This Week' (November 9): "This is probably one of those rare cases where assassination is the more moral course...we should kill him'. Sam Donaldson, co-host of 'This Week' (November 9), chose to enter a caveat: it was not morality alone that was invoked in the case at hand, since international legality could provide the rationalisation for an American mission of assassination. We should kill Saddam, he said, but 'under cover of law'. The act would pass the scrutiny of international legality, and the US could 'do business with his successor'. In response, Bill Kristol, ABC news analyst, commented that the proposition sounded 'good'. And this feast of concord was joyously received by Cokie Roberts, co-host of 'This Week', and endorsed for appropriate further action: "Well, now that we've come out for murder on this broadcast, let us move on to fast-track..." Other forums showed an awareness of the logistical difficulties involved, though not for the legal and ethical issues. Here is Jonathan Alter in *Newsweek*, November 17: "It won't be easy to take him out. ...But we need to try, because the only language Saddam has ever understood is force." A fortnight later, *Newsweek* chose to dignify the theme with a strongly affirmative headline to its editorial column: "Why We Should Kill Saddam".

Whatever elements of sobriety there may have been in the midst of this babble only suggested that a relapse into insanity would be a welcome prospect. An illustration was Laurence Eagleburger, former American secretary of state, who appeared on the same show in which Stephanopolous made his impassioned plea for a surgical assassination. Eagleburger took the cool and detached view - he upbraided his young and impetuous colleague for the advocacy of political assassination as an instrument of foreign policy and urged that the crisis arising from the stalled arms inspections in Iraq should be dealt with

through a massive show of air power in Iraq, indeed, nothing less than a reprise of the brutal aerial bombing campaign that the US unleashed during the Gulf War. He was convinced that a second visitation of American air power would ensure Iraqi compliance with even the most irksome conditions imposed by UN weapons inspectors. And in the final reckoning, the destruction wrought from the skies would, he said, provide an inducement for disgruntled elements within the military to get rid of Saddam Hussein and bring in a leadership more amenable to western tutelage.

That assault has now taken place, though one year later than the US wanted. Its immediate effect is that the UN disarmament mission in Iraq - pursued with maniac vigour and little regard for truth by the Australian diplomat Richard Butler - is dead. The regime of President Saddam Hussein remains in place, its legitimacy underwritten by the efficacy with which it has managed a situation of acute domestic stress and international isolation. In a nation enervated by sanctions, the regime seemed a push-over for any application of military force. Yet, two identifiable American efforts to overthrow Saddam Hussein have failed. The Iraqi National Congress - a creation of British and American intelligence - sought to launch a major military offensive from the northern region. This initiative collapsed in disunity and disarray in 1996. Shortly afterwards, the Iraqi National Accord, which sought to foment a military coup from the security of the Jordanian capital of Amman, suffered ignominious rout at the hands of the Iraqi intelligence services.

The new intrigues that the US administration has dreamt up in league with its worshipping acolytes in Britain, remain unknown as of now. Military power on an awesome scale has been deployed in the region. And it is also germane, that the US has substantially raised its 1999 military budget in direct response to the unresolved dilemmas of west Asia. Brute force, the world is reminded, remains an option when unsubtle intrigue and coercion by starvation fails. But if anything, the lessons of the eight years that have passed since the Gulf War are that American designs on Iraq, if they do not collapse at the moment of their conception, will at their moment of fruition, only engulf the entire region in a phase of violent instability. And since the well-being of Israel is the fixed and immutable basis of US policy in the region, few alternatives seem available, but a continuing denial of Iraq's sovereignty and the bottling up of regional tensions through the naked display of armed power.