Willful Blindness

Chris Toensing

Joy Gordon, *Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions* (Harvard, 2010).

Members of Congress are known for grandstanding, rather than circumspection, when the cameras are rolling. But Rep. Earl Pomeroy (D-ND) was a veritable master of understatement upon his return from a trip to post-invasion Iraq in August 2003. At the time, the Pentagon was spending $3.9 billion per month on its operations in country, as it became obvious that the insurgency was no desperate gang of "dead-enders." L. Paul Bremer, head of the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority that had begun misruling Iraq that May, would shortly request $6 billion from Congress to spend on repairing electricity and water infrastructure in 2004 alone. Democrats, however, were not yet ready to criticize the venture forthrightly. Of the unfolding disaster under Bremer's supervision, Pomeroy would say only, "The rebuilding of Iraq will be significantly more expensive, more dangerous and take longer than the American people have been prepared for."

Americans, in fact, had been told that Iraq was "floating on a sea of oil," in the infamous words of Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, and would be able to bear most of the cost of post-war reconstruction on its own. In the fantastical narrative sold to the public before the war, the regime of Saddam Hussein was not only a "mortal threat" to world peace, it was also solely responsible for the hardships of the Iraqi people, blowing millions building palaces while Iraqis barely survived (or did not) on meager rations. The United States, it was said, would ride in on a white horse to save the day.

There was no place in this fairy tale for the comprehensive economic sanctions imposed on Iraq in 1990, following its invasion of Kuwait, and kept in place until the regime's overthrow. Despite the reams of UN documents that recorded sanctions' effects from the get-go, despite ex-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's brutish dismissal of reports of 500,000 dead children on network television in 1996, despite the efforts of activists to publicize the grim facts, only a tiny minority of Americans—and a handful of members of Congress—knew how sanctions, stubbornly maintained by Washington, had complicated the fairy tale. Hence the self-righteous tut-tutting of journalists at the looting in liberated Baghdad; hence the resentment when Iraqi gratitude to America dissipated quickly; hence the puzzlement at the extent of the reconstruction Iraq required; hence the sticker shock at the bill.

Led by Bremer, US officials, aided again by credulous reporters, propagated another self-serving fantasy: that they did not know how badly Iraq had fared. For several years, argument has swirled around this whopper in Washington, propelled at least in part by partisan and intramural score settling. Most observers now believe that George W. Bush administration neo-conservatives, driven by ideology and spite, silenced the wiser technocrats associated with Bush *père* and Bill Clinton who were enlisted in the State Department's Future of Iraq project and—if listened to—would have managed reconstruction much better. It is a comforting, but sordid little fiction, because, again, sanctions and their effects are absent from the accounting. Joy Gordon, a philosophy professor who became a sharp student of the Iraq sanctions in the 1990s, has issued the definitive rebuttal: Three administrations of US officials, of both parties, realists, liberal internationalists and neo-conservatives, knew very well what the sanctions were doing to Iraq, and could easily have parsed out their own culpability in same, but did not want to.

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The sanctions on Iraq are a complex subject that is just beginning to be studied properly. Analysts and activists who were critical of sanctions in the 1990s wrote many times that the fallout would linger for years, if not decades, after the embargo was formally lifted. They were more correct than they knew, sadly: The humanitarian emergency caused by dilapidated water delivery systems, for instance, continues to this day, with the UN estimating that one third of Iraqi children lack access to potable water, because real reconstruction has been impossible in the post-invasion maelstrom. It is plain, as well, that the sanctions' impact upon Iraqi society was profound, eviscerating the middle class, accelerating brain drain, fostering the growth of a gray economy, encouraging retrograde Islamist and sub-national identity politics, and altering gender relations to the detriment of women, among numerous other observable phenomena. The social history of the sanctions era, when it is written, will make for sobering reading.

Gordon is concerned with another aspect of the subject: the US role in perpetuating, for over 13 years, what she aptly calls a policy of collective punishment. Several nostrums of sanctions defenders collapse under the weight of her impressive documentation: None of the Bush I, Clinton and Bush II administrations had any intention of lifting sanctions until Saddam was gone, despite their repeated assurances that the trade ban would be removed if UN weapons inspectors could be completely satisfied. From the beginning, the White House conceived of sanctions as a tool of regime change, not disarmament. Contrary to myth, opposition to sanctions on the Security Council did not emanate entirely from Russian, Chinese and (later) French desire to consummate oil exploration contracts with a reinvigorated

UN Security Council unanimously rolls over the Oil for Food program, December 10, 1999. EVAN SCHNEIDER/UN PHOTO

Saddam. Most of the jeremiads about sanctions' humanitarian effects and, later, most of the complaints about the arbitrary US (and, to a lesser extent, British) "holds" on innocuous import contracts under the Oil for Food program came from elected members of the Council, small countries like Ecuador and Ukraine who had nothing to gain from pleasing Baghdad. The US did not insist on these "holds" in purely principled defense of non-proliferation of illicit weapons technology. On several occasions, the US traded its acquiescence to previously blocked contracts for the votes of other Security Council members for US-backed initiatives. Washington repeatedly played politics with the workings of the sanctions committee.

The burning question of the sanctions era, for many, was whether the deterioration of Iraqi social indicators was due to a "sanctions effect" or a "Saddam effect." The US, of course, always laid responsibility at Saddam's doorstep. To the extent that the UN adjudicated the issue, it weighed in on the other side, saying that no matter the extent of the old regime's cruelty and corruption, the main contributor to Iraqi suffering was the total embargo on trade enforced by the Security Council. Gordon lays out in fascinating detail how the blame game distorted the production of knowledge: US officials were so eager to discredit UN personnel as Iraqi dupes that they discounted legitimate reporting of sanctions' ill effects; meanwhile, UN workers were so keen to disprove the "Saddam effect" that they glossed over instances where the regime did worsen the people's lot. Gordon is effective in explaining the damage multipliers within the sanctions—why deliveries of water purifiers, for example, did not translate into cleaner water because the pipes were also on the list of suspect "dual-use" items. In the end, though, she is unable to answer the burning question because she does not examine the Iraqi role from the inside, with recourse to Iraqi documents or interviews with relevant civil servants. Of course, no historian may ever be able to perform this task adequately since, thanks to bombing and looting, so many Iraqi state records have been destroyed or stolen. As a historical matter, nonetheless, Gordon's indictment of Washington is one-sided.

As a moral and ethical matter, however, it does not absolve Washington that Saddam Hussein withheld rations from disfavored regions of the country or failed to plan for lean years in the stupid belief that sanctions would be lifted soon (even as he repeatedly denounced the US for aiming at regime change). The fact, as Gordon demonstrates unimpeachably, is that successive US administrations knew the scope of the humanitarian catastrophe in Iraq and refused to consider that their ends might not justify the means. "The bottom line," admits Peter Burleigh, a top State Department official, "was that the US was prepared to live with the horrible human impact." He goes on to say, however, that US actions were guided by worries about chemical and biological weapons. Gordon's training as a philosopher shines through in her strongest chapter, a meditation upon US guilt of genocide or crimes against humanity that concludes with the lament that Washington cannot be held accountable because international law does not criminalize "willful blindness."

Though her presentation is analytical rather than literary, Gordon captures an important part of the tragedy that is the story of Iraq in the sanctions era. The US got away with a murderously cynical policy because, as the sole superpower, it could, and because it had an adversary who reliably lived down to the image that Washington conjured of him. In this story, there is no hero. There are, however, victims, and because the victims deserve a thorough accounting of their agony, if not for it, one hopes that historians may one day be able to file the other side of the indictment. ■