

"Nerve gas factory" claim exposed as hoax

What are the real reasons for the US missile strikes?

Editorial Board
26 August 1998

The official American explanation for last week's missile strikes against targets in Sudan and Afghanistan has begun to crumble, with widespread reports in the international press challenging the Clinton administration's version of events.

The US claim that the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum was making a chemical component of nerve gas has been largely discredited. Newspapers in Britain have carried interviews with the former technical manager of the plant, Tom Carnaffin, a British citizen from Northumberland, who denied the plant had anything to do with weapons production.

Carnaffin told the *Observer*, the Sunday edition of the daily *Guardian*, 'The loss of this factory is a tragedy for the rural communities who need those medicines.' He said the factory had been built by the Baaboud family and was in the process of being sold to a Saudi investor.

The *Observer* also reported that the US government had determined there was no nerve gas on the site before the bombing. Clinton knew the plant was a civilian facility when he ordered the launching of cruise missiles against it, the newspaper said.

Other reports noted that the Al-Shifa factory was neither clandestine nor closely guarded. There were multiple entrances to neighboring streets, with ordinary doors, rather than the airlocks and other precautions that would be required for a facility manufacturing nerve gas. The *New York Times* admitted these facts, then cited 'theories ... that the plant that was destroyed was only lightly guarded as a deception to keep suspicions low.'

An amoxycillin factory

Other US press reports conceded that the Al-Shifa plant was Sudan's largest commercial manufacturer of prescription drugs for both medical and veterinary purposes, producing 50 percent of the country's supply. The most widely used product made by the 300 workers at the factory was amoxycillin, the antibiotic commonly prescribed for childhood infections.

This is not the first time in recent years that Washington has targeted a civilian factory. During the Persian Gulf war US warplanes bombed and destroyed a baby milk plant. Pentagon officials maintained that the facility was producing biological weapons, not infant formula, but postwar investigations confirmed that the factory had no military purpose.

The government of Sudan has demanded a team of weapons inspectors from the United Nations--like those deployed against Iraq--to investigate the Al-Shifa plant. Sudanese officials took the chief UN representative in Sudan, Phillip Borel, on a tour of the factory on August 23. The site of the missile attack has been thrown open to the world media, with journalists finding no evidence of any weapons-related production.

On Monday the 22 nations of the Arab League, in a conference in Egypt chaired by the Sudanese delegate, voted unanimously to demand an

independent investigation and to condemn the attack on Sudan as a violation of sovereignty. A resolution calling on the United States to produce evidence to back its claims of nerve gas production in Sudan was introduced at the UN Security Council by Kuwait, the Arab state most closely aligned with US foreign policy.

Initially the Clinton administration said only that the factory made a 'precursor chemical' which 'could be used' in the manufacture of nerve gas, while refusing to name this chemical publicly or provide any proof of its existence. They did admit that the chemical does not appear on the list of substances banned under treaties prohibiting the manufacture of chemical weapons.

In response to the pressure from its Arab client states, the US began to expand its account of the raid on Khartoum. 'Senior US officials' from both the CIA and White House, whom the American media agreed not to name, gave interviews Monday in which they identified the precursor chemical as ethyl methylphosphonothionate, or EMPTA, and claimed that soil samples taken at the factory site showed its presence.

The same anonymous officials claimed that Iraqi scientists linked to nerve gas research had been seen at the Al-Shifa plant--again, without offering evidence. The British press noted, more prosaically, that the Al-Shifa plant had recently shipped veterinary medicine to Baghdad as part of the UN-sponsored plan to use oil shipments to buy food and medicine not available in Iraq.

The US government has continued its flat refusal to present its evidence before any public tribunal. Deputy US representative to the United Nations Peter Burleigh declared: 'I don't see what the purpose of a fact-finding study would be. We have credible information that fully justifies the strike we made on that one facility in Khartoum.' In other words, the world must accept on faith what Washington tells it.

As for linkage between the Al-Shifa factory and the bombs that exploded at two American embassies in East Africa, no one in the US government has been able to explain any relation.

Defense Secretary William Cohen initially declared that the alleged organizer of the bombings, Osama bin Laden, had financial ties to the Al-Shifa factory. But US officials later corrected this claim, saying bin Laden had a connection to the state-owned company which built the plant. Since bin Laden is a construction multimillionaire with business dealings throughout the region, the US could conceivably use this excuse to justify firing missiles anywhere it chooses in the Middle East or North Africa.

Secretary of State Madeline Albright brushed aside criticism that the Sudanese attack was not credibly linked to bin Laden. 'We do not think that just focusing on one single individual this way proves anything,' she said, after the administration had spent the weekend presenting the Saudi exile as the supposed mastermind of world terrorism.

Bin Laden is the latest in a long series of bogeymen foisted on American public opinion by the US government and the compliant American media. He follows in the footsteps of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, Panama's Manuel Noriega, Somali 'warlord' Mohammed Aidid, Ayatollah Khomeini and, of course, the arch-villain Saddam Hussein.

For nearly 20 years, in a technique which is now second nature, the American media has demonized these leaders in turn, branding them a threat to world peace and order, while their countries were targeted for American military attack or diplomatic isolation. Each was portrayed as the new Hitler, no matter how small and impoverished his country, and no matter what his previous relations to the United States (Noriega, Aidid and Saddam Hussein all collaborated closely with the CIA at various points in their political careers).

Bin Laden, however, is the first such figure to lack access to a state apparatus of any kind, making him even more implausible as a serious threat to the most powerful and heavily armed government in the world. US officials have sought to remedy this defect by focusing attention on bin Laden's financial resources, estimated at \$200 million to \$300 million, and this figure has been dutifully echoed or multiplied by the American media.

On closer examination, however, the notion that bin Laden's personal fortune could bankroll a significant military operation, even of an underground or terrorist character, is ludicrous. The bulk of bin Laden's money, like that of any corporate enterprise, is tied up in business activities, including construction projects and Islamic charities in many countries. It is not ready cash.

Even if it were, the amount would be completely inadequate. In the days when the US government was operating a terrorist army the size of bin Laden's alleged force--several thousand *contras* who engaged in raids into Nicaragua--the CIA and Pentagon were compelled to spend at least \$200 million **a year** to keep it in the field. In Afghanistan both the United States and Saudi Arabia expended billions each year to maintain the *mujahideen* guerrillas--of which bin Laden was one--who were fighting against the Soviet occupation forces.

Media propaganda

The barefaced lying by the American government demonstrates a cynical and contemptuous attitude to the public. And the corporate-controlled media obediently repeats the official propaganda, no matter how unconvincing. Both the media and the government count on the acquiescence of a public opinion which has been systematically deprived of the information necessary for critical judgment.

In the 25 years since the US departure from Vietnam, the media has worked assiduously to assure the Pentagon that public criticism and exposure of American military operations will never again be permitted. The media served in Grenada, Panama and Somalia, and most of all during the Persian Gulf war, as an unofficial arm of the American government. When CNN recently decided to retract a documentary exposing US use of nerve gas in the Vietnam War and fire the producers, corporate officials admitted they were afraid of offending the Pentagon.

While concealing the inconsistencies and contradictions in the official cover story for the attacks in Sudan and Afghanistan, the media has sought to whip up public support for the missile strikes and for even more aggressive military action.

The *Washington Post*'s foreign policy columnist, Jim Hoagland, brushed aside the lack of evidence connecting the US missile targets to the East Africa bombings, writing, 'Clinton did not have to wait for proof beyond a reasonable doubt to punish, destroy, and deter bandits hiding out in two broken states that lack the will or ability to control them.' A columnist in

the *Wall Street Journal* Monday suggested five other supposed 'safe havens' for terrorists which could become targets for American military attack, including Lebanon, Syria, Libya, Iran and the Palestinian Authority on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The *New York Times* has focused its campaign on provoking further American air strikes against Baghdad. Its editorial declared that while missiles were flying against Sudan and Afghanistan, this was 'No Time to Go Soft on Iraq.' The foreign policy columnist for the *Times*, Thomas Friedman, suggested Clinton should resign because the Monica Lewinsky scandal had left him too discredited to lead a new military onslaught on Saddam Hussein.

Behind the 'war against terrorism'

The American press has enthusiastically embraced the Clinton administration's description of its campaign against terrorism as a 'war,' and suggested that repressive measures at home may be required. Right-wing columnist Tony Snow wrote, 'One must fight dirty. The battle also requires the sacrifice of small freedoms.'

Sunday's Week in Review section of the *New York Times* commented, 'Terrorism experts wonder if the United States is ready to add itself to a roster of nations, including Britain, Ireland and Israel, that have curbed cherished civil rights in order to combat terrorism.' The article cited the Irish government's introduction of measures such as jailing suspects without charge as a possible model, adding, 'Due process may now be a luxury.'

At first glance such proposals might appear demented. As one commentator pointed out, the total number of Americans killed in international terrorist incidents over the past decade is 98, fewer than are struck by lightning in the average year, and fewer than died in the Oklahoma City bombing, an atrocity which did not produce anything like a 'war' against home-grown right-wing terrorists.

Yet international terrorism is now supposed to represent a threat so serious that it justifies American military action virtually unlimited in space and time--the strikes against Sudan and Afghanistan were appropriately code-named Operation Infinite Reach, while US officials spoke of preparing for a 'decades-long' struggle. This is to be accompanied by a degree of military secrecy more severe than at any time since World War II (according to the *Times*).

Clearly there are issues of great seriousness underlying the anti-terrorist campaign, although the real concerns are not being stated openly by US officials or the media. What are some of these concerns?

The political motivation for the timing of the assault has been widely commented on around the world. It is not simply a matter of Clinton seeking to distract public attention from the Lewinsky affair. More importantly, he is seeking to assure his right-wing opponents, who have made use of the independent counsel's investigation to besiege the White House, that he will make whatever concessions on foreign and domestic policy are necessary to remain in office.

The principal foreign policy demand of Clinton's right-wing critics is that he end US reliance on 'multilateral' agencies such as the United Nations and assert the right of the United States to take action on its own, without submitting to any check or limitation from any other power or international body. Their agenda is suggested in a column Tuesday in the *Wall Street Journal*, which denounced Clinton for sending in only missiles, when he should have dispatched ground troops and launched a real war against the governments of Sudan and Afghanistan.

Clinton has taken a major step to satisfy these demands, with State Department and Pentagon officials emphasizing that the missile attacks were not merely one-time efforts, but represent a significant change in American foreign policy. The change is not simply a political maneuver, however. With or without Lewinsky, the 'war against terrorism' would

have been launched. It meets a profound need of the American ruling class, the need for a foreign enemy which can be used to provide a rallying center for a society which is riven by deep and intensifying social and economic antagonisms.

In the handful of specialized journals devoted to American foreign policy, strategists for the ruling class discuss in fairly blunt terms the issues which are obscured in the mass media by sloganeering and propaganda. One such expert is Harvard University Professor Samuel P. Huntingdon, who wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs* last year on the end of the Cold War and its implications for the US. Huntingdon's essay was filled with foreboding over the implications for US domestic political stability of the collapse of America's traditional foreign foe.

'The Cold War fostered a common identity between the American people and the government,' he wrote. 'Its end is likely to weaken or at least alter that identity. One possible consequence is the rising opposition to the federal government, which is, after all, the principal institutional manifestation of American national identity and unity. Would nationalist fanatics bomb federal buildings and attack federal agents if the federal government was still defending the country against a serious foreign threat?'

'The fate of the Soviet Union offers a sobering example for Americans,' he continued. 'The United States and the Soviet Union were very different, but they resembled each other in that neither was a nation-state in the classical sense of the term. In considerable measure, each defined itself in terms of an ideology.... If multiculturalism prevails and if the consensus on liberal democracy disintegrates, the United States could join the Soviet Union on the ash heap of history.'

Huntingdon cited the need 'to find purposes for the use of American power. This need has led the American foreign policy establishment to search frantically for new purposes that would justify a continuing US role in world affairs comparable to that of the Cold War.'

The 'war on terrorism,' far from being an aberration, or merely an opportunistic effort by Clinton to escape his political crisis, represents an attempt to find a new axis for American foreign policy. The existence of a perceived foreign enemy not only serves as an ideological focus for the population, it provides a convenient justification for the maintenance of an immense military establishment, required both to defend the interests of American corporations abroad and suppress any challenge to the ruling class at home.

See Also:

The Sudan-Afghanistan attack:

Clinton uses cruise missiles to placate political opponents

[22 August 1998]

The press and US militarism -- a lesson from history

[21 August 1998]



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact