

Reply to a supporter of the US bombing of Iraq

29 December 1998

We are publishing here a letter sent by a reader in response to the editorial statement 'The bombing of Iraq: A shameful chapter in American history' (19 December 1998) followed by a reply by David North, WSWs editorial board chairman.

Dear editor,

Martin McLaughlin and David North should be ashamed of themselves. I haven't read such an unpatriotic article in my life. What is it that they expect the American government to do? What resolution do they offer? Should they stand by and let Saddam Hussein defy UNSCOM time and time again? How many times do you attempt a diplomatic solution before it becomes obvious that it isn't working? That Saddam is playing games and pushing to see how much he can get away with. It seems that military action may be the only thing that Saddam understands.

I think it's clear to most that you cannot compare these military strikes to World War II. The issues are not nearly as black and white as they were then, but that doesn't make them wrong. I believe that if you have a problem with American policy regarding Iraq, then it should have been voiced at the beginning of the gulf conflict. I don't know if these two writers have been against our presence in the gulf from the beginning or not. If they have, then I understand their article, but if they haven't, how can they be so against following up with our goals there. Do they think it is better to make our intentions clear and then not follow up? I think it is obvious that military action was not the first choice. Diplomacy has been tried constantly for months, but Saddam is not willing to cooperate. Therefore, other means must be used to accomplish our mission.

I don't think that there is anyone who wants Iraqi civilians to be maimed or killed. The military does what it can to keep civilian casualties to a minimum. Saddam, on the other hand, has no regard for human life. He has fired missiles at innocent civilians in Israel. He has even used chemical weapons against his own unarmed population. It is inevitable that some innocent lives will be lost, but it seemed like even the Iraqi media was having a hard time finding civilian deaths to publicize during these latest attacks. The men and women that carried out these attacks are heroes. Every time they are sent into Iraq, they are risking their lives and I believe that any World War II veteran would be deeply offended by the notion that anyone who is sent into battle for this country is not a hero, regardless of whether or not there is a high risk of death.

The article also says that Iraq does not have any 'weapons of mass destruction.' If this is true, why does Iraq constantly hinder the weapons inspectors? Shouldn't they want the inspections to be completed so that the embargo can be lifted? Can you truly believe that they are not hiding anything? Also, can you believe that the leaders of this country are such warmongers that they risk American lives just to flex their military muscle?

I am a strong believer in freedom of speech, but it makes me sick to think that these two writers can write such things. If they are so against this country's policies, leaders and the 'heroes' who make up the United States armed forces, then maybe they should move elsewhere!

JH

Dear JH:

As you pulled no punches in your letter of December 24--in which you suggested that Martin McLaughlin and I find another country to live in because our views on the US bombing of Iraq are different than yours--I won't mince words in this reply.

You inform us that you have never read such an 'unpatriotic' article in your entire life. If so, it points to the unfortunate fact that the range of political views available to the American public is extraordinarily limited. In matters relating to the use of military force by the United States, the mass media functions unashamedly as an agency of the government. The old democratic idea that the press should subject the statements and actions of the government to critical analysis--especially when issues of war and peace, of life and death are directly involved--has been largely abandoned in this country. If all you want are patriotic reports that endorse the government line, then at least call that type of writing by its proper name: propaganda!

You insist that the actions of Saddam Hussein left the United States no choice but to bomb Iraq. 'How many times do you attempt a diplomatic solution before it becomes obvious it isn't working?' you ask. What does the United States government mean by 'diplomatic solution?' Diplomacy implies, at the very least, a willingness to negotiate, i.e., to make concessions, to work out compromises, etc. The issuing of nonnegotiable ultimatums, backed up with the threat to launch bombing raids, has nothing to do with diplomacy. When you state that 'Diplomacy has been tried for months,' I am reminded of the story of the old farmer's wife, who explained how she preserved domestic tranquillity: 'When me and my old man agree, I do as he says; when we disagree, he does as I say!'

You offer assurances that the United States doesn't want to kill or injure Iraqi civilians. But launching cruise missiles against a largely defenseless and impoverished country, approximately one-fifteenth the size of the US, seems a strange way for the government to demonstrate its good will toward the people of Iraq. At any rate, you have an easy excuse for the misery caused by the actions of the United States: it's all the fault of Saddam, who 'has no regard for human life.'

Perhaps Mr. Hussein is not a worthy candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize (though men with political records not all that different from his have been, as a matter of fact, so honored). But the real reason for what is going on in the Persian Gulf has little to do with the personal characteristics of Hussein. It may come as a surprise to you to learn that for many years--especially during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s--the United States enjoyed a close relationship with Saddam Hussein.

The gassing of Iraqi civilians (members of the Kurdish minority, to be precise) took place at a time when the United States found it convenient to support Hussein as a counterweight to Iranian influence in the gulf region. Hence, the US government turned a conveniently blind eye to the atrocity committed by Hussein against the Kurds. The friendship between the United States and Hussein ended only after the August 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

That event, by the way, took place under very murky circumstances. In late July 1990, at an official meeting with Saddam Hussein in Baghdad, the American ambassador, April Glaspie, declared that the United States held a neutral position toward border disputes between Iraq and Kuwait. Her precise words were: 'We have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait.'

The ambassador added that she had been instructed by Secretary of State James Baker to offer this assurance to Iraq. And on July 31, 1990--just two days before the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait--Mr. John Kelly, the US assistant secretary of state, testified before a congressional committee that the United States had no obligation to defend Kuwait against an Iraqi invasion. If such a conflict were to erupt, he said, it would be viewed by the United States as 'a private matter' between the countries involved.

Hussein made the mistake of accepting US assurances and fell into a trap. The invasion of Kuwait was seized on by the United States as an opportunity to realize an old ambition: to strengthen its military position in the strategically-vital Persian Gulf. As a leading US official said at the time, 'We are talking about oil. Got it? Oil, vital American interests.'

Sorry about the history lesson, but the American people are very poorly informed about the background to the present state of affairs. With the help of the media, yesterday's lies have been converted into today's unquestioned assumptions. Which leads me to raise a few questions: What do you know about the political and economic background to the gulf war and its bitter legacy of conflict between the United States and Iraq? What do you know about the history of Iraq itself? Forgive me for assuming, based on my reading of your letter, that an honest answer would be, 'Not much' or even 'Nothing at all.'

Very few Americans have even a rudimentary knowledge of the history, politics and social structure of Iraq, not to mention the Middle East as a whole. And I think that's a bad state of affairs. The less the American people know about Iraq, the easier it is for the US government to demonize the country and attack it. Aided by the media, the government promotes and exploits ignorance and confusion in order to carry out policies that would face massive opposition if the people really understood what was going on.

You object to our assertion that the government's campaign against Iraqi 'weapons of mass destruction' is a fraud. 'If this is true,' you ask, 'why does Iraq constantly hinder the weapons inspectors? Shouldn't they want the inspections to be completed so that the embargo can be lifted?'

Actually, the statements of the US government are misleading, inconsistent and contradictory. At times it insists that Iraq must destroy its so-called 'WMDs.' When it is argued that no such weapons exist, and it is pointed out that the weapons inspectors have been unable to find any, the US ups the ante and declares that the *ability* of the Iraqis to build WMDs must be destroyed. As the creation of such weapons is easily accomplished by any country which can produce conventional pharmaceutical products, or even fertilizing agents used in modern agriculture, the US is actually demanding that Iraq be turned into a pre-industrial society. American officials have even declared it is necessary to destroy Iraq's ability *to plan* to produce WMDs. What would that entail? Perhaps the killing of all Iraqi scientists?

Your assumption that Iraq's full cooperation with the weapons inspectors would lead to a lifting of the embargo is far-fetched. Iraq, being required to prove the *nonexistence* of WMDs, can never satisfy the inspectors, especially when they are, for all intents and purposes, US agents. Indeed, the US has refused to offer any explicit statement on the conditions under which the sanctions would be lifted. This has been one of the chief complaints of the Iraqis.

The fact is that the US has absolutely no intention of lifting sanctions. Why should Hussein believe that the US is prepared to change its policies? When someone is placed on the official hate list of the United States, it is awfully hard to be taken off of it. Have you not noticed that

the United States has maintained sanctions against Cuba for nearly 40 years? Short of the death of Castro--Washington's oldest bogeyman--there is nothing that can persuade the United States to call a halt to the endless efforts to strangle Cuba economically.

In what seems for you the most sensitive issue of all, you object to our failure to hail military personnel who dispatch bombs against Iraq as 'heroes.' Do you want to know what I would consider heroic? It would be the decision of an airman to refuse orders to launch missiles and bombs against people who cannot defend themselves. That would take a great deal of courage. If the people of the United States found themselves in the same position as the people of Iraq, with bombs and missiles raining down upon their homes and factories, and unable to fight back against a foe who enjoys overwhelming military superiority, I doubt that they would be referring to the people who push the buttons that launch the weapons as 'heroes.'

At the conclusion of your letter, you assure us that you are a 'strong believer in freedom of speech,' but it made you sick to discover that 'two writers can write such things.' You suggest that perhaps Mr. McLaughlin and I should move elsewhere. While we have no intention of accepting your proposal, we invite you to reexamine your own conception of democratic rights. In a country where the entire television, radio and print media--owned and controlled by the most powerful capitalist conglomerates in the world--inundate the people with 'patriotic' militaristic propaganda, you find it troubling that there should be even two writers who raise their voices in opposition to the bombing of Iraq! If this exemplifies what you consider to be a strong belief in freedom of speech, then you hardly understand what the First Amendment is all about.

Yours sincerely,
David North

PS: One more point: Yes, our opposition to US policy toward Iraq does go back to the gulf war of 1990-91. You can read more about our analysis of the war in the book *Desert Slaughter*, which you can order online from Mehring Books. <http://www.wsws.org/news/1998/feb1998/dscont.html>

See Also:

The bombing of Iraq: A shameful chapter in American history
[19 December 1998]



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact