

Inventing a pretext for war against Iraq

Friedman of the Times executes an assignment for the Pentagon

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United Nations weapons inspections are entering their second week in Iraq without producing any evidence of the “weapons of mass destruction” continuously invoked by the Bush administration as justification for war. Washington is therefore laying the groundwork to launch an invasion using an even less convincing pretext than the actual discovery of biological, chemical or nuclear arms.

Hence the latest public ruminations of Thomas Friedman, the foreign affairs columnist of the *New York Times*. In a column published December 1, he urges his readers to “pay no attention” to the inspections taking place in Iraq. Rather, he advises, “the key to whether we end up in a war with Iraq” lies in a paragraph inserted into the UN Security Council’s inspections resolution allowing for the removal of Iraqi scientists, along with their entire families, to be interviewed abroad.

The columnist claims that this paragraph was among the “least-noticed” passages in the UN document, but has now become the pivotal issue in “the fate of Iraq.”

This is a deliberate falsification. The provision was inserted by the Bush administration as part of a series of demands designed to strip Iraq of even the semblance of national sovereignty—stipulations meant to be unacceptable and to serve as the pretext for war.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* commented on November 9: “This sets up a system that can easily be turned into a forced expatriation of Iraq’s scientific community, further undermining the country’s shattered economy and industrial base. Those asked to leave the country together with their families will be subject to intense pressure to defect and provide damning information—true or invented—on Iraq’s weapons programs. Offers of positions and money will doubtless be made to those who comply, along with threats of retribution against those who refuse.”

The provision was opposed not only by Iraq, but also the majority of the Security Council members, as well as leading weapons inspectors, who saw it as unnecessarily provocative

and largely unworkable.

The fact that Friedman begins his column with a lie will come as no surprise to any objective and politically literate observer who has followed his output. Friedman’s journalistic work over the past two decades amounts to a smug celebration of US military might and the wealth and privilege of the ruling elite that it defends. Cynical and indifferent to the suffering of ordinary people subjected to war, he employs the language of the bully, egging on US aggression from his comfortable desk at the *Times*.

He has declared his motto to be: “Give war a chance.” In 1998 he urged the Clinton administration to adopt a policy of “bombing Iraq over and over and over again.” During the US bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999, Friedman wrote: “It should be lights out in Belgrade: every power grid, water pipe, road and war-related factory has to be hit.... [W]e will set your country back by pulverizing you. You want 1950? We can do 1950. You want 1389? We can do 1389.”

He published a piece in the *New York Times Magazine* three years ago justifying imperialist militarism as a necessary support for corporate wealth: “The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist—McDonald’s cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the builder of the F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley’s technologies is called the United States Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps.... Without America on duty, there will be no America Online.”

Friedman is representative of a generation of journalists who launched their careers under the Reagan administration and adapted themselves to the reactionary political atmosphere in Washington. Over the years, many of them became corrupt, Pulitzer Prize-winning liars who specialize in comforting the comfortable and afflicting the afflicted. They became extraordinarily wealthy pandering to the needs and interests of America’s ruling strata.

Friedman first became fascinated with power as the *Times* correspondent in Beirut, covering the civil war in Lebanon. He reserved his admiration for the “tough guys” of the Israeli military and their allies in the Lebanese fascist Falange. He retained this attitude, never questioning the god-given right of the US—and Israel—to use military and economic power as they saw fit, and never wasting time worrying about the tragic results for the people in the oppressed countries. He is thoroughly petty-bourgeois, not merely in his Minnesota social origins, but more fundamentally in his lack of a critical attitude toward the social milieu of the financial and political elite.

In his latest column, Friedman, citing an unnamed “senior Pentagon official,” insists that the real gateway to war on Iraq will be plucking some Iraqi scientist from the country and getting him or her to tell all about the alleged existence of banned weapons. “And should that Iraqi worry about personal safety, US officials would be prepared to give his whole family green cards and money to live on. And why not?” he writes.

It is worth noting that Friedman’s argument reproduces almost exactly the points made by Richard Perle, chairman of the Defense Policy Board and one of the administration’s most rabid advocates of war on Iraq, in a little-reported presentation last month to British members of parliament. According to one press account, Perle told the MPs: “Suppose we are able to find someone who has been involved in the development of weapons and he says there are stores of nerve agents. But you cannot find them because they are so well hidden. Do you actually have to take possession of the nerve agents to convince? We are not dealing with a situation where you can expect cooperation.”

How does such a column find its way into print? Usually it begins with a phone call. “Tom, this is Richard, how about lunch?” The journalist is fed not only a free meal, but also the story that the state official wants floated as a means of furthering US policy. Well-paid hacks like Friedman have not a shred of independence from the government they are supposed to be critically covering. They serve as interlocutors and propaganda mouthpieces for the officials whose approval they curry.

The *Times* columnist goes on to worry that there are only two problems with the overseas interview plan. The first is the apparent reluctance of chief UN inspector Hans Blix to begin spiriting Iraq’s scientists out of the country. The second potential sticking point, he asserts, involves a “deeper moral question.”

The question is not whether the world’s greatest military power can justify an unprovoked attack on an impoverished and war-devastated country based on the unsubstantiated claims of one man. Rather, it is whether the Iraqi people are

“moral” enough to produce scientific stoolpigeons for Uncle Sam.

“Is there an Iraqi Andrei Sakharov?” he writes. “Is there just one Iraqi scientist or official who wants to see the freedom of his country so badly that he is ready to cooperate with the UN by submitting to an interview and exposing the regime’s hidden weapons?”

He continues: “If there is not one such person in Iraq, well, that tells us something about the Iraqi people’s own quest for freedom and a different future.”

While appealing for this freedom-loving hero to cooperate, Friedman offers the additional assurance that this person “does not really have to risk his life or his family to do it. He can get everybody out.” Moreover, he will be guaranteed a home in America and a well-paid stipend for life, according to US officials.

It says a great deal about Friedman’s own twisted “morality” that he hails as a paragon of morality and patriotism a person who would, in return for money and personal advancement, defect to the government that has bled his country dry and provide the pretext for that government to inflict death and destruction on his own countrymen.

Friedman’s absurd invocation of a “quest for freedom” is an attempt to provide “moral” trappings to a US plan to conquer Iraq, occupy the country and expropriate its oil wealth.

The column is provocatively entitled “‘Sodom’ Hussein’s Iraq,” a play on words between the Iraqi dictator’s name and the biblical city of Sodom. He cites a biblical passage in which god tells Abraham that he will spare the city if he can find just ten good men there, suggesting that Iraqi scientists or officials who tell Washington what it wants to hear would be assuring that their country would be spared.

But as anyone vaguely familiar with the bible knows, Sodom was destroyed in a rain of “fire and brimstone.” There is no doubt that the *Times* columnist is among those wishing a similar fate upon the people of Baghdad. His appeal is for one Iraqi to come forward and lie so the bloodletting can begin.



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