

War, oligarchy and the political lie

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7 May 2003

On April 30 David North, the chairperson of the editorial board of the World Socialist Web Site, addressed a meeting of students at Notre Dame University in South Bend, Indiana. We print below an edited transcript of his remarks.

Less than one month has passed since the end of the US war against Iraq—or, perhaps it is more accurate to say, the end of the most recent stage of the war; for it should not be forgotten that the United States has been engaged in military operations against Iraq, in one form or another, for 12 years. Iraq has the tragic distinction of being the country that has been subjected to the longest military operation ever undertaken by the United States.

There has been no comprehensive analysis of the cumulative impact on Iraqi society of the devastation wrought by the United States through either military or economic measures.

As a matter of policy, the United States military has refused to provide a rough estimate, let alone a precise count, of the number of Iraqi military personnel it has killed in the course of operations since the beginning of the first Gulf War in January 1991. There can be little doubt that in the period of the most intense military operations—in January–February 1991 and March–April 2003—the number of Iraqi military casualties ran into the tens, if not hundreds, of thousands. In the aftermath of the first Gulf War, there were ghastly reports of the massacre of thousands of retreating and defenseless Iraqi soldiers on the so-called “Highway of Death” leading north from Kuwait. During the past month, thousands of computer-guided bombs and missiles were used to destroy entire units of the Iraqi army that lacked any means of defending themselves against this type of attack.

Just how defenseless the Iraqi troops actually were was made clear by the accounts, however limited, of the outcome of the American assault on Baghdad’s airport. According to press reports, approximately two to three thousand Iraqis were killed, while the US military suffered less than a half-dozen casualties. A day or two later, US tanks rampaged through a section of Baghdad, once again killing thousands of soldiers (and a substantial number of civilians) while suffering only a handful of casualties.

The vast disparity in the military resources of the opposing armies makes it difficult to describe their engagements as battles. Rather, they recall the bloody one-sided massacres of the colonial era, such as the infamous Battle of Omdurman in which somewhere between ten and fifteen thousand Sudanese natives were slaughtered by British troops who suffered only a few dozen casualties.

There is also little precise information about the number of Iraqi civilian deaths directly caused by US military operations, either in January–February 1991 and March–April 2003 or during the innumerable bombing raids conducted by the United States in the course of the last decade. We are somewhat better informed about the impact of US-imposed economic sanctions on Iraqi society, particularly on young children. It has been estimated that the sanctions regime that has been in place since the end of the first Gulf War has cost the lives of somewhere between 500,000 and one million children.

I would hope that no one in this room has forgotten that the principal justification given by the United States government for not only the invasion of Iraq last month but for much of the suffering it has inflicted

upon the Iraqi people since the end of Desert Storm in 1991 is that the regime of Saddam Hussein was in possession of so-called “Weapons of Mass Destruction” that posed an immense and imminent danger to the United States and the rest of the world.

It would require an entire book to review and analyze the massive propaganda campaign that was developed over the past decade upon the “Weapons of Mass Destruction” theme. This was not the invention of the present Bush administration. Saddam’s “weapons of mass destruction” were invoked by the Clinton administration to justify the bombing campaign that it initiated against Iraq in 1998. In fact, the campaign dates all the way back to the immediate aftermath of the first Gulf War, as right-wing factions disappointed by the failure of Bush I to seize Baghdad, overthrow Saddam Hussein and occupy the country sought a justification for a second invasion of Iraq.

Let us only concentrate on the most recent period, leading up to the outbreak of war.

On September 12, 2002, President George Bush declared before the United Nations General Assembly that Hussein “continues to develop weapons of mass destruction. The first time we may be completely certain he has a nuclear weapon is when, God forbid, he uses one.”

On October 7, 2002, Bush declared that Iraq “possesses and produces chemical and biological weapons. ... Iraq could decide on any given day to provide a biological or chemical weapon to a terrorist group or individual terrorists. ... Knowing these realities, America must not ignore the threat gathering against it. Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof—the smoking gun—that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud.”

The claim that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction provided the foundation for the non-negotiable demand advanced by the Bush administration. As Bush stated on October 7, 2002, “Saddam Hussein must disarm himself, or, for the sake of peace, we will lead a coalition to disarm him.”

Of course, this demand presupposed that Iraq possessed the weapons of mass destruction that the US claimed it had. If Iraq did not possess such weapons, the demand was meaningless. It could not divest itself of weapons that it did not have. But the United States insisted that there was no question whatever about Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction and its willingness to use them. Indeed, after the inspectors arrived in Iraq under the direction of Hans Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei, their failure to find weapons of mass destruction or even credible evidence that such weapons existed was trumpeted by the Bush administration as proof that they existed—that is, only a regime that possessed weapons of mass destruction would hide them so carefully!

In an article published in the *New York Times* on January 23, 2003, entitled “Why We Know Iraq is Lying,” National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice asserted:

“Instead of a commitment to disarm, Iraq has a high-level political commitment to maintain and conceal its weapons, led by Saddam Hussein and his son Qusay, who controls the Special Security Organization, which runs Iraq’s concealment activities.”

Powell's case for war

The climax of the Bush administration's weapons of mass destruction campaign came on February 5, 2003, when Secretary of State Colin Powell appeared before the United Nations Security Council to present the US government's case for war. I will cite several passages from his speech:

1. "While we were in this council chamber debating resolution 1441 last fall, we know, we know from sources, that a missile brigade outside Baghdad was dispensing rocket launchers and warheads containing biological warfare agents to various locations in western Iraq."

2. "We know that Iraq has at least seven of these mobile, biological agent factories. The truck mounted ones have at least two or three trucks each."

3. "There can be no doubt that Saddam Hussein has biological weapons and the capability to rapidly produce more, many more. And he has the ability to disperse these lethal poisons and diseases in ways that can cause massive death and destruction."

4. "Our conservative estimate is that Iraq today has a stockpile of between 100 and 500 tons of chemical weapons agents. That is enough to fill 16,000 battlefield rockets."

5. "Saddam Hussein has chemical weapons ... we have sources who tell us that he recently has authorized his field commanders to use them."

6. "Iraqi denials of supporting terrorism take their place alongside the other Iraqi denials of weapons of mass destruction. It is all a web of lies."

7. "Leaving Saddam Hussein in possession of weapons of mass destruction for a few more months or years is not an option, not in the post September 11th world."

The mass media was enthralled by Powell's UN performance, proclaiming unanimously that he had presented an irrefutable indictment of the Iraqi regime. The most politically significant response came from its liberal segment, which seized upon the opportunity provided by Powell to fall completely in line with the war plans of the Bush administration.

Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post* proclaimed in a column published the day after Powell's presentation:

"The evidence he presented to the United Nations—some of it circumstantial, some of it absolutely bone-chilling in its detail—had to prove to anyone that Iraq not only hasn't accounted for its weapons of mass destruction but without a doubt still retains them. Only a fool—or possibly a Frenchman—could conclude otherwise."

Mary McGrory of the *Washington Post* wrote on the same day:

"I don't know how the United Nations felt about Colin Powell's '*J'accuse*' speech against Saddam Hussein. I can only say that he persuaded me, and I was as tough as France to convince. ... I had heard enough to know that Saddam Hussein, with his stockpiles of nerve gas and death-dealing chemicals, is more of a menace than I had thought."

One week later, on February 15, 2003, the *New York Times* asserted:

"There is ample evidence that Iraq has produced highly toxic VX nerve gas and anthrax and has the capacity to produce a lot more. It has concealed these materials, lied about them, and more recently failed to account for them to the current inspectors."

It must be stressed that the mass media was not duped by the Bush administration, but functioned as its willing accomplice in the deliberate deception of the American people. There was nothing that was particularly sophisticated in the government's propaganda campaign. Much of what it said was contradicted by both established facts and elementary logic. Even when it was established that the administration's claim that Iraq had sought to obtain nuclear material was based on crudely forged documents, the media chose not to make a major issue of this devastating exposure.

Now the war is over at the cost of countless thousands of Iraqi lives. The country lies in ruins. Much of its industrial, social, and cultural

infrastructure has been destroyed. During the past three weeks US military forces have combed Iraq in search of the weapons of mass destruction that could be seized upon by the administration and media to justify the war. And what has been found? Nothing.

The media has adapted its line to the failure to find the deadly weapons whose supposed existence provided the justification for the war and the deadly sanctions that preceded it.

The *New York Times* published on April 25 a front-page close-up photograph of a skull, which was purported to be that of a victim of Saddam Hussein's regime. And that is what it may well be. No one has ever doubted the brutal character of Saddam's regime—though those familiar with the history of Iraq know that his worst crimes were committed when he enjoyed the political support of the United States.

It has long been known among Iraqi socialists that the first Ba'athist seizure of power—in the coup of February 1963—was carried out with the support of the Kennedy administration. The CIA provided the Ba'athists with the names of Iraqi communists and socialists whom it wanted liquidated. The relations between the Ba'athists and the United States waxed and waned over the next 27 years, depending on international and regional conditions and their influence on the nuances of American foreign policy.

With some knowledge of this history, one could hardly doubt that the photograph had been placed on the front page of the *Times* for definite political reasons—which were soon to become clear. Two days later the *Times* published a column by Thomas L. Friedman, entitled "The Meaning of a Skull." It began as follows:

"Friday's *Times* carried a front-page picture of a skull, with a group of Iraqis gathered around it. The skull was of a political prisoner from Saddam Hussein's regime, as the grieving Iraqis were relatives who had exhumed it from a graveyard filled with other victims of Saddam's torture. Just under the picture was an article about President Bush vowing that weapons of mass destruction will be found in Iraq, as he promised.

"As far as I'm concerned, we do not need to find any weapons of mass destruction to justify the war. That skull, and the thousands more that will be unearthed, are enough for me. Mr. Bush doesn't owe the world any explanation for missing chemical weapons (even if it turns out that the White House has hyped this issue)."

Friedman continued:

"Who cares if we now find some buried barrels of poison? Do they carry more moral weight than those buried skulls? No way."

The timing of Mr. Friedman's attempt to find in the discovery of the corpses of the Hussein's victims an ex post facto justification for the war against Iraq was not exactly felicitous. On the very weekend his column was published the world was being reminded that the United States has plenty of skeletons of its own lying in unmarked graves all over the world. Prosecutors in Honduras announced the discovery of at least four secret cemeteries that were used by military death squads, who were trained and funded by the United States, to bury victims of government repression. Among the remains uncovered in one of these cemeteries were those of James Francis Carney, an American Jesuit priest, who disappeared in Honduras 20 years ago. The number of deaths in that country during the 1980s ran into the tens of thousands. Many of the Honduran army officers who were part of government death squads received their training in the United States.

The case of Honduras is not exceptional. There is hardly a Latin American or Central American country that has not carried out gruesome acts of repression with the direct support of the United States.

The political significance of government lies

But my purpose tonight is not to counterpose the crimes committed by puppet regimes of the United States to those of the Iraqi state under Saddam Hussein. Rather, I think that it is important that we dwell a bit longer on the deeper political significance of the fact that the war against Iraq was justified by the US government on the basis of lies, and that, when these lies are clearly exposed, the response of the American media is one of dismissive indifference, a big "So what."

There has never been a golden age in American politics. The last genuinely and indisputably honorable administration in the history of the United States, wholly and unequivocally devoted to the highest democratic ideals, was that of Abraham Lincoln. And yet, a portrayal of modern American history as one vast and unending reactionary saga would be caricature of reality.

Even within the framework of bourgeois politics, there have been not a few periods of momentous social struggles, in which democratic and egalitarian sentiments reverberated throughout broad strata of society. These sentiments found reflection even within the media, whose owners were still obliged to recruit at least some of their writers, broadcasters and editors from sections of the middle class who were sincere in their commitment to democratic principles.

A generation ago it was still possible to find reporters and editors who actually believed that government lying should be exposed and condemned. The term "credibility gap"—referring to the chasm between the claims made by the Johnson administration to justify American involvement in Vietnam and the historical, political and social truths of that conflict—was so widely popularized by the media in the 1960s that it became a household phrase. A decade later, the lies of the Nixon administration—already shaken by the publication of the Pentagon Papers by the *New York Times*—culminated in the eruption of the Watergate scandal that forced the resignation of a criminal president.

Now, it is apparent that the administration has lied grossly and openly to the American people and the entire world to justify the launching of a war that was, in any event, in violation of international law.

But the exposure of this massive political lie does not produce condemnation, but new and even more insolent justifications in the media.

We are dealing here with a serious political and social phenomenon that needs to be analyzed and explained. This situation is telling the American people something important and very disturbing about the nature of the society in which they are living.

First, let us consider the objective significance of the political lie. It must be considered not as a moral problem, but rather as a social phenomenon. The lie is a manifestation of contradictions within society. When an individual lies, he does so to bridge or cover over the chasm between his personal interests and accepted social norms. The lie, in this sense, arises out of the inherent conflict between the individual and society. The extent, depth and acuteness of that conflict will determine the scope and severity of the lie—whether it assumes the form of a relatively benign and good-humored "white lie" or the more distressing form of perjured testimony.

The lies told by a government are also the manifestations of contradictions—not those between the individual and society, but between social classes. In the final analysis, the state is an instrument of coercion that serves and protects the interests of the dominant class within society—that is, the capitalist class. But in a bourgeois democracy, that coercive role is mediated and to some considerable extent concealed by the elaborate political and legal superstructure that allows the state to appear as a more or less impartial arbiter of diverse class and social interests—serving the nation as a whole. The legitimacy of the state in the eyes of the broad mass of the population depends upon it being viewed in precisely this way—as the democratically elected representative of the people as a whole.

As long as economic and political conditions permit and even favor a

policy of class compromise, the democratic illusion is preserved—and the political lies of the state are kept within certain acceptable bounds. But in periods of increasingly acute social tensions, when the interests of social classes diverge ever more dramatically, the essential role of the state as an instrument of class rule tends more and more to erode the democratic veneer. It is precisely in such periods that the lies of the state assume an ever more blatant and odious character. That is, the function of the lie is to cover over the widening chasm between the interests of the ruling elite that controls the state and the broad mass of the population.

The weapons of mass destruction campaign rose organically out of the need of the ruling elite to conceal from the broad mass of the American people the rapacious class interests that underlay the drive for war.

What would a speech that honestly explained the reasons for war have sounded like? Let us imagine for a moment that Mr. Bush had decided to explain to the American people the real reasons for the war against Iraq. It might have gone something like this:

"My fellow Americans: Tonight the United States has initiated a massive bombardment of Iraq that will soon be followed by a ground invasion of that country's territory. Insofar as this action is in complete violation of international law, it is all the more necessary that I give you an honest explanation for the actions of your government."

"As you know, most members of my cabinet have occupied very lucrative positions in major corporations, and quite a few of us are intimately connected with the oil industry. My dad, as you might know, made his fortune in that business and continues to follow it closely. The only serious job I ever held before entering politics was also in the oil business, and though I was not particularly successful, I am highly sensitive to its concerns. Our vice president, Dick Cheney, a good man, served recently as CEO of Halliburton and is still receiving annual payments of \$600,000 from that company, which plays a major role in the oil exploration business."

"This makes my administration acutely sensitive to the problems of the international oil industry. Oil happens to be a finite resource and there are many who believe that the world will face critical shortages by 2025. So although there is a great deal of money to be made in the oil industry, our decision to go to war is not driven exclusively by personal considerations. We also think it is important that the United States secure its dominant world position by establishing through military means unrestricted access to the oil reserves of the Persian Gulf region."

"As a matter of fact, plans for the conquest of Iraq have been in the works for about a decade. After the fall of the Soviet Union, it became pretty clear that no one could stop the United States from doing what it wanted; and so the United States began developing plans for establishing an unchallengeable position of global hegemony. In these plans, oil plays a big role and Iraq—which has the second largest proven oil reserves of any country in the world—became a prime target for attack. Of course, we couldn't just say that the United States wanted Iraq for its oil, so we had to come up with some other reason. That's how we all came up with the idea of weapons of mass destruction."

"Especially after September 11, the weapons of mass destruction theme really came into its own. Frankly, we knew that Iraq had nothing to do with September 11—let alone with the anthrax attacks in the United States, which were carried out by some of the over-enthusiastic right-wing maniacs among my own supporters. But who's asking any questions?"

"Anyway, the war's getting started today. It will cost God-knows how many billions. But we figure that we can keep the planned tax cut and still pay for the war by implementing cuts in Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, and education."

"You probably won't like the consequences, but, hey, that's life. Anyway, 2004 is just around the corner, and we'll all pretend to have an election then."

"Thank you and God bless you all. My friends and I will take care of

ourselves.”

No one, of course, expects this sort of candor in a speech by an American president—especially one whose very tenure in office is based on electoral fraud.

Still, the massive and blatant character of the lies upon which this war was based, and the indifferent and cynical response of the media, are significant manifestations of the general breakdown of bourgeois democratic norms. The political life of the United States reflects in ever more grotesque forms the increasingly oligarchic character of the American state.

As an ever-greater percentage of the nation’s wealth is concentrated in an ever smaller percentage of the population, the ruling elites are unable to generate any genuine mass support for the policies of the state. As the coincidence between the interests of the oligarchy that controls the state and the broad mass of the people becomes increasingly tenuous, lies play a critical role in the daily manipulation of popular consciousness and the concoction of what is palmed off in the media as “public opinion.” Temporary and short-term successes may be achieved on this basis. But the longer-term result of this daily process of manipulation and deception is the irreparable alienation of the people from official politics.

This alienation initially assumes a form that the superficial observer mistakes for indifference and apathy. But beneath the surface of official politics a complex social and intellectual process is at work. The pressures of everyday life are slowly but surely having their impact on mass consciousness.

It is true that consciousness lags behind being. But the link between imperialism and the intensified exploitation and oppression of the working class is not a socialist myth but an objective fact. Inevitably the social implications of this new eruption of American imperialism will be felt ever more acutely by the working class in the United States.

Socialists must not only anticipate but also accelerate the renewal of political class consciousness by establishing, socially and programmatically, a new foundation for political struggle. This means recognizing that the real mass base for the development of a movement against imperialism—within the United States and internationally—is the working class. And it requires a clear understanding that the fight against war cannot be separated from the fight against the capitalist system.



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