

Friedman: We did it “because we could”

# New York Times covers up for lies on Iraq war

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In the face of a mounting international scandal over US and British falsehoods about weapons of mass destruction, advanced to justify the invasion and occupation of Iraq, Thomas Friedman, the *New York Times*'s chief foreign affairs columnist, has leapt into the breach to assure the paper's readers that whether Bush and Blair lied about WMDs is beside the point.

His June 4 column in the *Times* is a demonstration of the cynicism of the media—including its erstwhile “liberal” representatives—and its contempt for democratic principles.

Friedman declares that the failure to discover Iraqi weapons of mass destruction is not “the real story we should be concerned with.” The question of WMDs was, he says, “the wrong issue before the war, and it is the wrong issue now.”

The *Times* columnist argues that there is no point getting upset about the US president launching a war under false pretenses. This is a minor technicality. “Because there were actually four reasons for this war: the real reason, the right reason, the moral reason and the stated reason.”

Curiously, one often raised reason is absent from Friedman's list—namely, Iraq's oil wealth. This is a glaring omission, coming as it does in the wake of statements from top administration officials who planned the war acknowledging that Iraq's possession of the world's second-largest oil reserves was the decisive factor in the decision to go to war.

Explaining why Washington invaded Iraq—where no weapons of mass destruction were found—while opting for a diplomatic approach to North Korea, which has openly touted its nuclear weapons program, US Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz told delegates to a security summit in Singapore last weekend: “The most important difference between North Korea and Iraq is that economically we just had no choice in Iraq. The country swims on a sea of oil.”

In an earlier interview with *Vanity Fair*, Wolfowitz tacitly acknowledged that the charge of Iraqi chemical and biological weapons was a pretext. “For reasons that have a lot to do with the US government bureaucracy, we settled on the one issue that everyone could agree on: weapons of mass destruction,” the Pentagon's number-two man said.

Friedman's omission is all the more curious—and damning—since he himself published a column in the *New York Times* last January 5 bearing the headline “A War for Oil?” in which he declared he

had “no problem” with a war waged to gain control of Iraq's petroleum reserves.

In his latest column, Friedman writes, “The real reason for this war, which was never stated, was that after 9/11 America needed to hit someone in the Arab-Muslim world. Afghanistan wasn't enough.” Washington could have picked any Arab country, he argues. “Smashing Saudi Arabia or Syria would have been fine. But we hit Saddam for one simple reason: *because we could...*”

Friedman is unabashed in his thuggery. His answer is worthy of any thief asked to explain why he mugged an elderly woman. Iraq was an irresistible target because the 1991 Persian Gulf War, followed by a decade of United Nations sanctions, continuous US-British bombing in the “no-fly zones,” and the work of United Nations weapons inspectors had left the country virtually defenseless. And there was that small matter Friedman chooses to ignore: Iraqi oil.

Friedman is a fan of brutality and force, a taste he acquired while covering the bloody exploits of Ariel Sharon and the fascist Falange during the Lebanese civil war two decades ago. If the toll in human lives exacted in Afghanistan was not enough to balance the scales for September 11, why not slaughter thousands, if not tens of thousands more in Iraq?

The point, he suggests, is to terrorize the entire Arab and Islamic world, subjugating it to the requirements of Washington and Israel.

Having dispensed with the “real reason,” he moves on to the “right” and “moral” ones. The “right reason” for the war, he claims, is “the need to partner with Iraqis, post-Saddam, to build a progressive Arab regime.” Such a regime, Friedman suggests, would represent an antidote to a supposed terrorist threat by serving as a “model” for “angry, humiliated young Arabs and Muslims, who are produced by failed or failing Arab states.”

“Partnering”—a term that generally describes two companies setting up a joint enterprise—is a strange word to use for what could better be described as plunder. One could as easily speak of Hitler's Germany “partnering” with the Poles to create *Lebensraum* in the east.

The contours of Friedman's “progressive Arab regime” that is supposed to serve as a “model” for all of the Arab “failed states” have already begun to emerge. Its principal foundation is the sweeping privatization of Iraq's state sector, beginning with its oil fields. Accompanying these measures, the US viceroy in Baghdad,

L. Paul Bremer, has already announced more than half a million layoffs of Iraqi state workers.

Washington has made it clear that it will impose a “free market” economic model on Iraq—the same model that has produced a string of “failed states” from Latin America to Africa—regardless of what its people desire. This model will assure that the current mass unemployment and desperate poverty remain permanent. Politically, the regime will be a militarized puppet of the US.

The notion that such a state will inspire hope among “angry, humiliated young Arabs” is a measure of the appalling ignorance that merges seamlessly with Friedman’s arrogance and bloodlust.

Finally, there is the “moral reason” for the war—the fact that the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein repressed its own people. Never mind that the CIA helped bring the Baathists to power and provided them with lists of socialists and nationalists who became their first victims.

“Once the war was over and I saw the mass graves and the true extent of Saddam’s genocidal evil, my view was that Mr. Bush did not need to find any WMDs to justify the war for me,” says the *Times* columnist.

The unearthing of human remains in Iraq was, according to Friedman, the irrefutable answer to anyone’s questioning the morality of the war. That the bulk of these unearthed victims were Shiites, massacred with the tacit approval of the US government when they rebelled in the wake of the first Persian Gulf War, does not enter into Friedman’s moral calculations.

Moreover, the unearthing of similar remains in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile and Argentina—all victims of dictatorships installed by the CIA and the Pentagon—apparently escaped his notice. Had he seen the skulls and skeletons at those sites would it have caused a comparable epiphany, convincing him of the immorality of US imperialist interventions?

Friedman proudly declares that whether or not any WMDs are found or even existed is for him a matter of indifference. The “genocidal evil” that he perceived in the mass graves uncovered after the war was sufficient justification. “But I have to admit that I’ve always been fighting my own war in Iraq,” he tells his readers. “Mr. Bush took the country into *his* war.”

Friedman was never fighting his “own war in Iraq,” not even in his own head. His job involved not fighting, but lying. After luncheon consultations with the war’s Pentagon plotters, he crafted lying bits of sophistry to justify an illegal act of aggression. His specialty was to cloak a filthy and predatory enterprise in “progressive” and “moral” trappings.

The “Bush team,” Friedman tells his readers, opted, “for PR reasons,” not to disclose its “real reason” for war, not to mention its supposed “right” and “moral” motives.

Friedman, it should be pointed out, acknowledged during the buildup to the Iraq war that there existed no popular support for attacking the Middle Eastern country. In a column published February 5, he commented that he was “struck by an incredible contrast...between the audacity of what they [the Bush administration] intend to do in Iraq—a audacity that, I must say, has an appeal for me—and the incredibly narrow base of support that exists in America today for this audacious project.”

An avowed advocate of war, Friedman found himself compelled

to admit that in public appearances around the country, “there was not a single audience I spoke to where I felt there was a majority in favor of war in Iraq.”

Faced with the same dilemma, the administration bombarded the public with phony propaganda about “weapons of mass destruction.” It sought to terrorize the American people into supporting a war. It claimed repeatedly that Saddam Hussein’s regime had a huge stockpile of nerve gas, biological weapons and possibly even atomic bombs, and was preparing to hand them over to the same band of terrorists that leveled the World Trade Center.

That this is no big deal for the leading foreign affairs columnist at the *New York Times* is itself a testimony to the degeneration of the media and the disappearance of any significant base of support for democratic rights within the ruling elite, including its supposedly liberal wing.

One only has to recall the furor unleashed by the *Times*, the *Washington Post* and others over Richard Nixon’s secret bombing of Cambodia, not to mention his lying over what his administration tried to dismiss as a “second-rate burglary” at the Watergate complex some three decades ago.

Now, confronted with overwhelming evidence that a US administration launched an unprovoked war against a country that posed no threat to the American people based on lies and fabrications whose like has not been seen since the days of Adolf Hitler, the response is to invent “moral” alibis.

Implicit in this attempted whitewash is the idea that the American people have no right to know why the government sends its soldiers to kill and die in another country, much less to exercise any influence on the decision to go to war.

This is not a new idea. Herman Goering, the number-two man in Hitler’s Third Reich, described the same concept quite well in an interview conducted in his Nuremberg jail cell: “Naturally, the common people don’t want war, neither in Russia nor in England, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship...All you have to do is tell them that they are being attacked, and denounce the peacemakers for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country.”



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