

# The New York Times' Friedman libels the Iraqi resistance

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The *New York Times*' chief foreign policy commentator, Thomas Friedman, who has assumed the role of leading "liberal" defender of the American occupation of Iraq, published a particularly venomous column on October 30 under the headline "It's No Vietnam."

Friedman's piece appeared on the same day as columns by two other liberal commentators arguing that the recent upsurge of anti-US violence in Iraq and the exposure of Bush administration lies about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and Iraqi-Al Qaeda connections in no way discredited the war or provided legitimate grounds to oppose the US occupation of the country. Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post* penned a piece entitled "Vietnam It Isn't," and Benjamin Schwarz, the former executive editor of the liberal *World Policy Journal*, published a column in the *Los Angeles Times* headlined "Bush Fibbed, and That Might Be OK."

The simultaneous appearance of these columns in three of the most influential US dailies suggests something more than mere coincidence. Coming within days of the rocket attack on the Al Rasheed Hotel, the chief residence of US occupation officials, and the coordinated car-bomb assaults on the headquarters of the Red Cross and three police stations in the Iraqi capital, these attempts to belittle the significance of US government lies and dismiss the notion of a Vietnam-like quagmire have all the markings of a coordinated propaganda campaign. (We make this observation fully anticipating charges, from both liberal and conservative defenders of the war, of "conspiracy" mania and "paranoia.")

That these articles are coming from the liberal wing of the political establishment has far-reaching significance. It demonstrates the existence of a broad consensus within the US ruling elite—and its journalistic apologists—behind the Bush administration's policy of global conquest and colonial-style subjugation of peoples and regions considered to be of strategic importance to the American corporate oligarchy. Whatever tactical quibbles the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* might have with the authors of the US seizure of Iraq, they are in essential agreement with the war aims and imperialist goals of the Bush administration. The same can be said for the Democratic Party and the liberal camp as a whole—which accounts for the pathetic and unprincipled character of the so-called "anti-war" elements within this political milieu.

The *New York Times*' Friedman expresses most crudely and cynically the continuum between the Republican right and American liberalism on Iraq. His column, in the outlandishness of its lies and vitriol against those who oppose the US occupation, suggests something approaching panic at the prospect of a debacle for the US in Iraq and the emergence of a mass anti-war movement within the US.

Friedman begins his rant with the assertion that the October 30 attack on the Red Cross headquarters in Baghdad, which coincided with the first day of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, was an act of such depravity as to place the anti-US fighters beyond the pale of civilized peoples. Striking a pose of moral outrage, the *Times* commentator writes: "This suicide bomber was not restrained by either the sanctity of the Muslim

holy day or the sanctity of the Red Cross. All civilizational norms were tossed aside."

Friedman throws the moral "nihilism" of the "terrorists" in the face of what he deems an unholy alliance of war critics—the "Europeans, the Arab press and the anti-war left." All three are guilty of drawing a parallel between the situation in Iraq and the Vietnam War and suggesting that the Iraqi fighters are the contemporary equivalent of the Vietcong, engaged in a struggle "to 'liberate' their country from 'US occupation.'"

"Hogwash," Friedman declares. "The people who mounted the attacks on the Red Cross are not the Iraqi Vietcong. They are the Iraqi Khmer Rouge—a murderous band of Saddam Hussein loyalists and Al Qaeda nihilists, who are not killing us so Iraqis can rule themselves. *They are killing us so they can rule Iraqis.*" (Friedman's emphasis).

Ominously, Friedman continues: "Have you noticed that these bombers never say what their political agenda is or whom they represent? They don't want Iraqis to know who they really are. A vast majority of Iraqis would reject them, because these bombers either want to restore Baathism or install bin Ladenism."

In his righteous indignation, Friedman is evidently blind to the absurdities and contradictions lodged in his own assertions. Presumably, he would have the resistance fighters call a press conference in Baghdad to explain their program and introduce themselves to the American military that has seized control of their country. In any event, their basic plank is clear to all, and is obviously supported by broad sections of the Iraqi population, who have demonstrated in the streets in the tens of thousands and in the teeth of a massive US troop presence and daily repression. They want the US to get out of Iraq.

Moreover, if the so-called "terrorists" are anonymous and refuse to reveal their aims, as Friedman claims, how is it that he knows precisely who they are and precisely what they want? He doesn't say, but the manifest answer is that the US government—the same government that said Saddam Hussein had accumulated a massive stockpile of chemical and biological weapons—tells him so.

Next comes one of Friedman's favorite phrases: "Let's get real." As those who are familiar with Friedman's columns know, this rhetorical flourish inevitably announces an outpouring of even more outlandish and cynical lies. Mr. Friedman does not disappoint.

"The great irony," he writes, "is that the Baathists and Arab dictators are opposing the US in Iraq because—unlike many leftists—they understand exactly what this war is about. They understand that US power is not being used in Iraq for oil, or imperialism, or to shore up a corrupt status quo, as it was in Vietnam and elsewhere in the Arab world during the cold war. They understand that this is the most radical-liberal revolutionary war the US has ever launched—a war of choice to install some democracy in the heart of the Arab-Muslim world."

It turns out, according to Friedman, that the problems the US has faced in Iraq flow not from its bloody conquest of the country, its repressive occupation, or its attempt to gain control of Iraqi oil, but rather from its

efforts to “empower” Kurds, Shiites, non-Baathist Sunnis, women, etc. “The Qaeda nihilists, the Saddamists and all the Europeans and Arab autocrats who had a vested interest in the old status quo are threatened by this,” he writes.

Here you have in a nutshell the inverted moral and political universe of the Bush administration and its liberal acolytes. The US—with its bombs and global conglomerates like Halliburton—stands for progressive change, democracy and peace. The Iraqis who resist American occupation and those who criticize Washington’s policies stand for a status quo of tyranny and reaction.

Unfortunately for Friedman, there is history and the facts, in the face of which his claims collapse upon themselves. Let us begin with his pose of moral outrage at the car-bombing of the Red Cross headquarters in Baghdad.

From time immemorial progressive humanity has recognized the right of occupied peoples to use military force to throw off the yoke of their oppressors. One can be certain that phrases similar to those of the *Times*’ commentator were used by the Nazis to characterize the resistance movements of those living under German occupation in Poland, Holland, France, Greece and other countries during the Second World War.

The Iraqi people have the right to resist the American occupation of their country in any way they choose. The responsibility for the deaths of innocent civilians—as well as for American youth dragooned into this vile imperialist project—rests with those who conspired to launch an illegal war of aggression and promoted the most cynical lies to justify it.

As for Friedman’s attempt to counterpose the current American adventure with Washington’s intervention in Vietnam, one can only marvel at his disingenuousness. For his present purposes, Friedman goes so far as to imply that the Viet Cong were a legitimate anti-imperialist force, fighting against a “corrupt status quo.”

That, however, was not the line of the *New York Times* at the time. For years it promoted the Big Lie of that period, used to justify American atrocities against another impoverished and oppressed people. It was, supposedly, a war to defend democratic South Vietnam against an invasion from the communist North, armed and financed by Red China and the Soviet Union. The Viet Cong were communist terrorists, driven by a hatred of freedom and democracy, who served as willing agents of the international communist conspiracy in its struggle against the Free World.

Is Mr. Friedman now repudiating the line of his newspaper and the American cold war liberals on Vietnam? And if they were so badly mistaken, or so thoroughly dishonest, about Vietnam, why should anyone accept Mr. Friedman’s line on the Iraq war today?

In debunking the Iraqi resistance-Vietcong analogy, Friedman raises the specter of the Khmer Rouge, which carried out a bloodbath against the civilian population of Cambodia during its three-and-a-half-year rule from 1975 to 1978. He links the Khmer Rouge with “Qaeda nihilism” and “Saddamism” as embodiments of tyranny and mass murder. He conveniently ignores the historical fact that, at various points, the United States was allied with all three.

In his moral outrage over the bombing of the Red Cross in Baghdad, Friedman exhibits a remarkable capacity for selective indignation. Just short of two years ago, during the US invasion of Afghanistan, American war planes bombed a Red Cross warehouse in Kabul. The International Committee of the Red Cross rejected US claims that the bombing was unintentional, pointing out that the warehouse was clearly marked with a large red cross on its roof. The American response to the Red Cross’ protests was to bomb the warehouse a second time.

The US also bombed a United Nations de-mining agency in Kabul. Needless to say, such actions did not, according to Friedman’s moral compass, place the United States beyond the pale of civilized peoples. Nor did a host of other recent US attacks on civilian targets, including the bombing of the air raid shelter in the Al-Amariya residential district of

Baghdad during Persian Gulf War, which killed 288 innocents, including 91 children. Or the bombing of the Belgrade television station and the Chinese Embassy during the Kosovo War of 1999, or the attack on the Al-Jazeera television station in Kabul in November of 2001, or the bombing of the Al-Jazeera TV offices in Baghdad last April.

Nor is the US to be condemned for its liberal use of concussion bombs, daisy cutters, cluster bombs and depleted uranium weapons in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Let us now turn to Mr. Friedman’s own recent history. Journalists are obliged to leave a paper trail. It is an occupational hazard, and it creates serious problems for the *Times* columnist in his efforts to invent a new justification for the American seizure of Iraq.

In his October 30 column, Friedman baldly declares that the US invasion and occupation of Iraq are not about oil. Last January 5, however, he published a column headlined “A War for Oil?” in which he wrote: “Is the war that the Bush team is preparing to launch in Iraq really a war for oil? My short answer is yes.”

Six months later, after the invasion had failed to turn up any weapons of mass destruction, Friedman published a column (June 4) in which he provided another, no less predatory, explanation for the war. Then he was not speaking of the war’s “revolutionary” or “democratic” motives. He wrote: “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... Smashing Saudi Arabia or Syria would have been fine. But we hit Saddam for one simple reason: because we could...”

In a 1998 piece in the *New York Times* magazine, Friedman provided a justification for the role of the US military around the world that dispensed with democratic platitudes and got to the heart of the matter: “The hidden hand of the market,” he wrote, “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.”

So much for Friedman’s own views about the “democratic” and “empowering” role of American militarism in Iraq. The *Times* columnist concludes his piece by attempting to deal with a contradiction that he cannot simply ignore: the claim that the Bush administration, which is engaged in an unprecedented attack on democratic rights and social conditions for the broad masses within the US, is pursuing a “radical liberal” and “revolutionary” policy in Iraq. “Can the president really be a successful radical liberal on Iraq, while being such a radical conservative everywhere else?” he asks.

In reality, there is no contradiction here, since Bush’s neo-colonialist and militarist foreign policy is an extension of his reactionary domestic agenda. The very notion that a government installed by dint of electoral fraud and engaged in an illegal war could be organically capable of conducting a “revolutionary” democratic foreign policy is absurd on its face. But since Friedman is claiming the opposite in relation to Iraq, he is confronted with something of a dilemma.

His “solution” is to give Bush some friendly advice: ease off on the tax cuts for the rich in order to more effectively “summon Americans for the sacrifices victory [in Iraq] will require.”

Friedman’s groveling before Bush stands in sharp contrast to his vitriolic tone toward the “Europeans” and the “anti-war left.” His column has the merit of putting paid to any lingering illusions that the *New York Times* is opposed, even remotely, to the American imperialist adventure in Iraq.

He himself is the representative of a definite social type: the liberal middle class professional who threw in his lot with the extreme right wing in order to cash in on the vast redistribution of wealth that has been

engineered over the past two decades from the working class to the most privileged social layers. He has grown rich by prostituting himself in the service of the most reactionary and predatory sections of the ruling elite.

Ignorant of history, bereft of perspective and incapable of foreseeing anything, he now finds himself implicated in a colonialist enterprise in Iraq that is going badly, and fears that the widespread suspicion, disillusionment and anger over the war will turn into a massive movement of social protest and opposition to the entire political and corporate establishment in the US. He senses that his own head could roll, and that he, and hundreds of other journalistic hacks like him, will be held accountable for their roles in perpetrating a monstrous crime against the people of both Iraq and the America.

The rise of Friedman to prominence points to one major difference between the Vietnam War and the US intervention in Iraq. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the exposure of the lies that were used to justify and conduct the Vietnam War was sufficient to discredit the war policy of the government among important sections of the political and media establishment. The *Times* itself played a role in this process by publishing the Pentagon Papers in June of 1971. Even earlier, during the Johnson administration, the phrase “credibility gap” became synonymous with a war policy that was increasingly seen as illegitimate.

There is no similar reaction in establishment circles today to the exposure of Bush’s lies on Iraq. The overwhelming consensus within all wings of the establishment, liberal as well as conservative, is that the illegal character of the war and the massive deception that was used to promote it have no bearing on the legitimacy of the invasion and occupation. All discussion concerns the most effective means for carrying the seizure of a country and its total subordination to the US financial oligarchy through to a successful conclusion.

This in itself is a devastating commentary on the putrefaction of American democracy, and the disintegration of any liberal opposition to militarism abroad and authoritarianism at home. It reflects the far-reaching changes that have occurred in the underlying social structure of the United States, driven above all by the vast growth of social inequality. The wholesale corruption of the media, and its lavishly paid operatives like Friedman, is an essential aspect of this irreversible process of decay of the existing social and political order.



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