

British MP Galloway blasts US Senate on Iraqi oil probe

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It was a rare “emperor has no clothes” moment on Capitol Hill Tuesday when British anti-Iraq war MP George Galloway delivered a blistering rebuttal of charges that he had received kickbacks from the United Nations oil-for-food programme and had even given money to Saddam Hussein.

The British legislator turned the tables on his accusers on the US Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, exposing its chairman, Republican Senator Norm Coleman of Minnesota, as a “lickspittle” of the Bush administration. He demonstrated that the panel’s so-called investigation is merely another attempt to justify America’s illegal war of aggression against Iraq and smear those who have opposed it.

Galloway had insisted on his right to appear before the committee after it issued a report citing documents and testimony from sources within the Baathist regime naming him as a beneficiary of oil allocations under the UN programme. The allegations, which differ in no fundamental respect from those made earlier by the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Christian Science Monitor*, came just days after Galloway had been elected on an anti-war ticket in London’s Bethnal Green and Bow constituency for the Respect party.

The *Christian Science Monitor* had withdrawn its allegations after the documents they were based on were proved to be forgeries, while Galloway mounted a successful libel action against the *Telegraph* that the paper is contesting.

Appearing before a reduced panel made up of Coleman and Democrat Senator Carl Levin, the MP began by declaring that, even when measured against ever declining standards of political life in Washington, the panel’s probe was a travesty. He pointed out that the committee had published its accusations without so much as an attempt to contact him.

Galloway declared, “I am not now, nor have I ever been, an oil trader and neither has anyone on my behalf.”

His statement paraphrased the infamous query, “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party,” that was the hallmark of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations half a century ago, when it was led by the vile witch-hunter Senator Joseph McCarthy.

The subcommittee’s report describes Galloway as “the owner of a company that has made substantial profits from trading in Iraqi oil.” To this Galloway replied, “Senator, I do not own any companies, beyond a small company, whose entire purpose, whose sole purpose, is to receive the income from my journalistic

earnings from my employer Associated Newspapers, in London. I do not own a company that’s been trading in Iraqi oil. And you have no business to carry a quotation, utterly unsubstantiated and false, implying otherwise.”

Galloway stated that he could not comment on the authenticity of the documents presented by the committee, only that the claims made in them were false. The documents and testimony made against him raised nothing new and had been produced only after the installation of the pro-US puppet regime in Iraq. There was, he said, a history of forgeries seeking to implicate him in sanction-busting that had been gratefully seized on by the right-wing neo-conservative press.

Much of this material had its origins in the Iraq Survey Group inquiry headed by Charles Duelfer. This material was provided to Duelfer by “the convicted bankrobber, and fraudster and conman Ahmed Chalabi, who many people to their credit in your country now realise played a decisive role in leading your country into the disaster in Iraq.”

He noted that, out of an original list of 270 names, only a few individuals, including himself, had been targeted by the committee. All of them, Galloway said, “had one defining characteristic in common: they all stood against the policy of sanctions and war which you vociferously prosecuted and which has led us to this disaster.”

One of the main sources of the accusations against Galloway is Dahar Yassein Ramadan, former Iraqi vice-president, whom the MP noted is languishing in Abu Ghraib prison facing war crimes charges that are punishable by death. Knowing what the world knows about US abuses at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, “I’m not sure how much credibility anyone would put on anything you manage to get from a prisoner in those circumstances.”

Galloway went to the heart of the matter when he explained that there was no evidence to back up the claims made in the documents and witness testimony given to the committee. “What counts is not the names on the paper, what counts is where’s the money Senator? Who paid me hundreds of thousands of dollars of money? The answer to that is nobody. And if you had anybody who ever paid me a penny, you would have produced them today.”

He had no connection with any of the companies cited in the documentation from Iraq such as Aredio Petroleum. Galloway’s name appears in parenthesis—usually alongside his associate and chairman of his anti-sanctions Mariam Appeal, Jordanian businessman Fawaz Zureikat—as a beneficiary from oil contracts.

Galloway then turned to what he described as a “schoolboy howler,” the assertion by the committee that its documents referred to a different time period from those on which the *Telegraph* based its attack on the MP. In fact, the committee’s documents refer to precisely the same period, 2001, as the *Telegraph*’s. “But perhaps you were confusing the *Daily Telegraph* action with the *Christian Science Monitor*. The *Christian Science Monitor* did indeed publish on its front pages a set of allegations against me very similar to the ones that your committee have made. They did indeed rely on documents which started in 1992, 1993. These documents were unmasked by the *Christian Science Monitor* themselves as forgeries.”

As well as rebutting the specific charges against him, Galloway made repeated and effective attacks on the criminal actions of the US and British governments. To the claim that he had met repeatedly with Saddam Hussein, he replied, “As a matter of fact, I have met Saddam Hussein exactly the same number of times as [US Secretary of Defence] Donald Rumsfeld met him. The difference is Donald Rumsfeld met him to sell him guns and to give him maps the better to target those guns.” He added, “I was an opponent of Saddam Hussein when British and American governments and businessmen were selling guns and gas.”

In his closing remarks, Galloway declared, “I told the world that Iraq, contrary to your claims, did not have weapons of mass destruction. I told the world, contrary to your claims, that Iraq had no connection to Al Qaeda. I told the world, contrary to your claims, that Iraq had no connection to the atrocity on 9/11 2001. I told the world, contrary to your claims, that the Iraqi people would resist a British and American invasion of their country and that the fall of Baghdad would not be the beginning of the end, but merely the end of the beginning.”

“Senator, in everything I said about Iraq, I turned out to be right and you turned out to be wrong and 100,000 people paid with their lives: 1,600 of them American soldiers sent to their deaths on a pack of lies; 15,000 of them wounded, many of them disabled forever on a pack of lies.”

Referring to the Senate investigation as the “mother of all smokescreens,” he stated that its purpose was to “divert attention from the crimes that you supported, from the theft of billions of dollars of Iraq’s wealth.”

The real oil-for-food scandal was the \$8.8 billion of Iraq’s wealth that went missing after the US occupied the country and the fact that “the biggest sanctions busters were not me or Russian politicians or French politicians. The real sanctions busters were your own companies with the connivance of your own government.”

The bulk of the US and world media, outside of the most right-wing publications, was unanimous in concluding that nothing like the MP’s testimony had been heard on Capitol Hill.

The senators themselves were clearly shaken, forced to shut down the hearing early.

Galloway is a bourgeois politician whose views are alien to socialism. The fact that he accepted financial and political support from Zureikat and the rulers of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia expresses the opportunist character of his politics.

Attempts by the likes of Coleman and Levin to exploit this issue,

however, fell flat. As Galloway pointed out, his attitude to fund raising—of asking no questions—and his relations with corrupt Middle Eastern regimes such as Saudi Arabia are in fact the norm in Washington.

Nevertheless, it was not simply his pugnacious attitude that distinguished Galloway from the ritualised fawning and sycophancy of official politics in the US. The political points he made on the criminal nature of the Iraq war and the treatment of US detainees, as well as Washington’s role in arming and supporting Saddam Hussein, were hardly original. Yet they are taboo subjects, both for the Republican administration and its supposed opposition in the Democrat Party.

Galloway described the Senate Subcommittee as Republican “lickspittles,” adding, “There is no doubt Coleman is part of that neo-con assault on the United Nations and on those he perceives have betrayed the United States over Iraq and war.”

But the bipartisan nature of the committee only reflects the political unanimity that characterises both the Senate and Congress, whether on the Iraq war, or the broader issues of both foreign and domestic policy. Levin is one of the few Democrats who can claim to have been a critic of the Iraq war. Yet he lends his credibility to Coleman’s committee in order to conceal its essential aim of witch-hunting those viewed as opponents of the Bush administration. That is why Coleman’s questioning of Galloway—which focussed almost exclusively on whether the MP knew that Zureikat traded in Iraqi oil—was reinforced by Levin’s moralising on whether to take money from contracts that had been secured by paying kickbacks.

It is on the basis of such sanctimonious justifications that the Democrats will also support the attacks the committee has made against UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, former French interior minister Charles Pasqua and others in Washington’s ongoing efforts to whip America’s European rivals into line.

And Galloway himself is still under threat. He will not be forgiven, either for his anti-war stance or his public humiliation of Coleman and Levin.

The committee’s report insists that there is evidence to show that “Iraq granted George Galloway allocations of millions of barrels of oil under the oil-for-food programme,” that he had used the Mariam Appeal “to conceal payments associated with at least one such allocation,” and that “according to senior Saddam officials, the oil allocations were granted by Iraq because of Galloway’s support for the Saddam regime and opposition to UN sanctions.”

When asked whether Galloway had violated his oath to tell the truth before the committee, Coleman said, “If in fact he lied to this committee, there will have to be consequences.”

Under US law, lying to Congress can result in a year in prison.



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