

Thomas Friedman and Iraq: A bad case of amnesia

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Bill Van Auken of the *World Socialist Web Site* has recently commented on *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman's reply to readers critical of his support for the United States' invasion and occupation of Iraq. (See "Friedman on Iraq—the 'thinking' behind the *New York Times*'s debacle".) Van Auken provided a concise and damning analysis of Friedman's tortured justification of his endorsement of the war.

There is one extraordinary statement Friedman made in defense of his record, however, that merits separate attention. "As readers of my column know," he wrote, "I barely even mentioned the word Iraq for the first eight years that I was a columnist. I really only came to the Iraq issue when the country came to it, post 9/11, when the Bush administration decided it was going to invade Iraq come what may."

As it would be impolite to call Mr. Friedman a liar, I would suggest that he is suffering from some strange form of selective amnesia—perhaps a sort of Political Alzheimer's—that has destroyed his capacity to remember columns that might be a source of professional embarrassment.

The easily accessible archives of the *New York Times* establish that Iraq and the regime of Saddam Hussein were one of Friedman's principal concerns in the decade that preceded 9/11 and the subsequent invasion of Iraq. This is hardly surprising, for the United States did not—as Friedman absurdly claims—discover Iraq only after September 2001.

In the aftermath of the Desert Storm military operation of 1991, Iraq remained the focus of foreign policy debate in the United States—a policy obsession fueled by the anger of right-wing policy institutes that deplored the failure of the first Bush administration to occupy Baghdad and oust the regime of Saddam Hussein. The reluctance of the Clinton administration to commit the United States to a full-scale war against Iraq, for fear of the political and military consequences, was subjected to virtually unending denunciations by the Republican Party and wide sections of the media throughout the 1990s.

Friedman played a significant role in this campaign, writing numerous columns in which he promoted the myth that Saddam Hussein's regime either possessed or was developing weapons that threatened the United States, and lambasting the Clinton administration's unwillingness to face up to the scale of the supposed danger posed by Iraq.

Let us cite just a few examples of Friedman's opus from the archives of the *Times*.

In a column dated November 6, 1997, entitled "Head Shot," Friedman wrote:

"When you think about how the US should respond to Saddam Hussein's latest attempt to evade UN sanctions, just keep this in mind: Saddam Hussein is the reason God created cruise missiles. Cruise missiles are simply the only way to deal with him."

Asserting that "Saddam is up to something serious this time," Friedman demanded that the Clinton administration undertake decisive measures, insisting that "it cannot be just to obliterate those sites where he [Saddam] is still hiding weapons [sic]—although that's important. The US has to try to destroy him too. Because the worst of all worlds would be if we destroy his weapons but he survives and throws out the UN inspectors. He would then be able to rearm without anyone watching Iraq. And he will try to rearm."

"Given the nature of world politics today, and given America's feckless allies, the US will get only one good military shot at Saddam before everyone at the UN starts tut-tutting and rushing to his defense.

"So if and when Saddam pushes beyond the brink, and we get that one good shot, let's make sure it's a head shot."

In this column, loaded with the pretentious tough-guy jargon that is Friedman's trademark, so many of the themes that were to be employed by the Bush administration in the immediate run-up to the invasion of March 2003 were already visible: Saddam's hidden weapons, the feckless Europeans and tut-tutting United Nations who are too frightened to fight, and the need for decisive action by the United States to destroy Saddam.

Friedman escalated his campaign for a military assault on Iraq in 1998. He wrote on January 6 of that year:

"Saddam Hussein must be feeling pretty cocky right now. Yes, he's learned all the lessons from Gulf War I: Don't make yourself an easy target. Cooperate with UN inspectors just enough so that the US can't bomb you, but not enough so that they'll ever find the germ weapons you're making in your palaces. It's a strategy that has the White House tied in knots. Very clever, Saddam. Very clever."

There was, as we all now know, absolutely no factual basis for the claim that Hussein was manufacturing “germ weapons” in his palaces or anywhere else. But by making such unsubstantiated assertions Friedman was helping condition American public opinion to accept as a necessity military action against Iraq.

Indeed, the use of the term “Gulf War I” in the column was a virtual endorsement of a second war against Iraq, then still more than five years away.

Just three weeks later, on January 31, 1998, Friedman called for “bombing Iraq, over and over and over again, until either Saddam says uncle, and agrees to let the UN back in on US terms, or the Iraqi people eliminate him.... [W]e may have no choice but to go down this road. Once we do, however, we better have the stomach to stay the course.”

On February 17, 1998: “With a bombing of Iraq now increasingly likely, the question being raised by those uneasy with such a strike is: What is the endgame? Is America just throwing its weight around to punish Saddam Hussein?

“The answer is really very simple. It comes down to two words: weapons proliferation. If Iraq—already a repeat user of poison gas—is able to snub its nose at the UN weapons inspectors, then the world’s ability to fight the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction would be fundamentally compromised. Libya and its friends would all be less afraid to develop germ weapons and nukes. We would all end up in a much more dangerous world. That’s why Saddam has to be stopped.”

On February 24, 1998, Friedman wrote: “Another deal with Saddam Hussein? Hmmmm. Why does it leave me feeling uneasy—as if I had just agreed that Ted Kaczynski [the so-called “Uni-bomber”] could be my mailman, because he promised, this time, for sure, no more letter bombs? You just know that sooner or later something is gonna go boom.”

On February 28, 1998, Friedman developed a new argument for portraying Saddam Hussein as a massive danger. “The main threat to US and global stability is the super-empowered individual—the super-empowered angry man (or woman).

“That’s also why the proper analogy for the Iraq crisis is not Vietnam or Munich. It’s the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, masterminded by Ramzi Yousef, the quintessential super-empowered angry man. Ramzi Yousef had no political program or ideology, other than hating America and Israel. Saddam is Ramzi Yousef with part of a country. That is, Saddam is something more than a leader of a terrorist band, but something less than a leader of a unified state. That’s why confronting and disempowering him is both difficult and vitally necessary.

“Saddam may be a 13th-century tyrant, but he is the epitome of the 21st-century threat.”

On August 11, 1998, Friedman issued a bitter denunciation of the Clinton administration. “In the wake of the US embassy bombings in East Africa, the White House kept putting out the

same sound bite on every network: An unnamed senior official was quoted as saying, ‘We will not forgive and we will not forget.’ That is a noble sentiment. There is only one problem. If you look at the Clinton Administration’s foreign policy over the past two years, there has been a consistent pattern of forgiving and forgetting.

“Where should we start? How about Iraq?”

On January 19, 1999, after Clinton ordered a massive bombing campaign against Iraq, Friedman expressed his satisfaction with signs that the administration was prepared to take tougher actions:

“The good news is that the Clinton Administration says it has decided to focus its energy now on producing the ouster of Saddam, rather than just containing him. Almost the entire target list from the US attack three weeks ago was aimed at the generals and the Republican Guards who up to now have protected Saddam. The message on the US smart bombs which apparently killed hundreds of Saddam’s palace guards, was: ‘Warning: Hanging Around With Saddam Hussein Can Be Hazardous To Your Health.’ ”

One last citation: On July 23, 1999, in a column entitled “Tick, Tock, Tick...,” Friedman conjured up out of his perfervid imagination the “multiple clocks ticking away in the Middle East,” some of which, he asserted, “have dynamite attached.” The “Iraq clock,” Friedman warned, was among the most dangerous. “Saddam Hussein is clearly racing to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Will he come up with one in the next couple of years, and what sort of havoc might he wreak around the region if he does?”

All of these columns were written years before the events of 9/11 and the outbreak of war. They prove that Friedman, who now prefers to forget what he wrote, utilized his position as a columnist for the most influential newspaper in the United States to promote baseless claims that Iraq constituted a threat to the United States and to legitimize military attacks against that country. He functioned as a dishonest and cynical propagandist for war, and bears no small degree of moral responsibility for the carnage that has followed the invasion of March 2003.



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