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Book recounts toll of sanctions on Iraq

Raymond A. Schroth | Nov. 24, 2010

INVISIBLE WAR: THE UNITED STATES AND THE IRAQ SANCTIONS
By Joy Gordon
Published by Harvard University Press, $39.95

In *Invisible War*, Joy Gordon asks whether, legally, the United States could be tried for genocide in its role in the United Nations sanctions that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children following the war in Kuwait. Hers is a terrible tale to have to tell, and read.

In August 1991, I stood in a hospital room in Baghdad, where I had gone simply to look at what the war had done. Sitting on the bed were a mother and her tiny, emaciated son, who, I was told, would soon die because of the U.N. sanctions on medicines and hospital supplies. Back home I read that it was Saddam Hussein?s fault, that he exploited his people?s sufferings so he could keep his job. Read on.

Gordon, a philosopher at Fairfield University in Connecticut, in her meticulous study of the evidence, has produced a classic political-moral tract: the inside story of the U.N. economic sanctions against Iraq, from the invasion of Kuwait through three presidencies, when American obstructionism disregarded the sanctions? original purpose and reduced a once prosperous nation to a primitive state.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, the Security Council had imposed strict sanctions cutting off the importation of all goods, except those strictly intended for medical purposes, and, in humanitarian circumstances, foodstuffs. The United Nations? intent was to force Iraq?s withdrawal from Kuwait. When Iraq did not withdraw, the United States began in January 1991 a massive 42-day campaign that dropped 170,000 bombs on 800 targets, devastating not just military installations but factories, electricity, water, sewerage, communications, radio and television stations, and dams. They cut the drinking water supply by 75 percent, and the power grid by 90 percent.

This was a humanitarian crisis, and the Security Council in response permitted Iraq to sell oil for six months to raise $1 billion to buy food and medicine, but Iraq refused the deal because it needed three times that to sustain human life. The United Nations, it appears, wanted Iraq to turn the offer down, to demonstrate Iraq?s intransigence over U.N. ?generosity.? The Oil for Food program later returned. Thus began a 12-year internal struggle, during which, depending on who is asked, the United States was guilty of genocide, or crimes against humanity, or atrocities.

Nine U.N. agencies dealt with Iraq. A clique within a committee -- the 15-member Iraq Sanctions Committee, known as the 661 Committee (after U.N. Resolution 661) -- can determine policy that affects the world.

Operating by consensus, the 661 Committee decided which goods to let in, but its protocol allowed any one member to block a shipment or put it ?on hold,? without giving reasons, without allowing Iraq to address the meeting, and without recording committee decisions for the public record.

The dichotomy was that the Security Council?s aim was to defeat Iraq and free Kuwait; the U.S. goal, executed through its puppet representative on 661, was ?regime change,? to force Hussein from power no matter whom they had to starve and kill to do it. By 1998, 70 percent of Iraqi women were anemic. In 1996 on ?60 Minutes,? Lesley Stahl told Madeleine Albright that half a million children had died, more than had died at Hiroshima, and asked, ?Is the price worth it?? Albright replied, ?We think the price is worth it.? Years later she apologized for the statement but she did not admit that the policy was wrong.

UNICEF documented the deaths of 500,000 children under 5 from dysentery and malnutrition (Gordon says the latest figure is 880,000). All three U.S. administrations -- Bush, Clinton, Bush -- whenever challenged on its responsibility for an epidemic or a famine, simply blamed Hussein.

The actual Kuwaiti war was quick but the invisible war went ahead, reducing Iraq to ruin. In spite of more than 47 internal U.N. and independent scholarly reports on the humanitarian crisis, it was, for the most part, unreported by the media and ignored by Congress. The exceptions included Sens. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) and Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.), and Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.). By 2003, when the United States again invaded, Iraq was already on its knees.

Gordon?s rhetorical question on the United States? culpability for genocide acknowledges that genocide requires specific intent to destroy a racial or national group ?as such,? rather than for political or economic reasons. For eight months we prevented Iraq from importing any food, including powdered milk for infants. We blocked farming equipment, tractors, irrigation pipes, fertilizers, pesticides, repair parts for helicopters used for crop-dusting, material to make yogurt and mill flour, and we stopped contracts to have wheat milled outside the country.

We bombed sewage treatment plants, triggering epidemics of cholera and typhoid. We objected to the import of the antibiotic Ciprofloxacin and a drug necessary for surgery requiring anesthesia. We blocked textbooks and fabric for school uniforms and stopped Iraqi scholars from communicating with scholars abroad. Anything to rebuild manufacturing -- nails, wire, paint and window glass -- we blocked. We allowed shoes but not shoe leather, considered an ?input to industry.? The 661 Committee never had to justify its decisions. It merely said a request was ?suspicious? or ?weird,? or had some ?dual use.? Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld complained that a dump truck could be turned into a missile launcher. Personal computers could ?help Saddam rearm.? We even tried to block eggs, lest a chemical in eggs be used to produce weapons of mass destruction.

Gordon concludes that we cannot be tried for genocide because we did not intend mass death as such. What we

can conclude from the study, says Gordon, is how those acting in the name of international law ?can suspend rational judgment and the capacity to recognize obvious moral truths when called upon to do so.?

History, and Gordon?s book affirms this, will judge the United States ?not by its intentions but by the suffering they have wrought.? History will also conclude what British war correspondent Robert Fisk said in his analysis of America?s withdrawal from Iraq: ?They came. They saw. They lost. And now they say they?ve won.?

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