Comment:
Saddam's Oil

Oil is what it is about, this confrontation between Iraq and the United States of America. Saddam Hussein runs a monstrously criminal regime, nobody doubts that,even among the millions of ordinary people in the neighbouring states who,instructively albeit perversely,regard him as a hero simply because they perceived him as standing up to the Americans. No doubt President Clinton is happy to distract public attention away from his own deeply embarrassing problems, but, whatever cartoons in Arab and other newspapers suggest, nobody seriously thinks that, to do so,he would authorize bombing raids on Baghdad and risk the lives of American aircrew. The stated reasons are, of course, first that Saddam Hussein refuses to comply with agreements made when he was defeated in 1991 to allow United Nations monitoring of his arms-producing facilities, and secondly that Iraqi stocks of biological and chemical weapons, and imminent capacity to make nuclear devices, demand that he should be stopped now, rather than in four or five years' time, when his power to retaliate would be that much greater.

These reasons are not entirely absurd. At one stage, however, the first seemed to come down to little more than Iraqi objections to what they perceived as American control of the United Nations arms inspection teams: adding a dozen more experts from other countries might have resolved the problem. Israeli fears would be quite understandable,but references in British newspapers to Iraq's having enough anthrax to wipe out the entire human race seem rather like scare-mongering. Delivering anthrax in such lethal doses would require more sophisticated technology than Saddam Hussein has at his disposal. One might wonder, anyway,about the plausibility of bombing sites that are supposed to house such vast stocks of biological and chemical weaponry.

It seems much more likely that, even with all the laser-directed surgically accurate bombs in the West's armoury, hundreds and perhaps thousands of civilians would die, under the heading of collateral damage. According to United Nations and international humanitarian organizations, at least one million deaths — half of them children — have occurred since sanctions were imposed on Iraq in 1991, deaths directly or indirectly caused by lack of medical facilities and in particular by malnourishment. The point of imposing the extremely

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and oppressive sanctions was not just to weaken and humiliate the Iraqi dictator, but to encourage popular resentment against him and thereby hasten the collapse of his regime.The effect, predictably, has been to destroy the educated and affluent professional middle class among whom alternative leadership might have emerged (many now live in exile, and a significant number have been executed after botched plots), and to create a vast number of pauperised and demoralised people, especially in the cities, who are not likely to overthrow the regime but, on the contrary, are easy to bring out into the streets in demonstrations against the West.

Threats to take military action against Iraq have aroused protests from a whole range of people, from Pax Christi and CIIR to the Socialist Workers Party, from the Holy See to the seven American Cardinals, as well as Cardinal Hume.The lack of opposition in the House of Commons, and statements by the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, are very depressing.Even setting aside moral considerations, as we must no doubt sometimes do in a pluralist and largely post-Christian society, the lack of any good to be achieved,and indeed the lack of any precise objective (such as the death of Saddam Hussein), excludes military intervention under the old-fashioned just war rules.

The UN sanctions programme against Iraq is entirely constructed in terms of the sale of oil.Iraq has one of the richest oil deposits in the world.Before 1990 it was producing 3.2 million barrels a day.Now Iraq is allowed to sell £615 millions worth of oil every three months, for renewable six-month periods, to buy food and medicine.That amounts to only 600,000 barrels a day.Iraq has to pay 30% of its sales to Kuwait as reparations, another 5% to cover UN operations, another 15% to Kurdish areas in northern Iraq — which leaves less than half the total income for food and medicine for the Iraqi population (22 million people).Twice, recently, the United States has reiterated that attempts to lift these sanctions before Saddam Hussein has been removed will be the subject of an American veto.It seems obvious to the innocent bystander that the longer these punitive arrangements remain in force the less likely the dictator's departure is, voluntarily or by assassination.

The Security Council has voted to allow Baghdad to more than double the amount of oil it may sell to buy food and medicine.The problem remains that, currently, oil sells at about $14 a barrel. If Iraq were free to sell oil, it could easily afford to do so at $9 a barrel, which would devalue British North Sea oil and cut the American oil industry's profits savagely.Saddam's oil is the problem, not his stocks of anthrax.

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