Saddam Hussein: From Ally to Enemy

To: Friends of President Bush
From: Jude Wanniski
Re: The 1988 Turning Point

When the eight year Iran-Iraq war ended in September 1988, the little Iraq of 20 million people had defeated big Iran of 60 million people. We recently have been looking back on that period because they speak volumes about why the Bush administration is so hellbent on going to war with Iraq, if he ever nails down a cease-fire and settlement in Israel. As friends of President George W. Bush, you should encourage him to take a look at the past, as he was probably not paying much attention, totally involved that fall in helping his father win the presidential election.

Earlier in 1988, it was conventional wisdom that Iran would beat Iraq, which had fought a defensive war. The United States had given support to Iraq in the war; Israel, which in 1981 had blown up Iraq's nuclear power plant a few months after the Iran-Iraq war broke out, sided with Iran, fully expecting Iraq would lose and be crippled thereafter. The U.S. foreign policy establishment gave every sign of cheering the killing on both sides, as only Muslims were involved. I urged President Ronald Reagan to undertake a peace initiative, but he told me he was helpless in this situation.

In March 1988, the tide turned as Iraq decided to go all out on the offensive. It borrowed another several billion dollars from Arab friends and European banks to buy war materials from the West, had a successful call-up of young men, and by September broke the depleted and demoralized Iranians. We ran a report two weeks ago by Dr. Stephen Pelletiere, who studied the action with two colleagues of the Army War College, concluding that Iraq's decisive victory at Halabja on the Iraq side of the border did not involve use of poison gas against its own people. Pelletiere, who was an intelligence officer for the CIA during the Iran-Iraq war, argued the hundreds of civilians who died in the crossfire were felled by the kind of gas Iranians used. Iranians, though, insisted it was Iraqi gas that killed the Iraqi civilians. Their claim got better play in the U.S. press, which to this day refers to it as fact. The War College report also argued that Iraqi use of gas against the Iranians was not decisive, but that Iraq had successfully engineered Scud missiles to travel far enough to hit the distant Iranian capital and the Iranian people begged the Ayatollah to sue for peace. In his 2001 book, "Iraq and the International Oil System," Dr. Pelletiere picks up the story post-Halabja. The headline refers to Reagan's Secretary of State, George Shultz.

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SHULTZ'S MOVE

We go forward now to the period immediately after the end of the [Iran-Iraq] war, when the Iranians had agreed to cease fighting and when the two sides remained at odds.
over how to bring the war to a close. As stated earlier, the Iraqis were reluctant to call off their attack, given that they did not trust the Iranians to make concessions. Hence, even though by August 20 Saddam had been pressured into agreeing to enter into negotiations, the Iraqi army remained poised to resume the offensive. UN delegations went out to the area; talks were set up in Geneva. There was a plan to shift the venue of the talks to New York -- but all this was like pulling teeth, since the Iraqis fought every move to advance the process.

Then, on September 7, 1988, America's secretary of state George Shultz invited Iraq's junior foreign minister, Sadoun Hammadi, to Foggy Bottom, ostensibly to discuss how the negotiations could be speeded up. Hammadi appeared on September 8, unaware that he was about to be ambushed. For, in a routine press briefing before television cameras, Shultz, without warning, leveled the charge that, once again (as at Halabja) Iraq was using gas against its Kurdish citizens.

In fact, the Iraqis were at the moment carrying out operations to recapture the north from rebel Kurds (concentrated in an area called Amadiyah, close to the Turkish border). However, the Iraqi minister denied, vehemently, that gas was being used. He demanded that Shultz reveal his evidence, and Shultz said that he was not at liberty to do that, as this would compromise intelligence sources.

Well, then, said Hammadi, where are the victims? Here was a problem. Where were the victims? Rebel Kurds were pouring across the borders into Turkey and Iran, desperate to escape the Iraqi onslaught. Pesh mergas were everywhere in evidence, but reporters who rushed to interview them all reported they were seemingly fit; there was not a sign of gassing.

Indeed, Turkish doctors asked by the reporters to confirm that Kurds had been victimized denied this to be the case, or at least they said that they could not confirm that any such attacks had occurred because they had not seen any gassing victims. The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), which also had representatives in the area, confirmed this view, as did the Red Cross and the Red Crescent Societies and a doctor from Medicins du Monde.

Momentarily, it appeared that the Iraqis were exonerated. It was not to be, however, because of what happened next.

THE SENATE STAFFERS

If the ambush interview arranged by Shultz caused controversy, what followed certainly augmented it. Within 24 hours after Shultz's public accusation of Iraq, the Senate voted sanctions on the basis of his charges. The vote was nearly unanimous, and, as the Washington Post reported, it put a heavy burden on the Iraqis, since they would now have enormous difficulties trying to roll over their $69 billion debt (more about that later).

To be sure, the Senate's action was not the final word on the matter; the House had yet to act. But in the meantime, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee sent two of its staffers to the region to report personally on what might have occurred.

Within a week the two were back, claiming that the Iraqis had gassed not only the rebel guerrillas but some hundreds of thousands of other Kurds, killing in the process possibly as many as a 100,000.
The Iraqis were naturally upset by this allegation. When newsmen confronted their defense minister, he denied that this had occurred and further claimed that Iraq had no need of gas. Indeed, in that terrain, he said, gas would have been a liability. [In pursuit of the smaller Iranian force, the Iraqi army would have been spraying gas in its own path.]

This essentially is correct. Gas is an extremely tricky weapon to use and, except under certain circumstances, is not particularly lethal. It is interesting that although this feature of chemical warfare is well known throughout the military community, no one in the Western media (to the author's knowledge) ever confirmed it.

As the controversy escalated, the Iraqis became as incensed as the Americans. They demanded that the Arab League take a stand, and the league did, branding the outcry against Iraq as contrived. Like the Iraqis, the league asserted that the Americans lacked proof of their allegations.

The Senate staffers claimed to have "overwhelming" proof that the attacks had occurred. However, this turned out to be anecdotal evidence -- the Kurds told them that they had been gassed. The staffers also claimed to have seen obvious gassing victims and to have taken photographs of them. But no photographs were ever produced, and the alleged victims never were identified. As for the claim of 100,000 dead, this would appear to have been speculation. At the same time, however, it was quite a serious charge, implying "genocide."

The whole affair is disturbing, in as much as 10 years after the event no victims of the alleged attack have ever been produced, and the United States has never revealed what led it to claim that the attack occurred. Either this was a rush to judgment -- that is, that the U.S. State Department and Senate moved in haste and made charges that could not be supported later on -- or the whole thing was deliberately contrived.

In the former case, one would have supposed that the claimants would later have set the record straight. Instead, the matter has been left hanging, as it were.

Shultz leveled his charges at the tail end of the Reagan administration. Perhaps awareness that power soon would change hands (since Reagan could not serve another four years) caused the affair to subside, because it did for a time die down.

Also helping to avert a crisis was the fact that, when the Congress attempted to get its sanctions proposal enacted into law, it failed on a technicality. In the meantime, some sectors of the nation, which rather looked forward to improved commercial relations with Iraq, had begun to mobilize against the sanctions, speaking out against them... [The story died out in the next year and a half, revived after Iraq invaded Kuwait, with the "Saddam gassed his own people story" employed by those Americans who were eager to go to war with Iraq.]

Ten years after the end of the Gulf War, [Pelletiere wrote last year] the US State Department continues to devise policy toward Iraq as if it were a criminal society, which now we can see that it is not. It is time for the United States, in effect, to put up. If it has evidence that Saddam Hussein gassed his own people, then it should present it to the world. If, as the author believes, the famous gassing incident was all a hoax -- or perhaps we should say a nonevent -- then it should admit it and lift the sanctions, as
there is no justification to keep on with this harsh punishment.

The fact that the discredited policy is maintained against reason raises the possibility that self-delusion, far from being something to be abjured, is being cultivated.

Is the leadership in the United States deliberately perpetuating this sham of an irremediably vicious Iraq because it serves its purpose so to do? Since the deception has been going on for almost 10 years now, it would appear to be the case.

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Because it does not appear his staff is going to provide him with this kind of alternative view from an authoritative source, the President will continue to believe the Jeffrey Goldberg New Yorker account that he mentioned in a press conference three weeks ago. It should make a difference that Goldberg served in the Israeli army and is a citizen of Israel. But even if he were an Irish Catholic from Boston, it would be hard to buy into his man-in-the-street reporting of present-day Kurds, who remember gassings back in 1988. Pelletiere may be wrong, of course, but there is still no answer to the question he posed in the 1990 report: "Where are the bodies?" If there were 100,000 Kurds killed by poison gas in an open field, in a few days, the bodies should have turned up over 13 years. What is more likely is that when Iraq won the war, the surprised Israeli supporters in the United States decided Saddam was no longer the ally, but the victorious power in the region, a man who would be a threat to its survival. If you, as friends, want the President to understand why the rest of the world is so hostile to going war with Iraq now, this is most likely the reason. He gets a better press in the rest of the world than he does here.

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