

The Empire's War Was Averted

What Will We Do About The Peace?

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1998

By last count, 1.5 million Iraqis, one million of them children under five, have died as a result of the U.S./U.N. sanctions, either through starvation or from lack of medicine for easily curable diseases. People are dying at a rate of about 11,000 a month, and some four million more are on the verge of starvation. In the seven years since the 1991 Gulf War's intense and devastating bombing campaign, Iraq has become the international oil economy's extermination camp.

Throughout history empires have generally improved upon their predecessors' methods of mass murder; old fashioned siege and starvation, however, persist. Despite Clinton's recent threats to save Iraq by bombing it, none of his death technology can match the grisly consequences of the sanctions. People cannot avoid sanctions by hiding in a bomb shelter, or escape hunger in a bombed-out school, or narrowly avoid cholera in a forest. One needn't be sympathetic to the Iraqi despots to agree with the Iraqi foreign minister's comment that the sanctions themselves are weapons of mass destruction.

One is reminded of the Irish famine of 1845 through 1851. The failure of the Irish potato crop was by no means the result of a conscious conspiracy, but the British used it as a weapon to force submission on a rebellious nation. Ultimately, the continued forced requisitioning of crops, mass emigration and mass evictions had a predictable outcome: more than a million people lost their lives to disease and starvation-about the same number in almost the same length of time the U.N. sanctions have done their work in Iraq. American history provides other instances of starvation and disease as weapons of conquest, not least the mass depopulation of this continent of those who found themselves in the way of Manifest Destiny.

Ironically, the biological and chemical war we are warned of today already occurred in 1991, as U. S./U.N. terror bombing obliterated Iraqi civilian infrastructures, particularly the electrical and water treatment systems, and the civilian population succumbed as surely as it-would have under the onslaught of biological warheads. Furthermore, another round of bombing would have done nothing to impede Saddam Hussein's production of chemical and biological weapons-the "poor man's nuclear arsenal"-but rather would only have bounced the rubble around, while completely devastating what tenuous humanitarian assistance remains. Still, the U.S. was interested in flexing imperial muscle if for no other reason than to test new weapons such as the military's 5,000 pound "deep penetrator" bombs and its allegedly improved, so-called smart weapons.

As we write, hundreds more children are dying in Iraq, thousands more starve and are sickened, schools close, and families are forced to sell their belongings and sometimes their bodies in order to survive. Such suffering mostly goes unnoticed, a detail in history without a museum to honor its victims. Things have gotten so bad for the Iraqis that in the weeks leading up to possible air strikes, very few people bothered to fortify houses or stockpile what meager resources could be found; some have told Western journalists that they wish the Americans would

bomb them once and for all and put them out of their misery. But Iraqi misery is just an extreme example of conditions that are becoming a grim fact of life for growing numbers of people under global capitalism.

During the same period in the U.S., millions have returned again and again to movie theaters to see the most expensive film ever produced, the technological extravaganza "Titanic." As Iraqis sit on their doorsteps waiting for the bombs to fall, Americans thrill to the spectacle of catastrophe, wavering between an aestheticized, luxurious sense of passive surrender and an anxious, vicarious, privatized struggle for survival. For some, mass death is a reality; for others, succumbing to what one pundit has called "weapons of mass distraction," it's still only a Saturday evening's entertainment.

As the global megatech war-and work machine chugs along, reeling from crisis to crisis, one can only wonder when and where the next scandal, collapse, or military conflict will suddenly appear. Whatever we may "accomplish," how we respond to Capital's war—and its "peace"—means everything in defining who, and what, we are.

Let us gather our own meager resources and take a stand against all empires, as they drive humanity's frail ship deeper into the night.

fifth Estate

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Fifth Estate #351, Summer 1998

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