

Who is the “repeat offender”?

By Martin McLaughlin
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In reply to the question of why Iraq has been singled out to be bombed, among all the dictatorial regimes which possess chemical and biological weapons, Clinton administration officials have taken to referring to Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein as a "repeat offender."

While the US can maintain friendly relations with mass murderers like Suharto in Indonesia and Laurent Kabila in the Congo, the argument goes, Saddam Hussein is different because he has used chemical and biological weapons both against neighboring countries (Iran, in the Iran-Iraq War) and against his own people (during the Kurdish uprising against Iraqi rule).

The use of the term "repeat offender" is itself an indication of the ignorant and debased level of the discussion conducted by US policymakers, who seek to reduce questions of war and peace, involving complex historical issues, to law-and-order demagoguery. Saddam Hussein has become the Willie Horton of foreign policy.

But even if one accepts the term, the argument has no validity. Apologists for US military action should look in the mirror before they denounce another government as unfit to possess weapons of mass destruction. American imperialism has an unmatched record of using such instruments of war to slaughter defenseless populations.

The United States is the only country to have used nuclear weapons, incinerating more than 250,000 people in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. President Truman ordered the bombing not so much to shorten the Pacific phase of World War II--Japan was already on the brink of surrender--as to send a message to the Soviet Union, America's ally in the war, that Washington planned to call the shots in the postwar world.

World War II also saw the United States perfect the technique of saturation bombing, culminating in the gigantic firestorms that destroyed much of Tokyo,

Dresden and other targeted cities, with the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians. While classified in official parlance as "conventional" weaponry, such bombs have certainly served as "weapons of mass destruction."

In Korea and then in Vietnam, US bombing killed as many as four million people, the vast majority of them noncombatants. Vietnam also saw the introduction on a wide scale of napalm, a jellied gasoline causing horrifying and usual fatal burns, and Agent Orange, a chemical defoliant so powerful that tens of thousands of American soldiers were poisoned by the spraying.

In the Persian Gulf War the Pentagon unveiled new "weapons of mass destruction." Air Force planes used fuel-air explosives, which create a blast of near-nuclear proportions, to bury tens of thousands of Iraqi soldiers in their own trenches. Depleted uranium warheads, used by American tanks, not only destroyed Iraqi armored units, but contaminated the landscape with radioactive waste that is still claiming victims in Iraq today.

Even Saddam Hussein's own use of chemical weapons can be traced back, at least in part, to an American source. In both his war against Iran and his suppression of the Kurdish uprising, the Iraqi ruler was acting with the support of the US government, which throughout the 1980s took the position that a powerful and heavily armed Iraq was a useful counterweight to the anti-US Islamic regime in Iran.

The US government tacitly backed Saddam Hussein's unprovoked attack on Iran in 1980, and the Reagan administration supplied him with weapons and CIA intelligence throughout the eight-year war which followed. The US Navy first deployed a substantial fleet in the Persian Gulf to protect Iraqi oil tankers which had been "reflagged" and placed under nominal Kuwaiti ownership.

When Saddam Hussein used mustard gas, to prevent

an Iranian breakthrough in the late stages of the war and to massacre Kurdish villagers, there were no protests from the White House. On the contrary, the equipment used to manufacture the poison gas came from American, British and German companies, whose licenses to export to Iraq had the approval of Washington, London and Bonn.

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