

TARGET IRAQ:

WHAT THE NEWS MEDIA DIDN'T TELL YOU



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Solomon: **Spinning 9/11, Terrorism, and
Weapons of Mass Destruction**

Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.

—W.H. Auden

In the early autumn of 2002, shortly before Congress voted to authorize a U.S. war against Iraq, a CBS News poll found that 51 percent of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein was involved in the attacks of September 11, 2001. Soon afterwards, the Pew Research Center reported that two-thirds of the U.S. public agreed “Saddam Hussein helped the terrorists in the September 11 attacks.”

Around this time, a Washington correspondent for the Inter Press Service reported that “U.S. spy agencies appear unanimous that evidence linking Baghdad with the

September 11 attacks, or any attacks against Western targets since 1993, is simply non-existent.” There was no factual basis for assertions of an Iraqi connection to those recent outbreaks of terrorism. But the surveys help to explain how the White House was able to gather support for targeting Iraq.

The Bush administration never hesitated to exploit the general public’s anxieties that arose after the traumatic events of September 11, 2001. Testifying on Capitol Hill exactly fifty-three weeks later, Donald Rumsfeld did not miss a beat when a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee questioned the need for the United States to attack Iraq.

Senator Mark Dayton: “What is it compelling us now to make a precipitous decision and take precipitous actions?”

Defense Secretary Rumsfeld: “What’s different? What’s different is 3,000 people were killed.”

As a practical matter, it was almost beside the point that allegations linking Baghdad with the September 11 attacks lacked credible evidence. A meeting allegedly took place in Prague between 9/11 hijacker Mohammed Atta and an Iraqi intelligence officer, but after many credulous reports in major U.S. media the claim was discredited (with the help of Czech president Vaclav Havel). Another flimsy gambit came when Rumsfeld charged that Qaeda agents had been given sanctuary by Saddam Hussein. As Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper noted, “they had actually traveled to Iraqi Kurdistan, which is outside his control.” Nevertheless, such deceptions often gain

unflagging momentum. As Mark Twain once said, “A lie can go halfway around the world before the truth even gets its boots on.”

Former CIA analyst Kenneth Pollack got enormous media exposure in late 2002 for his book *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq*. Pollack’s book promotion tour often seemed more like a war promotion tour. During a typical appearance with CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer, who twice used the phrase “an important new book,” Pollack explained why he had come to see a “massive invasion” of Iraq as both desirable and practical: “The real difference was the change from September 11th. The sense that after September 11th—the American people were now willing to make sacrifices to prevent threats from abroad from coming home to visit us here—made it possible to think about a big invasion force.”

Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk was on the mark in the London *Independent* when, just after passage of the U.N. Security Council resolution in November 2002, he wrote, “Iraq had absolutely nothing to do with 11 September. If the United States invades Iraq, we should remember that.” On many psychological levels, the Bush team was able to manipulate post-9/11 emotions well beyond the phantom of Iraqi involvement in that crime against humanity. The dramatic changes in political climate after 9/11 included a drastic upward spike in the attitude—fervently stoked by the likes of Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and the president—that our military should be willing to attack potential enemies before they *might* attack us. Few politicians or pundits were willing to confront the reality that this was a formula for perpetual war,

and for the creation of vast numbers of new foes who would see a reciprocal logic in embracing such a credo themselves.

President Bush's national security adviser "felt the administration had little choice with Hussein," reporter Bob Woodward recounted in mid-November 2002. A quote from Condoleezza Rice summed up the approach. "Take care of threats early."

Determining exactly what constitutes a threat—and how to "take care" of it—would be up to the eye of the beholder in the Oval Office.

Quite appropriately, the U.S. media response to 9/11 included horror, abhorrence and total condemnation. The terrorists' willingness to destroy and kill was evil. At the same time, the Pentagon's willingness to destroy and kill became more and more self-justifying in the closing months of 2002. As reporters and pundits echoed the assumptions of official Washington, the prospect of a new war on Iraq seemed more acceptable. There was scant concern for Iraqi civilians, whose last moments beneath incoming missiles would resemble those of the people who perished in the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks.

"The greatest triumphs of propaganda have been accomplished, not by doing something, but by refraining from doing," Aldous Huxley observed long ago. "Great is truth, but still greater, from a practical point of view, is silence about truth." Despite the media din about 9/11, a silence—rigorously selective—has pervaded mainstream news coverage. For

movers and shakers in Washington, the practical utility of that silence is immeasurable. In response to the mass murder committed by hijackers, the righteousness of U.S. military action remains clear—as long as implicit double standards remain unexamined.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, while rescue crews braved the intense smoke and noxious rubble, ABC News analyst Vincent Cannistraro helped to put the unfolding events in perspective for millions of TV viewers. Cannistraro is a former high-ranking official of the Central Intelligence Agency. He was in charge of the CIA's work with the contras in Nicaragua during the early 1980s. After moving to the National Security Council in 1984, he became a supervisor of covert aid to Afghan guerrillas. In other words, Cannistraro has a long history of assisting terrorists—first, contra soldiers who routinely killed Nicaraguan civilians; and then mujahedeen rebels in Afghanistan such as Osama bin Laden.

How could a longtime associate of state-sponsored terrorists now be on record denouncing terrorism? It's easy. All that's required is for media coverage to engage in business as usual by remaining in a non-historical zone that has no use for inconvenient facts. In his book *1984*, George Orwell described the mental dynamics: "The process has to be conscious, or it would not be carried out with sufficient precision, but it also has to be unconscious, or it would bring with it a feeling of falsity and hence of guilt. . . . To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes neces-

sary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just so long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies—all this is indispensably necessary.”

Secretary of State Colin Powell denounced “people who feel that with the destruction of buildings, with the murder of people, they can somehow achieve a political purpose.” Powell was describing the hijackers who had struck his country hours earlier. Unintentionally, he was also describing a long line of top officials in Washington. Surely U.S. policy-makers had believed that they could “achieve a political purpose” with “the destruction of buildings, with the murder of people” when they opted to launch missiles at Baghdad in 1991 or Belgrade in 1999. But U.S. media scrutiny of killings perpetrated by the U.S. government is rare. Only some cruelties merit the spotlight. Only some victims deserve empathy. Only certain crimes against humanity are worth our tears.

“Spin” is often achieved with a single word. In the world of public relations, success or failure can depend on the public’s responses to particular buzzwords. Ever since the attacks of 9/11, no buzzword has seen more usage than “terrorism.” During the first two days of October 2001, CNN’s website displayed an odd little announcement. “There have been false reports that CNN has not used the word ‘terrorist’ to refer to those who attacked the World Trade Center and Pentagon,” the notice said. “In fact, CNN has consistently and repeatedly referred to the attackers and hijackers as terrorists, and it will

continue to do so.”

The CNN disclaimer was accurate, and by conventional media standards reassuring. But it bypassed a basic question: Exactly what goes under the heading of terrorism?

For this country’s mainstream journalists, that’s a non-question about a no-brainer. More than ever, the proper function of the terrorist label seems obvious. “A group of people commandeered airliners and used them as guided missiles against thousands of people,” said NBC News executive Bill Wheatley. “If that doesn’t fit the definition of terrorism, what does?”

True enough. At the same time, it’s notable that American news outlets routinely label groups as terrorist using the same criteria as the U.S. government. Editors generally assume that reporters don’t need any formal directive—the appropriate usage is simply understood. In sharp contrast, the global Reuters news agency has stuck to a distinctive approach for decades. “As part of a policy to avoid the use of emotive words,” the news service says, “we do not use terms like ‘terrorist’ and ‘freedom fighter’ unless they are in a direct quote or are otherwise attributable to a third party. We do not characterize the subjects of news stories but instead report their actions, identity and background so that readers can make their own decisions based on the facts.”

Reuters reports from 160 countries. The terrorist label is highly contentious in quite a few of them. Behind the scenes, many governments have tried to pressure Reuters into “spinning” coverage by using the terrorist label to describe their enemies. From the vantage point of government leaders in

Ankara or Jerusalem or Moscow, the news media should label their violent foes “terrorists.” From the vantage point of embattled Kurds or Palestinians or Chechens, the news media should label the violent leaders in Ankara or Jerusalem or Moscow “terrorists,” too.

In October 1998, scholar and activist Eqbal Ahmed made some recommendations to America. The first one: “Avoid extremes of double standards. . . . Don’t condone Israeli terror, Pakistani terror, Nicaraguan terror, El Salvadoran terror, on the one hand, and then complain about Afghan terror or Palestinian terror. It doesn’t work. Try to be even-handed. A superpower cannot promote terror in one place and reasonably expect to discourage terrorism in another place. It won’t work in this shrunken world.”

If American reporters expanded their working definition of terrorism to include all violence committed against civilians to pursue political goals, they would meet with fierce opposition in high places. During the 1980s, with a nonevasive standard for terrorism, news accounts would have labeled the Nicaraguan contra guerrillas—in addition to the Salvadoran and Guatemalan governments—perpetrators of U.S.-backed terrorism.

In the political lexicon of America, terrorism—as used to describe, for example, the killing of Israelis—cannot also be used to describe the killing of Palestinians. Yet, in an October 2002 report, the Israeli human rights group B’Tselem documented that 80 percent of the Palestinians killed recently by the Israeli Defense Force during curfew enforcement were children. Twelve people under the age of sixteen had been killed, with dozens more wounded by Israeli gunfire in occu-

pied areas, during a period of four months. “None of those killed endangered the lives of soldiers,” B’Tselem said.

Professor of politics George Monbiot helped to provide context for the White House’s moral stance toward Iraq, in an August 2002 column for the *Guardian*, when he assessed “the prospect of George Bush waging war on another nation because that nation has defied international law.” Monbiot pointed out: “Since Bush came to office, the United States government has torn up more international treaties and disregarded more U.N. conventions than the rest of the world has in twenty years. It has scuppered the biological weapons convention while experimenting, illegally, with biological weapons of its own. It has refused to grant chemical weapons inspectors full access to its laboratories, and has destroyed attempts to launch chemical inspections in Iraq. It has ripped up the antiballistic missile treaty, and appears to be ready to violate the nuclear test ban treaty. It has permitted CIA hit squads to recommence covert operations of the kind that included, in the past, the assassination of foreign heads of state. It has sabotaged the small arms treaty, undermined the international criminal court, refused to sign the climate change protocol and, last month, sought to immobilize the U.N. convention against torture.”

No double standard has been employed more flagrantly in the Middle East than the U.S. policy regarding “weapons of mass destruction.” In the world according to Washington and major American news media, U.S. policymakers have always enjoyed the unquestionably high moral ground in confronta-

tions with Iraq's dictator.

A portion of the British daily press has been appreciably more skeptical. "Respected scientists on both sides of the Atlantic warned yesterday that the U.S. is developing a new generation of weapons that undermine and possibly violate international treaties on biological and chemical warfare," *Guardian* correspondent Julian Borger reported from Washington on October 29, 2002. The scientists "also point to the paradox of the U.S. developing such weapons at a time when it is proposing military action against Iraq on the grounds that Saddam Hussein is breaking international treaties. Malcolm Dando, professor of international security at the University of Bradford, and Mark Wheelis, a lecturer in microbiology at the University of California, say that the U.S. is encouraging a breakdown in arms control by its research into biological cluster bombs, anthrax and non-lethal weapons for use against hostile crowds, and by the secrecy under which these programs are being conducted." Professor Dando warned that the United States "runs the very real danger of leading the world down a pathway that will greatly reduce the security of all."

"The security of all" has been a central rationale for war against Iraq—with the specter of nuclear weapons in the hands of Saddam Hussein serving as a crowning argument. In August of 2002, Vice President Cheney was so eager to play the nuclear scare card that he said Iraq would acquire nuclear arms "fairly soon," contradicting CIA reports that Iraq could not do so for at least five more years.

During a mid-summer 2002 interview for the book *War On Iraq* by William Rivers Pitt, former U.N. weapons inspec-

tor Scott Ritter discussed Iraq's nuclear weapons program: "When I left Iraq in 1998, when the U.N. inspection program ended, the infrastructure and facilities had been 100 percent eliminated. There's no debate about that. All of their instruments and facilities had been destroyed. The weapons design facility had been destroyed. The production equipment had been hunted down and destroyed. . . . We can say unequivocally that the industrial infrastructure needed by Iraq to produce nuclear weapons had been eliminated."

When chief U.N. inspector Hans Blix arrived in Baghdad on November 18, 2002, his comments included expressing hope for "a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East as a whole." That's not a concept that gets much news coverage in the United States, and this instance was no exception; a search of all the major U.S. daily papers in the Nexis database found Blix's statement quoted only by the *Washington Post* (and paraphrased by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*). Yet, as the *Scotsman* newspaper reported the same day, Blix was referring to "the Security Council's original measures in the wake of the Gulf War of 1991, which in theory outlined a nuclear-free zone to cover Iraq's neighbors Iran and particularly Israel."

Richard Butler—one of Blix's predecessors as the U.N. chief weapons inspector—had amassed a record of congeniality toward the U.S. government, but after returning home to Australia he made some critical statements about the superpower's approach to nuclear weapons: "My attempts to have Americans enter into discussions about double standards

have been an abject failure even with highly educated and engaged people,” Butler said. The disconnect had to do with the nuclear arsenals of the United States and its allies—including Israel. When he delivered the Templeton Lecture at the University of Sydney in the early fall of 2002, Butler recalled: “Amongst my toughest moments in Baghdad were when the Iraqis demanded that I explain why they should be hounded for their weapons of mass destruction when, just down the road, Israel was not, even though it was known to possess some 200 nuclear weapons.”

Much public knowledge of Israel’s nuclear weaponry can be traced to the courageous efforts of a former Israeli nuclear technician named Mordechai Vanunu. At the time of Butler’s university lecture, whistle blower Vanunu was completing his sixteenth year behind bars in Israel. (Many of the years passed in solitary confinement.) Vanunu has been a nonperson in U.S. news media, for reasons having everything to do with the kind of “double standards” that Butler cited.

On September 30, 1986, Israel’s government kidnapped Vanunu in Rome and put him on a cargo ship. Back in Israel, at a secret trial, he faced charges of espionage and treason. A military court sentenced him to eighteen years in prison. Vanunu had provided journalists at the *Sunday Times of London* detailed information about Israel’s arsenal of nuclear bombs.

After growing up in a Jewish family, Mordechai Vanunu became an employee at the Dimona nuclear plant in 1976. Nearly a decade later, shortly before his employment ended at the remote nuclear facility, he took photos inside Dimona, which has always been closed to international inspection.

Using severance pay to travel abroad in 1986, Vanunu contacted the famous Insight investigative unit of the *Sunday Times*. “During his extensive debriefing by our Insight team,” the newspaper reported, “he offered to give the paper his photographs and all his information for nothing provided we did not publish his name, insisting his sole interest was in stopping nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.”

The *Sunday Times* persuaded Vanunu to allow his name to be used. The paper agreed to pay Vanunu for serialization or a book based on his information, but money did not seem to motivate him. “My impression of the man was of someone who had a genuine desire to tell the world of something that was going on which he felt was genuinely wrong for Israel to do,” said Peter Hounam, the main reporter on the story for the *Sunday Times*. “He felt it was wrong that the Israeli public and parliament were not given any information about what was happening in Dimona.”

On October 5, 1986, the *Sunday Times* broke the story under the front-page headline “Revealed: The Secrets of Israel’s Nuclear Arsenal.” By then Vanunu was already a prisoner of the Israeli government.

If you mention Mordechai Vanunu’s name to an American, you’re likely to get a blank look. On the western side of the Atlantic, he’s a media phantom. But imagine what would have happened if another country in the Middle East—say, Iraq—kidnapped one of its citizens to punish him for spilling the beans about its nuclear weapons program. That person would have become an instant media hero in the United States.