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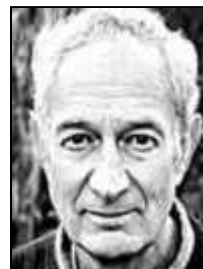
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Guest columnist

## We lost Iraqi hearts and minds long before current occupation

By Bert Sacks

*Special to The Times*



Bert Sacks

I recently attended an alumni meeting in Seattle of a well-known East Coast college. The president of the college spoke and a hundred alumni came to listen. I used the chance to speak to several of them about something I know well from my nine trips to Iraq: the 12 years of U.N. and U.S. economic sanctions on Iraq, reinstated after the Gulf War in 1991 and ending with this war in 2003.

It was enlightening.

The first man, a doctor, knew about the 500,000 Iraqi children who had died from 1991 to 1998, as reported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). He knew they died from epidemics of diseases caused by unsafe water. Perhaps he'd read about it in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, where the prime cause was described as our bombing of Iraq's electrical plants, water facilities and civilian infrastructure during the Gulf War. He was saddened by this but shrugged his shoulders: What can one do?!

Then I spoke with two more alumni, one a former Marine on his way to fish in the Caribbean. When I spoke about 500,000 dead Iraqi children, I felt I'd breached an unspoken rule of etiquette: One just doesn't talk about our responsibility for dead Iraqi children. The talk quickly went back to fishing.

I did find two people who were interested. And it was refreshing to talk to them, even though I learned they weren't alumni.

There is a personal irony in this. When I left to go to that college many years ago, I had the conscious thought that "now I am going to learn about the real world." Two years later, when I dropped out, I had the thought that I would not learn about the real world there.

In the question-and-answer period of the alumni meeting, the president of the college mentioned that he kept informed by reading both *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. I thought to myself, "My God, he really doesn't know!" This man, who attends meetings with the U.S. president, thinks these papers will keep him well-informed of important world events.

The example that immediately came to my mind was the coverage by these two papers of a very significant story in 1999. On Aug. 12, 1999, UNICEF reported "that if the substantial reduction in

child mortality throughout Iraq during the 1980s had continued through the 1990s, there would have been half a million fewer deaths of children under 5 in the country as a whole during the eight year period 1991 to 1998."

The report continued, "Even if not all suffering in Iraq can be imputed to external factors, especially sanctions, the Iraqi people would not be undergoing such deprivations in the absence of the prolonged measures imposed by the Security Council and the effects of war."

Here is the most credible children's organization in the world telling us that war and U.N./U.S. economic sanctions had contributed to the deaths of 500,000 Iraqi children. How did these two papers report it?

The Wall Street Journal's entire coverage was two sentences: "The death rate for Iraqi children doubled in this decade, according to a UNICEF report sure to reignite debate over U.N. sanctions. The U.S. blames Saddam Hussein's regime for hoarding food and medicine purchased under a program allowing limited oil sales." It isn't even listed as a news story in their news index.

The New York Times story said the same thing, but in 800 words: It failed to report the number of deaths and quoted only a U.S. spokesman who blamed everything on Saddam. Meanwhile, the three television networks never said one word.

It's often said there was a failure of intelligence leading up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. That is true. The most obvious failure is that so very few Americans knew the U.S. kept to a policy that devastated the civilian population of Iraq for 12 years. Thousands of its most vulnerable — the very young, very old and very sick — died needlessly every month.

We justified this by saying it was "to punish Saddam."

Can we begin to imagine someone doing the same here "to punish George W. Bush" for our invasion? How would we possibly feel? What piece of information better explains why U.S. troops never were received with open arms and flowers as predicted? Our invasion began with two strikes against it.

Congressman John Murtha recently said that we've already lost the battle for the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people. What chance did we have for Iraqi hearts and minds after all those years and all those deaths? Not much at all.

*Bert Sacks is a Seattle resident and retired engineer. Active with Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility and the Interfaith Network of Concern for the People of Iraq, he has worked for the past 10 years to change U.S. policy toward Iraq, including the economic sanctions.*

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