

An Annotated Refutation of President George W. Bush's September 23rd Address Before the United Nations

By Stephen Zunes

"Events during the past two years have set before us the clearest of divides: Between those who seek order and those who spread chaos; between those who work for peaceful change and those who adopt the methods of gangsters; between those who honor the rights of man and those who deliberately take the lives of men and women and children, without mercy or shame."

This is an ironic statement from a man who defied basic principles of international law and rebuked those who called for peaceful alternatives.

"Afghanistan's president, who is here today, now represents a free people who are building a decent and just society, a nation fully joined in the war against terror."

The people of Kabul, which is virtually the only part of Afghanistan under the firm control of President Hamid Karzai, are relatively free as compared with their lives under the Taliban regime. However, most of the rest of the country has fallen into chaos, as warlords, ethnic militias and opium magnates battle for control. This has led to a resurgence of the Taliban and their al-Qaeda allies in parts of Afghanistan.

"The regime of Saddam Hussein cultivated ties to terror while it built weapons of mass destruction. It used those weapons in acts of mass murder and refused to account for them when confronted by the world. The Security Council was right to be alarmed."

Unfortunately, much of the Security Council was not alarmed when Saddam Hussein engaged in mass murder through the use of chemical weapons, in large part because the United States and other great powers were at that time backing his regime. Nor was the Iraqi regime seriously confronted for such atrocities, in large part because the U.S. government falsely claimed that it was the Iranians - then the preferred enemy - who were responsibly for the infamous Halabja massacre and similar attacks. Indeed, throughout much of the 1980s, the United States,

along with other advanced industrialized nations, provided the dictator with much of the raw materials and technology needed for his WMD programs.

"The Security Council was right to demand that Iraq destroy its illegal weapons and prove that it had done so. The Security Council was right to vow serious consequences if Iraq refused to comply. And because there were consequences, because a coalition of nations acted to defend the peace and the credibility of the United Nations."

This is incredibly misleading on several counts:

First of all, the Security Council never specified the consequences and never authorized any member states to enforce alleged Iraqi non-compliance through military means.

Secondly, once Iraq allowed inspectors back into the country in November, released its accounting of proscribed items (which UNMOVIC chairman Hans Blix now says was probably accurate), and acceded to UNMOVIC's demands regarding surveillance flights, interviews, etc. there is reason to believe that Iraq was actually in compliance of UN Security Council resolutions for at least several weeks prior to the U.S. invasion.

Thirdly, since when is one country invading another an act of "defending the peace?"

Fourthly, the United States has done more than any country - including Iraq - to damage the credibility of the United Nations: 1) over the past thirty years, the United States has used its veto power more times



than all other members of the Security Council combined during that same period; 2) Iraq was hardly the only country in alleged defiance of UN Security Council resolutions: over ninety UN Security Council resolutions are currently being violated, but the United States has blocked enforcement of most of them since they usually involved a strategic ally (for example, Morocco, Israel and Turkey each are in violation of more Security Council resolutions than was Iraq at the height of its defiance); 3) the invasion of Iraq itself was a flagrant violation of the United Nations Charter.

"Iraq is free, and today we are joined by representatives of a liberated country."

Though Iraq is free from Saddam's dictatorial regime, it is still not free. The country is under foreign military occupation. The Iraqi "representatives" at the United Nations during President Bush's speech were hand-picked by the U.S. occupiers.

"Saddam Hussein's monuments have been removed and not only his statues. The true monuments of his rule and his character, the torture chambers and the rape rooms and the prison cells for innocent children, are closed. And as we discover the killing fields and mass graves of Iraq, the true scale of Saddam's cruelty is being revealed."

Actually, the scale of Saddam's cruelty was fairly well-known by human rights activists for quite a few years, revealed in reports by Amnesty International and other reputable human rights groups as far back as the 1980s. During this period - the height of Saddam's repression - the United States was quietly backing the regime. It was the United Nations that was largely responsible for curbing the worst of the regime's human rights abuses. These included unprecedented efforts by the Security Council, including the use of Chapter VII, to impose strict limits on the Iraqi government's ability to mobilize its forces within its internationally-recognized borders and to establish a large autonomous zone within Iraq for the country's Kurdish minority. In addition, the UN Security Council's imposition of a total ban on imports of military and police hardware dramatically lessened Saddam's ability to engage in mass murder more than a decade prior to the U.S. invasion.

"The Iraqi people are meeting hardships and challenges, like every nation that has set out on the path of democracy. Yet their future promises lives of dignity and freedom and that is a world away from the squalid, vicious tyranny they have known. Across Iraq, life is being improved by liberty."

The primary hardships for the Iraqi people stem not from any democratic transition, but from the lack of basic services, the breakdown of law and order, severe damage to the civilian infrastructure, massive unemployment, and related hardships resulting from the U.S. invasion and its aftermath. Unfortunately, despite the ouster of a brutal dictatorship, the majority of Iraqis believe that their quality of life has not improved as a result of the U.S. invasion, but has actually deteriorated.

"Across the Middle East, people are safer because an unstable aggressor has been removed from power."

In reality, Saddam Hussein's ability to engage in acts of aggression had been neutralized some years prior to his ouster as a result of losses in the 1991 Gulf War and the destruction of his weapons of mass destruction, delivery systems, and other offensive weaponry under the UN inspections regimes that followed.

"Across the world, nations are more secure because an ally of terror has fallen."

According to the CIA and the State Department, Iraqi support for international terrorism peaked during the 1980s, a time when the U.S. government actually dropped Iraq from its list of states sponsoring terrorism. (Iraq was put back on the list when it invaded Kuwait in August 1990 despite lack of any evidence of increased terrorist activity.) Subsequent to 1993, most credible analyses - both in and out of the U.S. government - of state-sponsored terrorism reveal that Iraqi support for international terrorism was relatively minor and indirect and far less than that of a number of other Middle Eastern countries, including U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia.

Today, however, due to the country's great instability and because - like Afghanistan under Soviet occupation in the 1980s - U.S.-occupied Iraq has become a magnet for extremists from throughout the region,

nations are actually less secure from the threat of terrorism arising out of Iraq than they were prior to the U.S. invasion.

"Our actions in Afghanistan and Iraq were supported by many governments, and America is grateful to each one. "

The initial U.S. military response in Afghanistan was indeed supported by many governments, though it lessened as the United States took sides in the country's civil war and civilian casualties from unnecessarily heavy high-altitude bombing increased. By contrast, very few governments supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Most of those that did support the invasion did so contrary to preferences of the vast majority of their populations; a number of poor countries were subjected to promises of increased aid and trading privileges in exchange for their support and threatened with loss of such vital transactions for their refusal.

"I also recognize that some of the sovereign nations of this assembly disagreed with our actions. Yet there was, and there remains, unity among us on the fundamental principles and objectives of the United Nations. We are dedicated to the defense of our collective security, and to the advance of human rights. "

In reality, there is enormous disagreement between the United States and most other nations in the United Nations regarding the role of the world body. Most nations see the UN as a quasi-legislative body based on certain clear legal structures designed to build an international consensus for the promotion of collective security against aggression and to seek non-military means of conflict resolution. By contrast, the Bush Administration has essentially demanded that the UN be used to advance its foreign policy agenda. Unfortunately, many if not most of the UN member states violate basic human rights and the Bush Administration supports some of the world's worst human rights abusers.

"These permanent commitments call us to great work in the world, work we must do together. So let us move forward. "

In practice, this appears to mean "do what we say." (This attitude is not new to the Bush Administration,

however: recall that President Bill Clinton's ambassador to the UN and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright stated, also in reference to Iraq, that the United States "will act multilaterally when we can and unilaterally when we must.")

"First, we must stand with the people of Afghanistan and Iraq as they build free and stable countries. The terrorists and their allies fear and fight this progress above all, because free people embrace hope over resentment, and choose peace over violence. "

Afghanistan is far from stable and the United States has opposed strengthening the international peace-keeping forces to extend their operations beyond Kabul. Iraq is not only unstable as well, but as long as the U.S. maintains its occupation, the United Nations will have a hard time standing with the people of Iraq. A bigger question is this: Has the U.S. invasion and occupation created an environment where the people of Iraq feel free, embrace hope and choose peace? Or, has it created a situation where people feel they are under foreign military occupation and thereby embrace resentment and violence?

"...In the nation of Iraq, the United Nations is carrying out vital and effective work every day. By the end of 2004, more than 90 percent of Iraqi children under age five will have been immunized against preventable diseases such as polio, tuberculosis, and measles thanks to the hard work and high ideals of UNICEF. "

This figure would be comparable to childhood immunization rates in Iraq prior to the U.S.-led Gulf War in 1991 and subsequent sanctions that largely destroyed the country's public health system.

"Iraq's food distribution system is operational, delivering nearly a half-million tons of food per month, thanks to the skill and expertise of the World Food Program. "

The World Food Program has also reported that malnutrition is much higher now than it was prior to the U.S. invasion.

"Our international coalition in Iraq is meeting its responsibilities. "

First of all, given that the United States is providing 85% of the personnel and an even higher percentage of the financial costs, it can hardly be called a "coalition." More to the point, the United States has failed miserably in living up to its obligations as an occupying power under the Fourth Geneva Conventions in such areas as providing basic security and public services.

"We are conducting precision raids against terrorists and holdouts of the former regime."

Unfortunately, there has been tragically little precision in quite a few cases, resulting in widespread civilian casualties. In addition, an increasing number of targets of the raids are neither terrorists nor holdouts of the former regime, but non-Baathist nationalists who are fighting U.S. occupation forces, not civilians. As tragic as every death of an American soldier may be, international law makes a clear distinction between terrorism (which targets innocent civilians and is always a war crime) and armed attacks against uniformed soldiers of a foreign occupying army (which is considered a legitimate form of warfare.)

"These killers are at war with the Iraqi people."

Actually, far more Iraqi civilians have been killed by U.S. occupation forces.

"They have made Iraq the central front in the war on terror and they will be defeated."

In reality, only a tiny percentage of the armed attacks have been directed at civilian non-combatants and therefore considered acts of terrorism. Furthermore, "the central front in the war on terror" should be directed toward Al-Qaeda, which really does present a serious threat, rather than Iraqis who would probably stop fighting once U.S. occupation forces got out of their country. Finally, given the steady increase in anti-American violence and indications that a growing percentage of the attacks are coming from non-Baathist nationalists rather than the remnants of Saddam's regime or foreign terrorist cells, it will not be defeated very easily.

"Our coalition has made sure that Iraq's former dictator will never again use weapons of mass destruction."

It is becoming increasingly apparent that Saddam Hussein did not have any weapons of mass destruction for at least five to eight years prior to the U.S. invasion. He last used such weapons (in the form of deadly chemical agents) in 1988, a full fifteen years before the U.S. invasion. It was the UN inspections regime, not the U.S. invasion, that eliminated his WMD programs. Similarly, it was the UN-imposed embargo, not the U.S. invasion that denied the regime access to needed technologies and raw materials to rebuild such programs in the future. In other words, the U.S. "coalition" had nothing to do with eliminating the possibility of the former Iraqi dictator using weapons of mass destruction as he did during the 1980s.

"We are now interviewing Iraqi citizens and analyzing records of the old regime, to reveal the full extent of its weapons programs and long campaign of deception."

So far, both the records of the old regime and interviews with Iraqis involved with WMD programs appear to indicate that the weapons programs were terminated and the proscribed weapons and delivery systems destroyed or otherwise rendered inoperable by the mid-1990s.

"We are training Iraqi police, border guards, and a new army, so that the Iraqi people can assume full responsibility for their own security."

As long as the United States remains the occupying power, these police, border guards and new army will have little credibility among large segments of the Iraqi population. Until they do, the situation on the ground will remain highly unstable.

"At the same time, our coalition is helping to improve the daily lives of the Iraqi people. The old regime built palaces while letting schools decay, so we are rebuilding more than a thousand schools."

Iraq actually had one of the best education systems in the Third World prior to the U.S.-led bombing campaign during the 1991 Gulf War and subsequent sanctions.

"The old regime starved hospitals of resources, so we have helped to supply and reopen hospitals across Iraq."

As virtually any development worker - whether with the United Nations or with any number of non-governmental organizations - in Iraq during the past dozen years will testify, it was the U.S.-led sanctions that starved hospitals of resources.

"The old regime built up armies and weapons, while allowing the nation's infrastructure to crumble. So we are rehabilitating power plants, water and sanitation facilities, bridges, and airports."

First of all, thanks to its enormous oil wealth (as well as exports and loans from the United States and other countries), Saddam Hussein's regime during the 1980s was able to provide both guns and butter - developing an over-sized military while building power plants, water and sanitation facilities, bridges, and airports. By contrast, Iraqi military spending during the 1990s was widely estimated to be only about one-tenth of its previous levels. Meanwhile, the heavy U.S. bombing during the 1991 Gulf War was largely responsible for the destruction of Iraq's power plants, water and sanitation facilities, bridges, and airports and the U.S.-led sanctions that followed made it almost impossible for Iraq to import the parts needed to rebuild them. Finally, it is important to note that the Bush Administration - with bipartisan support in Congress - is itself busy building up armies and weapons while allowing our own nation's infrastructure to crumble.

"I have proposed to Congress that the United States provide additional funding for our work in Iraq, the greatest financial commitment of its kind since the Marshall Plan. Having helped to liberate Iraq, we will honor our pledges to Iraq."

The financial commitment to Iraq does not come anywhere close in real dollars to the Marshall Plan and is actually quite paltry compared to what the administration has been willing to spend to bomb, invade, and occupy the country. In addition, there has not been a clear accounting of the funding earmarked for reconstruction work and much of that money has gone to politically well-connected U.S. corporations that gained exclusive contracts through non-competitive bidding. Additional billions of dollars have gone to bribe foreign governments to commit token numbers of soldiers to make up for insuffi-

cient manpower from the U.S. military and to make the U.S. occupation look like a broad coalition.

"And by helping the Iraqi people build a stable and peaceful country, we will make our own countries more secure."

Iraq is actually far less stable and peaceful than it was prior to the U.S. invasion and occupation and the enormous anti-American resentment that has sprung up in the Islamic world as a result increases the risks of deadly terrorist attacks.

"The primary goal of our coalition in Iraq is self-government for the people of Iraq, reached by orderly and democratic means. This process must unfold according to the needs of Iraqis, neither hurried nor delayed by the wishes of other parties."

If this was really the primary goal, then why doesn't the United States end the occupation and turn interim administration over to the United Nations, as was done with East Timor between the withdrawal of Indonesian occupation forces in 2000 and the country's independence two years later? A number of UN agencies have extensive experiences in recent years with successfully transitioning war-ravaged states to orderly and democratic self-governance; the U.S. military does not.

"And the United Nations can contribute greatly to the cause of Iraqi self-government. America is working with friends and allies on a new Security Council resolution, which will expand the UN's role in Iraq. As in the aftermath of other conflicts, the United Nations should assist in developing a constitution, training civil servants, and conducting free and fair elections."

A careful reading of the U.S.-sponsored resolution reveals that it essentially forces much of the financial and logistical burdens of overseeing the post-war, post-sanctions and post-dictatorship transition upon the United Nations while leaving the United States primarily responsible for shaping the military, political and economic future of the country. As part of a UN Trusteeship, UN workers would be more likely to build cooperative relationships with the Iraqi people. As simply a part of a U.S. occupation, however - as would be the case under the U.S. draft - they

would just become additional targets of an increasingly restive population.

"Iraq now has a Governing Council, the first truly representative institution in that country. Iraq's new leaders are showing the openness and tolerance that democracy requires, and also showing courage."

The Governing Council is representative only in the sense that its members are drawn from a diverse segment of Iraq's ethnic and religious mosaic; they are not necessarily representative of the political will of the majority of the population. Their perceived openness and tolerance may stem largely from the knowledge that they are serving only at the pleasure of the U.S. occupation authority. Their courage stems from the recognition that they are seen by many Iraqis as collaborators and therefore fear they could suffer from the same fate as has befallen collaborators with military occupations in other countries throughout history.

"Yet every young democracy needs the help of friends. Now the nation of Iraq needs and deserves our aid, and all nations of good will should step forward and provide that support."

Countries throughout the world have expressed a willingness to provide large-scale aid and assistance in the form of security, technical expertise, money and logistics as long as the country is under a UN trusteeship, not an American military occupation.

"The success of a free Iraq will be watched and noted throughout the region. Millions will see that freedom, equality, and material progress are possible at the heart of the Middle East. Leaders in the region will face the clearest evidence that free institutions and open societies are the only path to long-term national success and dignity."

This is ironic statement from the government that is the world's primary economic, diplomatic and military backer of autocratic leaders throughout the Middle East. Since coming to office, the Bush Administration has actually increased military and economic assistance to dictatorial regimes that deny their people free institutions and open societies.

"And a transformed Middle East would benefit the entire world, by undermining the ideologies that export violence to other lands."

Then why not encourage such a transformation by first ending U.S. support for the dictatorships in Saudi Arabia and Egypt - long considered America's two most important Arab allies - that not only deny their people the political freedom that President Bush claims to support, but have (not coincidentally) produced most of Al-Qaeda's members and leadership.

"Iraq as a dictatorship had great power to destabilize the Middle East."

It did during the 1980s, when the U.S. was supporting it. Subsequent to Iraq's defeat in the 1991 Gulf War, however, after its military capacity was largely destroyed and they were no longer able to import the necessary weapons, technology and raw materials from advanced industrialized countries, the Iraqi dictatorship was barely a shell of its once formidable military prowess.

"Iraq as a democracy will have great power to inspire the Middle East. The advance of democratic institutions in Iraq is setting an example that others, including the Palestinian people, would be wise to follow."

The primary obstacle to Palestinian democracy is the Israeli occupation - armed and financed by the United States - which denies the Palestinians their right to self-determination and their ability to create and sustain their own democratic institutions.

"The Palestinian cause is betrayed by leaders who cling to power by feeding old hatreds, and destroying the good work of others."

Actually, Palestinian public opinion is more militant than most of the Palestinian Authority's leadership, which has called for resuming negotiations and implementing the road map that would lead to a Palestinian state encompassing the now-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip alongside a secure Israel with a shared co-capital of Jerusalem. While some demagogues - particularly among radical Islamic groups - are indeed exacerbating the conflict, the violence from the Palestinian side stems less from "old

hatreds" as it does from the very current and ongoing occupation and colonization of their land and the ongoing repression and harassment of their people.

"The Palestinian people deserve their own state, committed to reform, to fighting terror, and to building peace."

Then why is the United States spending billions of dollars, vetoing UN Security Council resolutions, and shipping massive amounts of armaments to enable Israel to maintain the very occupation that prevents the Palestinians from establishing a viable state? In addition, thus far President Bush has shown no indication that his vision of a Palestinian "state" is anything more than right-wing Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon's plans to offer the Palestinians a bare 40% of the occupied territories (less than 10% of historic Palestine), subdivided into a series of non-contiguous cantons surrounded by Israel.

"A second challenge we must confront together is the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Outlaw regimes that possess nuclear, chemical and biological weapons -- and the means to deliver them -- would be able to use blackmail and create chaos in entire regions. ... We are determined to keep the world's most destructive weapons away from all our shores, and out of the hands of our common enemies. Because proliferators will use any route or channel that is open to them, we need the broadest possible cooperation to stop them. Today I ask the UN Security Council to adopt a new anti-proliferation resolution. This resolution should call on all members of the UN to criminalize the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; to enact strict export controls consistent with international standards; and to secure any and all sensitive materials within their own borders."

It is noteworthy how the United States exempts itself and such Southwest Asian allies as Israel and Pakistan from anti-proliferation resolutions while focusing solely on governments it doesn't like. It is also revealing that the Bush Administration has rejected calls from Middle Eastern nations - ranging from allies like Jordan to adversaries like Syria - for the establishment of a weapons of mass destruction-free zone for all of the Middle East, comparable to treaties that already exist in Latin America and the

South Pacific. It is also worth noting that the United States has also been notoriously lax in its own export controls of dual-use technologies.

"... There is another humanitarian crisis, spreading and yet hidden from view. Each year, an estimated eight to nine hundred thousand human beings are bought, sold, or forced across the world's borders. Among them are hundreds of thousands of teenage girls, and others as young as five, who fall victim to the sex trade. This commerce in human life generates billions of dollars each year, much of which is used to finance organized crime. There is a special evil in the abuse and exploitation of the most innocent and vulnerable. The victims of sex trade see little of life before they see the very worst of life, an underworld of brutality and lonely fear. Those who create these victims, and profit from their suffering, must be severely punished. Those who patronize this industry debase themselves and deepen the misery of others. And governments that tolerate this trade are tolerating a form of slavery."

Most development organizations and advocates for Third World women recognize that the sex trade and other human trafficking has grown most dramatically in countries where traditional economies have collapsed as a result of neo-liberal economic policies imposed by U.S.-backed international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund. The selling of one's daughter or oneself becomes a matter of survival. Shifting to a development policy that emphasizes sustainable development and grassroots economic initiatives (such as micro-lending programs) will do far more to lessen this human tragedy than relying on law enforcement alone.

"... As an original signer of the UN charter, the United States of America is committed to the United Nations. And we show that commitment by working to fulfill the UN's stated purposes, and give meaning to its ideals."

Then why did the United States violate the UN Charter by invading a sovereign member nation?

"The founding documents of the United Nations and the founding documents of America stand in the same tradition. Both assert that human beings should never be reduced to objects of power or commerce, because their dignity is inherent."

This is an excellent summation of why the policies of the Bush Administration are subject to growing opposition both at home and abroad.

"Both recognize a moral law that stands above men and nations which must be defended and enforced by men and nations. And both point the way to peace, the peace that comes when all are free. We secure that peace with our courage, and we must show that courage together."

Indeed, individuals and nations must demonstrate enormous courage and struggle nonviolently against the policies of what is being seen increasingly as a rogue superpower whose quest for domination so seriously threatens the rule of law, basic moral principles, human freedom and any hope for real peace and security.

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