

The oil-for-food ‘scandal’ is a cynical smokescreen

By [Scott Ritter](#)

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United States Senators, led by the Republican Norm Coleman, have launched a crusade of sorts, seeking to “expose” the oil-for-food programme implemented by the United Nations from 1996 until 2003 as the “greatest scandal in the history of the UN”. But this posturing is nothing more than a hypocritical charade, designed to shift attention away from the debacle of George Bush’s self-made quagmire in Iraq, and legitimise the invasion of Iraq by using Iraqi corruption, and not the now-missing weapons of mass destruction, as the excuse.

The oil-for-food programme was derived from the US-sponsored Security Council resolution, passed in April 1995 but not implemented until December 1996. During this time, the CIA sponsored two coup attempts against Saddam, the second, most famously, a joint effort with the British that imploded in June 1996, at the height of the “oil for food” implementation negotiations. The oil-for-food programme was never a sincere humanitarian relief effort, but rather a politically motivated device designed to implement the true policy of the United States – regime change.

Through various control mechanisms, the United States and Great Britain were able to turn on and off the flow of oil as they saw best. In this way, the Americans were able to authorise a \$1bn exemption concerning the export of Iraqi oil for Jordan, as well as legitimise the billion-dollar illegal oil smuggling trade over the Turkish border, which benefited Nato ally Turkey as well as fellow regime-change plotters in Kurdistan. At the same time as US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was negotiating with Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov concerning a Russian-brokered deal to end a stand-off between Iraq and the UN weapons inspectors in October-November 1997, the United States turned a blind eye to the establishment of a Russian oil company set up on Cyprus.

This oil company, run by Primakov’s sister, bought oil from Iraq under “oil for food” at a heavy discount, and then sold it at full market value to primarily US companies, splitting the difference evenly with Primakov and the Iraqis. This US-sponsored deal resulted in profits of hundreds of million of dollars for both the Russians and Iraqis, outside the control of “oil for food”. It has been estimated that 80 per cent of the oil illegally smuggled out of Iraq under “oil for food” ended up in the United States.

Likewise, using its veto-wielding powers on the 661 Committee, set up in 1990 to oversee economic sanctions against Iraq, the United States was able to block billions of dollars of humanitarian goods legitimately bought by Iraq under the provisions of the oil-for-food agreement. And when Saddam proved too adept at making money from kickbacks, the US and Britain devised a new scheme of oil sales which forced potential buyers to commit to oil contracts where the price would be set after the oil was sold, an insane process which quickly brought oil sales to a halt, starving the oil-for-food programme of money to the point

that billions of dollars of humanitarian contracts could not be paid for by the United Nations.

The corruption evident in the oil-for-food programme was real, but did not originate from within the United Nations, as Norm Coleman and others are charging. Its origins are in a morally corrupt policy of economic strangulation of Iraq implemented by the United States as part of an overall strategy of regime change. Since 1991, the United States had made it clear – through successive statements by James Baker, George W Bush and Madeleine Albright – that economic sanctions, linked to Iraq's disarmament obligation, would never be lifted even if Iraq fully complied and disarmed, until Saddam Hussein was removed from power. This policy remained unchanged for over a decade, during which time hundreds of thousands of Iraqis died as a result of these sanctions.

While money derived from the off-the-book sale of oil did indeed go into the purchase of conventional weapons and the construction of presidential palaces, the vast majority of these funds were poured into economic recovery programmes that saw Iraq emerge from near total economic ruin in 1996. By 2002, on the eve of the US-led invasion, Baghdad was full of booming businesses, restaurants were full, and families walked freely along well-lit parks. Compare and contrast that image with the reality of Baghdad today, and the ultimate corruption that was the oil-for-food programme becomes self-evident.

Scott Ritter is a former UN weapons inspector in Iraq (1991-1998) and the author of 'Frontier Justice: Weapons of Mass Destruction and the Bushwhacking of America', published by Context Books

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