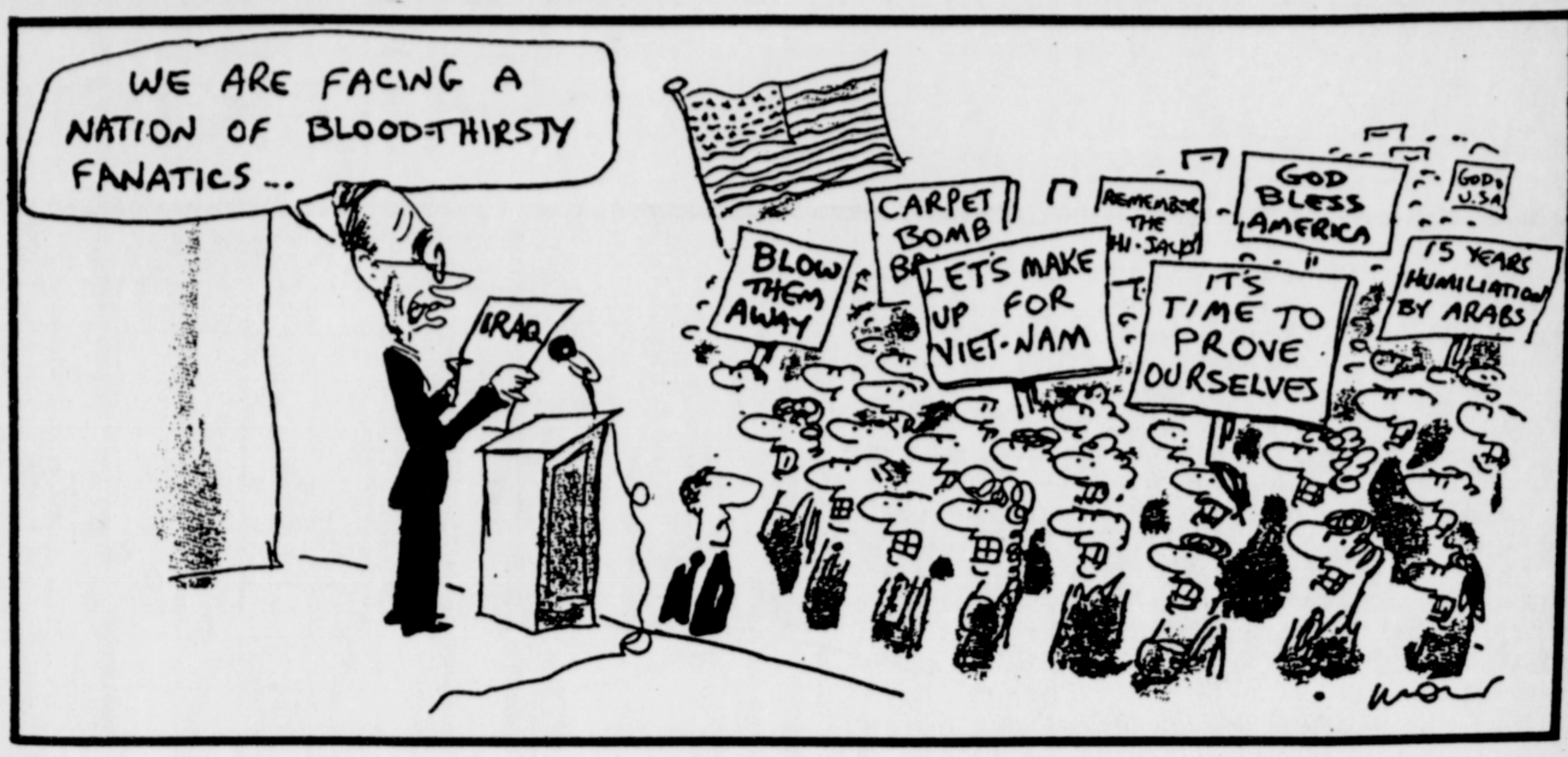


MOIR (SYDNEY MORNING HERALD, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA)

U.S. involvement in the Iran-Iraq war bore certain hallmarks of schizophrenia. Certain sectors were apparently relieved that two of the U.S.'s biggest potential enemies in the Middle East were busy hurling rockets at each other's capitals and slaughtering each other's draftees. In 1986, Reagan's secret "Contragate" network smuggled a huge shipment of sophisticated antitank missiles to Iran, using Israel as a conduit (and using the profits, of course, to fund rightwing rebels in Nicaragua). However, the U.S. generally considered Iran to be the greater threat, and when Iranian officials leaked the secret deal to a Lebanese newspaper the following year, spearking the "Contragate" revelations and subsequent Congressional probe, the U.S. started to "tilt" towards Iraq. U.S. warships were sent to the Persian Gulf, ostensibly to protect Kuwaiti tankers (which were hauling both Kuwaiti and Iraqi oil, mostly to Japan) from Iranian attack (even though most of the interruptions in Persian Gulf shipping were caused by Iraqi attacks on Iranian ships). U.S. involvement climaxed in 1988, when U.S. warships laid waste to an Iranian oil rig, and a U.S. missile cruiser "accidently" shot an Iranian civilian airliner out of the sky, killing all 290 passengers, including 66 children.

This "tilt" towards Iraq was apparently unaffected by the fact that it was Iraq which launched a missile attack on the "USS Stark", crippling the ship and killing 37 U.S. sailors — or by Iraq's unprovoked poison gas attack on a remote Kurdish market city within its own territory, instantly killing 5000 civilians and maiming 7000 others, a simple act of genocide against an ethnic minority which was not even involved in the war.

The war prompted dramatic changes in the world oil economy. In 1986, in an effort to weaken Iran, Saudi Arabia's powerful oil minister, Sheik Zaki Yamani, induced the other Arab states to follow his nation's lead in raising oil production, with the effect of lowering prices. The global market was instantly glutted and prices plummeted. Although oil-producing areas such as Texas, Alaska and southern California were hurt economically, U.S. policy makers were overjoyed. It was the exact opposite of 1973-74. Iran, with a war effort to finance, was furious, and started making veiled threats about instigating fundamentalist Shiite Muslim rebellions within Saudi borders. (Saudi Arabia, like most Arab nations, is dominated by the less orthodox Sunni Muslims, while Iran is predominantly Shiite.)

In July 1987, Shiite Muslims making their pilgrimage to Islam's holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, rioted, battling Saudi police in the holy city itself, resulting in 400 dead. Sheik Yamani was ousted as Saudi oil minister, a post he had considered permanent, and Saudi oil production quickly slowed down. However, regional production never returned to pre-glut levels, and Iran continued to assail Saudi Arabia for not doing enough to pressure the other Arab states to roll back production. This helps explain the U.S. tilt toward Iraq.

Due to less favorable geology and technology, Iran must spend far more money than the Arab states to extract oil. (The U.S., due to still less favorable geology, must spend even more, which is why the U.S. relies heavily on Middle East oil despite sizeable domestic sources, especially in Alaska.) Therefore Iran was seriously hurt by the glut while Saudi Arabia, the Gulf ministates, and even war-stricken Iraq could ride it out.

But, while good for U.S. motorists, the glut caused economic crises in oil-producing nations which had nothing whatsoever to do with the intrigues in the Middle East, such as Mexico and Nigeria. The value of the Mexican peso took a nosedive, while the military repressed a wave of angry labor protest in Nigeria.

In 1988, the war ended in a stalemate, leaving both Iran and Iraq economically devastated. Now it was Iraq's turn to press Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf ministates to lower production. With massive war debts to repay, principally to Kuwait, and war-crippled production infrastructure, high prices were in Iraq's interest. Continued high production and low prices would only mean more suffering for Iraq's people — and would thwart Hussein's personal ambitions to emerge as the leader of the Arab world, a successor to Egypt's late President Nasser.

In Hussein's view, the Gulf states' continued high production was slavishly pro-West and violated every principle of Arab nationalism. It deprived the Kuwaiti emir's regime any claim to legitimacy. By conquering and annexing Kuwait, Hussein could simultaneously achieve two goals: erasing the Iraqi debt to Kuwait and driving up the price of oil. Whatever else the invasion may have been, it was not irrational. So, in the predawn hours of August 2, 1990, he did it. Oil prices rose like a barometer in response to the threat of war.

The U.S. responded quickly with a massive troop deployment to Saudi Arabia, the last major U.S. oil mainstay in the Middle East. The Bush Administration is quick to point out that the U.S. is not acting unilaterally, but in a joint effort with Britain, France and a (rather hastily assembled) anti-Iraq Arab coalition. Only a few militant Arab states, such as Col. Qaddafi's Libya, have declined to join the coalition. Egypt, and even the stridently nationalist Syria, have sent troops of their own to Saudi Arabia alongside the U.S. troops. The White House claims that Iraq has been effectively isolated, and clearly has its eyes set not merely on forcing Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait, but on removing Hussein from power altogether.

However, in many ways, the U.S. military response actually strengthens Hussein. Hussein's strongest card is anti-U.S. sentiment in the Arab world, and Arab resentment of the U.S. is certain to escalate with thousands of U.S. troops on Arab soil and revelations of secret U.S. airbases being established in the Gulf states.

U.S. official hypocrisy is also giving Hussein very useful fuel for his propaganda machine. First and foremost is the fact that while decrying the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, the U.S. continues to support and fund the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. Since the Palestinian uprising began in the occupied territories two-and-a-half years ago, 700 Palestinians have been killed, 40,000 wounded, and more than 40,000 detained without charges by Israeli security forces — yet U.S. taxdollars continue to underwrite this repression.

The White House warns that an Iraqi takeover of Saudi Arabia would net Saddam Hussein one quarter of the world's oil. Yet, through effective political and economic control of Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states, the U.S. has long had effective control over one quarter of the world's oil. While these states have gone through periods of greater and lesser cooperation with the U.S., they have certainly been in a compliant mode since the glut of '86. While Aramco is currently being transferred from U.S. to Saudi ownership, the Saudi government had long had authority over Aramco's rate of production, so little is likely to change in terms of effective political control.

The U.S. consumes a highly disproportionate 30% of the world's oil. The notion that the U.S., as a "democracy" has a "right" to this oil, a right of which "madman" Hussein is unworthy, holds little water for many observers in the Arab world and elsewhere. In the '80s alone, the U.S. has used military might to topple unfriendly governments in Grenada and Panama, while a "Low density" covert military option was pursued in Nicaragua. Libya, Lebanon and Iran were also militarily attacked by the U.S. In the eyes of many, if the U.S. did not actually annex the smaller nations with which it had conflicts (as Iraq did Kuwait), it is because through effective domination of these nations' economies via the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and corporate investment, it did not have to. It could afford to use the more subtle and sophisticated methods of control which are not available to Saddam Hussein.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf ministates which have been working to keep down the price of oil since 1986 are seen by many in the Arab world as dominated by decadent and insensitive elites who are so rich that they do not have to care about the economic hardships which their high-production oil policies are inflicting on the poor Arab majorities. The U.S. claim to moral superiority over Hussein's Iraq by virtue of being a "democracy" takes on an embarrassing irony in light of the fact that the repressive monarchies it is defending in the Arabian peninsula are among the most undemocratic regimes on Earth. The Saudi state routinely practices public floggings, amputations and beheadings for such offenses as theft or drug possession. The torture and detainment without charges of political dissidents is widespread.

In 1987 Amnesty International reported that a Saudi man arrested in connection with writing opposition slogans on walls in his village and distributing opposition literature died in custody. His body was returned to his family with instructions that it should be buried without the customary funeral, and it showed signs of torture. The human rights organization released a report in 1990 claiming that 700 people were detained without charges in Saudi Arabia between 1983 and 1989. In 1987, six U.S. citizens testified before Congress that they had been arrested on suspicion of espionage and drug running and subjected to torture, beating and interrogation while traveling or working in Saudi Arabia. They charged that the U.S. State Department had done little to secure their release. (New York Times, June 16, 1987)

Amnesty International also reports that the State Security Intelligence Agency of the Kuwaiti regime ousted by the Iraqi invasion had routinely practiced torture, their specialty being beatings on the soles of the feet. Rights for women are virtually nonexistent in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Even Iraq, with its own atrocious human rights record, gets better marks than Saudi Arabia in this department.

These double-standards provide potent ideological fuel for Hussein's effort to undermine the U.S.-led Arab coalition against him. If Hussein cannot induce the leaders of the Arab nations to withdraw from the coalition through diplomatic means, he has another card to play — prompting Arab nationalist uprisings in Eygpt, Syria, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, and toppling these governments altogether. This possibility should not be dismissed too readily. Hussein's propaganda network pervades the entire Arab world, and pro-Hussein demonstrations have been staged in several Arab countries since the crisis erupted.

Most ominous of all is the fact that Iraq's old enemy Iran has just closed ranks with Hussein against the U.S. and its Arab allies. This points to the possibility that the two rival currents in the Middle East's anti-West nationalism — the secular socialism represented by Iraq and the Islamic theocratic fundamentalism represented by Iran — may be moving towards an alliance. Hussein has even started using the rhetoric of

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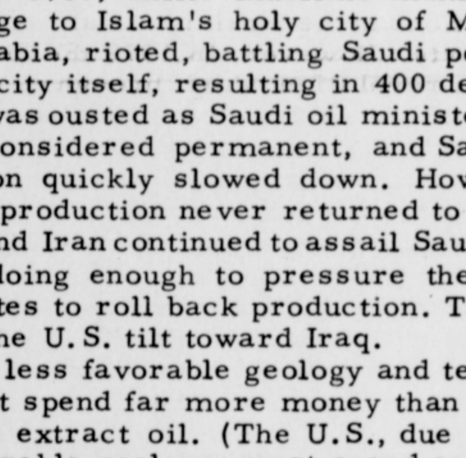

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