

# Bombs Away!

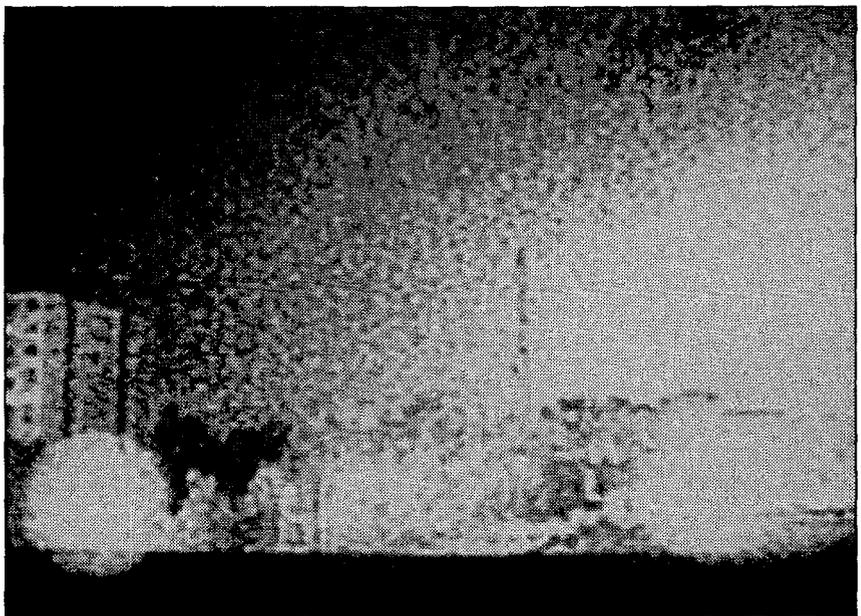
**When it comes to Iraq,  
the mainstream media has  
an outrageous lack of outrage**

By Seth Ackerman

**T**he House vote on Dec. 19 to impeach President Clinton was the climax of a year-long orgy of indignation from the Washington press corps. The day after Kenneth Starr sent his report to the House Judiciary Committee in November, the normally mild *New York Times* editorial page was hysterical, shouting that “until it was measured by Kenneth Starr, no citizen ... could have grasped the completeness of President Clinton’s mendacity or the magnitude of his recklessness.”

But the outrage, as always, has been selective. The day before the scheduled vote on his impeachment, Clinton announced the start of a bombing campaign against Iraq. Launched without the consultation of either Congress or the U.N. Security Council, the four-day attack was angrily opposed by, among many others, three of the Security Council’s five permanent members—France, China and Russia. The *New York Times* found nothing “reckless” in any of this, judging the strikes “fully justified.” In a year of high dudgeon over the “trampling” of the “rule of law,” it seemed not one pundit could muster enough outrage to call the bombing illegitimate.

Instead, there was much wary talk about the “timing” of the campaign. In a stunning declaration made only minutes before the first missiles were fired, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott said, “I cannot support this military action in the Persian Gulf at this time.” Although Lott was eventually reigned in (by Jesse Helms, of all people), “timing” became the mantra of the commentariat. Charles Krauthammer of the *Washington Post* approvingly quoted Lawrence Eagleburger, who said the timing of the strikes “smells to high heaven”; Krauthammer called that assessment “charitable.”



CNN

Baghdad by the rockets’ red glare ...

Yet pundits like Krauthammer who saw the attack as suspiciously convenient were often the same ones who had been demanding harsher treatment of Iraq. In one column, the *Wall Street Journal*’s Paul Gigot denounced the “bizarre timing” of the strikes and U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan’s earlier “diplomatic meddling.” It seemed that a large fraction of the Beltway crowd, having for so long insisted on the absolute right of a U.S. president to make war at a moment’s notice without anyone’s consent, was just now beginning to realize the drawbacks to such a policy.

The American news media always have functioned as a palace-court press. Any proposition that both major parties agree on will almost never be subject to debate. This principle

# Deadly Diplomacy

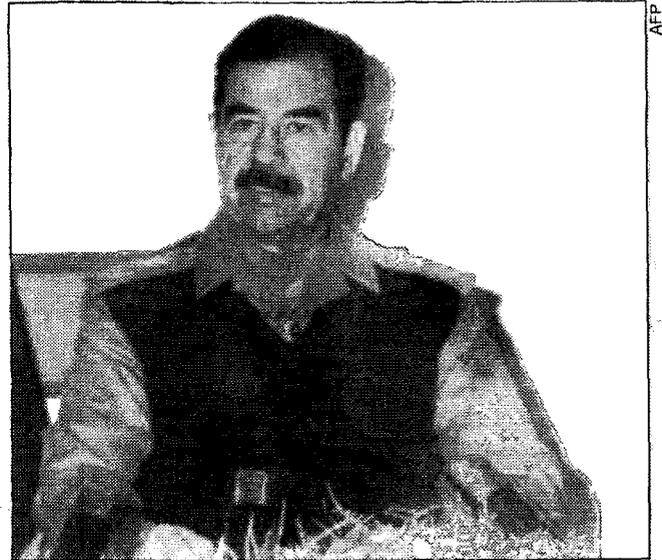
By Joel Bleifuss

**M**ideast policy expert James Akins has served as a foreign service officer in Iraq, Syria, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, where he was U.S. ambassador from 1973 to 1975. Akins, now a consultant on international economics and political affairs, returned from the Mideast on the day before the bombings began. He spoke with *In These Times* from his home in Washington.

*In These Times: What is the perception in the Arab world about Clinton's motives?*

**James Akins:** The idea that Clinton is bombing Baghdad to distract the public and Congress from his transgressions is not given much credence outside of Iraq. But there is certainly a widespread and strong feeling that Clinton's Mideast policy is unbalanced. Iraq is being punished because it doesn't obey the U.N. Security Council, while Israel has disobeyed with impunity.

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Staying alive.

eldom has been as clearly exposed as it was the week of impeachment and Iraq. Once Republican leaders had gone on record, however briefly, asking "why now?" about the bombing, there was a brand-new topic—the "timing issue"—for the talking heads. The bombing itself, endorsed by 95 percent of Democrats and 97 percent of Republicans in a House resolution, was never an issue at all.

Instead, a unanimous cheer went up from the nation's patriotic newspaper editorialists: The *Washington Post* called the strike "A Necessary Response." The *Boston Globe* said it was "A Just Attack." For the *Los Angeles Times*, it was a "Necessary Blow At Iraq." The *Dallas Morning News* urged readers to "Back Clinton On Airstrikes." The *Chicago Tribune* wrote that, faced with an impossible choice, "the president chose properly." *USA Today*, its finger always on the pulse of the moment, wrote: "The timing may well be debated. But the military action should not be." (Intriguingly, the reverse was true in the French press, where the government opposed the attacks. All three major Paris dailies—from the left-leaning *Liberation* to the conservative *Le Figaro*—editorialized against the bombing, with the prestigious *Le Monde* calling it "catastrophic, as the whole of American policy toward Iraq has been for too long.")

**T**hroughout coverage of the attack, it was hard to avoid Scott Ritter, the former UNSCOM inspector who

resigned in August over what he saw as the Clinton administration's squeamishness about confronting Iraq. In addition to being the author of a *New Republic* cover story the previous week ("The Plan: Saddam Hussein's Drive to Rebuild Iraq's Arsenal"), Ritter was featured prominently as a regular NBC News "analyst" and, notably, in a *New York Times* article on Iraqi weapons concealment in which Ritter is the only person quoted—his thoughts alone fill up 10 of the article's 23 paragraphs.

By contrast, Denis Halliday, who resigned a few weeks after Ritter from his post as head of the U.N. "oil-for-food" program in Iraq to protest the "calamity" of U.N. sanctions, wasn't quite so in demand. According to the Nexis database, he has been mentioned in 11 network news stories this year—Ritter was mentioned in no less than 244. And whereas Ritter's resignation was the subject of op-ed pieces by three of the *Washington Post's* regular columnists, the paper did not run a single article of any kind on Halliday when he resigned. Instead, it published a profile of him four months later, inexplicably placing it in the "Style" section. (For more on Halliday's views, see *ITT's* "U.N. Official Resigns over Iraqi Sanctions," Nov. 15, 1998.)

It seems that critics of U.S. foreign policy can be heard in the mainstream only as long as their perspective is one of even more cavalier hawkishness. ■

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