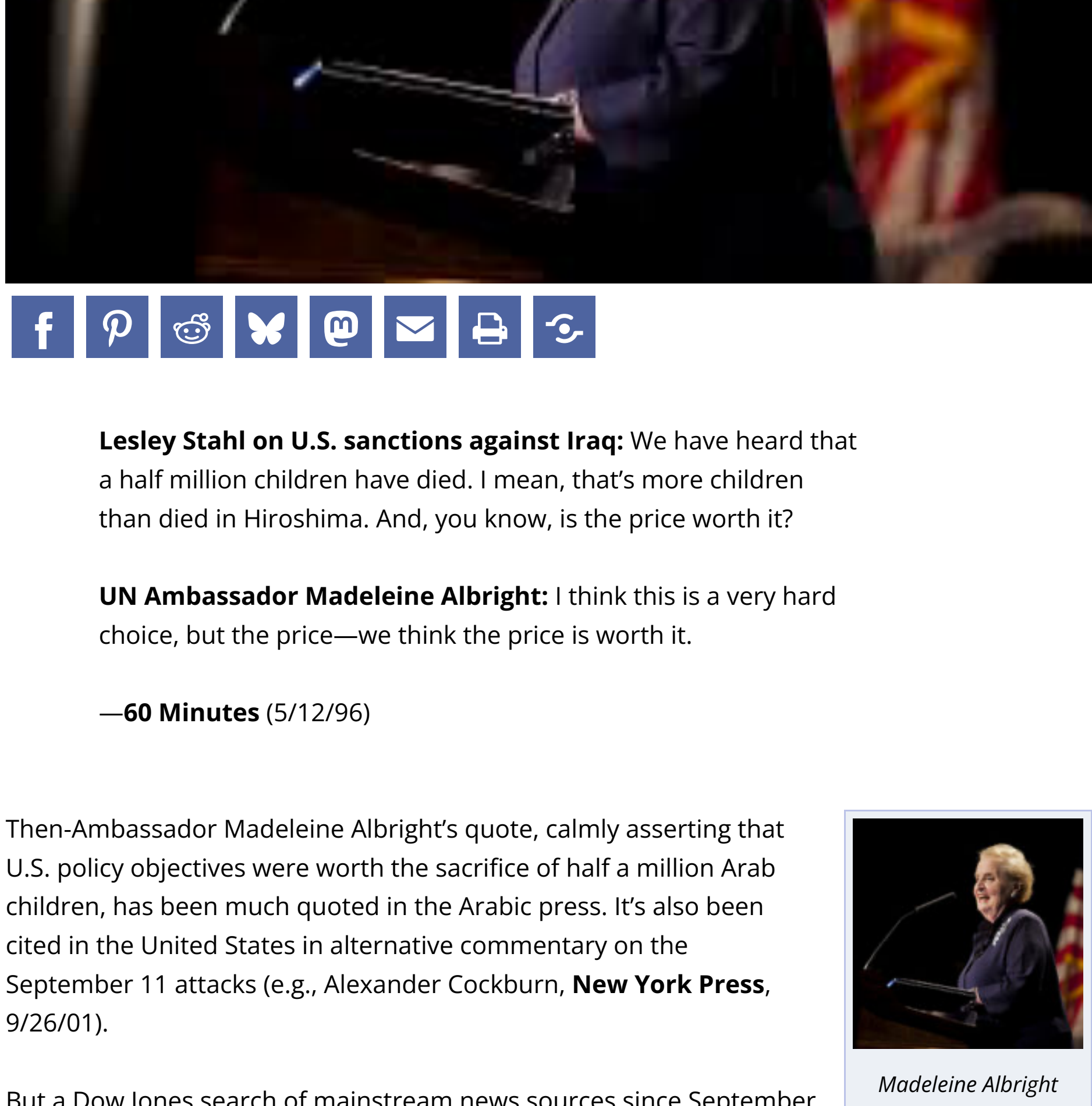


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'We Think the Price Is Worth It'

Media uncurious about Iraq policy's effects--there or here

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Lesley Stahl on U.S. sanctions against Iraq: We have heard that a half million children have died. I mean, that's more children than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?

UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright: I think this is a very hard choice, but the price—we think the price is worth it.

—60 Minutes (5/12/96)

Then-Ambassador Madeleine Albright's quote, calmly asserting that U.S. policy objectives were worth the sacrifice of half a million Arab children, has been much quoted in the Arabic press. It's also been cited in the United States in alternative commentary on the September 11 attacks (e.g., Alexander Cockburn, **New York Press**, 9/26/01).

Who's to blame

But a Dow Jones search of mainstream news sources since September 11 turns up only one reference to the quote—in an op-ed in the **Orange Country Register** (9/16/01). This omission is striking, given the major role that Iraq sanctions play in the ideology of archenemy Osama bin Laden; his recruitment video features pictures of Iraqi babies wasting away from malnutrition and lack of medicine (New York **Daily News**, 9/28/01). The inference that Albright and the terrorists may have shared a common rationale—a belief that the deaths of thousands of innocents are a price worth paying to achieve one's political ends—does not seem to be one that can be made in U.S. mass media.

It's worth noting that on **60 Minutes**, Albright made no attempt to deny the figure given by Stahl—a rough rendering of the preliminary estimate in a 1995 U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) report that 567,000 Iraqi children under the age of five had died as a result of the sanctions. In general, the response from government officials about the sanctions' toll has been rather different: a barrage of equivocations, denigration of U.N. sources and implications that questioners have some ideological axe to grind (**Extral**, 3-4/00).

There has also been an attempt to seize on the lowest possible numbers. In early 1998, Columbia University's Richard Garfield published a dramatically lower estimate of 106,000 to 227,000 children under five dead due to sanctions, which was reported in many papers (e.g. New Orleans **Times-Picayune**, 2/15/98). Later, UNICEF came out with the first authoritative report (8/99), based on a survey of 24,000 households, suggesting that the total "excess" deaths of children under 5 was about 500,000.

A Dow Jones search shows that, although some papers covered the UNICEF report, none mentioned that the previous figure had been contradicted. In fact, papers continue to cite the obsolete Garfield numbers (**Baltimore Sun**, 9/24/01).

Biological warfare?

With renewed concern about biological warfare in the U.S., it's worth noting an instance of the use of disease for military purposes that has gone almost uncovered. Last year, Thomas Nagy of Georgetown University unearthed a Defense Intelligence Agency document entitled "Iraq Water Treatment Vulnerabilities," which was circulated to all major allied commands one day after the Gulf War started. It analyzed the weaknesses of the Iraqi water treatment system, the effects of sanctions on a damaged system and the health effects of untreated water on the Iraqi populace. Mentioning that chlorine is embargoed under the sanctions, it speculates that "Iraq could try convincing the United Nations or individual countries to exempt water treatment supplies from sanctions for humanitarian reasons," something that the United States disallowed for many years.

Combined with the fact that nearly every large water treatment plant in the country was attacked during the Gulf War, and seven out of eight dams destroyed, this suggests a deliberate targeting of the Iraqi water supply for "postwar leverage," a concept U.S. government officials admitted was part of military planning in the Gulf War (**Washington Post**, 6/23/91).

A Dow Jones search for 2000 finds only one mention of this evidence in an American paper—and that in a letter to the editor (**Austin American-Statesman**, 10/01/00). Subsequent documents unearthed by Nagy (**The Progressive**, 8/10/01) suggest that the plan to destroy water treatment, then to restrict chlorine and other necessary water treatment supplies, was done with full knowledge of the explosion of water-borne disease that would result. "There are no operational water and sewage treatment plants and the reported incidence of diarrhea is four times above normal levels," one post-war assessment reported; "further infectious diseases will spread due to inadequate water treatment and poor sanitation," another predicted.

Combine this with harsh and arbitrary restrictions on medicines, the destruction of Iraq's vaccine facilities, and the fact that, until this summer, vaccines for common infectious diseases were on the so-called "1051 list" of substances in practice banned from entering Iraq. Deliberately creating the conditions for disease and then withholding the treatment is little different morally from deliberately introducing a disease-causing organism like anthrax, but no major U.S. paper seems to have editorialized against the U.S. engaging in biological warfare—or even run a news article reporting Nagy's evidence that it had done so. (The Madison **Capital Times**—8/14/01—and the **Idaho Statesman**—10/2/01—ran op-eds that cited Nagy's work.)

Decreased safety?

While there has never been much sustained attention in U.S. media to the costs of sanctions inside Iraq, one might expect the renewed concern for safety to occasion critical re-appraisal of whether U.S. policy towards Iraq contributes to or undermines American security. But there has been no such re-examination of, for example, the December 1998 bombing campaign known as "Desert Fox."

Contrary to much subsequent reporting, Iraq did not expel U.N. weapons inspectors in December 1998; rather, the U.S. withdrew them in preparation for conducting the unprovoked, unauthorized military strike. Many critics at the time suggested that this would make it impossible to conduct future inspections—especially after it was revealed that the CIA had been using weapons inspection as a cover for military espionage (**Washington Post**, 1/6/99; **Extral**, 3-4/99)—rendering verification that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction impossible. This analysis got little play in the media at that time.

The destabilizing effect of the airstrikes was evaluated at the time by analysts like the Merchant International Group (London **Times**, 1/1/99) as likely to increase the threat of terrorism. It was more recent U.S. policies have followed a similar approach. In July 2001, the U.S. decided to dump a proposed protocol for inspections and other mechanisms designed to give teeth to the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, preferring instead to rely on surveillance and espionage coupled with unilateral enforcement (**New York Times**, 7/25/01)—presumably through more strikes like Desert Fox, and like the August 1998 bombing of the El Shifa plant in Sudan, which turned out to produce pharmaceuticals, not chemical weapons. Since then, it has been reported that U.S. bioweapons research "pushes" the limits of the 1972 treaty, and that the Pentagon is even planning to produce a new strain of anthrax, ostensibly to test anti-anthrax procedures (**New York Times**, 9/4/01).

Even before the September 11 attacks, bombing of Iraq had dramatically increased. In February 2001, two dozen U.S. and British planes attacked Iraqi radar installations, some of them out of the "no-fly" zones. In August and early September, there were at least six more pre-planned attacks to degrade Iraqi air defense. This was part of a comprehensive plan for multiple strikes, with a U.S. government official quoted (on **MSNBC**, 9/14/01) as saying "Hitting targets one by one doesn't draw the same kind of attention or reaction. It takes longer, but it should eventually get the job done." It's certainly true that the bombing campaign didn't receive much notice from a Gary Condit-fixated media.

Independent military analysts like George Friedman of Stratfor (a private intelligence company) had concluded that this sustained attack on Iraqi air defense was a prelude to another major bombing like 1998's Desert Fox. This is particularly relevant once again, with frenzied attempts by commentators to link Iraq and bin Laden, or to assert that such a connection wasn't necessary to justify a renewed bombing of Baghdad (William F. Buckley, **National Review**, 10/9/01). Laurie Mylroie, an analyst noted for a 1987 **New Republic** article urging the U.S. to support Saddam Hussein ("Back Iraq," 4/27/87), has been making her rounds of the Sunday morning talk shows and op-ed pages (e.g., **Wall Street Journal**, 9/13/01; **CNN Crossfire**, 9/27/01) peddling her book, *Study of Revenge*, claiming that Iraq was behind the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, based on the questionable analysis of the identity of one man.

TV's drive to convict Iraq may have something to do with the fact that Iraq has real targets for bombing campaigns, unlike Afghanistan, which is already in ruins after more than 20 years of U.S., Soviet and other foreign meddling. Although no immediate plans to bomb Iraq have been revealed, if the Bush administration follows the advice of hawkish pundits like William Kristol and Fred Barnes, don't expect U.S. journalists to do a better job than they have so far in explaining the bombing's impact on the people of Iraq—and on U.S. security.

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CORRECTIONS: An earlier version of this article misidentified Albright's position at the time of her 60 Minutes interview.

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