

**DECEMBER 8**

# Rumsfeld's meeting with Saddam: Out of bounds

**C**hristmas came 11 days early for Donald Rumsfeld two years ago when the news broke that American forces had pulled Saddam Hussein from a spidery hole. During interviews about the capture, on CBS and ABC, the Pentagon's top man was upbeat. And he didn't have to deal with a question that Lesley Stahl or Peter Jennings could have logically chosen to ask: "Secretary Rumsfeld, you met with Saddam almost exactly 20 years ago and shook his hand. What kind of guy was he?"

Now, Saddam Hussein has gone on trial, but such questions remain unasked by mainstream U.S. journalists. Rumsfeld met with Hussein in Baghdad on behalf of the Reagan administration, opening up strong diplomatic and military ties that lasted through six more years of Saddam's murderous brutality.

As it happens, the initial trial of Saddam and co-defendants is focusing on grisly crimes that occurred the year before Rumsfeld gripped his hand. "The first witness, Ahmad Hassan Muhammad, 38, riveted the courtroom with the scenes of torture he witnessed after his arrest in 1982, including a meat grinder with human hair and blood under it," the New York Times reported on Dec. 6. And: "At one point, Mr. Muhammad briefly broke down in tears as he recalled how his brother was tortured with electrical shocks in front of their 77-year-old father."

The victims were Shiites – 143 men and adolescent boys, according to the charges – tortured and killed in the Iraqi town of Dujail after an assassination attempt against Saddam in early July of 1982. Donald Rumsfeld became the Reagan administration's Middle East special envoy 15 months later.

On Dec. 20, 1983, the Washington Post reported that Rumsfeld "visited Iraq in what U.S. officials said was an attempt to bolster the already improving U.S. relations with that country." A couple of days later, the New York Times cited a "senior American official" who "said that the United States remained ready to establish full diplomatic relations with Iraq and that it was up to the Iraqis."

On March 29, 1984, the Times reported: "American diplomats pronounce themselves satisfied with relations between Iraq and the United States and suggest that normal

## MEDIABEAT 2005 | NORMAN SOLOMON

diplomatic ties have been restored in all but name." Washington had some goodies for Saddam's regime, the Times account noted, including "agricultural-commodity credits totaling \$840 million." And while "no results of the talks have been announced" after the Rumsfeld visit to Baghdad three months earlier, "Western European diplomats assume that the United States now exchanges some intelligence on Iran with Iraq."

A few months later, on July 17, 1984, a Times article with a Baghdad dateline sketchily filled in a bit more information, saying that the U.S. government "granted Iraq about \$2 billion in commodity credits to buy food over the last two years." The story recalled that "Donald Rumsfeld, the former Middle East special envoy, held two private meetings with the Iraqi president here," and the dispatch mentioned in passing that "State Department human rights reports have been uniformly critical of the Iraqi President, contending that he ran a police state."

Full diplomatic relations between Washington and Baghdad were restored 11 months after Rumsfeld's December 1983 visit with Saddam. He went on to use poison gas later in the decade, actions which scarcely harmed relations with the Reagan administration.

As the most senior U.S. official to visit Iraq in six years, Rumsfeld had served as Reagan's point man for warming relations with Saddam. In 1984, the administration engineered the sale to Baghdad of 45 ostensibly civilian-use Bell 214ST helicopters. Saddam's military found them quite useful for attacking Kurdish civilians with poison gas in 1988, according to U.S. intelligence sources. "In response to the gassing," journalist Jeremy Scahill has pointed out, "sweeping sanctions were unanimously passed by the U.S. Senate that would have denied Iraq access to most U.S. technology. The measure was killed by the White House."

The USA's big media institutions did little to illuminate how Washington and business interests combined to strengthen and arm Saddam Hussein during many of his worst crimes. "In the 1980s and afterward, the United States underwrote 24 American corporations so they could sell to Saddam Hussein weapons of mass destruction, which he used against Iran, at that time the prime Middle Eastern enemy of the United States," writes Ben Bagdikian, a former assistant managing editor of the Washington Post, in his book *The New Media Monopoly*. "Hussein used U.S.-supplied poison gas" against Iranians and Kurds "while the United States looked the other way."

Of course the crimes of the Saddam Hussein regime were not just in the future when Rumsfeld came bearing gifts in 1983. Saddam's large-scale atrocities had been going on for a long time. Among them were the methodical torture and murders in Dujail that have been front-paged this week in coverage of the former dictator's trial; they

## **MEDIABEAT 2005 | NORMAN SOLOMON**

occurred 17 months before Rumsfeld arrived in Baghdad.

Today, inside the corporate media frame, history can be supremely relevant when it focuses on Hussein's torture and genocide. But the historic assistance of the U.S. government and American firms is largely off the subject and beside the point.

A photo of Donald Rumsfeld shaking Saddam's hand on Dec. 20, 1983, is easily available. (It takes a few seconds to find via Google.) But the picture has been notably absent from the array of historic images that U.S. media outlets are providing to viewers and readers in coverage of the Saddam Hussein trial. And journalistic mention of Rumsfeld's key role in aiding the Iraqi tyrant has been similarly absent. Apparently, in the world according to U.S. mass media, some history matters profoundly and some doesn't matter at all.

*Norman Solomon is the author of the new book "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death."  
For information, go to: [www.WarMadeEasy.com](http://www.WarMadeEasy.com)*