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## Were Sanctions Right?

By DAVID RIEFF

As the war in Iraq recedes, the challenges of occupying and rebuilding the country seem to grow more daunting with every passing day. It is becoming clear, though, that Iraq's devastation is not primarily the result of American bombing during the war or of the looting that followed it, but of the economic crisis that befell the country before the first shot was fired. There is still little consensus about what happened in Iraq during the years before the war or who is to blame. But the quest for answers has reawakened a fierce and bitter controversy over Iraq policy in the 1990's.

For officials in Washington and London and for American administrators now in Iraq, that country's postwar woes are essentially the legacy of Saddam Hussein's tyrannical, cruel and corrupt rule. As L. Paul Bremer III, the civilian administrator of postwar Iraq, recently said of Hussein, "While his people were starving -- literally, in many cases, starving -- while he was killing tens of thousands of people, Saddam and his cronies were taking money, stealing it, really, from the Iraqi people."

But others argue that the fundamental reason Iraq is in such terrible shape is not Hussein's brutality but rather the comprehensive regime of economic sanctions that the United Nations Security Council imposed on Iraq for almost 13 years, sharply restricting all foreign trade. It was these sanctions, they claim, that brought this once rich country to its knees.

For many people, the sanctions on Iraq were one of the decade's great crimes, as appalling as Bosnia or Rwanda. Anger at the United States and Britain, the two principal architects of the policy, often ran white hot. Denis J. Halliday, the United Nations humanitarian coordinator in Iraq for part of the sanctions era, expressed a widely held belief when he said in 1998: "We are in the process of destroying an entire society. It is as simple and terrifying as that." Even today, Clinton-era American officials ranging from Madeleine K. Albright, the former secretary of state, and James P. Rubin, State Department spokesman under Albright, to Nancy E. Soderberg, then with the National Security Council, speak with anger and bitterness over the fervor of the anti-sanctions camp. As Soderberg put it to me, "I could not give a speech anywhere in the U.S. without someone getting up and accusing me of being responsible for the deaths of 500,000 Iraqi children."

The end of the war has at last made it possible to find out what the effects of sanctions on Iraq really were. American officials from the administrations of George Bush Sr. and Bill Clinton are now willing to speak candidly about the human costs of sanctions, and Iraqis are also able to speak far more openly than they were before Saddam Hussein's ouster.

Many of the diplomats who constructed and administered the sanctions policy still defend them steadfastly. Richard Holbrooke, who served as ambassador to the United Nations under President Clinton, says: "The concept of sanctions is not just still valid; it's necessary. What else fills in the gap between pounding your breast and indulging in empty rhetoric and going to war besides economic sanctions?"

Albright insists that sanctions cannot be ruled out in the future when formulating policy, whether in Washington or at the Security Council, for dealing with such tyrannies as North Korea, Zimbabwe or Myanmar, formerly Burma.

And James Rubin asks: "What should we have done, just lift sanctions and hope for the best? I believed then and believe now that that was just too risky, given Saddam Hussein's past, his repeated attempts to invade his neighbors, his treatment of his own people and the weapons we knew he was developing."

According to Rubin, sanctions were the sole available choice that did not imply allowing Saddam Hussein to do what he pleased in the region. And officials of the first President Bush's administration, hardly known for endorsing many of the policies later formulated by Clinton's foreign-policy team, broadly agree. "What we were trying to do by putting sanctions in was to prevent Hussein from threatening the region," recalled Gen. Brent Scowcroft, the national security adviser for the first President Bush. "They worked in the sense that he was never able to rebuild his conventional army. When this war started, the Iraqi Army had no more than one-third of the strength it had possessed at the beginning of the first gulf war. But imagine that there had been no sanctions. Is it reasonable to suppose that the weakened Iraqi Army we just faced would have been so weak? I doubt it."

These observations do not answer the question of whether any policy, no matter how strategically sound, is worth the deaths of 500,000 Iraqi children -- a figure that originated in a Unicef report on infant mortality in sanctions-era Iraq and became the rallying cry of anti-sanctions campaigners. And the argument against sanctions on Iraq went beyond even this single, horrifying statistic. Sanctions, their opponents insist, transformed a country that in the 1980's was the envy of the developing world in terms of investments in health, education and physical infrastructure into a place where everyone (except the half-million or so members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party and their families and cronies) was dependent on United Nations food aid, where infant mortality rates had skyrocketed, educational outcomes had collapsed and diseases that had disappeared were reappearing, sometimes at epidemic levels.

American officials may quarrel with the numbers, but there is little doubt that at least several hundred thousand children who could reasonably have been expected to live died before their fifth birthdays. The damage, according to those who fought against sanctions, was terrible, medieval. It was, in the literal sense, unconscionable, since those who died had not themselves developed weapons of mass destruction or invaded Kuwait. Rather, they were the cannon fodder for Hussein's war and the victims of his repression.

Madeleine Albright was widely excoriated in 1996 for telling a television interviewer who asked her about the deaths of Iraqi children caused by sanctions, "This is a very hard choice, but the price, we think the price is worth it."

She says now that she regrets the comment -- "It was a genuinely stupid thing to say" -- and in a recent interview seemed still to be struggling with the moral and strategic questions that underlie the sanctions debate. For Albright, the comprehensive regime of sanctions imposed on Iraq represented at best a tragic choice between unhappy alternatives -- a search for the lesser evil.

As Albright put it to me, "I wish people understood that these are not black and white choices; the choices are really hard." Sanctions like the ones that were imposed on Iraq, she said, "are a blunt instrument. That's their tragedy. What was so terrible for me was that I did see the faces of the people who were suffering -- even if I thought then and think now that the sufferings of the Iraqi people were Saddam's doing, not ours. There's a terrible price you pay. A terrible price."

The actual history of American sanctions on Iraq is fairly straightforward. On Aug. 2, 1990, in response to Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 661, imposing comprehensive multilateral international sanctions on Iraq and freezing all its foreign assets. Iraq was no longer free to import anything not expressly permitted by the United Nations, and companies were forbidden from doing business with Iraq, with very limited exceptions. Before the conflict started, Iraq had imported roughly 70 percent of its food, medicine and chemicals for agriculture. Although its oil reserves, and hence its wealth, were virtually limitless, it was nonetheless a country that without international trade could not feed itself or sustain the modern developed society it was becoming.

On Feb. 28, 1991, Iraq, defeated on the battlefield, capitulated to American-led forces. The sanctions remained in place. On Aug. 27, 1992, the United Nations declared "no fly" zones over the Shiite areas of southern Iraq and the Kurdish areas of the country's north, adding physical containment of Hussein's military to the program of sanctions. This created a policy that several Clinton administration officials would later describe to me as "keeping Saddam in his box."

By early 1993, opposition to sanctions was growing, especially in the Arab world, and so was dissension within the United Nations. Albright, then Washington's newly appointed ambassador to the United Nations, recalls that when she arrived in New York to take up her post in February 1993, there was confusion about sanctions policy. As she put it: "No one had thought they would be in place for so long, but then, no one had really thought Saddam Hussein would still be there either. The intelligence was that he'd be gone fairly soon."

Albright's instructions from the White House were to hold "very firm" on sanctions. But she soon made a trip to the Middle East that, while it had been undertaken largely to persuade Middle Eastern leaders that they should support a continuation of sanctions

policy, also caused her to somewhat modify her view about what the effects of sanctions were on the ground in Iraq.

"I went to various Arab capitals with photographs we'd declassified that showed how much money Saddam Hussein was spending on his palaces," she told me recently. "The Arab leaders were amazed. They hadn't known any of this. But in turn they told me about how much the Iraqi people were suffering under sanctions. They also talked about the anger over sanctions that was building in the Arab 'street.' Of course, this protest was affecting them, too. But I was appalled by what they told me, not just worried about the political consequences. And it was when I returned to the U.N. that I began to try to mitigate the humanitarian consequences of the sanctions. That's when the idea of 'food for oil' was born."

The premise of the oil-for-food program, which was administered by the United Nations, was that Saddam Hussein would be allowed to sell a certain amount of oil. With the proceeds, Hussein's government would be permitted to buy essential humanitarian supplies, including food, medicine and materials needed to keep Iraq's crumbling infrastructure running. A humanitarian coordinator would oversee things in the country, making sure that the materials being imported were used for their stated purposes. The program sought to bar the Iraqi government from obtaining any materials that could be used for military purposes, and as Albright points out, that was problematic: items like chlorine or chemical fertilizer can be used to make poison gas or explosives even if their ostensible use is in water purification or agriculture. "Even shoes can be considered 'dual use' items," Albright told me, "since it all depends on whether they are going to the general population or to the military."

In New York, decisions on what Iraq would be permitted to import and what it would be barred from obtaining were made in a special United Nations sanctions body, the so-called 661 Committee, named after the Security Council resolution that had imposed sanctions in the first place. Outside the United Nations, pressure to do something to ease the plight of the Iraqi people was mounting. As David M. Malone, a former Canadian ambassador to the United Nations who now runs the International Peace Academy, recalls it, the modifications to the system of Iraq sanctions were the result of "huge publicity and international pressure." First Halliday and then his successor, Hans von Sponeck, resigned the post of United Nations humanitarian coordinator for Iraq in order to protest the sanctions.

But although the Security Council agreed to the oil-for-food program in April 1995, Saddam Hussein at first refused to participate, holding out for a total lifting of sanctions. It seems to have been during this period, when Hussein was trying to wait out the United Nations and the Americans and the British were trying to bring the Baghdad regime to its knees through sanctions, that the worst human suffering in Iraq took place. It was only in December 1996 that Hussein accepted the oil-for-food program, and only in 1997 that it became effective in alleviating some, though not all, of the torments of the Iraqi people.

At the same time, the French and the Russians were pushing hard within the Security Council either for a ratcheting down or an outright lifting of sanctions. Nancy Soderberg states flatly that the French and the Russians allowed their eagerness to develop business deals with Iraq to affect their work on the 661 Committee. "The French and Russians wanted to make money," she told me. "By the time of the second gulf war, the Russians had \$40 billion in prospective deals with Saddam Hussein's regime." (As for the French, as the International Peace Academy's David Malone puts it, "Paris never offered an effective alternative to sanctions, simply grandstanding on humanitarian questions while doing business with Iraq.")

Meanwhile, at the General Assembly, governments of a majority of the countries in the developing world were actively denouncing sanctions as wantonly brutal -- as a policy that in effect punished the Iraqi people in the cruelest possible manner without weakening Saddam Hussein's grip on power in the slightest.

In Washington, there was a growing sense that sanctions were a trap from which the United States was unable to extricate itself. Lee Feinstein, who was a senior State Department official during the Clinton administration and who was involved with Iraq policy, told me somewhat despairingly that the decision to continue with sanctions was as much as anything the result of there having been no other options that were politically feasible.

"We had a hostile Congress that would have leapt down our throats had we drastically loosened the sanctions," he said. "We had the French at the U.N. pushing for an outright lifting of sanctions. And we had Saddam Hussein, who was a real threat."

That is the way sanctions looked from the United States and Europe. But it was difficult, during the debate in the 1990's, to know what the Iraqi people really thought. This is no longer true. The Iraq I traveled to in May was full of dissonant voices and contradictory opinions. People were no longer afraid to speak their minds. And yet what I found was an almost universal opposition to sanctions -- a stern, unshakable conviction that the 1990's were a human and economic catastrophe for the Iraqi people and that sanctions were at the heart of the disaster.

Khaled Afra, a young physics student I met shortly after I arrived in Baghdad, phrased it this way: "Saddam was a criminal, the biggest. But sanctions were also criminal. There was a huge amount of victims due to illness. You see, sanctions really killed our dreams - not my personal dreams only, but those of my Iraqi people, all of us."

You can still see the effects of sanctions everywhere in Baghdad. It's not only in the degradation of the infrastructure of daily life; it's also in the remnants of the food-rationing program that Hussein's government instituted to deal with sanctions.

In every neighborhood of every Iraqi city and town, there are a number of small stores, approximately one for every 50 or 60 families, that warehoused the monthly government

ration of food staples on which most Iraqis depended for their physical survival. Essential items like flour, sugar, rice, cooking oil, lentils and beans were distributed to these "agencies" -- the term English-speaking Iraqis customarily use to describe them -- by Saddam Hussein's Ministry of Trade. (The stores are still in use today because the American occupation authorities have not been able to devise a better way to get cheap food staples to the general population.) The shops tend to be small and, even by the standards of a place that is as decayed and dilapidated as contemporary Iraq, far shabbier than the shops that surround them. They are the front line of what sanctions actually wrought in Iraq.

"I do not make money from selling these things to my neighbors," a merchant named Salman Moussa told me as we stood in front of his agency in the Baghdad neighborhood of Al Mansour. "Basically, I am doing a public service." After a long pause, he finally added: "Like a fireman. Since the prices are so low -- a few American dollars each month for all the food -- merchants like me only make a little profit."

Most Iraqis and most outside observers agree that food was the area in which Saddam Hussein's government coped best with sanctions. Kenny Gluck, a seasoned American relief worker who is now the operations director for the Dutch section of Doctors Without Borders, remarked to me recently, "You can't say too many bad things about Saddam Hussein, but give the devil his due: on the food issue, he responded very capably."

The food success buttresses the case of those who always claimed that the toll exacted on the Iraqi people through sanctions was all the fault of Saddam Hussein. He could have provided Iraqis what they needed all along, they say. But instead of doing so, he chose to devote his country's resources to building palaces for himself and for his family and functionaries, mosques to please the disaffected believers among his citizens and weapons with which to menace his neighbors and the world. To a limited extent, anyway, many Iraqis seem to agree with this analysis.

"Saddam could do many things to the people," a former Iraqi Army officer named Raed Mohammed told me, "but while he could kill them, he could not afford to starve them. So yes, he made sure the Ministry of Trade organized things correctly. As a result, the rationing was popular. It helped the regime maintain its legitimacy. Most people thought, 'Saddam is feeding us while the Americans are trying to starve us to death.'"

Indeed, Hussein's government was so proud of its accomplishment that in front of the Ministry of Trade headquarters, there was a huge mural of Saddam Hussein showing the tyrant holding up a ration book -- his "gift" to the Iraqi people. (The mural was later defaced by looters.) And there were other, unanticipated, advantages that accrued to the regime from the rationing system. Every Iraqi head of household had to have such a ration book, issued by the Ministry of Trade, which named every immediate family member and listed the precise quantities of foodstuffs to which the bearer was entitled. Every food agent had a computerized list from the Ministry of Trade of the people he was supposed to supply with these staples.

What this meant in practice was that the regime could maintain a database on every Iraqi citizen and constantly update it, without recourse to the security services or even a network of paid informants. It was a secret policeman's dream -- and it was all provided, however inadvertently, by the sanctions the United States and Britain had conceived as a way of limiting Saddam Hussein's power.

"First we got used to the idea that the government provided food," a young Iraqi journalism student named Aziz told me. (He preferred that I not know his last name.) "Then we started to see the government as the provider of absolutely everything. For Saddam, it was great. The more he controlled distribution, the more effective the Iraqi police state became. After all, practically the worst thing you could do was to lose your ration card."

In many ways, Saddam Hussein became a master at manipulating the sanctions system to his own ends. Under the rubric of the oil-for-food program, the United Nations allowed the Iraqis themselves to publish their list of humanitarian requirements and then to select the foreign companies with which it wished to do business. This provision meant that the Iraqi government was able to set up a well-orchestrated system of kickback schemes in which a contract would be signed at far more than the cost of fulfilling it, with the difference deposited secretly by the selected contractors in Iraqi government-controlled accounts all over the world. As a result, Saddam Hussein and the Baath elite got rich off the sanctions, and a great many international businessmen, notably in the Arab world, in France and in Russia, made handsome profits as well.

"The Syrians, the Jordanians, the Turks -- they all had their own deals," Nancy Soderberg recalls.

Meanwhile, Saddam Hussein used the pretext of the sanctions to wage a propaganda war -- one that even many American officials would later concede he probably won. Not only did Hussein use the sanctions to rationalize to Iraqis every shortage they were enduring, but he also proved himself a kind of genius at exaggerating and exploiting the effects of sanctions that were already tragic enough when reported truthfully. To rally his population, and probably also in a bid to win support from Western sympathizers and the international media, Saddam Hussein orchestrated a kind of traffic in suffering -- all meant for the television cameras.

One doctor I spoke to who spent several years in a hospital in the provincial city of Baquba, about 25 miles north of Baghdad, told me that the hospital staff had instructions, whenever a child died, to keep the corpse in the morgue rather than burying it immediately as mandated by Islamic custom. "When a sufficient number of bodies accumulated," he explained, "the authorities would stage a mass funeral, railing against the sanctions, even though as often as not there was no connection between a particular child's death and the sanctions."

I asked the doctor how a child's parents could possibly have agreed to such a deception.

"This was not a country in which one disagreed," he replied. "And in any case, they got 50 kilos of rice and 50 kilos of flour. Or else they were paid, you know, like the families of the freedom fighters in Palestine."

I inquired whether there had been other manipulations of the system to make things seem worse than they had really been.

"Of course," he replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "It happened all the time. For example, we would get a shipment from the Ministry of Health of vaccines provided by the World Health Organization. But then we would be instructed not to use them until they had reached or even exceeded their sell-by date. Then the television cameras would come, and we would be told to lie and tell the public how the U.N. made ordinary Iraqis suffer. You have to understand: this was a system where everyone knew what was expected of them. Most of the time, we didn't even have to be told what to do."

This media campaign was extremely effective. If anything, it was more influential in the West, mobilizing public opinion against sanctions, than it was within Iraq. What began as a campaign of left-wing fringe activists, like Ramsey Clark and the British member of Parliament George Galloway, soon became the dominant opinion. In the late 1990's, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan was privately emphasizing to American and British officials his own moral qualms about the humanitarian effects of Iraq sanctions. As another senior Clinton administration official put it to me: "I still think sanctions were the right policy. But there is no question that in terms of public opinion, as the 90's wore on we were increasingly on the defensive in the sanctions debate."

In Iraq itself, the experience of the doctor in Baquba was anything but unique. Dr. Mohammed al-Alwan, the head of the department of surgery at Baghdad's leading teaching hospital and one of the most prominent physicians in Iraq, told me very much the same thing. "Yes," he said, "the sanctions played a great role in the destruction of our health services and in health care generally. The shortages were extraordinary, particularly with regard to cancer patients, but even descending to such ordinary items as urinary catheters and chest tubes. I don't know what you Americans intended by these sanctions, but I do know that catastrophic effects were intended by Saddam Hussein's regime. The government wanted to say, 'Look, the Iraqi people are suffering so terribly.' But in reality, there were more than enough drugs for 'special' people."

As al-Alwan saw it, Iraq had been subjected to two sets of sanctions, those of the United Nations and those of Saddam Hussein himself. Voices outside Iraq echoed this perspective. Hans von Sponeck, the United Nations coordinator for humanitarian assistance in Iraq who resigned in protest in 2000, remarked bitterly to me in an e-mail message, "Local repression and international sanctions became brothers-in-arms in their quest to punish the Iraqi people for something they had not done."

And the reform of sanctions embodied in the oil-for-food process only partly alleviated the Iraqi people's sufferings. Although Saddam Hussein clearly exaggerated the effects of the sanctions, the 661 Committee was so hampered by American worries over Iraqi



imports of dual-use materials, as well as by the patent corruption of the process, that it soon became something of a laughingstock -- to everyone, that is, except the Iraqi people whose fate was so largely in its hands.

Most Iraqis I met knew all too well that the European, Middle Eastern and Asian private companies that the United Nations used as contractors to provide Iraqis with medical supplies routinely bought from third- and fourth-tier suppliers in India, Pakistan and Indonesia. They know how many contractors got rich off Iraq's predicament. In pharmacies all over the towns and cities of Iraq, it is commonplace to see medicines stamped with the World Health Organization logo along with the phrase "Not for Commercial Sale." These drugs were intended for hospitals. Instead, they were routinely sold to private pharmacists by the Ministry of Health, which was startlingly corrupt even by the standards of Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Under the highly regulated market that sanctions engendered, only the state was in a position to make traders rich by circumventing sanctions or by using them in ways their architects had never intended.

"Everyone traded here," the scion of an important Arab business family told me, asking that I conceal his identity. "Gulfis, Saudis, Egyptians, Russians, Chinese -- they all made money out of Iraq and out of sanctions. The poor U.N. didn't have a clue about what was going on. They were just idiots. It was a bazaar. Every contract was marked up by 10 percent. But Saddam controlled it all, and until the war started, he, not the Americans, was the big winner."

He hardly needed to add who the big loser had been.

The reality of sanctions is very likely the one adduced by Lee Feinstein of the Clinton-era State Department. For implicit in his description of why the Clinton administration acted as it did is the sense that sanctions were less a policy than a stopgap -- one that was a tragedy for the Iraqi people but that also turned into a trap for the United States.

Soderberg says that the controversy over sanctions allowed Saddam Hussein to transform the debate from one about his compliance with United Nations resolutions to one about the lifting of the sanctions. As a means of containing Hussein, she says, sanctions were successful, but they were a "deteriorating" policy.

And yet as new rogue states emerge and new international crises flare up, the appeal of sanctions remains. They are relatively cheap and virtually cost-free for those who impose them -- though they can be terribly costly for those upon whom they are imposed. Symbolically, they can be highly resonant and emotive. "See, we're doing something about Saddam, or Fidel, or Kim Jong Il," policy makers can say to the public and to themselves. The problem is that there is little or no evidence that sanctions do real damage to regimes that are willing to allow their people to suffer and die. In his mad dotage, despite the fact that he is rapturously out of touch with the thinking of ordinary Cubans, Fidel Castro is as strong as ever. The same was true of Saddam Hussein, who

was firmly in control in Iraq when the second gulf war began; sanctions palpably failed to dislodge his government and in fact strengthened him politically.

One may disagree with the policies the present administration has followed with regard to Iraq -- policies that have led to a brilliantly successful war and a staggeringly inept postwar occupation. But to its credit, at least it had a policy, one partly based on the understanding that Iraq sanctions may have contained Hussein, but they had failed at weakening his grip on his country. Brent Scowcroft is right that without the sanctions the American victory in the second gulf war might very well not have been as smooth. The embargo does seem to have achieved the goal subsequently advanced for it as a rationale; that is, to keep Hussein "in his box" and to prevent him from developing weapons of mass destruction. (Of course, the absence of weapons of mass destruction bolsters the case for sanctions but vitiates the stated case for the war itself.)

And yet had sanctions really succeeded, presumably there would have been no need for the war at all. Not that every Iraqi I met preferred sanctions to war. To the contrary, some even insisted that given the choice between being subjected to open-ended sanctions and the bloody resolution of an American invasion, they would opt for the latter. "I detest the Americans and want them to leave Iraq now, immediately," one Shi'ite notable told me. "But they got rid of Saddam, and now they have lifted the sanctions. That's good. Otherwise, who knows how long this slow death by water torture, which the sanctions were for us, would have gone on?"

James Rubin, the former State Department spokesman who largely rejects the notion that sanctions had such terrible human costs (at least once the oil-for-food program was up and running), argues that before Sept. 11 turned the parameters of American foreign policy inside out, war was not an option in Iraq. Given that fact, he says, the Clinton administration's choice was between giving Saddam a free hand or trying to limit what he could do through a sanctions regime. Rubin believes that American policy makers faced with rogue regimes have just three basic options -- doing nothing, using military force and imposing sanctions -- and so he remains convinced that for all their drawbacks, sanctions will have a future.

"For those who cannot countenance the use of military force, sanctions will always be an option," Rubin says. "Those who believe, as many of America's critics in the world do, that war is no longer a legitimate means in the modern world except in self-defense or with U.N. Security Council authorization will have to turn to sanctions as the ultimate method of coercion in international relations."

He points to the fact that in the run-up to the second gulf war, many of the same countries and campaign groups that had pushed hardest for the lifting of sanctions began to insist that sanctions and containment should be given time to work. "After spending 1995 to 2000 criticizing Iraq sanctions, the Germans and French fell in love with containment," Rubin observes sardonically. "They wanted better, more extensive containment. They were ready to rethink their opposition to sanctions."

We did not see the end of radical evil with the demise of Saddam Hussein. One has only to think of Robert Mugabe, Kim Jong Il or Charles Taylor to recognize that. Sooner or later, powerful states confronted by such a figure are almost certain to turn to sanctions as part of what Albright calls the diplomatic "tool box." In fact, the United States now has sanctions in place against about a dozen countries, including North Korea, Cuba, Zimbabwe, Syria and Libya. Just this month, Congress imposed a new array of economic sanctions against Myanmar after the military government in that country detained the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Some policy makers believe, in my view overly optimistically, that sanctions as now conceived are actually far less destructive and far more sensitively calibrated than they were 8 or 10 years ago. There is talk now in diplomatic circles of "smart sanctions," "targeted sanctions" and carefully balanced combinations of sanctions for noncompliance and rewards for compliance.

And there is always the example of apartheid South Africa -- the one instance where comprehensive, multilateral sanctions do appear to have succeeded in producing "regime change." To anti-sanctions campaigners, however, the South African case is the exception that proves the rule, rather than serving as a model for future confrontations with unsavory regimes. In South Africa, they point out, the humanitarian costs were low (South Africa was nowhere near so dependent on imported staples), and there was an effective and viable opposition in the African National Congress.

Even advocates of sanctions are convinced that the approach that helped bring about the end of apartheid has to be radically rethought for the 21st century -- and that, they say, is exactly what is happening now. The blunt instrument that was applied to Iraq is in the process of being reformed. "We were learning as we went in Iraq," Nancy Soderberg told me. "We're still learning."

In all likelihood, it will be a costly lesson, for there is this terrible conundrum at the heart of every sanctions policy: while sanctions imply rationality -- the knowledge on both sides that the pressure being applied can be lessened by compliance -- tyrants like Hussein and Mugabe are often fundamentally *irrational*. And so my own sense is that sanctions, even the "smartest" sanctions, will continue to exact an appalling human toll.

There may indeed be no way around them. But in that case, we should be clear about what we are really saying, which is that there is no way around the ruined lives and the dead bodies strewn across the ruins of broken societies either. Ultimately, as hard as some officials like Albright tried to mitigate the worst effects of Iraq sanctions through oil-for-food and other reforms, opting for them meant choosing American security over Iraqi mass suffering. If tragedy, as the German philosopher Hegel said, is the conflict of two rights, then sanctions are truly a tragedy.

*David Rieff is the author, most recently, of "A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis."*

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