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U.S. responsible for human toll of Iraq sanctions

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Last week the U.N. Security Council voted to lift the sanctions that it imposed on Iraq 20 years ago. Vice President Joe Biden hailed the occasion as “an end to the burdensome remnants of the dark era of Saddam Hussein.”

What he did not say was that the sanctions were more than burdensome. They triggered a humanitarian crisis that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of children, and the collapse of every system necessary to sustain human life in a modern society. And he certainly did not mention that among all the nations on the Security Council, it was the U.S. -- and the U.S. alone -- that ensured that this human damage would be massive and indiscriminate.

All of this took place within an obscure committee of the Security Council, known as the 661 Committee. Few have heard of it. But it was this committee that determined whether Iraqis would have clean water, electricity in their homes, or fuel for cars and trucks.

It was a committee that met behind closed doors, and never made its records public. Within it, the U.S. had a unique role. As the humanitarian situation in Iraq deteriorated, support for the sanctions on the Security Council began to erode. When other members of the council sought to allow critical humanitarian goods into Iraq, the U.S. vetoed them. For the first eight months of the sanctions, the U.S. would not even allow Iraq to import food. Once the committee decided to allow food, the U.S. then objected to trucks needed to deliver food and other goods, as well as irrigation equipment to increase agriculture.

The U.S. policies were extreme and relentless. The U.S. blocked refrigeration for medicines, on the grounds that refrigerators might be used to store agents for biological weapons. The U.S. blocked things as innocuous as plywood, fabric, glue and glass on the grounds that they were “inputs to industry,” which might be used to rebuild Iraq’s military.

The U.S. blocked child vaccines and yogurt-making equipment on the grounds that the Iraqi government might use them to make weapons of mass destruction. When Iraq tried to increase the number of small animals for meat, cheese and milk, the U.S. blocked goat and sheep vaccines, claiming that Iraq might use them as biological weapons.

The U.S. prevented Iraq from importing water tankers during a period of drought, while there were epidemic levels of sickness from drinking water unfit for human consumption. And water pipes for irrigation. And light switches, and telephones, and ambulance radios, and fire trucks, claiming that they might be used by Iraq’s military.

At one point, a U.S. official came before the 661 Committee with a vial of cat litter, and informed the members, in all seriousness: “This could be used to stabilize anthrax.”

No one else found the U.S. justifications to be plausible. UNMOVIC, the U.N.’s weapons inspectors, disputed many of the U.S. justifications for blocking humanitarian goods. Even Britain, the U.S.’ closest ally on the Security Council, did not share the views of the U.S. Still, the U.S. rarely relented.

The U.S. insisted that these policies were aimed at Saddam Hussein. But it was obvious that they had little to do with him. Iraq’s political and military leadership, and the wealthy elite, were insulated from the hardship. But the population as a whole was not.

To destroy a country’s infrastructure, to reduce a nation to a pre-industrial condition and then keep it in that state, means precisely that it will be unfit to sustain human life. The reports of U.N. agencies and international organizations such as the Red Cross ensured that U.S. officials knew, with certainty, exactly what harm was being caused by U.S. policies.

While Vice President Biden tells the world that the end of the sanctions means that Iraq can now move forward to a bright future, what he does not say is that in fact there was damage that was irreversible, including child deaths and stunted growth from years of malnutrition. What he also does not say is that the rest of the damage -- the collapse of the infrastructure, the terrible deterioration in industry, agriculture, electricity, health and education -- was not just due to Saddam Hussein’s indifference. However much harm Saddam did to the Iraqi people, the U.S., for over a decade, made it far, far worse.