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## The Other Bomb Drops

JEREMY SCAHILL

It was a huge air assault: Approximately 100 US and British planes flew from Kuwait into Iraqi airspace. At least seven types of aircraft were part of this massive operation, including US F-15 Strike Eagles and Royal Air Force Tornado ground-attack planes. They dropped precision-guided munitions on Saddam Hussein's major western air-defense facility, clearing the path for Special Forces helicopters that lay in wait in Jordan. Earlier attacks had been carried out against Iraqi command and control centers, radar detection systems, Revolutionary Guard units, communication centers and mobile air-defense systems. The Pentagon's goal was clear: Destroy Iraq's ability to resist. This was war.

But there was a catch: The war hadn't started yet, at least not officially. This was September 2002--a month before Congress had voted to give President Bush the authority he used to invade Iraq, two months before the United Nations brought the matter to a vote and more than six months before "shock and awe" officially began.

At the time, the Bush Administration publicly played down the extent of the air strikes, claiming the United States was just defending the so-called no-fly zones. But new information that has come out in response to the Downing Street memo reveals that, by this time, the war was already a foregone conclusion and attacks were no less than the undeclared beginning of the invasion of Iraq.

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JEREMY SCAHILL

Jeremy Scahill is a correspondent for the national radio and TV program *Democracy Now!* He has spent extensive time reporting from Iraq and the former Yugoslavia, where he covered the 1999 NATO bombing.

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The *Sunday Times* of London recently reported on new evidence showing that "The RAF and US aircraft doubled the rate at which they were dropping bombs on Iraq in 2002 in an attempt to provoke Saddam Hussein into giving the allies an excuse for war." The paper cites newly released statistics from the British Defense Ministry showing that "the Allies dropped twice as many bombs on Iraq in the second half of 2002 as they did during the whole of 2001" and that "a full air offensive" was under way months before the invasion had officially begun.

The implications of this information for US lawmakers are profound. It was already well known in Washington and international diplomatic circles that the real aim of the US attacks in the no-fly zones was not to protect Shiites and Kurds. But the new disclosures prove that while Congress debated whether to grant Bush the authority to go to war, while Hans Blix had his UN weapons-inspection teams scrutinizing Iraq and while international diplomats scurried to broker an eleventh-hour peace deal, the Bush Administration was already in full combat mode--not just building the dossier of manipulated intelligence, as the Downing Street memo demonstrated, but acting on it by beginning the war itself. And according to the *Sunday Times* article, the Administration even hoped the attacks would push Saddam into a response that could be used to justify a war the Administration was struggling to sell.

On the eve of the official invasion, on March 8, 2003, Bush said in his national radio address: "We are doing everything we can to avoid war in Iraq. But if Saddam Hussein does not disarm peacefully, he will be disarmed by force." Bush said this after nearly a year of systematic, aggressive bombings of Iraq, during which Iraq was already being disarmed by force, in preparation for the invasion to come. By the Pentagon's own admission, it carried out seventy-eight individual, offensive airstrikes against Iraq in 2002 alone.

"It reminded me of a boxing match in which one of the boxers is told not to move while the other is allowed to punch and only stop when he is convinced that he has weakened his opponent to the point where he is defeated before the fight begins," says former UN Assistant Secretary General Hans Von Sponeck, a thirty-year career diplomat who was the

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top UN official in Iraq from 1998 to 2000. During both the Clinton and Bush administrations, Washington has consistently and falsely claimed these attacks were mandated by UN Resolution 688, passed after the Gulf War, which called for an end to the Iraqi government's repression in the Kurdish north and the Shiite south. Von Sponeck dismissed this justification as a "total misnomer." In an interview with *The Nation*, Von Sponeck said that the new information "belatedly confirms" what he has long argued: "The no-fly zones had little to do with protecting ethnic and religious groups from Saddam Hussein's brutality" but were in fact an "illegal establishment...for bilateral interests of the US and the UK."

These attacks were barely covered in the press and Von Sponeck says that as far back as 1999, the United States and Britain pressured the UN not to call attention to them. During his time in Iraq, Von Sponeck began documenting each of the airstrikes, showing "regular attacks on civilian installations including food warehouses, residences, mosques, roads and people." These reports, he said, were "welcomed" by Secretary General Kofi Annan, but "the US and UK governments strongly objected to this reporting." Von Sponeck says that he was pressured to end the practice, with a senior British diplomat telling him, "All you are doing is putting a UN stamp of approval on Iraqi propaganda." But Von Sponeck continued documenting the damage and visited many attack sites. In 1999 alone, he confirmed the death of 144 civilians and more than 400 wounded by the US/UK bombings.

After September 11, there was a major change in attitude within the Bush Administration toward the attacks. Gone was any pretext that they were about protecting Shiites and Kurds--this was a plan to systematically degrade Iraq's ability to defend itself from a foreign attack: bombing Iraq's air defenses, striking command facilities, destroying communication and radar infrastructure. As an Associated Press report noted in November 2002, "Those costly, hard-to-repair facilities are essential to Iraq's air defense."

Rear Admiral David Gove, former deputy director of global operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said on November 20, 2002, that US and British pilots were "essentially flying combat missions." On October 3, 2002, the *New York Times* reported that US pilots were using southern Iraq for "practice runs, mock strikes and real attacks" against a variety of targets. But the full significance of this dramatic change in policy toward Iraq only became clear last month, with the release of the Downing Street memo. In it, British Defense Secretary Geoff Hoon is reported to have said in 2002, after meeting with US officials, that "the US had already begun 'spikes of activity' to put pressure on the regime," a reference to the stepped-up airstrikes. Now the *Sunday Times* of London has revealed that these spikes "had become a full air offensive"--in other words, a war.

Michigan Democratic Representative John Conyers has called the latest revelations about these attacks "the smoking bullet in the smoking gun," irrefutable proof that President Bush misled Congress before the vote on Iraq. When Bush asked Congress to authorize the use of force in Iraq, he also said he would use it only as a last resort, after all other avenues had been exhausted. But the Downing Street memo reveals that the Administration had

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already decided to topple Saddam by force and was manipulating intelligence to justify the decision. That information puts the increase in unprovoked air attacks in the year prior to the war in an entirely new light: The Bush Administration was not only determined to wage war on Iraq, regardless of the evidence; it had already started that war months before it was put to a vote in Congress.

It only takes one member of Congress to begin an impeachment process, and Conyers is said to be considering the option. The process would certainly be revealing. Congress could subpoena Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Gen. Richard Myers, Gen. Tommy Franks and all of the military commanders and pilots involved with the no-fly zone bombings going back into the late 1990s. What were their orders, both given and received? In those answers might lie a case for impeachment.

But another question looms, particularly for Democrats who voted for the war and now say they were misled: Why weren't these unprovoked and unauthorized attacks investigated when they were happening, when it might have had a real impact on the Administration's drive to war? Perhaps that's why the growing grassroots campaign to use the Downing Street memo to impeach Bush can't get a hearing on Capitol Hill. A real probing of this "smoking gun" would not be uncomfortable only for Republicans. The truth is that Bush, like President Bill Clinton before him, oversaw the longest sustained bombing campaign since Vietnam against a sovereign country with no international or US mandate. That gun is probably too hot for either party to touch.

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