

George Galloway's Lesson in Speaking Truth to Power

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George Galloway, the British parliamentarian who was drummed out of Tony Blair's Labour Party in 2003 for his principled opposition to the American and British aggression against Iraq, and for his unrelenting willingness to publicly call prime-ministerial and presidential lies and war crimes by their proper names, has had copious experience of being libeled and slandered in return.

In the immediate aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, Galloway spoke out against the deliberate and intentional targeting of Iraq's civilian infrastructure—of power stations and of water and sewage treatment facilities especially—by the cruise missiles and bomber aircraft of the U.S.-led coalition. He did not hesitate to inform his audiences and his readers (Galloway is a widely published journalist as well as a politician) that under international law attacks of this kind constitute a war crime.

Throughout the 1990s and up until the invasion of Iraq, Galloway spoke out against the United Nations sanctions imposed on Iraq (at the behest of the United States and Britain, principally)—sanctions which were used to prevent the Iraqis from rebuilding their shattered civilian infrastructure, and which as the United Nations itself has documented, resulted in the deaths of something like a million Iraqis, most of them children killed by easily-preventable water-borne diseases. The Oil for Food program was introduced by the United Nations in the mid-1990s, purportedly to reduce the appalling level of civilian suffering and death caused by the sanctions regime—but more plausibly as a means of deflecting rising criticisms of the sanctions. It is worth noting that two successive United Nations administrators of the Oil for Food program, Denis Halliday and Hans von Sponeck, resigned in protest against what they both called the genocidal consequences of the continued sanctions. Galloway himself set up a charitable foundation called the Mariam Appeal for the purpose of providing medical assistance to Iraqi children and of publicizing their increasingly desperate plight.

George Galloway's predictable reward was to see his political career dead-ended. (He had previously been regarded as a rising star within the Labour Party, someone of clear ministerial and perhaps even prime-ministerial potential.) He was mockingly described by fellow members of the House of Commons as "the member for Baghdad Central." Although he had a record from early in his political career of principled opposition to the Saddam Hussein dictatorship, the witty pundits of Britain's corporate press—measuring him, one must presume, by the standards of their own behaviour—found it hard to imagine that an apparently astute politician could be sacrificing any future prospect of political advancement on the basis of ethical principles: Galloway, they made a habit of insinuating, must in some sense be in the Iraqi dictator's pocket.

In August 2002, Galloway made an ill-judged appearance on Iraqi television with Saddam Hussein. During their exchanges Galloway, whose mission had been to persuade the dictator to re-admit United Nations weapons inspectors into Iraq, applied to him flattering language that he later said he had meant for the Iraqi people. However, while doing all he could against the sanctions, Galloway also continued to denounce the tyranny of Saddam Hussein and of the Baathist regime.

Since there was no evidence that Galloway was impelled by improper motives—and since, moreover, he was a major voice in the burgeoning anti-war movement—the evidence had to be manufactured.

Shortly after the fall of Baghdad in April 2003, a British journalist working for the right-wing London Daily Telegraph—a man who, by a curious coincidence, shared with his Prime Minister the surname Blair—was led by his handlers into the burnt-out ruins of the Iraqi Foreign Office building in Baghdad. There he discovered documents—miraculously undamaged—purporting to show that Galloway had been a big-time recipient of funds from the fallen dictatorship, and that the large sums of money paid to him had been drawn from the Oil for Food money.

The story resonated around the world: not merely was the major parliamentary opponent of the Bush-Blair aggression corrupt, but he had been enriching himself from funds untended to feed the very children on whose behalf he had been so solicitous.

Other documents supporting this slander were at the same time being fed to other media outlets. The Christian Science Monitor made one such set of documents into front-page news, but quickly discovered them to be fraudulent, and paid Galloway a substantial settlement. In late 2004, the Daily Telegraph was more grudgingly brought by a British court to an acknowledgment that its assault on Galloway had likewise been based on inauthentic documents.

Under the chairmanship of Republican Senator Norm Coleman, the U.S. Senate's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations has been looking into the Oil for Food program and the widespread system of kick-backs that appears to have become an integral part of that program. Coleman's evident motive has been to do as much damage as possible to the United Nations—and to its Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who has dared to venture the opinion that the invasion of Iraq was a violation of international law.

In the recent UK general election, Galloway won a stunning upset in an east London riding, ousting a pro-war Tony Blair loyalist who had held the seat on the previous election with a massive majority. The man whom the Blairite Labour Party, U.S. intelligence services and the corporate press has attempted to destroy was back in town, riding a renewed wave of anti-war sentiment. It can be surmised that the researchers who at Democratic Senator Carl Levin's instigation wrote a report for the Senate Subcommittee that recycled the discredited libels of the Daily Telegraph and the Christian Science Monitor, together with the U.S. intelligence agencies who attempted to buttress these libels with "intelligence" derived from former members of the Iraqi government who are now held in the American gulag, were trying to do their friend Tony Blair a favour.

Perhaps someone neglected to tell them that Galloway is a combative politician.

He testified before Senator Coleman's Subcommittee in Washington DC yesterday. On his

way into the committee's chambers, Galloway encountered a media scrum which included the egregious Christopher Hitchens, a former leftist who disgraced himself by noisily supporting the invasion of Iraq. Hitchens' journalistic stock-in-trade includes, very prominently, the bullying of interviewees. But before he was properly out of his corner, Galloway flattened him with a rhetorical uppercut to the jaw:

"You're a drink sodden former-Trotskyist popinjay," Mr Galloway informed him. "Your hands are shaking. You badly need another drink."

Unable to get an insulting question in edgewise, Hitchens, according to Oliver Burkeman of The Guardian, was reduced to hissing "You're a real thug, aren't you?" and stalking away ("Galloway and the mother of all invective," Guardian Unlimited [18 May 2005]).

Senator Coleman, in Galloway's presence, recited all of the charges against Galloway and others assembled by his Subcommittee, and then invited his witness to be sworn in and to speak. What follows is Galloway's opening statement, which I have transcribed from the BBC's video-stream report of the event. Galloway spoke in a deliberate voice, without notes, and with his eyes fixed firmly on the hapless Senator. His remarks began with a mocking historical allusion to the language commonly deployed a half-century ago in another set of investigative hearings, those of the House Un-American Activities Committee chaired by the infamous Senator Joe McCarthy.

Statement of George Galloway, MP, before the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, chaired by Senator Norm Coleman,

Washington DC, Tuesday 17 May 2005.

Senator, I am not now, nor have I ever been, an oil-trader; and neither has anyone on my behalf.

I have never seen a barrel of oil, owned one, bought one, sold one; and neither as anybody on my behalf.

Now I know that standards have slipped over the last few years in Washington, but for a lawyer you're remarkably cavalier with any idea of justice.

I'm here today, but last week you already found me guilty. You traduced my name around the world without ever having asked me a single question, without ever having contacted me, without ever having written to me or telephoned me, without any contact with me whatsoever. And you call that justice.

Now, I want to deal with the pages that relate to me in this dossier, and I want to point out areas where there are—let's be charitable, and say "errors." And then I want to put this in the context that I believe it ought to be.

On the very first page of your document about me you assert that I have had many meetings with Saddam Hussein. This is false. I have had two meetings with Saddam Hussein, once in 1994, and once in August of 2002. By no stretch of the English language can that be described as "many meetings with Saddam Hussein."

As a matter of fact, I've met Saddam Hussein exactly the same number of times as Donald Rumsfeld met him. The difference is, Donald Rumsfeld met him to sell guns, and to give him maps the better to target those guns. I met him to try and bring about an end to sanctions, suffering, and war—and on the second of the two occasions, I met him to try and persuade him to allow Dr. Hans Blix and the United Nations weapons inspectors back into the country. A rather better use of two meetings with Saddam Hussein than your own Secretary of State for Defense made of his.

[At this point there is a seven-second gap in the audio feed supplied by the BBC. Galloway was evidently here responding to the accusation that he was for ten years or more an ardent supporter of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship.]

[...support]er of the Hussein regime. This is false. I have brought along here a dossier—a dossier for all the members of your committee—of statements by me as late—as early, rather—as the 15th of March 1990, in which I condemn the Saddam Hussein dictatorship in the most withering terms—a stance I have taken since around about the time you were an anti-Vietnam War demonstrator.

I was an opponent of Saddam Hussein when British and American governments and businessmen were selling him guns and gas. I used to demonstrate outside the Iraqi embassy when British and American officials were going in and out doing commerce.

You will see from the official parliamentary record—Hansard—from the 15th of March 1990 onwards, voluminous evidence that I have a rather better record of opposition to Saddam Hussein than you do, and than any members of the British or American governments do.

Now, you say in this document—you quote a source—you have the gall to quote a source—without ever having asked me if the allegation from the source was true—that I am, quote, “the owner of a company which has made substantial profits from trading in Iraqi oil.”

Senator, I do not own any companies, beyond a small company whose entire purpose—whose sole purpose—is to receive the income from my journalistic earnings from my employer, Associated Newspapers in London. I do not own a company that's been trading in Iraqi oil, and you had no business to carry a quotation, utterly unsubstantiated and false, implying otherwise.

Now, you have nothing on me, Senator, except my name on lists of names from Iraq, many of which have been drawn up after the installation of your puppet government in Baghdad. If you had any of the letters against me that you had against [Vladimir] Zhirinovsky, and even [Charles] Pasqua, they would have been there in your slide show for the members of your committee today.

You have my name on lists provided to you by the Doelfer Inquiry, provided to him by the convicted bank robber and fraudster and con-man Ahmed Chalabi, who many people to their credit in your country now realize played a decisive role in leading your country into the disaster in Iraq.

There were two hundred and seventy names on that list originally. That's somehow been filleted down to the names you chose to deal with in this committee. Some of the names on that committee [an error for that list] included the former Secretary to His Holiness Pope

John Paul the Second, the former head of the African National Congress Presidential Office, and many others, who had one defining characteristic in common: they all stood against the policy of sanctions and war which you vociferously prosecuted, and which has led us to this disaster.

You quote Mr. Taha Yassin Ramadan. Well, you have something on me, I've never met Mr. Taha Yassin Ramadan. Your sub-committee apparently has. But I do know that he's your prisoner. I believe he's in Abu Graib prison. I believe he's facing war crimes charges punishable by death.

In these circumstances, knowing what the world knows about how you treat prisoners in Abu Graib prison, in Bagram Airbase, in Guantanamo Bay—including, I may say, British citizens being held in those places. I'm not sure how much credibility anyone would put on anything you managed to get from a prisoner in those circumstances.

But you quote thirteen words from Taha Yassin Ramadan, whom I have never met. If he said what he said, then he is wrong.

And if you had any evidence that I had ever engaged in any actual oil transaction, if you had any evidence that anybody ever gave me any money, it would be before the public and before this committee today. Because I agree with your Mr. Greenblatt. Your Mr. Greenblatt was absolutely correct. What counts is not the names on the paper. What counts is where's the money, Senator. Who paid me hundreds of thousands of dollars of money? The answer to that is, nobody. And if you had anybody who ever paid me a penny, you would have produced them here today.

Now you refer, at length, to a company named in these documents as Iradio Petroleum. I say to you under oath here today, I have never heard of this company; I have never met anyone from this company. This company has never paid a penny to me. And I'll tell you something else, I can assure you that Iradio Petroleum has never paid a single penny to the Mariam Appeal campaign—not a thin dime.

I don't know who Iradio Petroleum are, but I dare say if you were to ask them, they would confirm that they have never met me or ever paid me a penny.

Whilst I'm on that subject, who is this "senior former regime official" that you spoke to yesterday? Don't you think I have a right to know? Don't you think the committee and the public have a right to know who this "senior former regime official" you were quoting against me—interviewed yesterday—actually is?

Now, one of the most serious of the mistakes that you have made in this set of documents is—to be frank—such a schoolboy howler as to make a fool of the efforts that you have made. You assert on page nineteen—not once but twice—that the documents that you're referring to cover a different period of time from the documents covered by the Daily Telegraph which were the subject of a libel action won by me in the high court in England late last year. You state that the Daily Telegraph article cited documents from 1992 and 1993, whilst you are dealing with documents dating from 2001.

Senator, the Daily Telegraph documents date identically to the documents that you're dealing with in your report here. None of the Daily Telegraph's documents dealt with a period of 1992-1993. I had never set foot in Iraq until late in 1993, never in my life. There

could possibly be no documents relating to Oil for Food matters in 1992-93, for the Oil for Food scheme did not exist at that time.

And yet you've allocated a full section of this document to claiming that your documents are from a different era to the Daily Telegraph documents, when the opposite is true. Your documents and the Daily Telegraph documents deal with exactly the same period.

But perhaps you were confusing the Daily Telegraph action with the Christian Science Monitor. The Christian Science Monitor did indeed publish on its front pages a set of allegations against me very similar to the ones that your committee have made. They did indeed rely on documents which started in 1992-1993. These documents were unmasked by the Christian Science Monitor themselves as forgeries.

Now the neo-con websites and newspapers in which you're such a hero, Senator, were all absolutely cock-a-hoop at the publication of the Christian Science Monitor documents. They were all absolutely convinced of their authenticity. They were all absolutely convinced that these documents showed me receiving ten million dollars from the Saddam Hussein regime. And they were all lies.

In the same week as the Daily Telegraph published their documents against me, the Christian Science Monitor published theirs, which turned out to be forgeries, and the British newspaper Mail on Sunday purchased a third set of documents which also on forensic examination turned out to be forgeries.

So there's nothing fanciful about this, nothing at all fanciful about it. The existence of forged documents implicating me in commercial activities with the Iraqi regime is a proven fact. It's a proven fact that these forged documents existed, and were being circulated—amongst right-wing newspapers, in Baghdad, and around the world—in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Iraqi regime.

Now, Senator, I gave my heart and soul to oppose the policy that you promoted.

I gave my political life's blood to try to stop the mass killing of Iraqis by the sanctions on Iraq, which killed a million Iraqis, most of them children. Most of them died before they even knew that they were Iraqis, but they died for no other reason other than that they were Iraqis, with the misfortune to be born at that time.

I gave my heart and soul to stop you committing the disaster that you did commit in invading Iraq.

And I told the world that your case for the war was a pack of lies.

I told the world that Iraq, contrary to your claims, did not have weapons of mass destruction.

I told the world, contrary to your claims, that Iraq had no connection to Al Qaeda.

I told the world, contrary to your claims, that Iraq had no connection to the atrocity on 9/11, 2001.

I told the world, contrary to your claims, that the Iraqi people would resist a British and American invasion of their country, and that the fall of Baghdad would not be the beginning of the end, but merely the end of the beginning.

Senator, in everything I said about Iraq I turned out to be right, and you turned out to be wrong. And a hundred thousand people have paid with their lives, sixteen hundred of them American soldiers sent to their deaths on a pack of lies. Fifteen thousand of them wounded, many of them disabled for ever, on a pack of lies.

If the world had listened to Kofi Annan, whose dismissal you demanded, if the world had listened to President Chirac, who you want to paint as some kind of corrupt traitor, if the world had listened to me and the anti-war movement in Britain, we would not be in the disaster that we're in today.

Senator, this is the mother of all smoke-screens. You are trying to divert attention from the crimes that you supported, from the theft of billions of dollars of Iraqi wealth.

Have a look at the real Oil for Food scandal.

Have a look at the fourteen months you were in charge of Baghdad—the first fourteen months—when 8.8 billion dollars of Iraq's wealth went missing, on your watch.

Have a look at Halliburton and the other American corporations that stole not only Iraq's money, but the money of the American taxpayer.

Have a look at the oil that you didn't even meter, that you were shipping out of the country and selling, the proceeds of which went who knows where.

Have a look at the eight hundred million dollars you gave to American military commanders to hand around the country without even counting it or weighing it.

Have a look at the real scandal, breaking in the newspapers today, revealed in the earlier testimony in this committee, that the biggest sanctions-busters were not me or Russian politicians, or French politicians. The real sanctions-busters were your own companies, with the connivance of your own government.

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