

U.S. ROOTS OF U. N. SCANDAL - Orlando Sentinel, The (FL) - November 26, 2004 - page A24

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Another scandal? We have heard about so many powerful people abusing their positions to gain still more power that many suffer from scandal fatigue. But we ignore these all-too-frequent events at our peril: they raise our taxes, erode confidence in our institutions, reduce our security -- and even cause bloodshed.

Peter Brown's column "Why does U. N. get free ride in scandal?" last Friday was a welcome assault on that jaded indifference toward scandal. It sheds light on an alleged skimming of billions of dollars by Saddam Hussein and U. N. officials from the organization's Oil for Food Program during the 12 years before the Iraqi dictator was overthrown in 2003.

If true, this is outrageous. And while we learn about the scandal, we also need to understand its contexts.

The Oil for Food Program emerged in response to the devastation caused by the first Iraq war and by the ongoing sanctions. There was an outpouring of humanitarian sympathy to help innocent civilians -- even as the deal also fed an oil-hungry world.

When noticing the scandal, let's also remember the ongoing willingness of oil-consuming nations to negotiate with a dictator, and the strict sanctions on much more than military hardware that produced suffering and death for thousands of Iraqi civilians.

The U. N. scandal is a problem of corruption in the giving of aid -- and that is the delicate baby in the dirty bath water of whistle blowing on corruption.

This may turn out to be one more scandalous fact about the brutal regime of Saddam. But it would be a minor scandal in its own right if those indignant feelings blinded readers to the genuine suffering of the Iraqi people during the years of sanctions, and worse, if those feelings drove any readers to blunt their desire to help the people of southern Sudan or any other oppressed people in politically compromised situations.

In addition, a fair look at the scandal should also include a demand to clarify the roots of America's tangled involvements. Going back to the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iran-Contra scandal and the Iran-Iraq War, the United States gave more than moral support to the Taliban and Saddam. I believe much of the Taliban's ability to support terror and Saddam's ability to bilk the United Nations apparently sit squarely with U. S. policies beginning during the Reagan administration.

Right-minded citizens should demand all the facts on what seems to be a major scandal at the United Nations. But let's keep the support for such investigative journalism to only one cheer so

far. Hold back the three cheers until we also get investigations of the flow of oil that went with the flow of money, of the suffering of Iraqis during the sanctions, and of the prolonged and often forgotten role of the United States in support of Saddam and the Taliban while they were gathering power.

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