

# 1980-1988, Iran-Iraq: Helping Both Sides Lose the War

By Larry Everest, produced the video *Iraq: War Against the People* (1991).

President George W. Bush officials have repeatedly cited Iraq's use of poisonous gas in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War as proof – and justification – for an attack.

On August 18, 2002, the *New York Times* revealed that when Iraq's government did use chemical weapons against Iranian forces and its own Kurdish population, the U.S. government was there – aiding and abetting!

The *Times* (“Officers Say U.S. Aided Iraq in War Despite Use of Gas”) reported that, according to senior military officers with direct knowledge of the secret program, U.S. officials “provided Iraq with critical battle planning

This Pentagon program continued even when it became clear that the Iraqi military “had integrated chemical weapons throughout their arsenal and were adding them to strike plans that American advisers either prepared or suggested.” The obvious implication – not drawn by the *Times* – is that U.S. plans were shaped by the knowledge that Iraq would use chemical weapons. The *Washington Post*'s Bob Woodward reported as much (December 15, 1986): in 1984 the CIA began giving Iraq intelligence which it used to “calibrate” its mustard gas attacks against Iranian troops. An estimated 50,000 Iranians were killed by Iraqi gas warfare (Bruce Jentleson, *With Friends Like These – Reagan, Bush, and Saddam, 1982-1990*).

One DIA officer told the *Times*

## Scratching the Surface

The *Times*' revelations may be shocking, but they only scratch the surface of the enormously cynical, manipulative and murderous actions taken by the U.S. during the Iran-Iraq war. An equally sordid story could have been how the U.S. may have helped start the war in the first place.

In early 1979, the Shah of Iran, the U.S.'s loyal Persian Gulf gendarme, was overthrown and, in November, the U.S. embassy in Teheran was seized by militant students. These developments shocked the U.S. establishment. They threatened to undermine its grip on the oil-rich Gulf. The U.S. counter-attacked, and one front (and there were many) seems to have been encouraging Iraq to invade Iran. The goals: weakening Iran and limiting its ability to undermine U.S. clients in the Gulf, while creating opportunities for increased U.S. leverage in both countries and building up direct U.S. military presence in the region.

Not surprisingly, Carter administration officials deny they gave Iraq a “green light” for its September 22, 1980 invasion. On April 14, 1980, five months before Iraq's invasion, Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's National Security Advisor, signaled U.S. willingness to work with Iraq: “We see no fundamental incompatibility of interests between the U.S. and Iraq...we do not feel that American-Iraqi relations need to be frozen in antagonisms.” In June, Iranian students revealed a secret memo from Brzezinski to then-Secretary of State Cyrus Vance recommending the “destabilization” of Iran via its neighbors.

According to Iran's president at the time, Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, Brzezinski met directly with Saddam Hussein in Jordan two months before the Iraqi assault. Bani-Sadr wrote, “Brzezinski had assured Saddam Hussein that the U.S. would not oppose the separation of Khuzestan (in southwest Iran) from Iran.” Journalist Robert Parry reports that in a secret 1981 memo summing up a trip to the Middle East, then-Secretary of State Al Haig noted, “It was also interesting to confirm that President Carter gave the Iraqis a green light to launch the

*Official U.S. policy was to not help either side in the Iran-Iraq War. However, behind the scenes, the U.S. shifted support back and forth between the two sides.*



***“Our tilt to Iraq was timely when Iraq was against the ropes and the Islamic revolution was on a roll. The time may now have to come to tilt back,”***

said **Graham Fuller**, the CIA's national intelligence officer for the Middle East, in a CIA memo to Director William Casey in May 1985.

Former Deputy Director of the CIA's National Council on Intelligence, is now a senior analyst for the RAND Corp.

assistance at a time when American intelligence agencies knew that Iraqi commanders would employ chemical weapons in waging the decisive battles of the Iran-Iraq war.”

It's long been known that the U.S. gave Iraq satellite intelligence and other military support to prevent an Iranian victory. What's new in the *Times* story is the extent of U.S. involvement: “More than 60 officers of the Defense Intelligence Agency [DIA] were secretly providing detailed information on Iranian deployments, tactical planning for battles, plans for airstrikes and bomb-damage assessments for Iraq.”

that the Pentagon “wasn't so horrified by Iraq's use of gas. It was just another way of killing people – whether with a bullet or phosgene, it didn't make any difference.” Another U.S. intelligence officer said, “The use of gas on the battlefield by the Iraqis was not a matter of deep strategic concern.” The *Times* continues, “What Reagan's aides were concerned about, he said, was that Iran not break through to the Fao Peninsula and spread the Islamic revolution to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.”

In other words, the U.S. rulers have no problem with chemical weapons and mass slaughter – so long as it serves their strategic interests.

war against Iran through [then Prince, later King] Fahd” (Consortiumnews.com, January 31, 1996).

London’s *Financial Times* reported that the U.S. passed satellite intelligence to the Hussein regime via third countries, leading Iraq to believe Iranian forces would quickly collapse if attacked (they didn’t). So, while the U.S. media talks long and loud about Saddam Hussein the “brutal aggressor,” the U.S. most likely helped push Iraq into a long, bloody war.

### Manipulating Both Sides

The *New York Times* could also have delved into how the U.S. helped arm both Iran and Iraq, and then manipulated them in order to make sure neither won a decisive victory. In 1983, one U.S. official declared, “We don’t give a damn as long as the Iran-Iraq carnage does not affect our allies or alter the balance of power.” (Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War*, p. 121)

By 1982, the war’s momentum had shifted to Iran, which was threatening Basra, Iraq’s second largest city. According to a 1995 affidavit by Reagan National Security Council staffer Howard Teicher (which the U.S. government demanded the court seal for “national security” reasons), “In the Spring of 1982, Iraq teetered on the brink of losing its war with Iran.... In June, 1982, President Reagan decided that the U.S....would do whatever was necessary and legal to prevent Iraq from losing the war with Iran.” (RealHistoryArchives.com)

Teicher states that, after Reagan signed a secret National Security Directive in June 1982, “The U.S. actively supported the Iraqi war effort by supplying the Iraqis with billions of dollars of credits, by providing U.S. military intelligence and advice, and by closely monitoring third country arms sales to Iraq to make sure Iraq had the military weaponry required.”

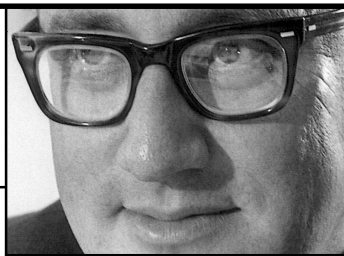
Anti-personnel cluster bombs were a U.S. favorite. “CIA Director [William] Casey was adamant that cluster bombs were a perfect ‘force multiplier’ for Iraq,” Teicher states, and “the CIA authorized, approved and assisted Cardoen [the supplier] in the manufacture and sale of cluster bombs and other munitions to Iraq.”

Over 8 years, the U.S. gave Iraq some \$5 billion in economic aid, and

As the U.S. fueled both sides, one million people died during the Iran-Iraq slaughter.

Henry Kissinger summed it all up:

**“Too bad they can’t both lose.”**



encouraged its allies to provide Iraq billions worth of arms. The British sold Iraq tanks, missile parts, and artillery; the French provided howitzers, Exocet missiles and Mirage jet fighters; and the West Germans supplied technology used in Iraqi plants that reportedly produced nerve and mustard gas.

The U.S. also supplied Iraq with biological weapons. William Blum notes that according to a 1994 Senate Committee Report, “From 1985, if not earlier, through 1989, a veritable witch’s brew of biological materials were exported to Iraq by private American suppliers pursuant to application and licensing by the U.S. Department of Commerce.” (*Counterpunch*, September 20, 2002)

The deadly mix included anthrax, botulism and E. coli bacteria. The Senate Report stated, “these microorganisms exported by the U.S. were identical to those the UN inspectors found and removed from the Iraqi biological warfare program.”

### A Cynical Strategy of Tilts

During the Iran-Iraq War, the U.S. cynically tilted to one side, then the other, to advance its overall agenda – which included trying to regain influence in Iran. A May 1985 CIA memo to Director Casey said, “Our tilt to Iraq was timely when Iraq was against the ropes and the Islamic revolution was on a roll. The time may now have to come to tilt back.”

The U.S. secretly encouraged Israel to ship arms to Iran in the early 1980s, and then began supplying weapons to Iran in 1985 as part of the Iran-Contra affair. In September 1986, Reagan official Oliver North promised Iran that the U.S. could “bring our influence to bear with certain friendly Arab nations” to oust Hussein.

In February 1986, while these secret discussions took place, Iran scored a major victory by capturing Iraq’s Fao Peninsula. The *Times* reported that Iraqi officials believed this

defeat “was due to faulty U.S. intelligence” (Jan. 19, 1987). Iraq detected Iranian troop movements, the Iraqi official said, but the U.S. “kept on telling us that the Iranian attack was not aimed against Fao.”

In fact, “American intelligence agencies provided Iran and Iraq with deliberately distorted or inaccurate intelligence data in recent years,” the *Times* reported (January 12, 1987). The motive was captured in the *Times* headline: “Keeping Either Side From Winning.” As Henry Kissinger coldly put it, “too bad they can’t both lose.”

In *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981-1987*, Woodward sums up the results of this U.S. double-dealing: “Doling out tactical data to both sides put the agency in the position of engineering a stalemate. This was no mere abstraction. The war was a bloody one....almost a million had been killed, wounded or captured on both sides. This was not a game in an operations center. It was slaughter.” (p. 507)

### Tilting Back Toward Iraq

Fears of an Iraqi defeat and the collapse of the U.S.’s backroom dealings with Iran led the U.S. to tilt back toward Iraq. Woodward writes that in late 1986 “Casey had met with senior Iraqis to...encourage more attacks on Iran, especially against economic targets.” Teicher states that, “In 1986, President Reagan sent a secret message to Saddam Hussein telling him that Iraq should step up its air war and bombing of Iran.” This took place during the “war of the cities,” when many Iraqi bombing raids were directed against economic and civilian targets.

In 1988, after an Iraqi poison gas attack that killed some 5,000 Kurds at Halabja in northern Iraq, U.S. aid to Iraq actually increased. According to the *Los Angeles Times* (February 13, 1991), U.S. intelligence reported that U.S.-supplied helicopters were used in such chemical attacks on Iraq’s Kurds.

**Source:** “Fueling the Iran-Iraq Slaughter: U.S. ‘Weapons of Mass Destruction’ Hypocrisy & So Much More,” September 5, 2002. <[www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=40&ItemID=2292](http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=40&ItemID=2292)>