

US Congressional Record: Remembrance of Halabja Massacre
Speeches by Senator Joe Lieberman and Representative Howard Berman
in the Senate and House of Representatives

1. Congressional Record: Senator Joe Lieberman (I-CT)
Washington, DC. March 16, 2009

Mr. LIEBERMAN: Madam President, it was exactly 21 years ago today that Saddam Hussein perpetrated one of modern history's most barbaric crimes. On the morning of March 16, 1988, the Iraqi Air Force dropped chemical weapons on Halabja, a Kurdish city in northeastern Iraq. Over the course of 3 days, tens of thousands of victims were exposed to mustard gas--which burns, mutates DNA, and causes malformations and cancer--as well as sarin gas--which can kill, paralyze, and cause lasting neurological damage--among other deadly chemical agents. Over the course of 3 days of bombing, it is believed that at least 5,000 civilians were murdered in Halabja.

The attack on Halabja was not the only instance in which the former Iraqi regime committed mass murder with chemical weapons. On the contrary, it was just one event in a large-scale campaign against the Iraqi Kurds called the Anfal, led by Saddam and his henchman, Ali Hassal Al Majid, also known as ``chemical Ali."

For 18 months between 1987 and 1988, it is estimated that Saddam's forces destroyed several thousand Iraqi Kurdish villages and murdered approximately 100,000 Iraqi Kurds, the majority of them unarmed civilians. At least 40 chemical weapon attacks have been documented--the first time in human history that a government has used weapons of mass destruction against its own citizens.

In her Pulitzer prize-winning book, ``A Problem From Hell," Samantha Power describes the assault on Halabja. It is a chilling account. The chemical weapons were dropped from aircraft that flew low over the city. In Samantha Power's words:

Many families tumbled into primitive air raid shelters they had built outside their homes. When the gases seeped through the cracks, they poured out into the streets in a panic.

There, they found friends and family members frozen in time like a modern version of Pompeii. Slumped a few yards behind a baby carriage, caught permanently holding the hand of a loved one or shielding a child from the poisoned air, or calmly collapsed behind a car steering wheel. Not everyone who was exposed died instantly. Some of those who inhaled the chemicals continued to stumble around town, blinded by the gas, giggling uncontrollably, or, because their nerves were malfunctioning, buckling at the knees.

On the anniversary of this horrific attack on Halabja, I urge my colleagues to pause and reflect on the lessons it teaches us.

What happened in Halabja should remind us that there is, unfortunately, such a thing as evil in the world, and that we in the United States not only protect our security but uphold our most cherished humanitarian values when we fight against it.

Halabja should also remind us that there are leaders in the world whose conduct is unconstrained by the most basic rules of humanity, whose only interest is their own power, and who are willing to do anything necessary--no matter how unspeakable or cruel--to perpetuate their power.

Halabja should remind us of the extraordinary danger posed by rogue states that possess weapons of mass destruction, and why we and our allies must be prepared to take extraordinary measures to prevent the world's most dangerous regimes from getting the world's most dangerous armaments.

Finally, Halabja should also remind us that despite the many mistakes and missteps the Bush administration made in the course of the war in Iraq, all who value human rights should be deeply grateful that Saddam Hussein and his terrible regime are gone and now consigned to the dustbin of history. If anyone doubts the world is a better, safer place with Saddam gone, they need only look to the history of what happened on this day 21 years ago in Halabja.

Two decades ago, the Kurdish-inhabited regions of Iraq were decimated and depopulated by one of the 20th century's most vicious and tyrannical despots. Fortunately, the story does not end there. Today, thanks in no small part to the protection provided by the United States, the Kurds of Iraq have rebuilt and their region is flourishing. The great Kurdish cities of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Dohuk are the safest in Iraq today, and they are booming economically. The Kurdish people have emerged from the yoke of tyranny to become some of America's best and most loyal allies anywhere in the world.

The leaders of the Kurdistan Regional Government still face challenges. They need to pursue further political reform and economic liberalization. They must fight corruption, and they must continue to work with the democratically elected Government in Baghdad to ensure that disputes over contested territory in northern Iraq, including in the city of Kirkuk, are resolved peacefully and not through violence. And I am confident they will.

Indeed, in a remarkable--I would say miraculous--turn of history, 21 years after the atrocity of Halabja, the Kurds of Iraq have at least assumed their rightful role in shaping the future of the great country of which they are a part. Today, the Kurds of Iraq enjoy the same rights and privileges as every other Iraqi citizen, and their representatives sit in a democratically elected Parliament in Baghdad.

Perhaps in the most miraculous of all turn of events and one of the great historical justices of our time, Saddam Hussein, that evil tyrant who ordered the mass murders of tens of thousands of Kurds, has been replaced as President of Iraq by a great Kurdish Iraqi patriot, a freedom fighter and a great friend of the United States, Jalal Talabani. That is something the survivors of Halabja 21 years ago could never possibly have imagined.

As we pause to remember the victims of Halabja today, we should also give thanks to the extraordinary progress that has been achieved since that terrible day 21 years ago--progress that has been made possible through the courage and sacrifice of Kurds, Iraqis, and Americans alike.

I yield the floor, and I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. COBURN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

2. Congressional Record: Representative Howard Berman (D-CA) Washington, DC. March 16, 2009

Remembering the slaughter In Iraqi Kurdistan (Extensions Of Remarks - March 16, 2009)

Mr. BERMAN: Madam Speaker, Twenty one years ago, on March 16, 1988, the Saddam Hussein regime committed one of modern history's most horrific crimes. The indiscriminate use of chemical weapons to destroy the town of Halabja in Iraqi Kurdistan led to the brutal slaughter of thousands of innocent men, women, and children and permanently debilitated many more. More than two decades after the massacre, the people of Halabja still suffer from the effects of that barbaric attack. Long-term effects include cancers, birth defects, neurological problems, miscarriages, infertility, and congenital malformations in children--all of which are disproportionately prevalent in the Halabja area--as well as irreparable damage to the environment. These serious medical and environmental problems continue to hinder the well-being and overall progress of those living in Halabja and the surrounding area.

Tragically, Halabja was not the only instance in which the former Iraqi regime used chemical weapons. Rather, it was but one event in a deliberate, large-scale campaign called the Anfal to exterminate the predominantly Kurdish inhabitants of Iraqi Kurdistan. The 1988 Anfal campaign resulted in the deaths of as many as 180,000

people. Iraqi forces used chemical and biological weapons against over 250 population centers from April 1987 to August 1988. Studies indicate that more than half of current inhabitants of Halabja were exposed to toxic chemical agents at the time of the attack.

On December 30, 2006, Saddam Hussein was hanged for the murder of 148 Shiite Arab citizens of Dujail, which is located in south-central Iraq. That case was taken up before the Anfal case, and it resulted in a death sentence. Because Iraqi law requires that a death sentence be carried out nearly immediately, Saddam's other crimes, including the Anfal genocide, never came to trial. The swiftness of Saddam's execution was an injustice to those that were brutally killed, maimed, or otherwise damaged in the Anfal; put simply, these victims were denied their day in court. Many Kurds now fear that the world will never hear of the true extent of the Halabja atrocities--widely considered the heaviest use of chemical weapons against civilians in modern times. It is therefore imperative that the Anfal campaign, and the massacre of Halabja, be documented and remembered--and internationally recognized as a crime of genocide against the Kurdish people. But we should also do more. On the tragic anniversary of Halabja 1988, the world must not only remember the individuals who perished but also provide help to those that continue to suffer today. That would be an appropriate way for the world to bear witness to crimes that are among the ugliest the world has seen.