

US ignites hellfire in Iraq

FOR those of us who follow world and national news, last week was torturous. It began with the weekend release of an expose, written by Democracy Now co-host Juan Gonzales and showcased on the front pages of the New York Daily News for two days. For that piece, Gonzales arranged for private laboratories to test the urine from members of a reserve unit returning from Iraq. The unit consisted of New York City police officers, firefighters and prison guards. The results showed that New York's local heroes were poisoned with still radioactive Depleted Uranium.

Most alarming was the fact that this group was not involved in any combat operations, nor were they in direct contact with radioactive DU debris. Their DU poisoning, which some of the men claim had already made them chronically ill, was the result of airborne contamination. This indicates that all coalition troops, as well as any person living in Iraq, were susceptible to DU poisoning. This is a point that Pentagon whistle blower Colonel Douglas Rokke (see *Getting a Grip* 7/31/03) has been making. It's a point that also vindicates the alternative media in the US and Europe, who have been shouting the warning about DU since the first Bush administration pelted Iraq with radioactive weaponry in 1991.

The same weekend that saw the release of Gonzales' report, also saw all hell break loose in Iraq. Again, just as in the case of DU, there was no surprise here. Back when most mainstream reporters were predicting jubilant Iraqis showering their American

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"liberators" with roses, the alternative media was warning of a quagmire of chaotic guerilla warfare – with no conceivable resolution.

Nothing to gloat over

There's always the temptation to say, "we told you so!" But in all honesty, just like when the alternative press warned about global warming in the 1970s, we hoped we were wrong. We hoped that even if our warnings weren't heeded, things would work out ok. We hoped for a quick war and the mirage of flower throwers. Right now, however, Iraq is awash in blood. With each Iraqi child that dies, a new terrorist is born. If history has taught us anything, it's that violence begets violence. And we are now stuck on autopilot full speed ahead in the wholesale manufacture of violence. Yeah, we were right. But this is nothing to gloat over. To the contrary, this is something to weep over. We in the alternative media failed to convince enough people to rise up and scream as loud as they could to prevent this insanity from unfolding. And we were unable to counter the mainstream media spin pimping the "Operation Iraqi Freedom" myth.

The Bush administration's big "D'uh" surprise of the week was that Sunnis and Shiites would band together and form a unified resistance against the forces occupying their country. This shouldn't come as a surprise to Americans. It's exactly what we as a nation did in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. We put our own political polarization on the back burner and joined together, only to be misled by radical political ideologues – in a situation not unlike Moqtada al-Sadr's current exploitation of Iraqi nationalism. There's also a clear historic precedent for Sunni/Shiite unity. Both groups also banded together to drive their British colonizers away during Britain's previous occupation of Iraq. This is the value of understanding history. It's also a value that is lost on the White House's current ruler, who publically celebrates his own ignorance proudly as if it were some sort of badge of honor. Yeah, it's the D'uh factor yet again.

Our "misunderestimated" moron

And we've all spent hours now, laughing away at the halting brainless babbling of our "misunderestimated" leader. But when I heard last week that a seventh Western New Yorker died amidst this insanity, the laughter and the Bush jokes just made me angry. How did we let this moron lead us into a war that's killing our neighbors and threatening our very security. This is a democratic society, so ultimately the blame rests with us.

The start of the Sunni/Shiite unified uprising coincided with the onset of the US siege of the city of Falluja. The US attack was in response to the brutal killing of four American mercenaries ("security contractors"), who are among over 10,000 private soldiers now

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working in Iraq. The military response, which so far has resulted in the killing of over 650 Falluja residents, is being condemned by the world community as a form of collective punishment – which is generally acknowledged as a war crime. The Fallujans, according to one American Lt. Colonel, must decide whether to “submit or die.” Bush himself decided to go on vacation in Texas, racking up his 500th vacation day in office as Falluja burned. Most of the casualties in Falluja, according to local hospitals, are women, children and the elderly, who together make up an overwhelming proportion of the local population.

By initiating a massive military attack against a civilian city roughly the size of Buffalo, the US seems to have given up on the “hearts and minds” front. Members of the British press have termed it a “medieval siege,” which fits in with George Bush and Colin Powell’s “Crusade” moniker. Press reports this week tell of Iraqi police officers turning their weapons on their American masters. Even the US-installed puppet administrators of the Iraqi Governing Council are bailing out like rats jumping from a sinking ship. Last Friday saw the resignation of one minister and one member of the Council’s Rotating Presidency. Another member of the Council, Ghazi Ajil al-Yawer, is threatening to resign, publicly terming the siege as “genocide” (which it is not). Of course it doesn’t help matters when American troops, for whatever reason, wind up firing missiles into mosques – especially when we call them “Hellfire” missiles.

Still following al-Qaida’s script

The Pentagon claims that troops are only “returning fire” when they’ve attacked mosques. I have no reason to doubt this account. If this is true, however, then isn’t this all the more reason not to be sucked into someone else’s script – with American commanders ordering their troops to do exactly what their enemies want them to do? Of course it’s too late now. The images of Hellfire attacks upon houses of worship are out in the world’s media and will, by this time next week, no doubt be the meat for the next generation of al-Qaida recruitment videos.

The Pentagon’s response hasn’t been to curtail its attacks against Mosques and its air strikes in populated neighborhoods. No. Their response has been to try to evict unembedded (as in real) journalists from Falluja. This, ironically, makes journalists the only men allowed to leave that embattled city, with other men turned back into the caldron at coalition checkpoints where only women, children and the elderly were allowed to leave last week. American troops at the same checkpoints stopped ambulances from moving either into or out of the city. Perhaps it’s this confining of civilians to a war zone that sparked the allegations of genocide. It’s also sparked horrific surreal biblical images, such as that of a carload of Iranians on a religious pilgrimage to Karbala, all shot dead near

Babel by Polish troops who couldn't speak Farsi and hence couldn't understand them.

Operation Vigilant Resolve

The Bush Administration named the Falluja Fiasco "Operation Vigilant Resolve." By midweek, however, the US media abandoned this ill-thought-out cognomen, as Iraqi resistance forces wooed the Arab street with their own vigilant resolve.

Lost in all of this blood and gore is the still unanswered question: And why are we there? Perhaps I'm being a bit unfair terming this an "unanswered" question. The Bush administration has actually given us quite a few answers. But they keep changing. First there was the imminent threat. Then it was the banned weapons. Or the banned weapons program. Saddam was deposed a year ago, so it can't still be about him. And it's not about protecting the Sunnis and Shiites from each other, since they seem to be getting along just fine. And it's not about bringing democracy to Iraq. The United States' first post-invasion Viceroy, Paul Bremmer's predecessor Retired Army Lt. Gen. Jay Garner, quit in protest over the Bush administration's postponement of Iraqi elections. And we certainly have no interest in bringing democracy to Pakistan, Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, so what makes Iraq so special?

"Preparations for hijackings"

Last week also saw Condoleezza Rice's long awaited and much over hyped testimony before the 9/11 commission. Again, there wasn't much new information here. What was new, however, was the mainstream media's sudden interest in covering a story that the alterative media has reported over and over again ad-nausea since 2001. Black Congressional Caucus Chair Elijah Cummings summed up the corroborating points of Rice's testimony quite succinctly, explaining that on August 6th, 2001, while Bush "was on a thirty-day vacation in Crawford Texas... he was informed by his national security team that al Qaida operatives in the United States had the ability to hijack passenger planes." Rice revealed the title of the classified presidential briefing as "Bin Laden Determined to Strike Inside the United States." We now know that this memo clearly stated that al Qaida was engaged in "patterns of suspicious activity in this country consistent with preparations for hijackings."

The Bush administration's response to this information is even more telling. Testimony before the 9/11 commission shows that they chose not to share this threat information with the Department of Transportation, the Federal Aviation Administration or the FBI field office in charge of international terrorism. Hell, Newsweek reports that Bush and Cheney even decided not to tell Attorney General John Ashcroft, under whose watch the

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FBI falls. Instead, they just chose to have top administration officials such as John Ashcroft stop flying on commercial flights.

The Washington DC-based think tank, the Center for American Progress, was quick to point out that Rice also made statements under oath that seem to counter the historic record. She claimed, for instance, that the Bush administration "decided immediately to continue pursuing the Clinton Administration's ... efforts to fight [al Qaida]." In reality, the Ashcroft Justice Department curtailed a Clinton era program to monitor al Qaida suspects in the US. They also terminated reconnaissance missions over Afghanistan that monitored bin Laden's movements.

In the months leading up to the 9/11 attacks, the administration further curtailed anti-terrorism efforts. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the 9/11 attacks, General Henry Shelton, reported that during the summer of 2001 the Bush administration moved anti-terrorism efforts "farther to the back burner." Bush advisor General Don Kerrick warned the administration that al Qaida would be striking again, but no one contacted him to ask for more details.

Rice testified that the Bush administration increased funding for counterterrorism activities when in fact they cut over \$500 million out of the Justice Department's counterterrorism budget. She also contradicted her own previous statements about Richard Clarke. First she alleged that Clarke never turned over a plan for combating al Qaida. Under oath, however, she claimed the administration was following suggestions made in Clarke's plan.

Another Warren Commission?

What has come out of the 9/11 commission is the fact that the Bush administration knew that a major al Qaida attack was imminent. And we know that they received specific warnings. They knew the attack might involve airplanes. Or at least they believed this enough to keep their own people off of commercial flights. And we know that simple judicious measures could have prevented these attacks, yet the Bush administration chose not to take any preventative action.

We know that the Bush administration was negligent. Perhaps we can argue that they were criminally negligent. But this is where the 9/11 commission stops short. People make mistakes. And mistakes can be forgiven. Even if the results are tragic on a massive scale. Everyone makes mistakes.

The 9/11 commission is out to either prove or disprove allegations of incompetence while ignoring countless allegations of intentional malfeasance or strategic incompetence. The commission also isn't asking questions about documented Saudi and

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Pakistani government connections to the hijackers and the possibility that officials from these countries were complicit in the attack on America. The commission isn't conducting the criminal investigation this nation needs if we are to have closure. They're not asking tough questions and they're not following the money. Nobody is. Perhaps its because the potential answers are so frightening that we're collectively shying away from asking the questions.

Any meaningful inquiry into an event that so radically changed our political landscape, ultimately changing the very ethos of our nation, must ask difficult questions. The friends and relatives of the tens of thousands of people who have been killed in New York, Pennsylvania, Washington DC, Afghanistan and Iraq deserve to know the answers.