

Poison and profit in Gulf War II

THE Bush presidency has certainly created some strange bedfellows. Take the peace movement – American peaceniks today are just as likely to gather and listen to right wing warriors as they are to swoon before the call of hairy pacifists. I remember seeing former US Marine Intelligence Officer and UN Weapons Inspector Scott Ritter speak last fall at a Syracuse University event promoted by various Central New York peace groups. Speaking to a crowd that included a nationally known draft resister and a host of other activists, Ritter described himself as a Republican who voted for George W. Bush for president. “I’m a warrior,” he went on to tell the crowd, explaining how he was willing to lay down his life in battle for his country.

Last week I went to see another warrior. This time it was Major Douglas Rokke, speaking in Buffalo at an event sponsored by the Western New York Peace Center. If Ritter’s easy talk about his willingness to kill in battle was chilling, Rokke was the ice man, repeating his “I am a warrior” mantra throughout his two hour presentation as he reminded his listeners that he has killed before and is willing to kill again.

This strange marriage of warriors and peaceniks stems from Rokke and Ritter’s love of country and their deep devotion to their fellow soldiers – who they see as being needlessly

POISON AND PROFIT IN GULF WAR II / 2

put in harms way to satisfy a political and commercial agenda as the nation's foreign policy is hijacked by the same president that at least one of them voted for. To save their comrades from the horrific weapons of an unnecessary war, they turned to the people who oppose all wars – and a new movement is born.

Last fall Ritter warned that the impending war wasn't about weapons of mass destruction at all. "Don't insult my colleagues," he said, as he explained how his team found no evidence of any such weapons still in existence. The war, he explained, was about "imperialism," plain and simple. And he didn't want his fellow Marines, soldiers who signed up in good faith to defend their country, to be sent off to fight, kill and die in a war for empire based on lies that Ritter found himself conscience-bound to repudiate.

Oral sex and wars

Time has since proven Ritter right. The US went to war. At last count, approximately 6,500 Iraqi civilians and at least 154 American troops were killed. George Bush started the war based on intelligence information confirming an Iraqi nuclear weapons program that Ritter claimed didn't exist. We now know that Ritter, the weapons inspector, was right. And according to information recently released by the CIA, George Bush knew it too, but went on to lie to the US Congress and the World's citizens – justifying the current war with a foundation of fiction. This in a country where the congress voted to impeach the previous president for lying about a blowjob.

While Ritter tours the country talking about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, or the lack thereof, Rokke has a different specialty. He is a former US Army Depleted Uranium (DU) Project Director. He talks about American weapons of mass destruction. Rokke, a former science teacher and college professor, was called in by the Army at the end of the first Gulf War to assess DU contamination and dangers to troops, and to recover and clean DU contaminated equipment. Assigning this task to him, Rokke now explains, was the Army's biggest mistake. That's because, he argues, the Army is actually more interested in covering up the dangers and liabilities posed by radioactive DU weapons, than it is in protecting US troops and taking responsibility for environmental devastation caused by DU weaponry.

Pluto – God of Hell

Rokke explains that each DU shell fired from an Abrams tank contains ten pounds of radioactive Uranium 238 – a toxic byproduct of nuclear fuel and weapons enrichment programs. By converting DU wastes into DU weapons, the military is taking a liability (impossible-to-dispose-of radioactive wastes) and converting it into an asset (the world's

POISON AND PROFIT IN GULF WAR II / 3

most powerful anti-tank projectile weapon). The problem with this plan is the fact that DU remains radioactive for four and a half billion years. It also contains traces of other radioactive compounds such as Plutonium, the most toxic substance on earth, named for Pluto, the Roman god of the dead and ruler of the underworld.

When these rounds hit their target, according to Rokke, 40% of their mass is instantly converted into dust, with particles measuring as small as one micron. DU rounds fired from airborne weapons, he went on to explain, weigh 300 grams. With guns firing 4,000 rounds per minute, they are capable of dispersing one ton of DU per minute into the environment.

According to Rokke, the military began using DU weapons in the first Gulf War despite the fact that they did not, and still do not, have any plan for cleaning up DU contaminated environments. Despite this, they used over 370 tons of DU in the first Gulf War, contaminating large sections of Kuwait and Southern Iraq. The London Guardian reports that 1,000 to 2,000 tons of DU weapons have been used so far in the second Gulf War. Still, according to a study issued at the end of May by the media watchdog group, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, the words "depleted uranium" were never uttered this year on ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News or NBC Nightly News.

The results of DU weapons deployment, though unreported in this country, have been devastating. In 1988, Basra's hospital saw 34 cancer deaths. By 1998 that number increased to 428 deaths, with one or two deformed babies born per day. Since the first Gulf War, the US has also used DU weapons in Kosovo, Serbia, Afghanistan and in training exercises in Vieques, Puerto Rico, off the coast of Seattle, and in Australia. All of this deployment is in violation of UN weapons conventions since the UN has determined that DU kills indiscriminately and is, therefore, illegal.

Gulf War Syndrome

It's this indiscriminant killing that has Rokke traveling the world speaking out, at his own peril, against the policies of his own army (Rokke is still a Major in the Reserves). He sees DU contamination of the battlefield as the key component in a toxic stew that is slowly disabling and killing personnel who served in the first Gulf war. There, he argues, soldiers were given six to eight immunization shots all at once, throwing their immune systems off balance. He claims that contrary to standard procedures, military kept few if any records of the immunizations. He also claims personnel were exposed to unknown pesticides which were applied irresponsibly. Add smoke from oil fires and DU dust, and you have a "toxic mess." It's these simultaneous attacks from multiple poisons, Rokke believes, that cause a multiple chemical sensitivity and ultimately, Gulf War Syndrome.

POISON AND PROFIT IN GULF WAR II / 4

Despite the fact that the military had numerous reports detailing DU dangers, they never warned troops in either Gulf War about the weaponry that they were handling. Hence, soldiers would explore the radioactive ruins of Iraqi tanks, pocket contaminated war trophies, and, according to reports, camp for months at a time on ground contaminated by DU dust particles.

Hence, it should come as no surprise that according to the US Department of Veterans' Affairs, approximately 221,000 Gulf war veterans have permanent war related disabilities, with another 10,000 or so veterans now dead from war related syndromes. With 696,628 people serving in the first Gulf War, these casualty numbers represent a casualty rate of nearly one in three. Add to these figures the numbers of veterans whose disability claims have been turned down, and the rate rises to nearly one in two. By comparison, the casualty rate for injuries and death in World Wars I and II, as well as the Vietnam War, was one in fifteen.

Warriors and pacifists

This is why warriors like Ritter and Rokke are coming forward to seek help from the peace movement. It's because their former comrades in arms are needlessly dying at the hands of a military machine that callously poisons them, and a government that needlessly sends them off to avoidable wars. Ritter and Rokke are supporting the troops. And they're asking other Americans to join them. This is true patriotism and true support for America's fighting men and women.

Many of these servicepersons enlisted for idealistic reasons – to defend the nation while fighting for liberty and democracy. Even more, however, signed up for economic reasons. Like Jessica Lynch, they hail from economically distressed communities. Like Jessica Lynch, they couldn't afford the college education that they wanted. In essence, they were caught up in an economic draft, hoping for job training or education benefits. Others just signed up since this was the only job available. Hence, it shouldn't come as a surprise that between 90 and 95% of the military hail from poor and working class backgrounds. And like Jessica Lynch, the vast majority of them opted for non-combat support positions, far from the front lines. With a DU contaminated battlefield, however, the front lines are now everywhere. Veterans advocates claim that during the first Gulf War, approximately 436,000 troops entered radioactive DU contaminated areas.

The Bush forces, comprised almost exclusively of "chickenhawks" – people who advocate war while having evaded military service themselves – hide behind a banner of "supporting our troops." They wrap themselves in our flag and deride the Ritters and Rokkes of this nation as being unpatriotic while they slash veterans benefits and extend

POISON AND PROFIT IN GULF WAR II / 5

hellacious tours of duty for morale-drained combatants. They order the poisoning of large chunks of the world, then order American troops into the contaminated areas, in effect creating the largest friendly fire incidents in military history. But worst of all, they claim to support our troops as they, in reality, march them off to slow deaths. And they do all this, sending the children of the patriotic poor off to die, while themselves becoming rich from war.

Cheney's priorities

Vice President Dick Cheney typifies the worst of the Bush administration. He supported the Vietnam war, yet avoided serving in the military himself, telling one reporter that he "had other priorities in the Sixties than military service." Cheney, the former Secretary of Defense in the first Bush administration, left government service to become the CEO of the nation's 73rd largest defense contractor and oil industry services company, Halliburton. With Cheney's contacts, Halliburton quickly rose to become the nation's 18th largest military contractor. Dollars and Sense magazine reports that from 1999 to 2002, Halliburton contributed \$700,000 to political fundraisers, with 95% going to Republican causes. Hence it should come as no surprise that the Bush administration just awarded a Halliburton subsidiary a no bid contract to rebuild Iraqi infrastructure with a "cost plus" contract guaranteeing profits to be paid above fluid costs. Hence, Halliburton will rebuild facilities that they initially built for Saddam Hussein after the first Gulf War, which were bombed during the second Gulf War. This contract was awarded despite the fact that Halliburton was just fined \$2million by the SEC for bribing Nigerian officials in a tax avoidance scam. Under Cheney's leadership, the company avoided paying almost \$400 million in US taxes by creating offshore subsidiaries. Cheney currently still receives deferred compensation of up to \$1million per year from Halliburton.

Bechtel is another winner, with a new Iraq contract that could be worth over a half billion dollars. Former Reagan Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger, as well as former CIA Director William Casey, were both former Bechtel executives. Current executives include former Reagan Secretary of State George Shultz, who wrote a slew of articles last winter calling for the US to attack Iraq. And of course Bechtel is a big campaign contributor, showering both Republicans and conservative hawkish Democrats with cash.

Campaign contributions are the name of the game for military contractors who live large off the government teat. According to a recent report by Dollars and Sense, Northrop Grumman spent nearly \$30 million on lobbying and campaign contributions from 2000 through 2002. In return, they received over \$24 billion in Department of Defense contracts over the same time period (just a reminder – a billion is a thousand

POISON AND PROFIT IN GULF WAR II / 6

million). Lockheed Martin spent \$26 million courting warmongering politicians during this two year period, netting over \$47 billion in defense contracts in return. Boeing spent \$26 million and netted almost \$43 billion in return. General Dynamics got a \$17 billion return on their \$18 million investment. Raytheon got a \$19 billion return on \$10 million while TRW got a \$6 billion return on a \$3.5 million outlay. And of course there's George Bush Senior's bin Laden family-connected employer, Carlyle, who netted almost \$4 billion in contracts on a \$6 million investment. Overall, according to a recent study conducted by United for a Fair Economy, CEOs of major defense contractors saw their salaries increase by 79% in 2002 as the nation readied for war.

These folks have all got rich off the backs of the dead and crippled US troops who they claim to be supporting. And their riches come at the expense of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who have died due to sanctions and DU poisoning of their environment.

So if you really want to be a patriot – and you really want to wave your flag – do it at a peace rally. Support our troops by bringing them home. Support our country by stripping the defense contractors of their blood money and instead spending it on education and economic development, so that young Americans won't have to march off to war to get a job or an education. This is true patriotism. ●

For more information about DU weapons, see www.miltoxproj.org/issues.html.