

Who are the War Criminals? Thirty-one Years Ago. The 1991 Gulf War: The Massacre of Withdrawing Soldiers on “The Highway of Death”

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I want to give testimony on what are called the “highways of death.” These are the two Kuwaiti roadways, littered with remains of 2,000 mangled Iraqi military vehicles, and the charred and dismembered bodies of tens of thousands of Iraqi soldiers, who were withdrawing from Kuwait on February 26th and 27th 1991 in compliance with UN resolutions.

U.S. planes trapped the long convoys by disabling vehicles in the front, and at the rear, and then pounded the resulting traffic jams for hours. “It was like shooting fish in a barrel,” said one U.S. pilot. The horror is still there to see.

On the inland highway to Basra is mile after mile of burned, smashed, shattered vehicles of every description – tanks, armored cars, trucks, autos, fire trucks, according to the March 18, 1991, Time magazine. On the sixty miles of coastal highway, Iraqi military units sit in gruesome repose, scorched skeletons of vehicles and men alike, black and awful under the sun, says the Los Angeles Times of March 11, 1991. While 450 people survived the inland road bombing to surrender, this was not the case with the 60 miles of the coastal road. There for 60 miles every vehicle was strafed or bombed, every windshield is shattered, every tank is burned, every truck is riddled with shell fragments. No survivors are known or likely. The cabs of trucks were bombed so much that they were pushed into the ground, and it’s impossible to see if they contain drivers or not. Windshields were melted away, and huge tanks were reduced to shrapnel.



“Even in Vietnam I didn’t see anything like this. It’s pathetic,” said Major Bob Nugent, an Army intelligence officer. This one-sided carnage, this racist mass murder of Arab people, occurred while White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater promised that the U.S. and its coalition partners would not attack Iraqi forces leaving Kuwait. This is surely one of the most heinous war crimes in contemporary history.

The Iraqi troops were not being driven out of Kuwait by U.S. troops as the Bush administration maintains. They were not retreating in order to regroup and fight again. In fact, they were withdrawing, they were going home, responding to orders issued by Baghdad, announcing that it was complying with Resolution 660 and leaving Kuwait. At 5:35 p.m. (Eastern standard Time) Baghdad radio announced that Iraq’s Foreign Minister had accepted the Soviet cease-fire proposal and had issued the order for all Iraqi troops to withdraw to positions held before August 2, 1990 in compliance with UN Resolution 660. President Bush responded immediately from the White House saying (through spokesman Marlin Fitzwater) that “there was no evidence to suggest the Iraqi army is withdrawing. In fact, Iraqi units are continuing to fight. . . We continue to prosecute the war.” On the next day, February 26, 1991, Saddam Hussein announced on Baghdad radio that Iraqi troops had, indeed, begun to withdraw from Kuwait and that the withdrawal would be complete that day. Again, Bush reacted, calling Hussein’s announcement “an outrage” and “a cruel hoax.”



Eyewitness Kuwaitis attest that the withdrawal began the afternoon of February 26, 1991 and Baghdad radio announced at 2:00 AM (local time) that morning that the government had ordered all troops to withdraw.

The massacre of withdrawing Iraqi soldiers violates the Geneva Conventions of 1949, Common Article III, which outlaws the killing of soldiers who are out of combat. The point of contention involves the Bush administration's claim that the Iraqi troops were retreating to regroup and fight again. Such a claim is the only way that the massacre which occurred could be considered legal under international law. But in fact the claim is false and obviously so. The troops were withdrawing and removing themselves from combat under direct orders from Baghdad that the war was over and that Iraq had quit and would fully comply with UN resolutions. To attack the soldiers returning home under these circumstances is a war crime.

Iraq accepted UN Resolution 660 and offered to withdraw from Kuwait through Soviet mediation on February 21, 1991. A statement made by George Bush on February 27, 1991, that no quarter would be given to remaining Iraqi soldiers violates even the U.S. Field Manual of 1956. The 1907 Hague Convention governing land warfare also makes it illegal to declare that no quarter will be given to withdrawing soldiers. On February 26, 1991, the following dispatch was filed from the deck of the U.S.S. Ranger, under the by-line of Randall Richard of the Providence Journal:

"Air strikes against Iraqi troops retreating from Kuwait were being launched so feverishly from this carrier today that pilots said they took whatever bombs happened to be closest to the flight deck. The crews, working to the strains of the Lone Ranger theme, often passed up the projectile of choice . . . because it took too long to load."

New York Times reporter Maureen Dowd wrote,

“With the Iraqi leader facing military defeat, Mr. Bush decided that he would rather gamble on a violent and potentially unpopular ground war than risk the alternative: an imperfect settlement hammered out by the Soviets and Iraqis that world opinion might accept as tolerable.”

In short, rather than accept the offer of Iraq to surrender and leave the field of battle, Bush and the U.S. military strategists decided simply to kill as many Iraqis as they possibly could while the chance lasted. A Newsweek article on Norman Schwarzkopf, titled “A Soldier of Conscience” (March 11, 1991), remarked that before the ground war the general was only worried about “How long the world would stand by and watch the United States pound the living hell out of Iraq without saying, ‘Wait a minute – enough is enough.’ He [Schwarzkopf] itched to send ground troops to finish the job.” The pretext for massive extermination of Iraqi soldiers was the desire of the U.S. to destroy Iraqi equipment. But in reality the plan was to prevent Iraqi soldiers from retreating at all. Powell remarked even before the start of the war that Iraqi soldiers knew that they had been sent to Kuwait to die. Rick Atkinson of the Washington Post reasoned that “the noose has been tightened” around Iraqi forces so effectively that “escape is impossible” (February 27, 1991). What all of this amounts to is not a war but a massacre.

There are also indications that some of those bombed during the withdrawal were Palestinians and Iraqi civilians. According to Time magazine of March 18, 1991, not just military vehicles, but cars, buses and trucks were also hit. In many cases, cars were loaded with Palestinian families and all their possessions. U.S. press accounts tried to make the discovery of burned and bombed household goods appear as if Iraqi troops were even at this late moment looting Kuwait. Attacks on civilians are specifically prohibited by the Geneva Accords and the 1977 Conventions.

How did it really happen? On February 26, 1991 Iraq had announced it was complying with the Soviet proposal, and its troops would withdraw from Kuwait. According to Kuwaiti eyewitnesses, quoted in the March 11, 1991 Washington Post, the withdrawal began on the two highways, and was in full swing by evening. Near midnight, the first U.S. bombing started. Hundreds of Iraqis jumped from their cars and their trucks, looking for shelter. U.S. pilots took whatever bombs happened to be close to the flight deck, from cluster bombs to 500 pound bombs. Can you imagine that on a car or truck? U.S. forces continued to drop bombs on the convoys until all humans were killed. So many jets swarmed over the inland road that it created an aerial traffic jam, and combat air controllers feared midair collisions.

The victims were not offering resistance. They weren’t being driven back in fierce battle, or trying to regroup to join another battle. They were just sitting ducks, according to Commander Frank Swiggert, the Ranger Bomb Squadron leader. According to an article in the March 11, 1991 Washington Post, headlined “U.S. Scrambles to Shape View of Highway of Death,” the U.S. government then conspired and in fact did all it could to hide this war crime from the people of this country and the world. What the U.S. government did became the focus of the public relations campaign managed by the U.S. Central Command in Riyadh, according to that same issue of the Washington Post. The typical line has been that the convoys were engaged in “classic tank battles,” as if to suggest that Iraqi troops tried to fight back or even had a chance of fighting back. The truth is that it was simply a one-sided massacre of tens of thousands of people who had no ability to fight back or defend themselves.

The Washington Post says that senior officers with the U.S. Central Command in Riyadh

became worried that what they saw was a growing public perception that Iraqi forces were leaving Kuwait voluntarily, and that the U.S. pilots were bombing them mercilessly, which was the truth. So the U.S. government, says the Post, played down the evidence that Iraqi troops were actually leaving Kuwait.

U.S. field commanders gave the media a carefully drawn and inaccurate picture of the fast-changing events. The idea was to portray Iraq's claimed withdrawal as a fighting retreat made necessary by heavy allied military pressure. Remember when Bush came to the Rose Garden and said that he would not accept Saddam Hussein's withdrawal? That was part of it, too, and Bush was involved in this cover up. Bush's statement was followed quickly by a televised military briefing from Saudi Arabia to explain that Iraqi forces were not withdrawing but were being pushed from the battlefield. In fact, tens of thousands of Iraqi soldiers around Kuwait had begun to pull away more than thirty-six hours before allied forces reached the capital, Kuwait City. They did not move under any immediate pressure from allied tanks and infantry, which were still miles from Kuwait City.

This deliberate campaign of disinformation regarding this military action and the war crime that it really was, this manipulation of press briefings to deceive the public and keep the massacre from the world is also a violation of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, the right of the people to know.

Joyce Chediac is a Lebanese-American journalist who has traveled in the Middle East and writes on Middle East issues. Her report was presented at the New York Commission hearing, May 11, 1991.

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