

Toxic Truths from the Iraqi Battlefield

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When a war is illegal, the methods of warfare are bound to go beyond what is permissible under the laws of war. But don't expect the American media to tell you any of this.

Fiction:

"I love the smell of napalm in the morning." Lt. Col. William Kilgore in *Apocalypse Now*, 1979.

Non-fiction:

"At the end of the fight we thought back on some of the things we were the proudest of. What jumped to the forefront was infantry and tank platoon sergeants ... telling us that the artillery and mortars were awesome. At the end of the day, that is what it is all about: our maneuver brethren recognizing why we are called the 'King of Battle'." Captain James T. Cobb, First Lieutenant Christopher A. LaCour, and Sergeant William H. Hight in *"The Fight for Fallujah,"* Field Artillery magazine, 2005. (Among the 'awesome' mortars fired were White Phosphorous chemical munitions).

Concerned at the environmental consequences of having dumped thousands of pounds of chemical weapons of various types into the ocean off its coast soon after World War II, the U.S. in the 1980s decided to prepare a master-list of all such dumps for future monitoring.

The report, authored by William R. Brankowitz of the Army Chemical Materials Agency, was titled "Summary of Some Chemical Munitions Sea Dumps by the United States" and was printed for internal circulation on January 30, 1989. Among the 50-plus incidents catalogued involving mustard gas, lewisite, and other nasty chemicals were the following two: Between September 14 and December 21, 1945, 924 canisters of White Phosphorous (WP) cluster bomb munitions from the Edgewood Arsenal in Maryland were loose-dumped in the Atlantic Ocean along with WP smoke canisters and smoke projectiles and arsenic trichloride; and then on June 18, 1962, 5,252 WP munitions were dumped in the Atlantic along with mustard projectiles, 20 drums of cyanide and 421,157 pounds of radiological waste. Another report prepared in March 2001 titled "Offshore disposal of chemical agents and weapons conducted by the United States" by the Historical Research and Response Team of the U.S. Army Research, Development and Engineering Command at the Aberdeen Proving Ground, corroborated the same information, including the dumping of WP.

These reports are significant because they tell us that as far as the U.S. military's own inventory of weapons was concerned, White Phosphorous was classified as a "chemical munition" or a "chemical agent and weapon" as recently as 1989 and 2001. And for good reason too. The WP had been dumped into the ocean in 1945 and 1962 but was obviously

considered dangerous enough for the U.S. Army to be concerned about its toxicity five decades later.

So how come a weapon that is not considered kosher enough to dump in the ocean in 1945 is OK to dump on human beings in Fallujah, Iraq, some 60 years later? And even if the Pentagon believes it's OK, how come it can get away with now saying WP is not a chemical weapon?

For a war launched by the United States in the name of dealing with the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction, the allegation of chemical weapon use levelled by Italy's RAI television channel (to see the documentary in English, [click here](#), per Italiano qui) last week was undoubtedly as incendiary as the munitions in question. Quoting former U.S. Army personnel involved in the massive, no-holds-barred military assault on the Iraqi city of Fallujah last November, a documentary produced by Sigfrido Ranucci and Maurizio Torrealta charged the U.S. with the indiscriminate use of White Phosphorous munitions and showed graphic and shocking visual evidence of the effect this weapon produced on its human victims, many of whom were civilian. According to the military affairs website, [globalsecurity.org](#), WP "results in painful chemical burn injuries. The resultant burn typically appears as a necrotic area with a yellowish color and characteristic garlic-like odor. White phosphorus is highly lipid soluble and as such, is believed to have rapid dermal penetration once particles are embedded under the skin." Basically, the chemical burns the human body but can leave the clothes covering it intact. This is exactly what the Italian documentary showed.

In the documentary, Maurizio Torrealta asked Peter Kaiser, spokesperson of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, whether White Phosphorous was a prohibited substance. "No, white phosphorous is not prohibited by the Convention on chemical weapons in the context of war operations, provided that use is not made of that substance for its toxic properties. For example, white phosphorous is normally used to produce smoke bombs that hide troop movements, and this is considered a legitimate use with respect to the conventions. But if the toxic or caustic properties of White Phosphorous are used as a weapon, then it is prohibited."

I did a Google News search of how the U.S. media was reporting the allegation and discovered that apart from the Boston Globe and Christian Science Monitor, virtually no "mainstream" American newspaper had bothered to cover the story. A few ran denials by the Pentagon that the U.S. had used illegal weapons but most chose to ignore the issue altogether. To the best of my knowledge, not even the Daily Press of Newport, Virginia — whose probe into the presence of deadly White Phosphorous landmines in Chesapeake Bay and other chemical weapons elsewhere on the U.S. east coast led to the two Army reports mentioned above being declassified last month — reported the Fallujah allegations let alone the coincidence of WP being involved.

One of the collateral benefits of defeating a country in war is that victory brings with it not just Victor's Justice but Victor's Book-keeping as well. Thanks to Paul Volcker and the CIA-run Iraq Survey Group of Charles Duelfer — which preceded him and couldn't find WMDs and so decided to find a corruption scam — we now know the fate of virtually every farthing paid into and out of the Iraqi oil-for-food accounts. What we don't know is how many Iraqi civilians have been killed in U.S. offensive operations — "We don't do body counts," General Tommy Franks had famously said — or how they died and are still dying. After Nuremberg,

all aggressors have realised the value of sloppy record-keeping.

When the allegation of chemical weapon use in Fallujah first surfaced last December, the U.S. State Department swung into action to deny the charge. On December 9, 2004, its International Information Programs posted a response on its website under the section "Identifying Misinformation": "[S]ome news accounts have claimed that U.S. forces have used 'outlawed' phosphorus shells in Fallujah. Phosphorus shells are not outlawed. U.S. forces have used them very sparingly in Fallujah, for illumination purposes. They were fired into the air to illuminate enemy positions at night, not at enemy fighters."

The State Department's response was carefully formulated because the Chemical Weapons Convention — to which the U.S. is a signatory — does not outlaw the use of WP if the purpose is to use the smoke the munition generates to mark a target or obscure ground movement or even as an incendiary against material facilities. But using it as a weapon to directly attack human beings is generally considered illegal since the CWC bans the use of "any chemical which through its chemical action on life processes can cause death, temporary incapacitation or permanent harm to humans or animals." Thus, the ST100-3 Battle Book published by the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth in July 1999, notes in chapter 5: "Burster Type White phosphorus (WP M110A2) rounds burn with intense heat and emit dense white smoke. They may be used as the initial rounds in the smokescreen to rapidly create smoke or against material targets, such as Class V sites or logistic sites. It is against the law of land warfare to employ WP against personnel targets." (emphasis added)

Accordingly, on the day the Italian documentary was to be telecast, Lt. Col. Steve Boylan, spokesperson of U.S. military in Iraq, admitted the use of WP in Fallujah as a battlefield prop but told Amy Goodman of Democracy Now!: "I know of no cases where people were deliberately targeted by the use of white phosphorus."

Unfortunately for the State Department and Lt. Col. Boylan, an in-house Army magazine, Field Artillery, had already published a breathless and rather candid account of the utility of deliberately targeting people with WP by three soldiers who had taken part in Operation Phantom Fury. "White Phosphorous proved to be an effective and versatile munition. We used it for screening missions at two breaches and, later in the fight, as a potent psychological weapon against the insurgents in trench lines and spider holes when we could not get effects on them with HE (high explosives). We fired "shake and bake" missions at the insurgents, using WP to flush them out and HE to take them out."

In the course of two years, the world has borne witness to the ease with which the United States has broken one civilised norm after the next. First out was the taboo against indefinite detention, then the one on torture and collective punishment, then the ban on the use of disproportionate force and the use of indiscriminate weapons in closely confined areas where non-combatants could be targeted. In Fallujah, that martyred city which will now take its place in the annals of human infamy alongside Guernica, the U.S. appears to have crossed yet another frontier. And there is no Paul Volcker to catalogue the crime.

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