

US drug czar tied to atrocities in Gulf War

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Barry McCaffrey, the director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy and point-man for the escalating US military intervention in Colombia, was responsible for a military operation at the close of the 1991 Persian Gulf War that claimed the lives of thousands of fleeing Iraqi soldiers, prisoners of war, civilians and even children, according to a recent article in the *New Yorker* magazine. This slaughter was carried out after a negotiated cease-fire already had been put in place.

Based on hundreds of hours of interviews with scores of current and former military personnel who witnessed the carnage, the article by veteran reporter Seymour M. Hersh provides a devastating exposure of war crimes allegedly carried out under McCaffrey's direction, and an indictment of the US war in the Persian Gulf as a whole.

Hersh gained his reputation as a reporter by exposing the 1968 My Lai massacre, in which US troops killed nearly 600 Vietnamese women, children and old men in a ditch. His latest article, "Overwhelming Force: What happened in the final days of the Gulf War," undermines the claims made by the government, the military and the media nearly a decade ago that the US attack on Iraq had put an end to the "Vietnam syndrome." The Gulf War, the argument went, had demonstrated Washington's capacity to wage a "clean" and relatively casualty-free war with international support.

Hersh's investigation demonstrates that the atrocities committed in the Persian Gulf differed from those carried out in Vietnam principally in that US forces were able to carry them out from a discreet distance. Killing was accomplished either through the use of "smart bombs," like the one that killed hundreds of women and children in the Al-Almariya air raid shelter, or, as is reported in McCaffrey's case, the deployment of missile-firing attack helicopters to incinerate Iraqi troops from a safe distance.

The principal lesson of the Vietnam War that the US military carried into the Persian Gulf was the so-called "Powell Doctrine," named for then-Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Colin Powell. It called for the use of overwhelming force to obliterate the enemy and prevent American casualties, thereby minimizing opposition at home. The result was the most savage aerial bombardment in history, one that reduced the modern infrastructure of Iraq to rubble, killing thousands of Iraqi civilians and creating conditions of malnutrition and disease which, compounded by US-backed sanctions, have claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands more over the past decade, most of them children.

In Kuwait, millions of tons of explosives were dropped on trenches and bunkers manned by Iraqi soldiers, killing untold thousands while leaving survivors shell-shocked and virtually unable to engage in combat.

The so-called "ground war" initiated by the US invasion lasted all of four days. Most of the few dozen US casualties were the result of "friendly fire," when American units were caught in the massive fire

power thrown against the Iraqis.

Some indication of the slaughter emerged with televised images of the so-called "highway of death" from Kuwait to Basra in southern Iraq. The US carpet-bombed Iraqis as they fled in panic, leaving the six-lane highway littered for miles with the blackened shells of trucks, cars and military vehicles and the charred corpses of Iraqi soldiers and civilians.

On February 28, 1991, the Bush administration declared a cessation of hostilities and called for a negotiated end to the war. Washington had no interest in a permanent occupation of Iraq and feared that the complete destruction of the military forces of Saddam Hussein would create conditions for revolutionary upheavals and chronic instability in the strategically important country.

At the time of the cease-fire, McCaffrey's 24th Infantry Division, a mechanized unit of 18,000 troops with battle tanks and heavy artillery, had driven into southern Iraq in a flanking maneuver designed to cut off Iraqi columns fleeing from Kuwait toward Basra. Hersh reports that while other US units ceased offensive operations and stayed in place after the cease-fire, McCaffrey's division pressed on until it came within striking distance of a road that was one of the principal exit routes for Iraqi forces fleeing from Kuwait. The Iraqis had been assured safe passage, but, according to Hersh, the 24th Division's forward deployment was to make that impossible.

In the pre-dawn hours of March 2, a scout unit in the forward edge of the division reported that it had been fired upon by Iraqis. Thus, according to the official version, began the "Battle of Rumaila," named for the oilfield through which the road passed. Troops in the unit commonly referred to the engagement as a "turkey shoot."

Officers and soldiers interviewed by Hersh questioned whether any Iraqi shots had been fired. Several interviewed for the article had been with the units closest to the road and saw no hostile actions by the retreating Iraqis. "Somebody panicked and thought they saw something they didn't see," was one explanation given for the reported Iraqi attack.

Nonetheless, the alleged incident was seized upon by US commanders to launch a murderous assault that McCaffrey claimed was designed to protect "the safety of my soldiers." By the time the US attack began, however, the bulk of the Iraqi column had proceeded north well past the 24th Division's lines, with Iraqi tanks loaded onto flatbed trucks and their gun turrets locked and pointed backwards, as had been agreed upon in cease-fire talks.

Hersh claims that McCaffrey chose to use massive force. Helicopter gunships were ordered to destroy vehicles crossing a bridge over the marshlands, effectively cutting off the road, while artillery sealed off the other end to the south. The rag-tag column of trucks, cars and armored vehicles was trapped in a killing zone, with Iraqis abandoning their vehicles and fleeing in panic into the ditches along the roadside. Apache helicopters pounded them with missiles, while

US tanks poured cannon fire on the defeated and unresisting column.

"We went up the road blowing the shit out of everything," one soldier with a tank platoon told Hersh. "It was like going down an American highway—people all mixed up in cars and trucks. People got out of their cars and ran away. We shot them. My orders were to shoot if they were armed or running. The Iraqis were getting massacred."

According to McCaffrey, the attack destroyed more than 400 trucks and 187 tanks and armored vehicles. How many Iraqis were slaughtered has never been estimated, either for the one-sided battle in Rumaila or for the war as a whole.

At least one of the vehicles destroyed by a US Hellfire missile was a bus carrying Iraqi children. The same tank soldier said that a sergeant came and told him and other members of his unit to prepare for a grim task. "He said, 'We've blown away a busload of kids,' and warned us that we were going to get called for a burial mission." However, the US soldiers were never sent to bury the children's bodies. In all likelihood the corpses were plowed under the sand together with the rest of the Iraqi dead.

Other actions that fall into the category of war crimes were also reported in connection with the 24th Division's operations. One involved a scout platoon sent to block traffic on the same road the day before the cease-fire went into effect. The Americans were besieged by "scared and crying" Iraqis desperate to surrender. Among them were wounded and bandaged soldiers aboard a clearly marked hospital bus. The total number of prisoners reached 382.

According to the *New Yorker* article, the US scout unit disarmed the Iraqis and herded them into a space sealed off on three sides by the hospital bus and two trucks. They gave them food and water and assured them they would be safe, radioing their status and position to headquarters. When the unit received radioed instructions to move on, US soldiers gave each of the Iraqis propaganda leaflets printed in Arabic that promised that any soldier who surrendered would be allowed to return home.

As they rode away, members of the scout unit reportedly saw a column of Bradley armored vehicles approach and begin firing machine-guns into the prisoners, some of whom attempted to run. "I had fed these guys and gotten them to trust me," said Sgt. James Testerman, a member of the scout unit. He recalled one Iraqi who refused to touch the food placed in front of him, prompting the sergeant to take a bite of it to show him it wasn't poisoned. "The tough guy broke down crying," he recalled. "I can only imagine what he thought" when the armored vehicles "started shooting—that we were sending him to the slaughter. You think about it. All those people."

In another incident, a unit searching a village for weapons reportedly opened fire with machine-guns on a group of villagers walking behind a man waving a white flag. Soldiers who witnessed the shooting estimated that 20 civilians were killed.

As the 24th Division prepared to go home, McCaffrey praised his troops for their one-sided victory. The war in the Gulf, he said, was "probably the single most unifying event that has happened in America since World War II.... The upshot will be that, just like Vietnam had the tragic effect on our country for years, this one has brought back a new way of looking at ourselves."

More than a few of McCaffrey's soldiers saw the conflict differently, however, feeling shame and revulsion. Major David Pierson, who served as an intelligence captain with the 24th Division, indicated that many felt guilty: "guilty that we had slaughtered them so; guilty that we had performed so well and they so poorly; guilty that we were

running up the score.... They were like children fleeing before us, unorganized, scared, wishing it would all end. We continued to pour it on."

Within months of the division arriving back at Fort Stewart, Georgia, an anonymous letter arrived at the Pentagon detailing the massacre of the Iraqi prisoners and charging that McCaffrey had initiated the March 2 battle without any Iraqi provocation. The letter, which included detailed information that could have only come from within the general's command staff, referred to the actions as "war crimes."

Other soldiers assigned to the division also came forward and told military investigators what they had seen. In each case, the army conducted cursory and secretive investigations and suppressed the charges, driving some of those who had made them out of the service. Among McCaffrey's officers, few dared contradict the official version, certain that their careers would be destroyed.

That the reports of these atrocities have only surfaced in public nine years after the fact is a testament to the subservient role played by the US media throughout the Gulf War. Officially barred for the first time from any coverage of US military operations on the front line, the media contented itself with acting as propaganda cheerleader for the US effort and lionizing men like McCaffrey and General Norman Schwarzkopf as heroes.

Accepting de facto military censorship, the television networks and major news organizations repeated every pretext provided by Washington for its military action, while remaining silent on the devastating impact the US war machine had upon the people of Iraq.

The silence continues. Hersh's well-founded charge of US war crimes has received scant treatment in the broadcast and print media.

While these atrocities were carried out under the Bush administration, the Clinton White House has rushed to McCaffrey's defense, participating in an extraordinary government campaign aimed first at suppressing Hersh's article, and then vilifying its author. This included pressure on former military officers to change their stories and efforts to induce human rights groups to issue statements defending McCaffrey and denouncing the piece before it was even published.

The White House and the Pentagon have serious and immediate concerns about the retired general being implicated in war crimes. As the Clinton administration's "drug czar," McCaffrey has played the leading role in campaigning for the US Congress to pass a \$1.7-billion military aid package for Colombia that would substantially increase US involvement in that country's protracted civil war. He has also toured Latin America, attempting to win support from the region's governments for Washington's escalation.



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