TV documentary: US lied about Gulf War missile “hits”

Henry Michaels
7 February 2003

On Wednesday evening, the same day that US Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed the UN Security Council, a Canadian television program provided a timely reminder of the lengths to which the US government, assisted by a servile media, went to deceive American and world public opinion during the 1991 Gulf War.

In a report entitled “The Best Defence,” the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s documentary program, *The Fifth Estate* traced one set of lies told by the previous Bush administration and the Pentagon during the 1991 conflict. It replayed footage of both President George Bush the elder and Desert Storm commander General H. Norman Schwarzkopf declaring that the US military’s Patriot missiles had achieved a 100 percent success rate in destroying Iraqi Scud missiles headed for Saudi Arabia and Israel.

The claims were a crucial part of Washington’s propaganda effort to create the impression of high-technology precision weaponry that would ensure a rapid victory with few US casualties, while causing limited Iraqi civilian deaths. Billions of dollars were at stake for Raytheon, the company that manufactured the Patriots, and, by extension, the entire military industry upon which the US economy depends heavily.

In briefings that were featured by every American TV network and most media outlets around the globe, Schwarzkopf and other Gulf War commanders displayed video footage and aerial photographs boasting not only that every Scud had been intercepted, but that mobile Scud launchers had been blown to pieces with unerring accuracy by guided missiles.

Accompanied by the media corps, the first President Bush traveled to where the Patriot missiles were manufactured, the Raytheon plant in Lexington, Massachusetts, to publicly congratulate the assembled employees. “It is thanks to the patriots here that the Patriot has achieved such success,” he stated.

It is now clear from *The Fifth Estate* program that when he made that boast, Bush knew it to be a lie. Just before his appearance at the Raytheon factory, he received an urgent visit from Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Arens, who warned him that Israel was about to enter the war against Iraq because the Patriot missiles had proven completely ineffective.

Interviewed by *The Fifth Estate*, Arens said he told Bush that, at best, the Patriots had intercepted 20 percent of the Scuds, a figure that soon turned out to be generous. Bush was desperate to forestall the Israeli threat, which could have inflamed the Middle East. He called in Pentagon officials, including Defense Secretary Richard Cheney, who insisted that the US military had reliable evidence of its “100 percent” hit rate.

But by the time the 40-day war ended, 39 Iraqi Scuds had struck Israeli territory, killing two people and wounding hundreds, despite constant fire from US-operated Patriot batteries near Tel Aviv. American soldiers also became victims of the Patriot cover-up. In the most serious incident, 28 were killed when a Scud missile hit a barracks in Saudi Arabia.

Conducting their own investigations, the Israelis quickly established that the Patriot missiles had probably failed to knock out a single Scud. Closer examination of Schwarzkopf’s presentations established that the mobile Scud launchers he showed being bombed were, in fact, fuel or water tankers.

The Fifth Estate claimed that Bush may not have been aware of the Patriot’s failure. Arens himself stated that Bush appeared to be stunned by his comments. Yet, if Bush appeared surprised, he quickly gained his composure. On his much-publicized visit to the Raytheon, he did not depart from his prepared script, hailing the performance of US military technology.

Throughout the 1990s, the Pentagon, the Bush and Clinton administrations and the mass media contrived to prevent the story of the Patriot debacle becoming widely known to the American people. They buried a 1992 report by a House of Representatives Operations of Government subcommittee. After hearing expert testimony, the committee concluded:

“The Patriot missile system was not the spectacular success in the Persian Gulf War that the American public was led to believe. There is little evidence to prove that the Patriot hit more than a few Scud missiles launched by Iraq during the Gulf War, and there are some doubts about even these engagements. The public and the Congress were misled by definitive statements of success issued by administration and Raytheon representatives during and after the war.”

While the committee, chaired by Michigan Democrat John Conyers, was careful to clear Bush and Schwarzkopf of any personal culpability, its own report showed that the Patriot’s

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utter failure must have been known at the highest official levels.

By the time the committee convened, the Army's official assessments of the Patriot's success rate in the Gulf War had fallen from 100 percent to 25 percent. Generals admitted relying on intelligence reports of ground damage that were unverified, contradictory, erroneous and misleading.

When properly examined, the media's video recordings of supposed Patriot "hits" showed clearly that the Patriots were not hitting the Iraqi warheads—in some cases they were missing by hundreds of meters. One expert witness, Dr. Theodore Postol of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, concluded from his analysis of video tapes of roughly 25 Patriot intercept attempts that most missed by "hundreds of meters or more."

Other independent reviews, even using the Army's own methodology and evidence, indicated that Patriots hit no more than 9 percent of the Scud warheads engaged. Many of the targets turned out to be debris from the poorly designed Scuds as they broke up in flight. It became apparent that at least 45 percent of the 158 Patriots launched in the war were aimed against debris or false targets.

In addition, it emerged that the Army had relied on Raytheon to conduct its postwar analysis of the Patriot's performance, paying the company $520,000 for its services.

Nonetheless, the official cover-up extended through the 1990s, enabling the Clinton administration and Raytheon to sell or deploy hundreds of Patriot missiles around the world. Having paid $117 million for two batteries of Patriots in September 1990, a month after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Israel later ordered a third battery, for delivery in March 1994.

President Bill Clinton personally arranged the sale of two Patriot batteries to Turkey when visiting that country in 1994. Other substantial customers included Taiwan and South Korea. Last month, Bahrain joined the list, in preparation for the planned US invasion of Iraq.

These sales continued even after serious problems developed with the second and third generations of Patriots, known as PAC-2 and PAC-3 missiles. In March 2000, the US Army announced that it had replaced hundreds of PAC-2s in southwest Asia and Korea, due to breakdowns in "hot" missiles that had been powered up and ready to fire for months on end.

Last June, the Pentagon's Ballistic Missile Defense Agency reported that the PAC-3, manufactured by Lockheed-Martin, had failed in three out of four tests in intercepting dummy ballistic missiles at the Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands.

Yet before the end of the year, the Defense Acquisition Board formally approved the production of 208 PAC-3 missiles for 2003 and 2004. Last December this order was accelerated because of the impending war, adding $120 million to the price tag. A Pentagon official told CNN the military was "increasing production of the PAC-3 missile because of things that may happen."

Once more, the media hype is being cranked up, with Pentagon officials insisting that the new missiles are far superior to the old Patriots. Whereas Patriots exploded near an incoming threat, officials declared that the PAC-3's improved sensors and newer radar would allow it to "categorically destroy a Scud missile in flight."

As in 1991, these claims are made for the most cynical, politically motivated reasons. Because of the breadth of popular opposition to the planned war, the myth of US invincibility and high-tech accuracy is even more needed than it was a decade ago. Israel's government, now headed by Ariel Sharon, must also be restrained again. In addition to supplying Israel with batteries of PAC-2s and PAC-3, Washington has spent $2 billion jointly developing with Israel another anti-missile system, the Arrow, which is designed to intercept targets at higher altitudes, 50 kilometers above the ground.

Not the least consideration in the ongoing Patriot debacle is the protection of the gigantic profits of military supplier companies such as Raytheon and Lockheed-Martin. Over the past two decades, Raytheon, which specializes in anti-missile and aerospace systems, has become a global giant, boasting 77,500 employees worldwide and $16.9 billion in 2001 revenues.

Far more is at stake than simply the Patriot and Arrow contracts. The Patriot revelations throw into doubt the Bush administration's entire multibillion-dollar missile defense shield program. Having exposed the flaws in the Patriot, scientists such as the MIT's Theodore Postol have condemned the program as futile. Responding last December to the White House's latest announcement of a plan to deploy interceptor missiles in Alaska, Postol said the system could be "paralyzed by the simplest methods you can imagine."

Drawing on the inherent problems revealed by the Patriot project, Postol explained that the interceptor missiles could be easily and cheaply tricked by releasing decoys or wrapping warheads in radar-absorbing materials.

The Fifth Estate stopped well short of accusing Washington of deliberate deception. It raised nothing about the corporate and economic interests driving the renewed war campaign. Nevertheless, intentionally or otherwise, it gave a glimpse of the hypocrisy, corruption and fraud that dominate the political and military establishment now headed by George W. Bush.

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