UN conceals Picasso's "Guernica" for Powell's presentation

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In an act with extraordinary historical resonance, United Nations officials covered up a tapestry reproduction of Pablo Picasso's anti-war mural "Guernica" during US Secretary of State Colin Powell's February 5 presentation of the American case for war against Iraq.

Picasso's painting commemorates a small Basque village bombed by German forces in April 1937 during the Spanish Civil War. The painter, in desolate black, white and grey, depicts a nightmarish scene of men, women, children and animals under bombardment. The twisted, writhing forms include images of a screaming mother holding a dead child, a corpse with wide-open eyes and a gored horse. Art historian Herbert Read described the work as "a cry of outrage and horror amplified by a great genius."

The reproduction has hung outside the Security Council chamber at UN headquarters in New York since its donation by the estate of Nelson A. Rockefeller in 1985. As the council gathered to hear Powell on Wednesday, workers placed a blue curtain and flags of the council's member countries in front of the tapestry.

UN officials claimed that the cover-up was simply a matter of creating a more effective backdrop for the television cameras. "When we do have large crowds we put the flags up and the UN logo in front of the tapestry," asserted Stephane Dujarric. *New York Newsday*, however, reported that "Diplomats at the United Nations, speaking on condition they not be named, have been quoted in recent days telling journalists that they believe the United States leaned on UN officials to cover the tapestry, rather than have it in the background while Powell or other US diplomats argued for war on Iraq."

The right-wing *Washington Times* was obliged to note: "Television cameras routinely pan the tapestry as diplomats enter and leave the council chambers, and its muted browns and taupes lend a poignant backdrop to the talking heads. So it was a surprise for many of the envoys to arrive at U.N. headquarters last Monday for a Security Council briefing by chief weapons inspectors, only to find the searing work covered with a baby-blue banner and the U.N. logo."

Further damaging Dujarric's claim, the *Toronto Star*'s art critic Peter Goddard wrote that "the coverup may have been prompted by UN realization that images of the mural's vivid anti-war message were televised world-wide when it appeared as a backdrop to the Jan. 27 interim report by chief weapons inspector Hans Blix."

A group of protesters held up copies of Picasso's painting outside the UN on Wednesday while Powell was making his warmongering appeal.

Aside from its general evocation of anti-war sentiment, Picasso's painting threatened to speak to historical parallels that the Bush administration and UN officials were clearly determined that the media or the public should not make.

For an entire generation the bombing of Guernica and Picasso's interpretation of the event signified the barbarity of fascism and the widespread determination to resist its violence and brutality.

The bombing of Guernica, by the German Luftwaffe in support of Francisco Franco's Nationalist army, was one of the first opportunities for European fascism to reveal its murderous face.

German bombers launched an unprovoked attack on the Basque village of 5,000 at 4:30 in the afternoon, the busiest hour of a market day. According to one account, "The streets were jammed with townspeople and peasants from the countryside. Never before in modern

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warfare had noncombatants been slaughtered in such numbers, and by such means" (Lael Wertenbaker, *The World of Picasso*, 1967).

From 4:30 to 7:45 the squadron of German airplanes rained uncontested bombs and gunfire on the village. "Villagers who were not immediately killed fled to the fields to take refuge, only to be ravaged by plunging machine gun fighters" (Thomas Gordon and Max Morgan, *Guernica: The Crucible of World War II*, 1975).

One-third of the population of the village was either killed or wounded. The fires that engulfed the city burned for three days. Isolated farms as far away as four miles were bombed.

A survivor of the attack recounted, "The air was alive with the cries of the wounded. I saw a man crawling down the street, dragging his broken legs.... Pieces of people and animals were lying everywhere.... In the wreckage there was a young woman. I could not take my eyes off her. Bones stuck through her dress. Her head twisted right around her neck. She lay, mouth open, her tongue hanging out. I vomited and lost consciousness" (Gordon and Morgan).

The bombing of Guernica had no strategic military significance. It was an opportunity for the German military—with the authorization of Franco—to test its powerful new air force. The killing and maiming of 1,700 Spanish villagers was essentially done for bombing practice. The raid also had the aim of intimidating and terrorizing not simply the Spanish population, but any and all of those who might oppose the fascist onslaught.

After news of the massacre had reached Paris, more than one million people flooded the city's streets on May 1 to protest the atrocity. Eyewitness accounts filled French newspapers. Stunned and horrified by the black and white photographs of the bombing's devastation, Picasso quickly sketched the first images for the Guernica mural. Three months later the painting was delivered to the Spanish pavilion at the 1937 World's Fair in Paris. Following the victory of Franco's fascist army, with the aid of Hitler and Mussolini, Picasso forbade the work's display in Spain until the country enjoyed "public liberties and democratic institutions." "Guernica" was returned to Spain on October 25, 1981, on the centenary of the painter's birth.

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