

# Rumsfeld pushes big lie on "human shields" in Iraq

**Henry Michaels**  
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Faced by protests against their war plans involving millions of people worldwide, the Bush administration and the US media are increasingly employing one of the "big lie" techniques notoriously employed by the likes of Hitler and Stalin: accusing their enemy of the crimes they are about to commit.

International humanitarian agencies are warning that the coming US assault on Iraq could cause half a million civilian casualties and create two million refugees. But the White House and Pentagon, joined by a complicit media, are seeking to shift the blame for the impending slaughter to the Iraqi government.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld ramped up the propaganda effort at a February 19 Pentagon press briefing where, without offering the slightest evidence, he accused Saddam Hussein of preparing to use civilians as "human shields" against US attacks.

According to Rumsfeld: "It is a practice that reveals contempt for the norms of humanity, the laws of armed conflict, and, I am advised, Islamic law, practice and belief."

He declared that those responsible would be treated as war criminals. "These are not tactics of war, they are crimes of war. Deploying human shields is not a military strategy, it's murder, a violation of the laws of armed conflict, and a crime against humanity, and it will be treated as such."

In a chilling performance, Rumsfeld sought to prepare American and world public opinion for the widespread civilian deaths that will inevitably be caused by the Pentagon's "shock and awe" plan to unleash more than 3,000 missiles on Iraq in the first 48 hours of the invasion.

He charged that Saddam Hussein "deliberately constructs mosques near military facilities, uses schools, hospitals, orphanages and cultural treasures to shield military forces, thereby exposing helpless men, women and children to danger." This can only mean that mosques, schools, hospitals, orphanages, cultural treasures and other civilian sites are on the Pentagon's target lists.

Not one journalist at the Pentagon briefing challenged Rumsfeld to substantiate his allegations.

In effect, the Bush administration is accusing Baghdad of using the entire Iraqi population as "human shields." Washington is preparing to commit war crimes of monumental proportions by launching an unprovoked war, inflicting terrible civilian casualties, and then depicting the Iraqi leaders as the war criminals.

The Iraqi leadership is not the only target of this truly Orwellian logic. Rumsfeld's threats followed reports that hundreds of peace activists from Britain, the United States and other countries are assembling in Baghdad with the intention of camping near power stations, water plants and other civilian facilities that the US and its allies bombed during the 1991 Gulf War.

One group, the Iraq Peace Team, includes US veterans from the Vietnam War. They have been hanging banners on bridges and power plants that say a US bombardment of these sites would amount to a war crime. Another group, known as Human Shields, has stated that its aim is to prevent a US attack.

Rumsfeld, flanked by General Richard Myers, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, indicated that these anti-war volunteers could also be accused of war crimes. "Those who follow his [Saddam's] orders to use human shields will pay a severe price for their actions," Rumsfeld declared.

Myers added: "It is a violation of the law of armed conflict to use noncombatants as a means of shielding potential military targets—even those people who may volunteer for this purpose.... Therefore, if death or serious injury to a noncombatant resulted from these efforts, the individuals responsible for deploying any innocent civilians as human shields could be guilty of grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions."

The truth is that Rumsfeld and Myers, along with President Bush, are guilty of preparing a war of aggression—the very crime for which Hitler's henchmen were tried at Nuremberg. Their war will flagrantly breach a series of international laws and conventions going back to the Declaration of St. Petersburg in 1868 that require armed forces to minimize harm to civilians during battles.

The people of both Iraq and the Balkans have already experienced Washington's use of the "human shields" lie as a cover for war crimes. During the 1991 Gulf war, the White House and the Pentagon consistently blamed Saddam Hussein for the civilian casualties of US bombing, including the killing of 288 people in Baghdad's Al-Amariya bomb shelter.

In one of the most infamous atrocities of the 1999 bombardment of Serbia, US aircraft bombed a refugee convoy. Initially, US and NATO officials claimed that the vehicles were military. When investigations by reporters confirmed it was a line of civilian refugees, NATO insisted that Serb military forces and equipment had infiltrated the convoy as a setup.

As for Rumsfeld, he is politically complicit in war crimes in Afghanistan, including the killing of as many as 800 captured Taliban prisoners in November 2001 at Mazar-i-Sharif. Rumsfeld vetoed a proposal by Northern Alliance General Khan Daoud to grant foreign Taliban fighters safe passage out of Afghanistan and gave the green light for a killing spree, saying "My hope is that they will either be killed or taken prisoner." [See "US war crime in Afghanistan: Hundreds of prisoners of war slaughtered at Mazar-i-Sharif"]

One government in the Middle East has admitted to forcing innocent civilians to act as human shields, resulting in numerous Palestinian deaths. Israel's Sharon government, however, is fiercely protected by the Bush administration. Last May, after Israeli human rights groups sought a Supreme Court order barring the practice following its widespread use during the army's assaults on Jenin and other West Bank cities, the military admitted the policy was illegal and pledged it would stop. But media reports have confirmed that soldiers are still routinely using Palestinian men as live shields.

Major US media outlets consistently retail the official line that the Bush administration and the military top brass are determined to do everything in their power to minimize civilian casualties, through the use of precision-guided "smart bombs." But of late, the media has supplemented such claims with elaborations on the government theme of Iraqi human shields and other alleged Iraqi war crimes. At the same time, it is gingerly preparing US public opinion for images and reports of Iraqi civilian victims of US bombs, knowing in advance it will be unable to totally suppress evidence of the impending carnage.

On February 5, for example, the *Washington Post* reported that Saddam Hussein had armed 1 million Iraqi civilians with rifles and grenade launchers as a last line of defense against an American invasion. The next day, General Myers announced that Washington would consider such people to

be combatants.

On February 18, the day before Rumsfeld's latest Pentagon briefing, an article listing a number of American alibis-in-advance appeared in the *New York Times*. The piece was obviously based on handouts from the Pentagon and the White House. Under the headline, "War Planners Speak of the Risks," senior writers David Sanger and Thom Shanker reported that Rumsfeld "has a four- to five-page, typewritten catalog of risks that senior aides say he keeps in his desk drawer."

Sanger and Shanker let it be known that the document warned of "Saddam Hussein hiding weapons in mosques or hospitals or cultural sites, and using his citizenry or captured foreign journalists as human shields." The authors made no pretence of substantiating these claims. Rumsfeld's other concerns, they informed their readers, included neighboring states being attacked, and the use of Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction" across the region.

President Bush, the article added, was preparing the United States for "what one senior official calls 'the very real possibility that this will not look like Afghanistan,' a military victory that came with greater speed than any had predicted, and with fewer casualties."

Perhaps the most revealing comment quoted in the article came from an unnamed senior official who cautioned that despite months of internal studies, advance planning and the insertion of CIA officers and Special Operations forces into Iraq, "We still do not know how US forces will be received. Will it be cheers, jeers or shots? And the fact is, we won't know until we get there."

In other words, the White House and its trusted journalists are attempting to prepare public opinion for American forces being greeted with hostility as murderers and colonial-style conquerors, rather than liberators. The scale of the terror, death and destruction being planned will only intensify such hatred.

Sanger and Shanker are conscious of their own role as conduits for the administration's black propaganda. They acknowledge that "such cautionary notes from the White House, the Pentagon and intelligence officials may well have a political purpose ... the administration may feel it is better to warn the American public of these dangers in advance."



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