

“Human shields” charge

Bush prepares alibi for slaughter in Iraq

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The Bush administration’s buildup to war has reached the stage where top officials feel compelled to arm themselves with alibis for the coming slaughter of thousands of Iraqi civilians.

That is the significance of Bush’s speech February 12 in Nashville, warning that the Iraqi regime is preparing to use its civilian population as “human shields” in the event of a US invasion. He said that Iraq’s president Saddam Hussein intends to deploy the country’s military forces among civilians “in order to shield his military and blame coalition forces for civilian casualties that he has caused.” As always, Bush presented no evidence to back these assertions.

“America views the Iraqi people as human beings who have suffered long enough,” Bush told a conference of Christian broadcasters. The address, dripping with the kind of hypocrisy that is the stock-in-trade of his audience, constituted a transparent attempt to blame the Iraqis for the massive destruction that the US military is preparing to unleash against their country.

The argument is that if Iraqi soldiers attempt to defend the country’s capital and largest city from conquest by invading US troops, they are responsible for civilians killed by American bombs, missiles and gunfire. This particular species of lying is by no means an innovation. During the last Persian Gulf war, the White House of Bush senior and the Pentagon routinely blamed civilian casualties on Iraqi positioning of military forces and even—absurdly—on anti-aircraft fire falling short.

The single most atrocious attack of that war, the bombing of the Al-Amariya bomb shelter in Baghdad, was first dismissed as “Iraqi propaganda” and then defended. The 288 civilians killed by American bombs, including 91 children, were said to be proof that the

Iraqi regime “does not share our value for the sanctity of human life.”

Bush’s comments on “human shields” were supplemented by testimony delivered the same day by Vice Admiral Lowell Jacoby before the Senate Armed Services Committee. “If hostilities begin,” he said, “Saddam is likely to employ a ‘scorched earth’ strategy, destroying food, transportation, energy and other infrastructure, attempting to create a humanitarian disaster significant enough to stop a military advance.”

Jacoby went on to say that the Iraqi regime would likely unleash weapons of mass destruction on its own citizens in order to blame the US for war crimes.

There is without question a “scorched earth” strategy for Iraq; the Pentagon has prepared it. Plans leaked to the press earlier this month for a “shock and awe” campaign call for bombardment of the country with 3,000 to 4,000 cruise missiles and smart bombs in the first 48 hours of a US attack, more explosive power than was used during the entire Persian Gulf War a decade ago.

This air assault will be aimed at killing Iraqi civilians. The idea is to inflict sufficient casualties to shock the entire population into submitting to the US invaders. One of the architects of the plan, Harlan Ullman, currently an analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, compared it to the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. “The Japanese quit because they couldn’t appreciate that one bomb could do what 500 planes did in a night. That was shock,” he said. “Now, can you take that level of shock and apply it with conventional weapons? We thought you could.”

Nuclear bombs, however, have by no means been ruled out, as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld made clear once again on Thursday. “Our policy ... has been generally that we will not foreclose the possible use of

nuclear weapons if attacked,” he told the Senate Armed Services Committee. The claim that Iraq is prepared to use weapons of mass destruction against its own people is designed to provide a cover for the Pentagon’s own contingency plans for the use of such weapons.

As for plans to destroy the country’s infrastructure, the American ruling elite and military have much expertise in this field. Much of Iraq’s economic and social infrastructure was destroyed in the US bombing campaign in 1991, which knocked out power grids, sewage treatment plants, water purification facilities and hospitals. This devastation, followed by a decade of punishing economic sanctions maintained by Washington, has caused the deaths of over one million Iraqis.

As for Jacoby’s charge that the Iraqi regime is planning to create a “humanitarian disaster,” there have been multiple reports issued by the United Nations and relief agencies warning that US military action will accomplish precisely that without any assistance from Saddam Hussein. One physicians’ group has predicted that more than a quarter of a million will be killed, while a conservative UN estimate foresees half a million people requiring treatment for wounds and injuries suffered in the war.

Up to 16 million Iraqis depend on a government food relief system that is certain to collapse with US military action. Millions more will be turned into refugees by an invasion. Air strikes on power plants will wipe out the already ravaged water and sanitation systems, creating the conditions for new epidemics.

The attempt to blame such death and devastation in advance on Iraqi “scorched earth” or “human shield” tactics is the hallmark of officials who are preparing massive war crimes.



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