

Missing explosives at Al Qaqaa: Bush caught in another Iraq war lie

Patrick Martin
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The Bush administration's political fortunes have been dealt a serious blow, only a week before the presidential election, with the revelation October 25 that 400 tons of extremely powerful explosives—some potentially usable in detonators for nuclear weapons—have gone missing in Iraq.

A joint investigation by the *New York Times* and CBS News found that the huge stockpile of high-powered explosives, of three types known by their abbreviations as HMX, RDX and PETN, has disappeared from one of Saddam Hussein's largest conventional weapons depots, at Al Qaqaa, 30 miles south of Baghdad. The facility was captured by US forces during the invasion of Iraq, but not carefully inspected until May 27, 2003, when US agents found that all of the explosive materials had been removed.

Nearly three weeks ago, on October 10, the US puppet government in Baghdad reported the disappearance of the explosives in a letter to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the chief nuclear weapons inspection agency of the United Nations. IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei presented the letter to the UN Security Council, but the US and UN officials concealed the news until after the *Times* article was published Monday. (According to an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*, a rabidly pro-Bush media outlet, the administration knew of the disappearance from October 15.)

The letter to the IAEA from Mohammad J. Abbas, an official of the Iraqi Ministry of Science and Technology, gave the quantities of missing explosives as 215 tons of HMX, 156 tons of RDX and 6 tons of PETN. The substances are the most lethal non-nuclear explosives used in making armaments.

They are ideal weapons for terrorists: less than one pound of HMX was used to blow up Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1987. HMX is also used for the explosive charge that compresses quantities of uranium into the critical mass required for detonating a nuclear device.

The IAEA was monitoring the Al Qaqaa site before the US invasion, but was prevented from continuing its monitoring activities by the Bush administration, which refused to allow IAEA inspectors back into Iraq after the US seized control of Baghdad.

White House spokesmen tried to downplay the significance of the report. They initially suggested that Saddam Hussein might have ordered removal of the explosives between the last UN inspection of Al Qaqaa, in January 2003 and the first thorough US search five months later. The current US-appointed regime in Iraq,

however, maintains that the explosives disappeared after the fall of Baghdad on April 9, 2003, during the period of widespread looting that followed the US conquest of the country.

Bush aides called attention to an NBC News broadcast the same day as the *Times* article, which reported that soldiers from the 101st Airborne had not found high explosives at Al Qaqaa when they arrived at the facility on April 10, 2003. However, they deliberately falsified the content of the report, portraying it as proof that the explosives were gone before the US forces took control.

This distortion compelled NBC to broadcast an unusual rebuttal the following night, with anchorman Tom Brokaw declaring, "Last night on this broadcast we reported that the 101st Airborne never found the nearly 380 tons of HMX and RDX explosives. We did not conclude the explosives were missing or had vanished, nor did we say they missed the explosives. We simply reported that the 101st did not find them."

Brokaw added, "For its part, the Bush campaign immediately pointed to our report as conclusive proof that the weapons had been removed before the Americans arrived. That is possible, but that is not what we reported."

There is more than a little irony here. The Bush administration finds it difficult to prove the nonexistence of weapons stockpiles—the same task it set before Saddam Hussein in the period leading up to the US invasion of Iraq. Moreover, the very pretext used to justify the invasion—that stockpiles of deadly weapons in Iraq might be handed over to Islamic terrorists—has quite possibly been transformed from myth to reality by the actions of the US government itself.

Since the invasion, US officials, including the 9/11 commission and the CIA's chief weapons inspector, have confirmed that the Iraqi regime possessed no stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction and did not collaborate with Al Qaeda or other Islamic terrorist groups. But by invading Iraq, toppling the Hussein regime, and failing to secure weapons sites—using US troops to guard the oil and interior ministries instead—Washington has created the conditions for highly destructive conventional weapons to fall into the hands of terrorist groups.

The exposure of missing high explosives comes on the heels of a similar exposure of missing nuclear-related equipment. ElBaradei raised his concerns on this matter in a letter to the UN Security Council on October 1. Based on satellite photos and other evidence, he pointed to "the widespread and apparently systematic

dismantlement” at sites subject to IAEA monitoring. “The imagery shows in many instances the dismantlement of entire buildings that housed high precision equipment (such as flow forming, milling and turning machines; electron beam welders; coordinate measurement machines) formerly monitored and tagged with IAEA seals, as well as the removal of equipment and materials (such as high-strength aluminium) from open storage areas.”

The machines were deemed to be “dual use”—that is, one of their possible applications is the manufacture of nuclear weapons. The IAEA monitoring ensured that such equipment was not used in nuclear programs and that it was not moved or shipped out of the country. Nineteen months after the US invasion of Iraq, neither the Bush administration nor its puppet administration in Baghdad can account for the whereabouts of this sensitive equipment. As ElBaradei diplomatically pointed out: “[T]he disappearance of such equipment and materials may be of proliferation significance.”

Following this week’s reports by CBS and the *Times* of the missing high explosives, the commander of the Second Brigade of the 101st Division, Col. Joseph Anderson, denied that his troops had conducted any search of Al Qaqaa in April 2003, saying that he did not learn until this week—18 months later—that the facility was considered sensitive by the IAEA and had been visited by the UN weapons inspectors before the war.

“We happened to stumble on it,” he told the press. “We did not get involved in any of the bunkers. It was not our mission. It was not our focus. We were just stopping there on our way to Baghdad. The plan was to leave that very same day. The plan was not to go in there and start searching. It looked like all the other ammunition supply points we had seen already.”

The revelation immediately became the focus of political attacks on the White House, both at home and abroad. IAEA officials, who rebutted American claims of an active nuclear weapons program in Iraq and were repeatedly denounced by the Bush administration in the run-up to the war, no doubt felt satisfaction in pointing out the administration’s failure to secure one of the largest stockpiles of weapons in the country.

Russian UN ambassador Andrei Denisov told reporters that the Security Council should take up the disappearance of the explosives and their potential for use by terrorists. He urged the Security Council to authorize the return of UN weapons inspectors to Iraq.

The *Times* report immediately became an issue in the presidential campaign, with Democratic candidate John Kerry declaring that the missing explosives “could produce bombs powerful enough to demolish entire buildings, blow up airplanes, destroy tanks and kill our troops.” In speeches and new campaign commercials, the Democratic campaign used the incident to attack the Bush administration’s handling of Iraq as incompetent and negligent.

Kerry charged that Bush had sought to conceal the disappearance of the explosives until after the election, and linked it to a report Tuesday in the *Washington Post* that the administration was preparing to request an additional \$70 billion in funding for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but was delaying that until after November 2 as well.

The controversy produced obvious signs of consternation and disarray in the Bush campaign. Bush refused for two days running to discuss the missing Iraq explosives. At one point, when questioned on the subject while he was campaigning at a Wisconsin dairy farm, Bush “simply glared,” reporters said.

Bush’s chief campaign strategist Karl Rove denounced the *Times* report as evidence of media bias, and attacked Kerry for raising an issue “ripped from the headlines.” This peculiar comment echoes a profile of Bush published in the October 17 *New York Times Magazine*. The article quoted Bush aides who described their political opponents as the “reality-based community,” in contrast to Bush’s reliance on fundamentalist religion to guide his policy choices.

The criticism of Bush in the US media and by the Kerry campaign is entirely limited to charges of incompetence and gross negligence in failing to secure the stockpile of high explosives. It proves, in Kerry’s words, that Bush has “failed as commander in chief.” This covers up the real significance of the issue.

The *Times* report confirms that the whole issue of weapons of mass destruction was a bad-faith pretext for war, aimed at concealing the real motives for the US invasion of Iraq: seizing control of the world’s second-largest oil reserves and gaining a key strategic position in the Middle East.

If US soldiers did not attempt to secure the huge arms depot at Al Qaqaa, and their commanders did not even know the facility had been regularly visited by UN weapons inspectors, it is because WMD was never a serious factor in the minds of the war planners. The Bush administration and the Pentagon did not believe their own claims that Saddam Hussein had stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons, or a significant nuclear weapons development program. They had other concerns, exemplified by orders to secure the Iraqi oil ministry and interior ministry, which contained the files of Hussein’s secret police, including records of secret dealings with Iraq under the Reagan and first Bush administrations.

The issue of weapons of mass destruction was concocted and sustained by successive US governments—beginning with the first Bush administration, continued by Clinton and Bush II—to justify diplomatic, economic and military pressure on Iraq. Ultimately, in 2002-2003, WMD became the principal means of intimidating US public opinion and obtaining congressional authorization for war. But the Bush administration did not believe its own lies—nor did the congressional Democrats who were his co-conspirators.

To point this out, however, would be to demonstrate the criminality of the entire US enterprise in Iraq—an enterprise endorsed by the corporate-controlled media, and which Kerry fully intends to continue should he win the election and enter the White House.



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