

US troops witnessed looting of weapons at Al Qaqaa explosives dump

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A *Los Angeles Times* article published on Thursday has provided new evidence that 380 tons of high-grade explosives stored at the Al Qaqaa ammunition site was looted in the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq. The disappearance of the explosives—including non-nuclear materials used in making nuclear armaments—was first reported on October 25 by the *New York Times* and CBS News.

The revelation became a major issue in the presidential campaign, and was met with stonewalling and misinformation from the White House, which maintained that there was no proof the explosives were present when the invading forces arrived. The *Los Angeles Times* article directly contradicts this assertion. What is involved, however, goes far beyond the Democratic Party's charges of incompetence against the Bush administration. The failure of the US military to secure the weapons site is a devastating exposure of the pretexts and lies used to justify the invasion of Iraq.

The *LA Times* spoke to four reservists and National Guardsmen from the 317th Support Center and the 258th Rear Area Operations Center, who witnessed a massive looting operation at the Al Qaqaa site, 30 miles south of Baghdad. The looting took place over several weeks in late April and early May of 2003, following the fall of Iraq's capital to US troops. The soldiers who spoke to the newspaper chose to remain anonymous, fearing retaliation from the Pentagon.

They described how the looters, who far outnumbered the US soldiers at the site, took explosives from the unsecured bunkers and drove them away in Toyota trucks. "We were running from one side of the compound to the other side, trying to kick people out," one senior noncommissioned officer said. "On our last day there, there were at least 100 vehicles waiting at the site for us to leave," another officer explained. "It was

complete chaos. It was looting like LA during the Rodney King riots."

One soldier saw the looters' trucks being loaded with material marked "hexamine"—a key ingredient for the highly explosive HMX. This material was used to blow up the Pan Am airplane over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1987, and can also be used as the explosive charge in the detonation of a nuclear device. The soldier only learned what hexamine was after he searched for information on the Internet. "We found out this was stuff you don't smoke around," he told the newspaper.

These new revelations again demonstrate the utterly cynical nature of the propaganda employed by the Bush administration prior to the invasion of Iraq. Exploiting people's fears of terrorism and invoking the specter of September 11, the White House maintained that invading Iraq was the only course that could ensure that terrorist groups did not gain access to dangerous Iraqi weaponry. Yet the American invasion force made no attempt to secure weapons sites, and thereby created the very danger—which previously did not exist—that the war was supposed to avert.

The *Los Angeles Times* article left no doubt that the US forces' failure to secure the Al Qaqaa site formed part of a wider pattern of indifference regarding the security of such facilities. While troops were ordered to ensure the protection of Baghdad's oil and interior ministries, munitions stores—including those alleged to be connected to weapons of mass destruction activities—went unguarded.

An unnamed senior US military intelligence official told the newspaper that Al Qaqaa had previously been identified as "one of the top 200" sites suspected of storing chemical and biological weapons. Despite this, no US forces were assigned to guard the site. Members of the 258th Rear Area Operations Center happened

upon the looting during a patrol of the wider area, and received support only from the 317th Support Unit.

At no time was either of these units ordered to maintain security at the munitions site, and requests to commanders in Baghdad for additional support were ignored. “We couldn’t have been given the assignment to defend a facility unless we were given the troops to do it, and we weren’t,” said one National Guard officer. “[Al Qaqaa] being protected or not protected was not really part of the equation. It wasn’t an area of immediate concern.”

The *Times* report follows the broadcast of a video last week by a Minnesota television station. The footage, dated April 18, 2003, shows US troops with the 101st Airborne Division—the first US forces to reach Al Qaqaa—cutting through wire seals left by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to secure the explosives. The station reported that after opening the bunkers, the soldiers left them unsecured.

On October 1, IAEA Director General Mohammed ElBaradei told the UN Security Council of his concerns about widespread looting of other sites previously monitored by his inspectors. He described “the widespread and apparently systematic dismantlement” of machinery and equipment that could be used in the manufacture of nuclear weapons.



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