

US media begins preparing the public for mass slaughter in Iraq

By Bill Vann
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In the midst of the Bush administration's drumbeat for an invasion of Iraq, the government and the media have begun to prepare public opinion for a massive slaughter of innocent Iraqi civilians, as well as substantial American military casualties.

For the most part, both the Bush administration and the media have portrayed an invasion as a simple matter of "taking out" Saddam Hussein and "liberating" a grateful Iraqi people. Such a feat, they maintain, will be accomplished with satellite-guided precision bombs destroying a few presidential palaces and bunkers, while leaving the general population largely unscathed.

A few retired senior military officers—undoubtedly expressing deep misgivings within the Pentagon's uniformed command—have attempted to throw cold water on this scenario, warning that the war could prove protracted and bloody. Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee September 23, Gen. Joseph Hoar, who was the senior US commander in the Middle East after the 1991 Persian Gulf War, cautioned that US invaders could confront 100,000 Iraqi troops with thousands of artillery pieces defending Baghdad.

Affirming that US forces would ultimately conquer the city, Hoar continued: "But at what cost? And at what cost as the rest of the world watches while we bomb and have artillery rounds exploded in densely populated neighborhoods?"

In house-to-house fighting, he warned, "you could run through battalions a day at a time ... because of casualties," adding that such combat would resemble "the last 15 minutes of *Saving Private Ryan*."

Articles appearing in three of the most influential national US newspapers Friday took up the question of a "nightmare scenario" of urban warfare in Iraq. With the Bush administration preparing to launch the most powerful military machine on the face of the earth against a backward and relatively defenseless country, all three papers sounded a remarkably similar theme: if slaughter does take place, the blame will rest with the Iraqis.

A *USA Today* article based on sources in the Pentagon cited plans for a "lightening" war against Iraq involving massive air power, air-dropped troops seizing key facilities, and the wholesale surrender of the Iraqi military.

The article cautions, however: "[I]t's possible that the Iraqi leadership would try to create the conditions for ... street-by-street gun battles."

The *Washington Post* similarly warns in its article: "Iraq's military likely would respond to a US invasion by attempting to lure American forces close to Baghdad and other large population centers, where Iraqi commanders believe their soldiers would be less vulnerable to air strikes and civilians would be more willing to fight for the government, according to senior government officials and diplomats here."

The idea that the Iraqi military is setting out "to create the conditions" for street fighting or "to lure American forces close to Baghdad" is curious, to say the least. The Bush administration is loudly demanding UN and congressional approval for an unprovoked "preemptive" invasion of Iraq for the purpose of overthrowing its government and assassinating its president. Clearly, such goals cannot be achieved without storming, occupying and subduing Baghdad and other major cities.

The *Post* claims that the danger of urban warfare arises from a new "strategy" that the Iraqi military devised based upon the experience of the 1991 Gulf War. "During that war, US ground forces were able to easily overrun Iraqi troops, whose trenches and bunkers provided little cover from American artillery and bombs," the article states. "Now Iraqi officials have indicated that they would fight a very different war by shielding their soldiers in cities and trying to draw US forces into high-risk urban warfare."

Iraq's generals would be criminally irresponsible if they placed their forces in the open desert so that they could be slaughtered from the air. But the principal change in strategy from the first Gulf war stems from Washington's military objectives. In 1991, the US war was conducted for the ostensible purpose of expelling Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

The war now being prepared is aimed at conquering Iraq and establishing a US protectorate to rule that country and administer its oil wealth. Such a “regime change” is virtually inconceivable without urban warfare.

The story goes on to quote an unnamed diplomat as saying that the Iraqi army preferred to stay in the cities so that it “can mix with the civilian population.” The diplomat added: “If soldiers start sniping from apartment buildings filled with people, what can the Americans do? They can’t very well blow them up.”

The obvious implication is that Iraq’s military is prepared to use the population of Baghdad as “human shields,” taking advantage of the Pentagon’s supposed principled aversion to inflicting casualties on civilians.

Similar assertions were made in a column by Nicholas Kristof entitled “Fighting Street to Street” published in the *New York Times* on the same day. “American restraint is Iraq’s ace going into the war,” Kristof writes. “Iraq knows that the United States cannot bomb schools, mosques and residential neighborhoods, and so it has plenty of places to hide its army. In the last gulf war, we were able to destroy an enemy that was out in the open desert, but this time Iraq seems intent on a different approach.”

The same theme was featured on that evening’s NBC news report, with a former general warning that Saddam Hussein planned to deploy 15,000 crack Republican Guard troops for urban fighting in Baghdad, and a reporter predicting that such combat would unavoidably result in thousands of Iraqi deaths, military and civilian alike, as well as heavy US losses.

This is war propaganda, pure and simple. Those who write such lines know that they are turning reality inside out to further the predatory aims of the US government.

Who says that the US “cannot bomb schools, mosques and residential neighborhoods,” or that if American units are fired upon from Baghdad apartment buildings, they won’t just “blow them up”? Avoiding the slaughter of civilians at all costs is not part of the Pentagon’s military doctrine; avoiding casualties among your own forces is.

Every major intervention by the US military has involved deliberate attacks on defenseless civilian populations. From the carpet-bombing of Hanoi to the My Lai massacre, the US waged a war in Vietnam that claimed the lives of two million people, most of them unarmed civilians. In the 1989 invasion of Panama—improbably cited by US officials as a model for the “regime change” they hope to accomplish in Iraq—as many as 4,000 civilians were killed when the US bombed a crowded working class neighborhood.

In the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, thousands of civilians were killed and wounded. Targets included passenger trains, farming villages and non-military factories.

The last Gulf War saw the targeting of a bomb shelter in the Baghdad district of Al-Amariya, killing 288 civilians, most of them women and children. And, the more recent invasion of Afghanistan has seen repeated war crimes against the civilian population.

There is little doubt that in the first days of an assault on Baghdad—the best efforts of military censors notwithstanding—images will be broadcast of distraught people digging for their loved ones through the rubble of apartment buildings demolished by US bombs or cannon fire.

The stories appearing in the press today are aimed at preparing for the horror and revulsion that will be felt in the US and around the world over the inevitable carnage that will accompany an invasion of Iraq. The press is seeking to convince people in advance that they should not believe what they will see with their own eyes—the mass murder of Iraqi civilians by the US military.

When these killings take place, the coordinated line from the White House, the Pentagon and the media will be that it is Saddam Hussein’s fault, not that of the US invaders. The civilians were killed because they were used as “human shields.” Or, it was not US bombs at all, but a misfired Scud missile or Iraqi anti-aircraft shells that caused the devastation. Everyone knows that “American restraint” would not permit such atrocities, but “the Iraqis do not place the same value on human life as we do.” These are the shop-worn and racist lies used in every war of aggression.

The media is deliberately misleading the public on every issue, from the real aims that are being pursued in the war buildup against Iraq—oil, not “weapons of mass destruction”—to the criminal methods that will be used to accomplish them. This campaign of lies and misinformation is the surest indication that the war that the Bush administration wants is aimed at benefiting only the ruling corporate elite at the expense of the vast majority of working people in America and all over the globe.

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