

Missing Explosives Cache Emblematic of Bush Administration Failures in Iraq

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Whether news about the 380 tons of powerful explosives found missing from a major weapons depot in Iraq will have any impact on the presidential election remains to be seen. Democrats hope that these disclosures have given a last-minute boost to John Kerry's presidential campaign, which is depicting this debacle as illustrative of President Bush's failure of leadership.

Since the Democratic Party decided to nominate presidential and vice-presidential candidates who, like the incumbent president, falsely claimed that Iraq had 'weapons of mass destruction' and who authorized and supported the U.S. invasion, they are unable to challenge Bush on the illegality and immorality of the war. However, the level of negligence and incompetence shown by the Bush administration in the aftermath of the initial invasion has indeed been extraordinary by any measure, and the missing explosives are emblematic of the failures of Bush's Iraq policy.

These missing explosives are particularly dangerous, since they include plastic explosives like PETN and RDX, which are a favorite of terrorists. Just one pound of a similar material blew up Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988. These explosives were also used in the bombing of the housing complex in November 2003 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and the blasts in a series of Moscow apartment complexes in September 1999, which killed hundreds.

The Bush administration was quite familiar with the Al-Qaqaa facility, as was the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which had overseen the destruction of parts of Iraq's nuclear weapons program there in the early 1990s. Though primarily used for conventional weapons, the explosives at the site included HMX, which could be used for detonating a nuclear weapon. As a result, the IAEA had carefully monitored the site prior to their departure in December 1998 and resumed their monitoring activities when they returned in November 2002. When the United States forced the IAEA from Iraq immediately prior to the March 2003 invasion, the IAEA publicly warned about the dangers of such explosives. Soon after the invasion was launched, the IAEA specifically told the Bush administration about this particular store of explosives and the need to keep them secured, advice which was apparently ignored.

Despite this, the Bush administration denies any responsibility for the missing explosives. Vice-president Dick Cheney insisted that 'it is not at all clear that those explosives were even at the weapons facility when our troops arrived in the area of Baghdad.' President Bush went further, dismissing Kerry's assertions that the Bush administration should have secured the site as 'wild charges,' accusing the Democratic nominee of 'denigrating the action of our troops.'

The Ministry of Science and Technology and others within Iraq's interim government, however, have explicitly told the IAEA that the explosives disappeared some time after U.S. forces took control of Baghdad.

Furthermore, Minneapolis television station KSTP showed footage last week of a whole series of bunkers at Al-Qaqaa filled with explosives taken by journalists who were embedded with advancing U.S. forces which bivouacked near the site on their way to reinforce units already occupying Baghdad. The footage also shows an IAEA seal on a bunker, which was used at that site only for the HMX explosives, being broken by these U.S. forces before entering. Furthermore, this footage and other photographs of the explosives stockpiles 'which were taken on April 18, nine days after the U.S. overthrew the Iraqi government' appear identical to those last taken by the IAEA just before their departure the previous month.

David Kay, President Bush's former top weapons inspector in Iraq, observed that, due to the intense aerial surveillance of the area in which the facility was located 'right on the main road to Baghdad from the south' 'I find it hard to believe that a convoy of 40 to 60 trucks left that facility prior to or during the war and we didn't spot it on satellite or UAV [unmanned aerial vehicle].'

Kay also emphasized that, 'When you break into it, you own it. It's your responsibility to secure it.' None of the reporters there at the time noted any effort by U.S. forces to secure the facility, however.

While the Al-Qaqaa site contained some particularly lethal explosives, this phenomenon of leaving ammunition stores and other stockpiles of weapons and explosives unguarded for the taking has not been uncommon since the United States took control of the country in early April 2003.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has reported that it 'repeatedly gave U.S.-led coalition forces in Iraq detailed information about massive stockpiles of unsecured explosives and munitions located throughout the country, but coalition forces took little or no action to secure the stockpiles.' HRW is particularly concerned about the circulation of such weaponry in the general population: It has been explosives looted from such facilities from around Iraq which are believed to be the primary source for bombs used by terrorists over the past year and half which have killed many hundreds of Iraqi civilians and others. An October 28 HRW report includes the following telling example:

On May 9, 2003, a Human Rights Watch researcher encountered a massive stockpile of warheads, anti-tank mines, anti-personnel mines, and other weaponry at the unsecured Second Military College, on the main road from Baghdad and Baquba.

Concerned about the safety of the displaced persons at the military college, the researcher immediately went to the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad and reported the weapons stockpile, showing U.S. military officials photographs of the weaponry, giving the exact GPS coordinates of the site, and showing the location of the site on a military map' The researcher repeatedly returned to the 'Green Zone' over the next days to report continuing looting at the site, but U.S. coalition forces did not move to secure the site.

The road between Baghdad and Baquba is now one of the main locations for attacks using 'improvised explosive devices' (IEDs) against passing coalition troops and Iraqi security forces. Typically, suicide bombers and IEDs involve between 25 to 200 kilograms of high explosives.

Under the highly-centralized rule of Saddam Hussein, who trusted no one he could not control, such weapons stockpiles, including the particularly dangerous cache at Al-Qaqaa, were carefully controlled. This was no longer the case after the government collapsed as American troops entered Baghdad. When it became clear that the United States did not place a priority on securing such sites and widespread looting erupted, an internal IAEA memo warned that terrorists could be helping themselves to 'the biggest explosives bonanza in history.'

Prior to the U.S. takeover, President Bush argued that the best way to prevent weapons in Iraq from being used against Americans was to invade the country and overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime. However, as subsequent events have demonstrated, having dangerous explosives under the firm control of a weakened and contained dictatorship subjected to close international supervision was a lot safer than having them scattered among groups of armed extremists accountable to no one. Indeed, there were plenty of reasons to have suspected that this would be the very result of a U.S. invasion: For example, in an article I wrote for The Nation magazine in September 2002, just prior to the bipartisan Congressional vote authorizing President Bush to invade Iraq, I predicted that in 'the chaos of a US invasion and its aftermath' the chances of weapons finding their way 'into the hands of terrorists would greatly increase.'

Thankfully, as many of us suspected, Iraq had already eliminated its chemical and biological weapons long before the U.S. invasion. Otherwise, these weapons would probably now be in the hands of terrorists as well. Or would they? One has to wonder why the Bush administration seemed to have so little concern about securing weapons caches during the initial invasion. Focusing instead on the drive toward Baghdad may indicate that the Bush Administration had already realized some time before the war that there actually were no 'weapons of mass destruction' that needed to be secured after all. Their real goal, therefore, may not have been to protect the region and the world from possible chemical, biological or nuclear attack as they claimed, but simply to seize the center of Iraq's government in order to take control over this oil-rich country in the heart of the Middle East.

Either way, John Kerry has every right to be critical of the Bush Administration.

Of course, since he, John Edwards and most other Democratic Senators granted President Bush license to invade Iraq in the first place, the Democrats must share responsibility for what has transpired as well. In voting to authorize force, they naively trusted that Bush would be a competent commander-in chief, which even back then should have been obvious was an erroneous assumption. This decision, along with his gross exaggerations of Iraq's alleged military threat prior to the invasion, raises serious questions regarding Kerry's own competence to serve as commander-in-chief. Whether George W. Bush or John Kerry serves as president over the new four years, however, the ongoing war in Iraq 'made worse by the Al-Qaqaa fiasco and similar blunders' is likely to be what will most define his administration.