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## Covering up American War Crimes, From Baghdad to New York

by Charles Glass

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BBC correspondent John Simpson reported on March 4 that the number of defects in newborn babies in the Iraqi town of Fallujah had risen dramatically since the American assault there at the end of 2004. Some people in the town blame the abnormalities in their children on whatever chemicals the US Marines may have used in their conquest of the Sunni Muslim redoubt. Dr. Samira al-Ani, a paediatrician at Fallujah's General Hospital, told Simpson that two or three children were born each day with serious cardiac problems. Before the first American attack on Fallujah in two years earlier, she noticed similar ailments in one baby every two months. "I have nothing documented," she admitted, "but I can tell you that year by year the number [is] increasing."

The Iraqi government, which supported the American attack with troops of its own, denies there has been any increase. "The US military authorities," Simpson said, "are absolutely correct when they say they are not aware of any official reports indicating an increase in birth defects in Fallujah—no official reports exist." Nor are any likely to. By any standard, though, this was a big story. John Simpson is a serious journalist and a friend, and I listened carefully to his report that morning on the *BBC World Service*. I waited in vain for the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and other serious American journals to take up the story. All I read was a brief item on the *CBS News* website quoting Simpson.

**“The US government does not want it known that it was using chemicals on human beings in a country whose leader it overthrew ostensibly because he retained the capacity to do the same thing.”**

The US denied it anyway, perhaps out of habit. Military spokesman Michael Fitzpatrick responded predictably, “No studies to date have indicated environmental issues resulting in specific health issues.” But, as Simpson said, there have not been any studies. American spokesmen were reluctantly forced to admit the use of White Phosphorous—or Willie Pete, as the troops call it—in Fallujah when someone noticed that *Field Artillery Magazine*, a U. S. Army publication, had already documented its deployment in its March/April 2005 edition. The magazine wrote, “We fired ‘shake and bake’ missions at the insurgents, using WP [White Phosphorous] to flush them out and HE [High Explosives] to take them out.” After Dahr Jamail, a brilliant freelance journalist, reported *during* the battle in 2004 that American forces were using WP on Iraqis, Project Censored gave him an award for the second most under-reported story of the year. It is still under-reported, but it is not difficult to understand why. The US government does not want it known that it was using chemicals on human beings in a country whose leader it overthrew ostensibly because he retained the capacity to do the same thing. And the US Treasury does not want to compensate foreigners for any harm its troops might have done. Let us turn now to New York and what has become the secular-sacred site of the former World Trade Center.

The government this month finally settled claims by 10,000 workers on the Ground Zero clean-up by agreeing to pay \$657.5 million for the debilitating effects of the asbestos and other poisons they were exposed to. That’s an average of \$65,750 a head, less the lawyers’ share. It doesn’t sound like much, but they’re doing better than anyone in Fallujah. There are precedents for government resistance to admitting responsibility. American Vietnam veterans crippled by the dioxin they dropped all over Vietnam waited many years for the government to acknowledge their plight. At first, the government resisted the connection between dioxin and the veterans’ cancer, Parkinson’s, and other fatal illnesses. By the time the government paid anything, the vets were observing that their children were being born with severe birth defects from dioxin in Agent Orange and other herbicides unleashed on the South Vietnamese countryside. Their children’s congenital deformities included spina bifida and other horrors that may go for generations to come. The Department of Veterans Affairs didn’t send them any money until 2003—thirty years after the last barrel of poison was dropped on Vietnam. Even that was restricted to 7,520 of the 99,226 veterans who claimed to have been affected.



While dioxin disabled thousands of American service personnel who merely handled it, as many as 4.8 million Vietnamese endured twenty-eight million gallons of toxic rain that drenched their skins, soaked their soil, and polluted their rivers and groundwater for ten years. As with the American war vets, then-unborn children were also affected. Vietnam has one of the world's highest levels of birth defects, concentrated in the south where the American forces deployed most of the chemicals. Five children out of one hundred are born with serious abnormalities, including missing limbs, spina bifida, twisted or missing internal organs and grotesque malformations that have made their survival impossible. While reluctantly accepting a link between dioxin and birth defects in American service personnel's children, the US denies any connection when it comes to Vietnamese. I guess it's just one of those strange anomalies that nature throws up every so often, like Los Angeles police chief Daryl Gates' observation that the disproportion in African-American deaths from the police choking was due to the fact that "blacks might be more likely to die from chokeholds because their arteries do not open as fast as they do on 'normal people'." Perhaps Vietnamese born after 1961, when Operation Ranch Hand to defoliate South Vietnam began, were just not normal anyway.

The abnormal people of Iraq remember that the US denied Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons on its Kurdish citizens. In those days, Saddam was an American ally. When freelance journalist Gwynne Roberts brought back the soil samples from Hallabja that proved Saddam had gassed the Kurds, the US blamed the Iranians. That assessment became inoperative when condemning Saddam was politically useful. Now that the US has been caught using chemicals in the same country that the monster Saddam did, it admits using them on "insurgents" but not on civilians. It is hard in a city to blast chemicals at the people with guns and miss those who don't have any. No matter. The US and Iraqi governments are blocking an investigation that would prove one way or another that White Phosphorous did any harm to Iraqi mothers and their children. It's unlikely they'll receive a cent for the next fifty years, if ever. But why the hell isn't this a big story?