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The Suffering of Fallujah

Posted By Robert Koehler

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Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Fallujah . . .

And so it turns out that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, though not until we arrived and started using them.

Along with whatever else we did to Fallujah – exacted collective punishment on a defiant city (a war crime) in November 2004, killed thousands of civilians, shattered the infrastructure (nearly six years later, the sewage system hasn't been repaired and waste flows in the streets) — we also, apparently, nuked the city, leaving a legacy of cancer, leukemia, infant mortality, and genetic abnormality.

Freedom isn't free. Remember when that was the go-to phrase of the citizen war zealots among us, their all-purpose rebuttal when those of us appalled by this insane war cited civilian casualty stats? Discussion over. Thought stops here.

This is the power of language. Call it "war" and along come glory, duty, courage, sacrifice: the best of humanity writ large. The word is impenetrable; it sets the heart in motion; God makes an appearance, blesses the troops, blesses the weapons. Operation Iraqi Freedom: They'll greet us with open arms.

At what point do we learn our lesson, that "war" is a moral cesspool of horrific consequences, especially, and most troublingly, unintended ones?

Thus last November, a group of British and Iraqi doctors petitioned the U.N. to investigate the alarming rise in birth defects at Fallujah's hospitals. "Young women in Fallujah," they wrote, ". . . are terrified of having children because of the increasing number of babies born grotesquely deformed, with no heads, two heads, a single eye in their foreheads, scaly bodies or missing limbs. In addition, young children in Fallujah are now experiencing hideous cancers and leukemias."

The official U.S. response was that the doctors' letter was anecdotal: There have been no studies to verify that anything is truly amiss in Fallujah, beyond the devastation caused by U.S. troops and bombs. Now that has changed.

The International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health has just published an epidemiological study, "Cancer, Infant Mortality and Birth Sex-Ratio in Fallujah, Iraq 2005-2009," which has found, among much else, that Fallujah is experiencing higher rates of cancer, leukemia and infant mortality than Hiroshima and Nagasaki did in 1945.

Perhaps most eerily, the study, conducted by a team of 11 researchers this past January and February, in 711 households, found a radical shift in the ratio of female-to-male births. Under normal circumstances, the human constant is approximately 1,050 boys born for every 1,000 girls. In post-invasion Fallujah, 860 boys have been born for every 1,000 girls — similar to a shift seen in Hiroshima after the atom bomb was dropped.

Dr. Chris Busby, one of the study's authors, said only "some very major mutagenic exposure" could account for such an aberration. The most likely culprit, he said, is depleted uranium, a dense metal with extraordinary penetrating ability used in the manufacture of missiles, shells, and bombs. DU explodes on impact into an extremely fine, radioactive dust that settles on the ground or is carried by the wind. While the U.S. military continues to deny that breathing it is harmful, many scientists insist that it is highly toxic and a likely contributor to Gulf War Syndrome — that it is, in short, a nuclear weapon, with fallout as dangerous as a nuclear bomb.

To read about this is to grow increasingly sickened and disturbed at who we are and what we are doing: still debating "the war," still dignifying this ongoing hemorrhage of national values with the term; still murdering civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and resolutely fleeing from any responsibility for the ecocide we have committed in Iraq; and still silently, inevitably, preparing for the next one.

Would that we could bring the suffering of Fallujah to the heart of America, or at least to the heart of Congress, which just OK'd another \$59 billion to "fund the troops" (notice the delicacy of the Pentagon's phrasing) in Afghanistan.

Enormous, future-devouring numbers turn over in Congress with such ease, if the money is demanded by the war machine. Money dedicated to building the future, or repairing the damage from old, dead wars, is another matter entirely: Suddenly it's real, like a pound of flesh, and meted out only with howls of anguish.

To help clean up our legacy of Agent Orange in Vietnam, for instance, Congress has appropriated \$9 million since 2007. We sprayed 19 million gallons of this highly toxic defoliant on the country between 1962 and 1971, causing harm to at least 3 million Vietnamese in the process. Our sense of responsibility amounts to \$3 per person. And such money becomes available only after decades of denial that we have any responsibility at all.

I think again about Fallujah. The city's suffering will haunt our national dreams for decades to come. It is our future. In a generation or so, our children will face the consequences of what we have done there; but in the meantime, we'll keep trying to buy "victory" and ultimate justification in multi-billion-dollar increments until our financial bankruptcy equals our moral bankruptcy.