

'WINNING' DOESN'T MAKE IT RIGHT

By Michael Ventura

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On the sandstorm from hell: Two dirty words remain largely unspoken on television and unwritten in most printed Iraq War coverage: "depleted uranium." U.S. and British tank, artillery, and heavy machine-gun shells sport depleted uranium tips. A *Los Angeles Times* editorial, March 31: "When depleted uranium burns upon penetrating its target, it turns into a fine dust that can remain highly concentrated in the environment." There isn't yet conclusive evidence that this dust is the primary cause of Gulf War Syndrome or the astronomical cancer rates of the Iraqis since the Gulf War, or the high cancer rates among U.S. soldiers serving in Bosnia. But no one has offered another theory on why, as *The Los Angeles Times* reported on March 30, "of the 504,047 eligible veterans of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, about 29% are now considered disabled by the Department of Veteran Affairs, the highest rate of disability for any modern war ... These guys were rough, tough, buff 20-year-olds a decade ago ... [They] lived for months in areas of the Middle Eastern desert that had been contaminated with depleted uranium." The extent of the contamination boggles the mind. In the Gulf War "more than 350 tons of depleted uranium were dropped on Iraq, and later in Kosovo ... about 13 tons of DU were exploded." At the outset of George W. Bush's Iraq War, our armed forces were enveloped for days in a monstrous sandstorm; with every breath they inhaled particles of contaminated sand. Let us pray that the government scientists who say there is no connection between DU and Gulf War/Kosovo Syndrome are right. Let us pray the scientists and doctors who believe DU is deadly are wrong. If they're not, our men and women in Iraq are going to pay an awful price. We should know in about 10 years.

On budget hypocrisy: Bob Herbert, *The New York Times*, April 3: "The [House Republican budget] offers the well-to-do \$1.4 trillion in tax cuts, while demanding billions of dollars in cuts from programs that provide food stamps, school lunches, health care for the poor and disabled, temporary assistance for needy families -- even veterans' benefits and student loans" [my italics]. To cut veterans' benefits while ranting, "Support our troops!" is obscene. Especially if the rate of disability in the Iraq War will be anything like the rate produced by the Gulf War (29%, see above). House majority leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas, says, "Nothing is more important in the face of war than cutting taxes." Even if it means cutting veterans' benefits?

On the economy: 108,000 jobs were lost in March. More than 300,000 were lost in February. Since just last November, the total is over 600,000. Grand total of over two million since Bush took office. In February, factory orders had their steepest drop in five months. American manufacturers have reduced employment for 36 consecutive months. The states are broke; in a time of critical education needs, many are even closing schools. Only wars and rumors of wars have kept these facts from headlining the news -- which is partly the reason for Bush's wars and why he'll continue making war. For what would his approval rating be if the economy got half the war's coverage?

On neo-liberal wishful thinking: Some liberals support the Iraq War on the rationale that America, as the world's only superpower, is responsible for ridding the world of oppressive regimes. (This, though Bush's Coalition of the Willing includes severe human-rights offenders like Uzbekistan, Dritrea, Colombia, Macedonia, Rwanda, Uganda, and Ethiopia.) The flaw in such liberal thinking is: The only way to be such a superpower is to economically and militarily enforce a global imbalance in which 6% of the world's population (that's us) gloms up 50% of the world's resources; the result is that two-thirds of the world lives on next to nothing, in a state of continuous want, helpless against the very oppressions that we're supposed to rid them of -- which we rarely do unless they have a resource (oil, the Panama Canal, etc.) we want to control. I suspect that people who need to believe that this war is about Liberation, instead of about Empire, are afraid to face this question: What is my responsibility as the citizen and beneficiary of an Empire?

On neo-conservative delusions of grandeur: Maureen Dowd, *The New York Times*, April 2: "As two members of the pre-emptive Bush doctrine's neo-con brain trust, Bill Kristol and Lawrence Kaplan, argued in a book-length call for battle, 'The War in Iraq': 'Well, what is wrong with dominance, in the service of sound principles and high ideals?'" What's wrong is that only the dominant get to define "sound principles" and "high ideals." As the Nobel-winning Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz has written: "There is ample experience to show that men envelop themselves in sublime goals, purity, and the nobility of a hifalutin spiritual domain, in order to pretend they don't know what their hands are doing."

And speaking of pre-emptive war: Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has been making threatening noises about Syria and Iran. (When Bush was informed of this, he smiled and said, "Good.") Rumsfeld's right-hand man Paul Wolfowitz echoes him: "There's got to be change in Syria as well." *The New York Times*, April 6: "For a year now, the president and many of his team have privately described the confrontation with Saddam Hussein as something of a demonstration conflict ... 'Iraq is not just about Iraq,' a senior administration official who played a crucial role in putting the strategy together said in an interview last week." But the idea of pre-emptive war is catchy. *The New York Times*, April 9: "India's external affairs minister, Yaswaht Sinha, said ... India had a 'better case' for a pre-emptive strike against Pakistan than America did against Iraq." A State Department spokeswoman was quickly dispatched to say that "any comparison between Iraq and [Pakistan vis-a-vis India] was wrong." But the world is watching what we do, not what we say.

On the late great two-war strategy: For years the United States has claimed it is capable of simultaneously fighting two full-fledged wars in two parts of the world. The Iraq War has proven that claim false. We've had our hands full fighting and supplying one war against an impoverished country that can barely fight back -- and our struggling economy will have to sacrifice school lunches and veterans' benefits, among other things, to manage that. In addition, our reliance on air power is draining our capabilities. One example (*The New York Times*, April 2): Merrill A. McPeak, former Air Force chief of staff, said "We are relying to a great extent on cruise missiles, of which we have a limited supply." If India-Pakistan, or North Korea, or any other major trouble spot, decide to

misbehave, our military options would be severely limited -- and now they know it. In addition, major governments who've supported Bush (England, Spain, Australia, Italy, Jordan) are reaping severe domestic consequences; such governments may not be eager to join Bush again. Which may mean: Iraq could backfire and, in the long term, weaken the U.S. deterrent. Not only our strengths but our limits have been demonstrated for all the world to examine.

On a frightened, thirsty, hungry people: I don't doubt that many Iraqis are glad to see Saddam go down. Who wouldn't be? But what nation is grateful to be invaded and occupied? What families thank the nation that kills their conscripted soldier-sons, -brothers, -husbands? The Iraqi people, defenseless, are dependent upon our handouts for sufficient food and water -- so of course they've started to cheer us. It would be insane not to. Anyone who takes those cheers at face value is underestimating the power of fear, hunger, and thirst. We don't know how they really feel. We only know what they want men with guns to think they feel.

On smoking guns: American units are searching for the weapons of mass destruction that supposedly justified our invasion. So far the results are spotty at best. Fact: *Every* bit of "evidence" cited by Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld-Powell was authoritatively refuted by journalists and international experts. No new smoking-gun evidence deserves belief until confirmed by neutral, independent parties. Fact: Even under direst provocation, weapons of mass destruction have not yet been unleashed on the invaders. So far, that is still the most pertinent fact.

"Winning" doesn't make it right: Winning was never the issue. Of course the mightiest military power in history would flatten an impoverished desert nation, eventually. Winning is not the measure of morality.

Say it twice: Winning is not the measure of morality.

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