

DU Disinfo Dupes Project Censored

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Background:

In September 2004, Project Censored picked "High Uranium Levels Found in Troops and Civilians" as the #4 most-censored story this year, citing the following articles:

- URANIUM MEDICAL RESEARCH CENTER, January 2003

"UMRC's Preliminary Findings from Afghanistan & Operation Enduring Freedom"
and

"Afghan Field Trip #2 Report: Precision Destruction- Indiscriminate Effects"

Author: Tedd Weyman, UMRC Research Team

- AWAKENED WOMAN, January 2004

Title: "Scientists Uncover Radioactive Trail in Afghanistan"

Author: Stephanie Hiller

- DISSIDENT VOICE, March 2004

Title: "There Are No Words...Radiation in Iraq Equals 250,000 Nagasaki Bombs"

Author: Bob Nichols

- NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, April 5, 2004

Title: "Poisoned?"

Author: Juan Gonzalez

- INFORMATION CLEARING HOUSE, March 2004

Title: "International Criminal Tribunal For Afghanistan At Tokyo, The People vs. George Bush"

Author: Professor Ms Niloufer Bhagwat J.

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It's like confusing a dime for a dollar. That's the difference between the amount of depleted uranium in weapons the U.S. is known to have used in Iraq since the invasion of March, 2003 - bad enough at almost 200 tons - and 2,000 tons, a grossly exaggerated estimate accepted as fact by some writers, and now also by Project Censored, the Sonoma University project that each year highlights under-reported news.

So what's the harm if the numbers are off by ten times? Isn't the message - that troops and civilians are being harmed by this new generation of radioactive warfare - important enough?

The answer depends upon whether you'd like to see a policy change that stops the use of depleted uranium weapons. That's what I'd like to see, because the limited scientific evidence available plus common sense lead me to conclude that adding more ionizing radiation into the environment in the the form of highly refined, breathable and ingestible uranium oxides resulting from combat is a bad idea.

As a long-time anti-nuclear activist, I've learned that outsiders seeking justice can only hope to change government policy by having truth on our side. We abandon credibility and will be dismissed in the halls of power when we present unsupported speculation as scientific fact.

Beyond the issue of credibility, the case for any hazard is better made by presenting proven numbers, along with evidence of any adverse effect. If we claim it takes a dollar to do a dime's worth of damage, we're conceding a big point on dosage.

Project Censored presented their own summary of the articles they cite. In it, they claim that "Four million pounds of radioactive uranium were dropped on Iraq in 2003 alone."

The claim in Bob Nichols' article that it "turns out they used about 4,000,000 pounds of the stuff, give or take, according to the Pentagon and the United Nations" is simply not true. I have repeatedly asked Nichols and others making this claim, including the Uranium Medical Research Center (UMRC), to cite their Pentagon or UN sources. None have.

For example, a November, 2003 UMRC paper, "Abu Khasib to Al Ah'qaf: Iraq Gulf War II Field Investigations Report©", notes five "published estimates of quantities of uranium munitions." The last, and by far largest estimate, is attributed to "Associated Press article, UNEP [United Nations Environmental Program] Environmental Press Release Reports... April 2003." These reports are assembled from UNEP news releases and articles selected from the world press.

A review of these press release reports from UNEP reveals that the 1,000-2,200 ton estimate is credited to "independent" analysts in some of the stories, and in others, to "UN and independent" analysts, and eventually, in Nichols, "to the Pentagon and United Nations". But never is a UN document or named UN source quoted to give credence to such an estimate. Follow-up with several of the journalists revealed the not-uncommon practice of simply citing the work of other journalists without further fact-checking for themselves. [1]

And of course, no Pentagon source has ever offered such an estimate.

The most comprehensive estimate to date of DU use since 2003 in Iraq, based on known DU weapons systems and Pentagon and other government statements, is less than 200 tons (400,000 lbs.),[2] or 1/10th the inflated claim endorsed by Project Censored.

WHERE DID THIS INFLATED NUMBER COME FROM?

To understand why this ten-fold greater number is such a popular misconception, you have to believe, as Project Censored writes, that "Most American weapons (missiles, smart bombs, bullets, tank shells, cruise missiles, etc.) contain high amounts of uranium..."

The fact is, there is simply no forensic nor documentary evidence that DU is used in "high" amounts, or even at all, in "most American weapon systems." Apart from its less problematic use in armor plating and as counterweights in some fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft, the only known uses of uranium in conventional warfare are in various caliber armor-piercing bullets and tank shells.

The amount known to be fired from tanks and aircraft cannon just can't approach such a quantity. To believe the hyperbole, you have to believe Bob Nichols, who writes that you'll find, "...In the case of a cruise missile, as much as 800 pounds of the stuff..."

This belief that cruise missiles have depleted uranium in their warheads has its genesis in the misunderstanding of a 1984 Navy memo about Tomahawk Cruise missile flight tests.[3]

This misunderstanding was compounded by the work of Dai Williams, a British industrial psychologist and independent researcher. Among the stories cited by Project Censored, Stephanie Hiller's article, UMRC's reports and the Tokyo tribunal all move beyond Williams' published hypothesis that many warheads on bombs and Tomahawk cruise missiles include a very dense metal penetrator. While Williams concludes only that DU may be what he dubs the "mystery metal", others have construed Williams' misleading conflation of facts and speculation [4] as evidence these weapons all contain massive amounts of DU.

The oft-repeated Tomahawk/DU myth is refuted by several government documents that specifically deny the use of DU in conventionally-armed (i.e., non-nuclear) Tomahawk cruise missiles.

To quote just one, G.A. Higgins, U.S. Navy Medical Service Corps Commander and Executive Secretary, Naval Radiation Safety Committee responded on March 29, 1999, to an FOIA request made by the Military Toxics Project (MTP). Higgins' letter reads, in part...

"Responding to your second request for information under the Freedom of Information Act pertaining to the amount of depleted uranium in Navy munitions, counterweights, and specifically the Tomahawk cruise missile, as noted above, the only Navy weapons system using depleted uranium ammunition is the Phalanx CIWS. [Close-In Weapons System] Each 20 mm round contains 70 grams of depleted uranium.

"Regarding the Tomahawk missile system, there is no depleted uranium used in or on the deployed version of this weapons system. An unspecified quantity of depleted uranium is used as mass for test and evaluation purposes within the United States and is owned by the Department of Energy (DOE)...."

That last sentence refers to the same circumstance that is the subject of the misunderstood 1984 Navy memo: a flight test model of the nuclear-capable Tomahawk. The DU used in such tests provides a suitably heavy replacement for the intended nuclear warhead, so as to produce comparable flight dynamics. Other U.S. military documents also confirm that DU is not used in operational Tomahawk cruise missiles, Air Launched Cruise Missiles, Advanced Cruise Missiles, or Conventional Air Launched Cruise Missiles. [5]

I am not saying, nor do I believe, that one must accept all government documents as truth. But when establishing facts in dispute, more compelling evidence must be presented to refute government claims.

A keystone of Williams's hypothesis is a handful of U.S. warhead patents that mention depleted uranium. This circumstantial piece of evidence has, for some readers, constituted further proof.

But I have read these patents, and in all cases Williams cites, DU is mentioned not as the primary material for the patented warhead shroud or penetrator, but only as another suitably dense material, after the mention of tungsten or similarly dense alloys. Following up on this, I telephoned two of the named patent holders. Both had no knowledge of any production of such warheads with DU instead of non-radioactive metals; both expressed doubt that such production would have proceeded without their knowledge and both agreed with this writer's assessment of the patent language in question: that DU is noted as an alternate material simply to protect the innovations of the patented designs, regardless of which available dense metal is used.

Even the United Nations Environmental Program, which allegedly endorsed the 1,100-2,200 ton estimate, directly rebutted one of Williams' and UMRC's central claims regarding the bombardment of Iraq:

"There is currently no evidence that missiles or bombs used during the war - particularly the AGM-86D CALCM hard target penetrators (153 were used) or bunker-busting bombs - contain DU." [6]

Finally, a few days after completing my first draft of this examination of the evidence, I received an unequivocal letter from the Pentagon. More than a year earlier, I had written at length to Sen. Jon Kyl of Arizona (where I live), and posed a very specific question: "Have any of the laser or satellite-guided bombs, guided missiles, or Tomahawk or air-launched cruise missiles, used in Iraq since March 19, 2003, incorporated any components manufactured from depleted uranium or an alloy of any type of uranium?"

The reply, addressed to Kyl, was direct to the point: "Our review of the constituent's specific question regarding the use of certain munitions in recent operations confirms that none of the guided bombs or cruise missiles that the U.S. used in Iraq and Afghanistan contained uranium of any type." [7]

There are other outrageous and unsubstantiated claims made by the authors of Project Censored's selections, too many to debunk as thoroughly as the DU in cruise missiles claim. So here is a sample.

◇ A respected uranium info site maintained by the international anti-nuclear watchdog World Information Service on Energy (WISE) has reviewed the uranium contamination data collected from U.S. soldiers by the UMRC, and reported in the New York Daily News article. They conclude that where DU is present in the soldiers' urine, the relative levels found are anything but "high" compared to the levels normally found in humans. [8]

◇ From the very title of Bob Nichols' article, the hyperbole endorsed by Project Censored is apparent to thoughtful students of things nuclear:

“...Radiation in Iraq equals 250,000 Nagasaki Bombs.”

Further study about the source of this extreme comparison reveals that the unit measured is “atomicity”, an intellectual construct coined by a Japanese scientist. It is simply the calculated number of radioactive atoms involved, with no regard for the type of radiation present and its relative biological impact, method of dispersal, etc. Such comparison is meaningless at least, misleading at worst.

◇ The "International Criminal Tribunal for Afghanistan At Tokyo, The People Vs. George Bush" lays its foundation by accepting Dai Williams' hypothesis as a conclusion, and on the testimony of Leuren Moret. Moret's testimony incorporated many of the factual inaccuracies and poorly supported conclusions already discussed here.

◇ In interviews and press releases, including an update on Project Censored's web site, UMRC's Dr. Durakovic and Tedd Weyman have declared that thousands of tons of uranium warhead bunker busters were dropped and depleted uranium missiles fired in Afghanistan and Iraq. But in a curious contrast, their published work cited by Project Censored is far from concluding that any uranium at all is used in these weapons.

Weyman reveals in Afghan Field Trip #2 Report: Precision Destruction - Indiscriminate Effects the tentative nature of their public conclusions: “These results are also indicative that, if uranium is in use, the new generation of OEF [Operation Enduring Freedom] weapons produce significantly higher levels of contaminant than DU penetrators.” (emphasis added). In UMRC's Preliminary Findings from Afghanistan and Operation Enduring Freedom, Weyman states “the possibility of Natural Uranium [as the source of the uranium in the samples] remains under investigation.”

This significant hedge remains in the more recent May, 2004 UMRC poster summary of data titled The Urinary Concentration of Uranium Isotopes in Civilians of the Bibi Mahro Region after Recent Military Operations in Eastern Afghanistan [<http://www.umrc.net/downloads/mp4.pdf>]. This document concludes in part that “the explanation of our findings [of elevated uranium levels in urine samples] could be either of two possible mechanisms. 1) exposure to contaminated dust in the areas of the bombing raids by natural uranium containing weapons or 2) unusual geological and environmental excessively high uranium levels contained in the soil or drinking water.” (emphasis added)

This poster and the poster-reproduction of their Iraq research [http://www.umrc.net/downloads/UMRC_HPS_2004_Poster2.pdf] also fail to demonstrate that the bomb craters contain the “significantly higher levels of [uranium] contaminant”, as predicted. In Iraq, the most radioactive battle sites reported by UMRC were targets of A-10 and tank rounds made of DU, not cruise missile strikes or aerial bombing as their other claims would suggest. Furthermore, two of the scientists cited on the posters as responsible for the work - Gerdes and Parrish - have since distanced themselves from the conclusions UMRC's attributed to them without their consent.

I conclude with a few questions of my own.

If it were true, as UMRC claims in Afghan Field Trip #2 Report (absent any reference), that "the United States and its weapons' contractors acknowledge the development, expansion and deployment of weapons and delivery systems that use low, medium and high altitude, air-to-surface and ship-launched uranium alloyed munitions", what other evidence should exist?

I can think of:

*Handling protocol for ordnance specialists (such protocol exists for the A-10's DU ammo and the tank rounds);

*DU licenses for production, and production records from the factories making the warheads;

But significantly, no documents other than the patents already discussed have been put forward as evidence that uranium of any sort is used in such a wide spectrum of missiles and bombs.

And finally, if the Pentagon publicly considers DU relatively benign; uses it indiscriminately in other applications; and even brags of its advantages for our troops; then why would it keep such warhead uses a deep, dark secret?

While Project Censored has brought attention to an important story, they did so by endorsing the unsubstantiated and alarmist views of an activist fringe.

That's my 10¢ worth .

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FOOTNOTES

1) i.e.,

From: Felice & Jack Cohen-Joppa <nukeresister@igc.org>

Sent: Monday, August 04, 2003

To: larryjohnson@seattlepi.com

Subject: Thanks for DU article / ?source for ##s?

Thanks for today's DU article, Larry.

...Can you tell me your source for these numbers:

"The Pentagon and United Nations estimate that U.S. and British forces used 1,100 to 2,200 tons of armor-piercing shells made of depleted uranium during attacks in Iraq in March and April..."

From: "Johnson, Larry" <LarryJohnson@seattlepi.com>

To: 'Felice & Jack Cohen-Joppa' <nukeresister@igc.org>

Subject: RE: Thanks for DU article / ?source for ##s?

Date: Mon, 4 Aug 2003

Forgive my lack of precision, but I've been working on this DU thing since I came back from Iraq in late June and it has taken on a life of its own.

anyway, as near as I can recall, those numbers come from articles in the news media in Britain, where the

Ministry of Defense has been considerably more forthcoming than has the Pentagon... those numbers or something similar (often saying up to 2,000 metric tonnes) are used widely in Britain... BBC, Times, etc...

Best,
Larry

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2) [see 'The emergence and decline of the debate over depleted uranium munitions' at <http://www.antenna.nl/wise/uranium/pdf/duemdec.pdf>]

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3) See "Uranium Battlefields at Home and Abroad" by McGehee, Lopez and Bukowski (1993)

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4) (see charts conflating 'known and suspected' DU weapons at <http://www.eoslifework.co.uk/Uhaz7feb03/sld011.htm>)

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5) Links to US military documents that unequivocally state that DU is not used in operational Tomahawk cruise missiles, Air Launched Cruise Missiles, Advanced Cruise Missiles, or Conventional Air Launched Cruise Missiles:

http://www.gulflink.osd.mil/du_ii/du_ii_refs/n52en215/9354_019_0000001.htm

http://www.gulflink.osd.mil/du_ii/du_ii_refs/n52en216/9354_020_0000001.htm

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6) Environment in Iraq: UNEP Progress Report (20 October, 2003)

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7) <http://www.antenna.nl/wise/uranium/pdf/lamiq04.pdf>

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8) <http://www.antenna.nl/wise/uranium/dissgw.html#GERDES>.