Weapons of Mass Deception

What the Pentagon doesn't want us to know about depleted uranium.

By **Frida Berrigan** | 6.20.03 **print** | **email** | **comment**

An Iraqi woman and a child sit in the leukemia ward of the Al Mansoor Hospital in Baghdad, where children with various forms of cancer, attributed to the 1991 use of depleted uranium munitions by the allies, are being treated.

In the weeks leading up to the war on Iraq, TV screens across America were crowded with images of U.S. soldiers readying for upcoming battles with a crazed dictator who would stop at nothing. One clip after another showed U.S. soldiers racing to don $211 suits designed to protect them from the chemical and biological attacks they would surely suffer on the road to ousting Saddam Hussein.

But these grim forecasts were wrong. Despite the advance hype, Hussein's dreaded arsenal was not the biggest threat to Americans on the battlefield in Iraq. In fact, it was no threat at all.

The real threat—not only to U.S. troops but to Iraqis as well—may prove to be a weapon scarcely mentioned before, during or after the war: depleted uranium.

A toxic and radioactive substance, depleted uranium (DU)—otherwise known as Uranium 238—was widely used by U.S. troops as their Abrams battle tanks and A-10 Warthogs thundered through Iraq this spring.

Depleted uranium is a byproduct of enriched uranium, the fissile material in nuclear weapons. It is pyrophoric, burning spontaneously on impact. That, along with its extreme density, makes depleted uranium munitions the Pentagon's ideal choice for penetrating an enemy's tank armor or reinforced bunkers.

When a DU shell hits its target, it burns, losing anywhere from 40 to 70 percent of its mass and dispersing a fine dust that can be carried long distances by winds or absorbed directly into the soil and groundwater.

Depleted uranium's radioactive and toxic residue has been linked to birth defects, cancers, the Gulf War Syndrome, and environmental damage.

But the Pentagon insists depleted uranium is both safe and necessary, saying it is a "superior armor [and] a superior munition that we will continue to use." Pentagon officials say that the health and environmental risks of DU use are outweighed by its military advantages. But to retain the right to use and manufacture DU weaponry and armor, the Pentagon has to actively ignore and deny the risks that depleted uranium poses to human health and environment.

To keep depleted uranium at the top of its weapons list, the Pentagon has distorted research that demonstrates how DU dust can work its way into the human body, potentially posing a grave health risk. According to a 1998 report by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, the inhalation of DU particles can lead to symptoms such as fatigue, shortness of breath, lymphatic problems, bronchial complaints, weight loss, and an unsteady gait—symptoms that match those of sick veterans of the Gulf and Balkan wars. Dr. Rosalie Bertell, a Canadian epidemiologist, released a study in 1999 revealing that depleted uranium can stay in the lungs for up to two years. "When the dust is breathed in, it passes through the walls of the lung and into the blood, circulating through the whole body," she wrote. Bertell concluded that exposure to depleted uranium, especially when inhaled, "represents a

serious risk of damaged immune systems and fatal cancers."

The Pentagon has to cloak this dangerous weapon in deceptive and innocuous language. The adjective "depleted," with its connotation that the substance is non-threatening or diminished in strength, is misleading. While depleted uranium is not as radioactive and dangerous as U235—a person would not get sick merely from brief DU exposure—depleted uranium has a half-life of 4.5 billion years (as long as the solar system has existed) and may pose serious health risks and environmental contamination.

Don't Believe the Hype: Propaganda Wars

As the U.S. military prepared to launch a new offensive against Iraq early this year, the Pentagon and White House embarked on a parallel effort to promote depleted uranium as a highly effective weapon that would protect the lives of innocent Iraqis. At the same time, the Iraqi government sought to exploit the use of depleted uranium and the serious public health concerns about its use in its propaganda war against the United States.

At a March 14 Pentagon briefing, Col. James Naughton of the U.S. Army announced that U.S. forces had decided to employ DU munitions in the looming war on Iraq. When asked about depleted uranium's possible effects on civilians, Naughton characterized opposition to the use of DU weapons as a product of propaganda and cowardice. "Why do [the Iraqis] want [depleted uranium] to go away?" he asked. "They want it to go away because we kicked the crap out of them [in the first Gulf War]."

The White House echoed Naughton's sentiment, rejecting reports linking depleted uranium to birth defects and cancers in Iraq. Early this year the White House released a report titled *Apparatus of Lies: Saddam's Disinformation and Propaganda 1990-2003*, which includes a section on "The Depleted Uranium Scare." In it, the White House accuses the Iraqi government of launching a "disinformation campaign" that uses "horrifying pictures of children with birth defects" as a tool to "take advantage of an established international network of antinuclear activists." Iraq's aim, the report charged, was to promote the "false claim that the depleted uranium rounds fired by coalition forces have caused cancers and birth defects in Iraq."

But few anti-DU activists say that depleted uranium is the sole cause of cancer and birth defects. Rather, they contend there is an obvious link between depleted uranium and other toxins released into the environment during the 1991 Gulf War, that independent study is now required, and, in the meantime, that the United States should declare a moratorium on any future use of depleted uranium.

Depleted Uranium Use Increasing

Over the past 15 years, the Pentagon has become increasingly dependent on DU weapons and armor. The 1991 Gulf War was the first major conflict in which DU weaponry and armor was used. Almost 320 tons—an amount equal to the weight of five Abrams battle tanks—were fired in the Iraqi desert. About 10 tons of DU munitions were used in Kosovo and the former Yugoslavia in the '90s. DU weaponry was reportedly used in Afghanistan in 2001 as well, but reliable estimates are not yet available.

Depleted uranium was used extensively in this year's war on Iraq, but if Pentagon officials have an accurate accounting of total DU use, they are keeping that number to themselves. In a May 15 article in the *Christian Science Monitor*, reporter Scott Peterson wrote that after the war, the Pentagon, when pressed by reporters, announced that about 75 tons of DU munitions were fired from A-10 Warthogs. However, the Pentagon has stalled on releasing additional relevant data on how much depleted uranium was fired from Abrams battle tanks—the other system that uses only DU munitions. More importantly, it has not addressed concerns that DU weaponry was used much more extensively in Iraq's urban and densely populated areas in the 2003 war than in 1991.

The use of DU weapons in urban areas and against civilian targets in Iraq gives the lie to the Pentagon's insistence that it needed the DU advantage in order to win the recent war quickly. To illustrate the power of this wonder weapon, a March Pentagon press conference prominently featured pictures from the first Gulf War of an Abrams tank firing a DU munition through a sand dune to destroy an Iraqi tank hidden behind. While this makes good TV, did depleted uranium really provide a critical advantage to the U.S. military in Iraq? The answer is no. The U.S. military did not need a wonder weapon in Iraq because the crippled country was not a wonder opponent. Its arsenal was antiquated and had been poorly maintained since the first Gulf War. Suffering under more than 12 years of U.N. economic sanctions, moreover, Iraq had not been able to develop or purchase comparable high-tech armored weaponry.

In his May 15 article, Peterson describes video footage from the last days of the recent war showing an A-10 Warthog strafing the Iraqi Ministry of Planning in downtown Baghdad. This was not an armored target; it was a building in a heavily populated neighborhood. Peterson visited the area and found "dozens of spent radioactive DU rounds, and distinctive aluminum casings with two white bands, that drilled into the tile and concrete rear of the building."

The indiscriminate use of DU munitions in densely populated areas throughout Iraq, which put large numbers of civilians in jeopardy of radioactive and toxic exposure, violates the Geneva Convention's protocol prohibiting the use of weapons that do not distinguish between soldiers and civilians during wartime.

So why did the Pentagon insist on using DU weapons in Iraq? Tungsten alloys would have worked as well. Depleted uranium, it turns out, has one tremendous advantage over tungsten. It is provided to weapons manufacturers nearly free of charge by the U.S. government—an ingenious method of radioactive waste disposal. Essentially, depleted uranium is the waste left over from decades of nuclear weapons development. In fact, the United States has stockpiles of depleted uranium scattered at sites throughout the country—728,000 metric tons to be exact—a tiny fraction of which is used in the manufacture of depleted uranium warheads.

Lies and Silence

In an April 14 video address, President Bush spoke directly to military personnel and their families, thanking them for their role in the Iraq war. The monuments to Hussein had been toppled in Baghdad, and the first troops were beginning to return home triumphant. The message, broadcast on armed services networks around the country and beamed to troops on the Iraq battlefield, included Bush's promise that veterans of "Operation Iraqi Freedom" would receive "the full support of our government. We will keep our commitment to improving the quality of life for our military families."

The same day, the Defense Department and the Centers for Disease Control released the results of their four-year study on birth defects in the children of Gulf War Veterans. Although the study did not mention depleted uranium specifically, it found "significantly higher prevalences" of heart and kidney birth defects in veterans' children. Unfortunately, the study's disturbing findings were not reported by any U.S. media outlets until June.

The Pentagon and White House propaganda on depleted uranium was never challenged by the mainstream media this past spring. If members of the national press corps had done their homework, they would have found ample evidence that the Pentagon is fully aware of the dangers posed by DU weaponry and is actively ignoring its own research and warnings.

A 1974 military report evaluated the medical and environmental effects of depleted uranium, noting that "in combat situations involving the widespread use of DU munitions, the potential for inhalation, ingestion, or implantation of DU compounds may be locally significant." This contradicts recent Pentagon claims that depleted uranium does not pose a threat and demonstrates the military's understanding of how depleted uranium is absorbed into the human body, posing risks to organs.

In a 1998 training manual, the U.S. Army acknowledged the hazards of depleted uranium, requiring that anyone who comes within 25 meters of DU-contaminated equipment or terrain wear respiratory and skin protection. The manual cautioned: "Contamination will make food and water unsafe for consumption."

And in November 1999, NATO sent its commanders the following warning: "Inhalation of insoluble depleted uranium dust particles has been associated with long-term health effects, including cancers and birth defects."

They Hid It Well

The fact that these reports are in the public record is the result of years of hard work, study, and Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests by anti-DU activists. The Pentagon and Bush administration have also been hard at work. In the past two years, they have clamped down on sources of information that had been immensely valuable to service personnel and their families over the past decade.

Dan Fahey served in the United States Navy just months after the fighting ended in the Gulf War. Seeing the havoc the war wreaked on his fellow veterans, he set out to become an independent expert on depleted uranium. He sits on the board of Veterans for Common Sense and has played a major role in obtaining U.S. government documents about depleted

uranium through FOIA.

Fahey says that, under President Bush, the Department of Defense is controlling the release of information about depleted uranium so tightly that if he were starting his research and disclosure efforts today, he would be unable to get any information through the Freedom of Information Act. “There is less information and more secrecy,” he says. “There are tighter restrictions on access to information.”

Fahey was responsible for publicizing the findings of a July 1990 report by Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), a defense contractor commissioned by the Pentagon to study depleted uranium.

The report revealed that the Pentagon knew that depleted uranium was harmful before 1991, when they sent 697,000 American troops to the Gulf, where they could be exposed to DU dust and residue. SAIC asserted that depleted uranium is “a low-level alpha radiation emitter” that could be “linked to cancer when exposures are internal.” The report further warned, “DU exposures to soldiers on the battlefield could be significant, with potential radiological and toxicological effects.” In addition the report found that “short-term effects of high doses [of depleted uranium] can result in death, while long-term effects of low doses have been implicated in cancer.”

SAIC says in its report that widespread knowledge of depleted uranium’s harmful properties could lead to public outrage about the “acceptability of the continued use of DU kinetic energy penetrators for military applications.” That’s what worries the Pentagon.

All the while, as the Pentagon hides behind claims that more study is needed to prove depleted uranium’s connection with the ailments suffered by Gulf War veterans and Iraqi civilians, their own research demonstrates that, at best, depleted uranium is radioactive and toxic—and that at worst, it can lead to incurable diseases and death.

Veterans Suffer

The Pentagon says more study is needed. But veterans of the Gulf War, meanwhile, need medical care, information, and benefits, and for the Pentagon to come clean about depleted uranium. The veterans had been exposed to a “toxic soup” of smoke from oil and chemical fires, pesticides, vaccinations, depleted uranium and, most likely, plutonium.

Two types of depleted uranium exist. One is “clean” depleted uranium, a byproduct of the processing of uranium ore into uranium-235 (which is used in nuclear fuel and weapons). The other type is created at government facilities as a byproduct of reprocessing spent nuclear fuel (done to extract plutonium for nuclear warheads) and is known as “dirty” depleted uranium because it contains highly toxic plutonium.

In November 2000, U.N. researchers examined 11 sites in Kosovo hit by DU shells and found radioactive contamination at eight of them. Furthermore, those tests uncovered evidence that at least some of the DU munitions in the U.S. arsenal used in Kosovo contained “dirty” depleted uranium. This raises the question: How much of its plutonium-processing waste did the U.S. government supply to weapons manufacturers?

If some of the DU shells in the U.S. arsenal have been made from dirty depleted uranium, that could help explain why about 300 of 5,000 refugees from a Sarajevo suburb heavily bombed by NATO jets in 1995 had died of cancer by early 2001. And it could also help explain the fact that 28 percent of veterans who served in the first Gulf War have over the past 12 years sought treatment for illness and disease resulting from their military service and filed claims with the Veterans Administration for medical and compensation benefits. In all, 186,000 veterans of that war have sought treatment for a collection of maladies including chronic fatigue, joint and muscle pain, memory loss, reproductive problems, depression, and gastrointestinal disorders. Together these ailments are known as the Gulf War Syndrome.

Based on the struggles of Gulf War veterans, Congress passed a law in 1997 requiring the Pentagon to conduct pre- and postdeployment medical screenings of troops and military personnel so that medical professionals would have an accurate base of information if health problems developed. In the early months of this year, as U.S. troops were being deployed to Iraq, lawmakers found that the Pentagon was not complying with the 1997 law: The troops were not being screened at all.

According to Steven Robinson, a former Army Ranger who now directs the National Gulf War Resource Center, it took two congressional hearings, 30 news interviews, 60 radio interviews, and a timely *New York Times* ad courtesy of **www.TomPaine.com** to pressure

the Pentagon to follow the law. On April 29, the Pentagon announced it would begin conducting postdeployment examinations. Anti-DU activists say the military's grudging compliance is too little, too late.

Activists are struggling for treatment of veterans, for information about depleted uranium and other toxins that could be responsible for the Gulf War Syndrome, and for some sort of government acknowledgement or apology. But they are also battling against a legacy of lies, secrecy, and official promotion of an ends-justifies-the-means posture. Veterans with Gulf War Syndrome can be seen as the latest in a long line of Pentagon guinea pigs that includes the troops ordered to witness the atomic blasts in the early days of the Cold War, soldiers exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam, and the black men in Tuskegee, Alabama, who were subjected to federal government-sponsored syphilis experiments.

Keeps on Killing

If the Pentagon and the Federal government can treat American troops and their families with such casual disregard and use doublespeak with such abandon, what hope is there for Iraqi civilians and troops?

The people of Iraq have known nothing but decades of war, deprivation, and oppression. It is understandable that many cheered when the statues of dictator Saddam Hussein toppled. At the same time, how could they greet the United States, their liberators, with anything other than the deepest skepticism?

In his just-released book *The New Rulers of the World*, Australian journalist John Pilger recounts conversations with Iraqi doctors like Jawad Al-Ali, a cancer specialist in Basra. Before the Gulf War, Dr. Al-Ali told Pilger, "We had only three or four deaths in a month from cancer. Now it's 30 to 35 patients dying every month, and that's just in my department. That is a 12-fold increase in cancer mortality. Our studies indicate that 40 to 48 percent of the population in this area will get cancer. That's almost half the population."

Not only are Dr. Al-Ali's patients suffering, but his own family members are ill as well. "Most of my own family now have cancer, and we have no history of the disease," he told Pilger. "We strongly suspect depleted uranium."

The public has had to rely on anecdotal evidence like Dr. Al-Ali's testimony to get a sense of the health crisis in Iraq. Throughout the '90s, Hussein's government released data on cancer and birth defects, but it is unlikely that those figures provide an accurate picture.

Kathy Kelly, director of the Chicago-based Voices in the Wilderness and three-time nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize, has visited Iraq repeatedly since the first Gulf War and has built strong relationships with doctors and nurses there. She recounted a day she spent in a pediatric hospital in November 1998. "Four babies were born that day with deformities. I was shocked, but the doctors said, 'This is not unusual.'"

"So, I asked them," she continues, "'Did you know where the mothers were when they conceived? Were their fathers involved in the war? Were they in an area exposed to depleted uranium?'"

"One of the doctors replied, 'All of these questions are very important, and we need to be collecting this data, but we cannot. Let me show you something.' And she showed me a prescription for a baby that was written on the back of a candy wrapper. Because of the effects of the economic sanctions, they did not even have paper to write prescriptions on."

There is an overwhelming need for medical research in Iraq, but it is impossible to initiate within the context of the pressing health needs and the lack of medical supplies and equipment that constitute the fallout of war. This situation allows the U.S. military to continue insisting that there is no proof that DU exposures lead to cancers. "No proof of harm is not proof of no harm," Richard Clapp, an epidemiologist at Boston University, told the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "The potential for a DU-cancer link (especially lung cancer in those who breathe depleted uranium through dust and smoke particles) is still an open question."

Rep. Jim McDermott, a doctor from Washington state, traveled to Iraq in the fall of 2002. He visited hospitals, speaking with his peers, and saw the hospital beds crowded with the dying. He returned to the United States adamantly opposed to a new war in Iraq and deeply committed to challenging the continued use of depleted uranium. McDermott drafted legislation requiring studies of the health and environmental impact of depleted uranium. His bill, introduced just as the war started this past spring, is co-sponsored by a number of other Democrats but needs wider support.

Clearly, this legislation, if passed, would be an important first step in understanding the long-term effects of depleted uranium.

German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has called for an outright ban on shells made from depleted uranium. That would indeed be another sensible place to start.

In addition, anti-DU activists Dan Fahey, Steve Robinson, and Kathy Kelly should be encouraged and financially supported in their ongoing efforts to compile data and release their findings to the public. Next, manufacturers of DU weapons—like the Minnesota-based Alliant Techsystems, which built 15 million DU shells for the A-10 Warthog—should be held accountable for the long-term effects of their "products."

Finally, we might take up Yugoslavian President Vojislav Kostunica's suggestion: "We should be discussing the depleted conscience of those who used the notorious depleted uranium."

Only then will the cycle of deception and silence about depleted uranium be broken. ■

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READER COMMENTS

As the father of an active duty serviceman that spent time in Kuwait during the recent 2nd Gulf War on Iraq I have grave concerns about the use of depleted uranium in our weaponry. There is no doubt in my mind that exhaustive studies need to be done to accurately answer any questions about the risks posed by the use of these munitions. People, especially, people with loved ones in the military (or anyone concerned about the American serviceman or even more broadly, concerned about the humaneness of using such weapons on a declared enemy) should be contacting their political representatives to demand that such studies be begun immediately.

Posted by: Fado on 6.20.03 | 5:06 pm from Indianapolis, IN