

Nov 04, 2016 by [Nicholas J. Cull](#)

Restoring America's Reputation and the Tragic Children of Fallujah ^[1]

Last Thursday (March 4, 2010), some of the top thinkers currently engaging the issue of America's image in the world testified on Capitol Hill in hearings before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs under the title 'Restoring America's Reputation in the World: Why it Matters .' Joseph Nye of Harvard stressed the value of smart power. Andrew Kohut of Pew pointed to the fragility of the recent promising trends in world opinion and J. Michael Waller of the Center for Security Policy provocatively challenged the assembled legislators to stop and think: 'Would I run my political campaign the way the United States government runs its strategic communication?' Meanwhile a story broke which has the potential to put yet another hole in America's already leaky boat. TV, radio and web-based news services of the BBC carried an alarming report from the Iraqi city of Fallujah by the distinguished correspondent John Simpson.

In the report Simpson noted that the level of birth defects in this city had reached such a scale that officials were now warning women not to have children at all. Simpson visited hospitals and clinics, met doctors, parents and children and viewed photographs of horrible deformities including a baby born with three heads. The hospital saw three new cases each day. The significance for the United States was the explanation given by all those he spoke to: the cluster of birth defects must be the result of the high tech munitions used by the Americans during the battle of Fallujah in 2004. Simpson noted that the defects were worst where the fighting was most intense. In some versions the BBC explained that rubble from the battle had simply been bulldozed into the river Euphrates and that the river was the sole source of drinking water for all the mothers of disabled children that they had met. The report mentioned depleted uranium munitions and the use of white phosphorus in the 2004 attack and left no doubt that at the very least there were grounds for a major investigation. In some versions of the story, the Iraqi claims were balanced with an interview with a Leeds University professor, Alistair Hay, who pointed out that no link had been proven, and a rather limp written statement from the Pentagon which disputed a connection and ended rather fatuously by noting that improvised explosive devices were also a hazard to public health. Of course, Fallujah was a center of the Iraqi chemical industry and the rubble would be a health hazard whatever else happened to the city, but the problem here is that this story is not really about scientific casualty, it is about images of mutilated children and America's public diplomats stand to lose big if they don't respond appropriately.

Think about the most powerful images of warfare generated by the twentieth century: the broken child in Picasso's *Guernica*; the terrified Jewish boy with his hands raised on the streets of Warsaw; the burned girl running in Nick Ut's photograph from Vietnam; the dead Palestinian child on the streets of Gaza. Images of suffering children penetrate like no other. The deformed children of Fallujah will haunt the United States unless it acts now not merely to intone 'not my bad,' but to show that it cares about the children whatever the cause of their illness. Could not the United States work with the Iraqi government to identify the cause of the

epidemic? Should not the United States move to facilitate access to safe water for the next generation of mothers in Fallujah? Can we not all be part of a 'stepping up' of the existing international conversation about how best to build a future for people born with physical and learning difficulties for whatever reason? If the US does nothing, the images will merge with the familiar claims about the poisonous nature of depleted uranium. They will become further grist to the anti-American mill and a sap on American global power and influence regardless of whether Congress heeds Drs. Nye, Kohut and Waller and takes America's ailing public diplomacy machine in hand.
