

The "fog of war"

# How the US media covers up civilian deaths in Afghanistan

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A key aspect of the American media's role as a propaganda arm of the Pentagon is its treatment of the death and destruction wrought by the US in Afghanistan. Unable to simply deny the mounting evidence of civilian deaths caused by some 18,000 bombs dropped on the country, the media has resorted to other means to defend the slaughter of civilians, as well as combatants, by Washington's war machine.

The US government and military refuse to make any public accounting of the civilian death toll in the Afghan war. The Pentagon also refuses to release estimates of the number of dead Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters. This is in keeping with the practice established in the Gulf War, when then-chairman of the Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, stated he was "not terribly interested" in establishing how many Iraqi soldiers were killed.

Earlier this month the *Washington Post* published an article contending that ordinary Afghans—inured to years of civil war and violence—were not overly upset about the death of civilians, and blamed the Taliban for the loss of their loved ones. The article, titled "From Victims of US Bombs, Forgiveness," quoted various Afghan officials declaring that their countrymen were not dwelling on the loss of family and friends, and were delighted to be "liberated" by the Americans.

Then there was the February 1 piece by Nicholas Kristof—a "Merciful War"—in which the *New York Times* columnist claimed the killing of thousands of Afghan civilians and Taliban fighters served "the most humanitarian of goals," since Western aid would now pour in and save a million starving and sick Afghans over the next decade.

Kristof acknowledged that the US military had killed many more people in Afghanistan than died in the attack on the World Trade Center, and provided a rather low

estimate of 8,000 to 12,000 dead Taliban fighters and another 1,000 Afghan civilians. So what was the lesson of the US intervention, he asked rhetorically. "Is it that while pretending to take the high road, we have actually slaughtered more people than Osama bin Laden has? Or that military responses are unjustifiable because huge numbers of innocents inevitably are killed?"

"No, it's just the opposite," Kristof declared. The Afghan experience, the *Times* columnist claimed, showed that "troops can advance humanitarian goals just as much as doctors and aid workers can."

Kristof denounced those who were "deeply squeamish about the use of force" and "who are often so horrified by bloodshed involving innocents that they believe nothing can justify it." His piece was an open-ended justification for almost any level of killing by the American military, virtually anywhere in the world.

Finally there is the argument that the circumstances of the war make it impossible to estimate the number of Afghans killed by US bombs. The *New York Times* published an article in this vein on February 10 under the headline: "Uncertain Toll in the Fog of War: Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan."

The *Times* article admits that "hundreds and perhaps thousands of innocent Afghans have lost their lives during American attacks," citing several incidents in which 100 or more civilians were killed by US air strikes since bombing began October 7. In each case Pentagon officials initially dismissed charges of civilian deaths as enemy propaganda and insisted their bombs and missiles had hit "legitimate targets," but the reports were later confirmed by journalists or human rights organizations.

It is, however, "extraordinarily difficult to tabulate" the number of dead, the *Times* writes, because villages are in remote areas and, under Muslim tradition, the dead are

quickly buried. “Some answers disappear in the turned earth,” the newspaper concludes.

The *Times* then quotes without comment various Pentagon and military officials. The task of tracking the number of civilian casualties is “next to impossible,” Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld says, citing the supposed inaccessibility of bombed targets.

Rear Admiral Craig R. Quigley, the senior spokesman for the Central Command, adds that civilian deaths could not be verified because “we did not have people on the ground to check” at the early stages of the war. Even now, when there are 4,000 American troops in Afghanistan, Quigley says, investigations would be unreliable because of the time that has passed, and because some of the damage has been repaired and many of the witnesses have moved away. “You just don’t find much,” he declares.

But while the US government and media find it “impossible” to estimate the number of civilians killed by American bombs, they have no problem giving out civilian death figures when the alleged perpetrators have themselves been targeted for US military attack. During the 1998 war against Yugoslavia, US officials repeatedly claimed that tens of thousands of Kosovar Albanians had been killed by Serb forces. They showed no reticence in making such estimates, even though the US had no forces on the ground in Kosovo. The media repeated all such reports uncritically, generally giving the greatest exposure to the most exaggerated accounts.

As has since been established, the figures were wildly inflated. But reports of killings on a colossal scale were essential for mounting the type of propaganda campaign, replete with charges of genocide, required to build public support for the US-NATO military intervention.

In the current war, the US has thousands of troops on the ground. Even before large numbers of US soldiers entered, the US used special forces, CIA agents and local “spotters” to direct bombing attacks against Taliban and Al Qaeda forces. In addition, as the Pentagon likes to boast, the US is deploying the world’s most advanced intelligence-gathering techniques, including cameras mounted on satellites and spy planes that can photograph the earth’s surface with tremendous accuracy and in astonishing detail.

There can be no doubt that aerial photographs of the bloody aftermath of US air strikes and on-site “damage assessments” are being studied at the command center in Tampa, Florida, giving the military brass and the White House a daily update on the body count.

One of the ways the government and the military keep

this information from the public is by imposing draconian censorship on the news media. The US military has banned reporters from combat scenes in Afghanistan (something the *Times* omits to mention in its disquisition on the “fog of war”).

Earlier this month, the military intervened to prevent American and foreign journalists from investigating the deaths in eastern Afghanistan of three peasants killed by a missile fired from an unmanned CIA drone. The reporters were held at gunpoint by US soldiers and barred from traveling to the scene or interviewing witnesses. *Washington Post* journalist Doug Struck said a US commander told him, after conferring with military superiors, “If you go further, you would be shot.”

In a rare criticism of the Pentagon, the *Post* reporter said the incident showed “the extremes the military is going to, to keep this war secret, to keep reporters from finding out what’s going on.”

This was not the first incidence of coercion against journalists. In early December US Marines rounded up a group of reporters and photographers from the Pentagon’s press pool and held them in a warehouse near Kandahar to prevent them from reporting on the killing and injuring of American troops by a stray bomb.

Defense Secretary Rumsfeld has also threatened reporters with prosecution if they leak classified information.

The fact that the US media has aided the military in keeping the truth from the public is acknowledged even by some American reporters. Comparing the role of the media in the war to that of accounting firm Arthur Andersen in the Enron scandal, Mark Thompson, *Time* magazine’s defense correspondent, wrote, “We are the auditors of this operation. Sometimes you get the feeling there’s a little too much Arthur Andersen going on.”



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