

# US will provide no estimate of Iraqi war casualties

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Bush administration and Pentagon officials have made it clear they have no intention of providing an official estimate of the number of Iraqi soldiers and civilians who were killed or wounded by US and British forces during the three-week war.

According to the military brass, the US no longer does “body counts,” a reference to the often-inflated battlefield reports that contributed to galvanizing international and domestic opposition to the Vietnam War. In line with its efforts to sanitize the image of the US military, the Pentagon and the US news media have decided to conceal from the world and the American public the extent of the massacre that has occurred in Iraq.

The military is following the precedent established by then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, who declared after the first Gulf War that he was “not terribly interested” in establishing how many Iraqi soldiers had been killed. This undisguised indifference to the human cost of the US invasion, and contempt for world public opinion, reflects the real thinking that predominates in the White House and the top echelons of the US military, where the Iraqi masses are looked upon as barely human.

The *New York Times* reported that the question of Iraqi casualties was not discussed at the daily briefings for senior commanders at Central Command. The newspaper said the military no longer requires its field commanders to count the number of enemy soldiers killed and wounded.

Captain Frank Thorp of the Navy, the chief spokesman at Central Command, said commanders had not been asked to keep track because it was “too time consuming” and “risky” to count corpses on the battlefield. “Out there in the combat environment,” he said, “the commander on the ground is focused on the present, the future and how his troops are doing. We are not going to ask him to make specific reports on enemy casualties.”

This attitude, reminiscent of the genocidal policy toward the American Indians and the haughty barbarism of European colonialists in Africa and Asia, has been directly encouraged by President Bush, who declared on several occasions that the US would not stop at “half measures” in its war of conquest against Iraq.

Casualties throughout Iraq were so high, according to the International Red Cross, that many hospitals—already overstretched as a result of bombing, looting and a lack of electricity, medicine and clean water—were too busy to keep track of the dead and wounded. There is no Iraqi authority left to count the dead and inform their families.

Anecdotal accounts, however, give a picture of the extent of the killing and maiming. In the southern city of Basra alone ambulance drivers and hospital workers estimate they have handled between

1,000 and 2,000 corpses since the outbreak of war March 20.

The *Washington Post* noted that in a cemetery in Najaf, 100 miles south of Baghdad, cemetery workers spoke of hundreds, even thousands being buried from dawn to dusk during the three weeks of war. The newspaper wrote: “In a procession of sorrow, they came in minibuses and pickups, in taxis and vans, with simple wood coffins lashed to the roofs. Some bodies were hardly recognizable, exhumed after days, even weeks, from hastily dug graves. Others were only recently discovered at hospitals and mosques where they had been stashed with other corpses in the chaos of war.

“Everything we have in Iraq is rich, our oil, our resources, our land,” said Shamil Abdel-Sahib, a 33-year-old who performed ritual washing of the bodies as they were brought to the cemetery. “The only thing that is cheap in Iraq is its people.”

While the Pentagon has refused to release any official figures, the US Central Command reported that in just one engagement—the April 5 rampage by a column of US tanks and armored vehicles in Baghdad—2,000 to 3,000 Iraqi soldiers were killed.

Unnamed US military officials have said that between 10,000 and 15,000 Iraqi soldiers were killed, but reports about the so-called “degradation” of Iraqi units’ combat strength would suggest that the number is considerably higher.

Before the war, military analysts said Iraq had 389,000 full-time active duty military personnel, including 80,000 Republican Guard soldiers. According to US military reports, these forces have been reduced to below 20 percent of combat strength. This would suggest that tens of thousands of Iraqi soldiers were killed or wounded. With two-thirds of Iraq’s army drawn from conscripts—who are required to serve once they reach the age of 18—the net effect of the US assault was to wipe out a large portion of the young generation of Iraqi men.

After it became clear that the US was facing stiff resistance to the invasion, the Bush administration and the Pentagon decided to unleash massive firepower against the Iraqi defenders, regardless of the number of civilian and military casualties. The aim was to kill as many enemy soldiers as possible with precision weapons before any US ground forces came in contact with them.

“The bombing campaign that accompanied ground actions to squeeze Iraqi military units into ever-smaller ‘kill boxes’ almost certainly left thousands of soldiers dead, perhaps tens of thousands,” the *New York Times* reported.

This strategy was summed up by Lt. Col. Bryan McCoy, the commander of the Third Battalion, Fourth Marines, a force of 1,500 soldiers that was equipped with tanks and armored vehicles, and backed by artillery, helicopter gun ships and fighter jets. This was one of the first units to reach Baghdad.

McCoy told a *Times* reporter his strategy of establishing "supremacy" meant killing anyone who took up a weapon against the US-British invaders, even if they were running away. He said, "We're here until Saddam and his henchmen are dead.... It's over for us when the last guy who wants to fight for Saddam has flies crawling across his eyeballs. Then we go home."

McCoy's equation of resistance against the invasion with political support for the regime of Saddam Hussein is typical of the war propaganda pumped out by the Bush administration, the Pentagon and the mass media. It was clear in the television reportage and the coverage in the print media that the word had gone out to always refer to resisters as die-hard Hussein partisans, supporters of the regime, etc. This language was calculated to induce in the public mind the notion that all those who opposed the American conquest of Iraq were implicated in the repressive policies of the regime, and presumably deserved to die, while discounting any possibility that Iraqis who opposed the regime also opposed the US invasion and occupation of their country.

Accounts from the perspective of the Iraqi soldiers have begun to be reported in the international media. For example, an infantryman in the 6th Corps of the Republican Guard described how nine days of bombing decimated his unit of 2,000 men deployed to defend the town of Kut, 100 miles southeast of Baghdad.

Although the US media regularly portrayed Republican Guard soldiers as the best-trained and fiercest Iraqi fighters, Baha Aldin Jalal Abdul Ameer was a 21-year-old math student when he was conscripted after college and sent to defend Kut after only two months of training.

He told the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, "From the start, lots of my friends were killed by the bombs. There were at least 150 that I knew who died in the first few days. The bombs fell everywhere, blowing people apart and destroying everything.... At any moment you thought you were going to die." At night, Ameer said, US forces had "night-vision goggles and they came at us constantly from the dark. We couldn't see them, and they could kill us at will."

The one-sided slaughter reportedly disturbed many American soldiers, who had been told that Iraqi soldiers would surrender without a fight. An article in the *Christian Science Monitor* noted that after one battle, a Marine from the Third Battalion said privately, "For lack of a better word, I feel almost guilty about the massacre. We wasted a lot of people. It makes you wonder how many were innocent. It takes away some of the pride. We won, but at what cost?"

The disdain towards Iraqi lives extends to civilians. Despite their efforts to portray the aim of the war as the "liberation" of the Iraqi people, US officials have said they will not quantify the number of dead and injured civilians, nor assess the property damage done to the civilian infrastructure.

Initial hospital reports, news media accounts and other sources estimate at least 3,500 civilians were killed and another 5,000 wounded. These numbers are mounting, as occupation forces continue the use of violence, particularly against anti-American demonstrators, and thousands more face the threat of unexploded ordinance, hunger and chronic diseases, such as cholera and diarrhea, caused by the lack of clean water and other unsanitary conditions.

Pentagon officials have dismissed these estimates of civilian deaths, claiming many of the dead were combatants dressed in civilian clothes or victims of the Iraqi defenders, rather than US cruise missiles, bombs and invading ground forces.

Secretary of State Colin Powell told a BBC reporter April 13, "We

really don't know how many civilian deaths there have been, and we don't know how many of them can be attributed to coalition action, as opposed to action on the part of Iraqi armed forces as they defended themselves."

In a bid to shore up the increasingly threadbare pretense that the war was fought on behalf of ordinary Iraqis, the US Congress inserted a measure into the recent \$78.5 billion emergency spending bill for the war to provide token assistance to the families of "innocent" civilians killed or injured by US forces. The money will come out of the \$2.5 billion relief and reconstruction fund earmarked for food, water, health care, transportation and other needs.

A spokesman for Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy, who sponsored the measure, said Congress, however, did not intend to create a formal claims process for the Iraqis or obligate the military to identify individuals or communities that suffered injury.

The Pentagon issued a two-sentence reply to the measure, saying the Defense Department "has no plans" to determine the total civilian casualty toll.

The claim that US officials have no way of knowing how many Iraqis were killed and injured is a lie. The Defense Department has the most advanced means of assessing the destructive impact of its weaponry, including the satellite "bomb assessment" photos that are regularly displayed before the media at Pentagon press conferences.

Moreover, military officials have confirmed that US soldiers, following the Geneva Conventions protocols on handling remains, recorded the identification of dead enemy soldiers and sent the information to "mortuary affairs" personnel in Kuwait before burying them in marked graves. Such documentation could be compiled, along with numbers from reliable witnesses, to obtain a low-end estimate of the number of Iraqi dead. The refusal to do so is a political decision.

Robert Turner at the Center for National Security Law at the University of Virginia told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* that because the long-term plan includes running Iraq after the war, the military wants to keep casualty numbers as low as possible. "The more mothers and fathers lose children, the more wives lose husbands, the more anger there will be toward the people who killed them," Turner said.

Moreover, the Pentagon wants to perpetuate the fraud that the war was waged against a formidable enemy that threatened the US with weapons of mass destruction. The fact that 165 coalition soldiers were killed versus tens of thousands of Iraqis underscores that the US used the most terrifying weapons of mass destruction to carry out the colonial conquest of an impoverished and defenseless country.

The ratio of US troops lost to enemy troops killed has few precedents. One, according to German military historian Ralph Rotte, was the Battle of Omdurman in 1898 in the Sudan, where the British, armed with rifles and machine guns, mowed down thousands of Sudanese tribesmen armed only with swords and lances.



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