

Iraq checkpoint killings—the ugly face of imperialist war

Bill Vann
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The killing of seven women and children by US troops who poured cannon fire into a vehicle approaching a checkpoint near the embattled Iraqi town of Karbala has sparked outrage throughout the Middle East and beyond. Pentagon officials have dismissed the incident as an unfortunate accident, while insisting that the soldiers involved behaved appropriately.

The company commander of the 3rd Infantry Division unit manning the roadblock ordered his troops to fire a warning shot, but, according to a graphic account published in the *Washington Post* Tuesday, saw no action taken. As the four-wheel-drive Toyota drew closer he ordered the soldiers to “Stop him.” At least one Bradley Fighting Vehicle opened up on the vehicle with 25mm cannon fire.

“You just f—ing killed a family because you didn’t fire a warning shot soon enough,” the Captain reportedly yelled over a radio to his platoon leader. Packed inside the vehicle was an entire family, 13 people in all, who were fleeing the fighting. The victims included five children age five or under. At least one of the wounded was not expected to survive.

“It was the most horrible thing I’ve ever seen, and I hope I never see it again,” Sgt. Mario Manzano, an Army medic, told the *Post*. He described how one of the women who survived the attack sat in the vehicle clutching the mangled bodies of two of her children. “She didn’t want to get out of the car,” he said.

The horrific incident was by no means unique. Several hours later, an unarmed Iraqi was shot and killed and his passenger badly wounded by US Marines at another roadblock outside the southern town of Shatra on the main road to Nasiriyah. An elderly man and his two grandsons were killed on another road. As US soldiers helped to bury the dead, one commented to French television, “It is terrible what we are doing to these people.” There was yet another incident at a nearby checkpoint in which a driver was shot and wounded.

Meanwhile, the Agence France-Presse reported that 15 members of a family were killed late Monday when an Apache helicopter fired a rocket into their pickup truck. The family had been fleeing the combat in Nasiriyah. The survivor of the attack showed an AFP photographer coffins containing the bodies of his wife and six children, his father and mother, and three of his brothers and their wives.

In the same area, a US warplane dropped fragmentation bombs on the farming town of Hilla Tuesday, killing 33 people, most of them women and children, and wounding another 310. Local hospital director Murtada Abbas appealed to his “former colleagues” at the hospital where he studied and worked in Britain to do something to stop the bloodshed.

These killings are in the immediate sense the working out of new “rules of engagement” set by the Pentagon in the aftermath of a

deadly suicide bomb attack carried out by an Iraqi soldier at a checkpoint near Nasiriyah on Saturday. Four soldiers from the 3rd Infantry Division died when a man, identified as 50-year-old Iraqi army sergeant and a veteran of both the Iran-Iraq war and the 1991 Gulf War, opened the trunk of his car as ordered by the US soldiers, triggering a bomb blast.

The Iraqi regime claims that 4,000 men from other Arab countries have already arrived in Iraq to volunteer for similar suicide missions against US forces. While this number cannot be confirmed, newspapers in Lebanon, Syria and elsewhere report large numbers of young men have crossed the border with the aim of joining the resistance.

“We are going to fight the Americans, the British and the Zionists who want to take over our land,” 24-year-old Nourredine al Sayyed, one of about forty men who boarded a bus in Lebanon bound for Iraq, told the Lebanese *Daily Star*. “This will not be allowed except over our dead bodies. We are going to die. We know we will not come back,” said Sayyed, who leaves behind three children.

“When we see women and children being slaughtered in front of us, would we be men if we didn’t go?” asked another of those on the bus.

The threat of suicide attack is part of the mounting resistance of Iraqi soldiers, militiamen and resistance, who have adopted classic guerrilla tactics as the only means of fighting back against the overwhelming firepower of the US-British invaders.

In response, US and British officials have denounced the Iraqi fighters as “terrorists,” “thugs” and “death squads,” blaming them for any civilian deaths. Indeed, even cruise missile attacks on civilian neighborhoods in Baghdad and elsewhere have been blamed on the Iraqis, with fantastic claims that Saddam Hussein has ordered explosions to discredit the macabrely named “Operation Iraqi Freedom.”

The British newspaper the *Guardian* debunked this last claim Tuesday, revealing that a piece of metal found at the site of one of the worst of these incidents—the bombing of a market in the working class Baghdad suburb of Al Sha’ab—contained a manufacturer’s serial number traced back to a Raytheon Co. plant in Texas that produces cruise missiles for the US Air Force.

In a broader sense, the new massacres of civilians are a byproduct of the abject failure of the Pentagon leadership’s war strategy. Having promised to topple the regime of Saddam Hussein and terrorize the population into submission with its vaunted “shock and awe” plan of “precision” bombings, the US military now finds itself face-to-face with a hostile people prepared to fight and die to defend their country. In light of the stunning setbacks for the US war effort, the Pentagon has shifted to a strategy that far more directly targets Iraq’s civilian

population.

From well before the launching of the aggression against Iraq, both the Pentagon's civilian and military leaderships testily dismissed any parallels between the war in Iraq and the debacle suffered by US forces in Vietnam. Yet as the conflict goes on, the echoes from that ill-fated intervention of three decades ago grow ever louder.

Military planners speak of winning the "hearts and minds" of the Iraqi people while ordering nightly bombing campaigns that have claimed the lives of several hundred and filled Iraq's ill-equipped hospitals with maimed and screaming children. Iraqi resisters, like the National Liberation Front fighters before them, are described as "terrorists" for hiding among civilians and supposedly lacking any concern for human life. US-British forces, meanwhile, lay siege to Basra, cutting off its electricity and water supply and lobbing high explosives into its crowded streets. All that is needed is for a general to tell the press assembled at the Centcom headquarters in Qatar that the military had to "destroy the city to save it."

The echo of Vietnam becomes most clear in the complaints by US soldiers, dismayed that they are meeting stiff resistance instead of the cheering crowds that they were promised. Under these conditions, frightened troops, many of them shy of their twentieth birthday, are capable of carrying out terrible crimes in the name of self-defense.

"This is a completely new dimension," said Lt. Col. Scott Rutter, commander of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment of the 3rd Infantry Division. "It is very difficult to distinguish civilians from possible fighters." In short, it must be assumed that any Iraqi is the enemy.

Now his troops, exhausted from the stalled race for Baghdad and fearful after nearly continuous hostile fire, man roadblocks that have shut every road surrounding the strategic city of Najaf with orders to shoot on sight any driver approaching a checkpoint. The effect has been to impose a virtual state of siege on the entire region, forcing civilians fleeing bombardment and battle back into conflagration.

In a passage in her book about the Vietnam War, *Fire in the Lake*, Frances Fitzgerald attempted to explain the conditions that gave rise to the war's atrocities, particularly the My Lai massacre of 1969 in which US soldiers herded several hundred women and children into a ditch and mowed them down with automatic weapons fire.

"Young men from the small towns of America, the GI's who came to Vietnam found themselves in a place halfway around the earth among people with whom they could make no human contact," Fitzgerald wrote. "Like an Orwellian army, they knew everything about military tactics, but nothing about where they were or who the enemy was. And they found themselves not attacking fixed positions but walking through the jungle or through villages among small yellow people, as strange and exposed among them as if they were Martians."

Once again, the US soldier is as "strange and exposed" as any extraterrestrial. Unable to speak Arabic—only one in four soldiers, it is reported, even have Arabic-English translation guides, and far fewer still know how to use them—and knowing next to nothing of Iraq's complicated history and culture, American soldiers are being thrust into a vicious spiral. Acts of Iraqi resistance trigger retaliation, which in turn engender even greater popular anger and resistance.

It is a type of warfare for which the Pentagon's civilian leadership in its arrogance failed to consider. Massive firepower and advanced technology, they insisted, would turn the Iraqi intervention into a "cakewalk."

Now the Pentagon freely acknowledges that the Iraqi resistance will

be no pushover. Indeed, a senior military commander speaking not for attribution told the media that Washington is prepared to pay "a very high price" to accomplish its goal.

"We're prepared for this as we're not going to do anything other than ensure this regime goes away," he said. "If that means a lot of casualties, there'll be a lot of casualties." Referring to World War II, in which he said the US military could lose "1,000 people" in a day, the commander added, "There may come a time when things are going to be much more shocking."

No one has bothered to give any estimate of how many Iraqis must die to achieve the Bush administration's aims, but if the Pentagon is prepared to lose thousands of troops, it is doubtless prepared to kill one hundred times as many civilians.

Nor has the Pentagon returned to the vexed subject of what level of force and how many years will be required to occupy this country of 23 million, assuming the US and British invaders succeed in taking Baghdad. When Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric Shinseki told a US Senate panel on the eve of the war that "something on the order of several hundred thousand" troops would be needed to control the country, he came under withering criticism from the Defense Department's civilian leadership. "Wildly off the mark," was the reaction of Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz. The general "misspoke," said Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Given that these were the same strategists who predicted that the Iraqi regime would crumble under the first US air strikes and that Iraqis would line the road to scatter flowers in the path of advancing US tanks, Shinseki's estimate appears all the more credible.

Thus, the military aggression that the Bush administration has launched against Iraq could well tie down most of the deployable force of both the US Army and the Marine Corps for the foreseeable future, with continuing "pacification" efforts yielding fresh casualties among both US soldiers and Iraqi civilians for years to come.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the impending battle for Baghdad—and a US, British victory is by no means assured—the present intervention can only end in catastrophe for the corrupt ruling elite in Washington. It has already become clear that the masses of Iraq and indeed the entire Middle East have no intention of allowing Bush and his cronies to turn the clock back to the days of colonialism.

Nor, in the end, will American working people continue allowing their sons and daughters to be sacrificed as cannon fodder in a war to secure US control of Iraqi oil reserves. The diversion of huge sums to pay for this war and for the occupation of Iraq will only widen the immense gulf between the wealthy oligarchy represented by the Bush administration and the vast majority, those who work for a living. Combined with the revulsion felt by millions over the slaughter in Iraq, the inevitable result of growing social inequality at home will be political upheavals in the US itself.



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