

Massacre in Samarra: US lies and self-delusion

David Walsh
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The US military's initial account of Sunday's firefight in the central Iraqi city of Samarra, uncritically relayed to the American people by a servile media, has proven to be a tissue of lies. It turns out that the "major victory" over the Iraqi resistance consisted of American forces blasting away indiscriminately in Samarra's city center, killing innocent men, women and children, damaging property and buildings—including a mosque and a kindergarten—and further enraging the local population.

The Samarra incident in its various aspects—the battle itself, the military's claims, the media's role—is a microcosm of the US occupation of Iraq.

American military spokesmen first declared that US forces had defeated a "massive attack," inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy. The Pentagon claimed that 46 Iraqi guerrillas had been killed, and later increased that figure to 54.

The US media passed on the "good news," repeating the military's assertion that dozens of Iraqi fighters had been slain. As *Editor & Publisher Online* noted December 2: "Neither the *New York Times*, *New York Post*, the *Boston Globe*, *USA Today*, the *Washington Post*, or Knight Ridder included any civilian witnesses or Iraqi hospital accounts in their initial reports Monday. Many flatly reported the death tally and account of the battle without noting this was 'according to military officials.' The *Times* topped its front page with the declarative headline: '46 Iraqis Die in Fierce Fight Between Rebels and GIs,' and this was common treatment."

Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* predictably ran the most depraved headline: "GIs Blow Away 46 Saddam Fanatics."

The story, however, evaporated almost as soon as it was told. On-the-scene reporting by journalists made clear that the claim of dozens of guerrilla fatalities was absurd, an invention of the US military command in Iraq. Local residents told reporters that eight to ten people had been killed—most, if not all of them, civilians.

On Tuesday, the military's version of events continued to unravel, as even major US media outlets acknowledged widespread doubts about a major American military triumph and provided certain information about civilian casualties.

The *San Francisco Chronicle*'s Vivienne Walt reported from Samarra's hospital: "In a mix of rage and grief, residents lashed out at the brigade's soldiers, accusing them of firing randomly into crowded market areas in the center of the city, killing civilians, including two Iranians believed to be pilgrims visiting a Shiite mosque in town. 'All the people in town today are asking for revenge,' said Majid Fadel al-Samarai, 50, an emergency-room worker at the Samarra General Hospital. 'They want to kill the Americans like they killed our civilians. Give me a gun, and I will also fight.'

"Residents also charged that American soldiers showed little regard for the safety of civilians during the gun battle. 'I saw a man running across the street to get his small son, who was stuck in the middle,' said Abdul Satar, 47, who owns a bakery a block from one of the two banks to which the convoys had driven. 'So the Americans shot the man,' he said."

Similar reports and comments from Samarra residents appeared in other major newspapers and even on US television. The *New York Times* cited the comments of a 52-year-old ambulance driver at the city's morgue, Adnan Sahib Dafar, who pointed to a dead woman and demanded, "Is this woman shooting a rocket-propelled grenade?... Is she fighting?" The *Times* also quoted a shopkeeper, Satar Nasiaf, 47, who had watched two Iraqi civilians die at the hands of US troops, "If I had a gun, I would have attacked the Americans myself.... The Americans were shooting in every direction."

New York Newsday correspondent Mohammed Bazzi commented: "Some witnesses said US forces began firing at random after they were attacked. 'They just started shooting in all directions,' said Akil al-Janabi, 43, who said his brother was wounded in the crossfire. 'They have no regard for civilians. We were not the ones attacking them, but now we want revenge for our dead and injured.'"

Reporters from Britain's *Guardian* spoke to local officials who "questioned the high body count and said there were non-combatants among the dead. 'We think that at most eight or nine people died,' said Khaled Mohammed, an admissions clerk in the hospital's emergency ward, but added that some of the dead might have been taken straight to the town morgue.

A Samarra policeman, Captain Sabti Awad, said American troops had opened fire at random in response to the ambush, killing and wounding civilians. Ahmed al-Samarai, another police officer, said: 'Not more than 10 people were killed and some of those were not involved in the fighting'... Jihad Hussein, a student, said he had seen passersby running for cover. 'They were spraying the whole street,' he said. 'I don't know who fired the first shot, the Americans or the Fedayeen, but I saw at least one young woman hit by a bullet as she lay on the ground.'

A US soldier, a "combat leader," writing on the *Soldiers For The Truth* web site, who claims to have participated in the Samarra battle, explained that "most of the casualties were civilians, not insurgents or criminals as [is] being reported. During the ambushes the tanks, brads [Bradley Fighting Vehicles] and armored HUMVEES hosed down houses, buildings, and cars while using reflexive fire against the attackers."

Agence France Presse (AFP) reporters spoke with residents who had not seen any militants' bodies after the firefight. An ambulance

driver, Abdelmoneim Mohammed, said he had not transported any fighters. "If I had seen bodies, I would have picked them up. It's not like the Americans would have done it. If the death toll had reached that announced by the Americans, the atmosphere in Samarra would be quite different."

The owner of a grocery store located 60 yards from the scene of one of the attacks told AFP, "After the firing, I went out of my shop. There were no wounded, no killed on the streets. Where could they have disappeared?"

(Whatever lessons the battle of Samarra may have taught the Pentagon, one must be prominent in many minds: the need to prevent journalists from being in a position to debunk the American version of events. The military may resort once again to the killing of reporters, a policy already put into effect early in the Iraqi war, in order to intimidate and silence journalists not inclined to parrot the official line.)

In the face of considerable evidence, Pentagon officials stood firm Tuesday, continuing to claim a great victory. In Brussels, Gen. Peter Pace, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters, "They attacked, and they were killed. So I think it will be instructive to them."

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asserted that the continuing insurgency was being conducted by "a limited number of people who are determined to kill innocent men, women and children." According to Rumsfeld, they are "being rounded up, captured, killed, wounded and interrogated." A senior military official told the *New York Times*, "They [the Iraqi resistance] got whacked, and won't try that again."

As for accounts of civilian casualties, which appeared in virtually every news outlet worldwide, US Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt told a Baghdad press conference, "We have no such reports, whether from medical authorities or police."

American military officials attempted to brazen their way through the thorny issue of the missing corpses of the Iraqi fighters. Kimmitt told the media, "I would suspect that the enemy would have carried them away and brought them back to where their initial base was." Col. Fredrik Rudesheim, when asked about the same issue, responded: "Are you asking me to produce [them, i.e., the dead bodies]?" He continued, "This is a good question and I think perhaps if you can interview the Fedayeen or whoever attacked us, you might get a better answer."

Lieut. Col. Ryan Gonsalves, commander of the 166th Armored Battalion in Samarra, said the body count was "based on the reports we got from the ground." The AFP acerbically noted, "The mystery [of the absent bodies], which borders on solving a mathematics equation, further deepened with Col. Gonsalves' report. According to him, a total of 60 militants, divided into two groups, attacked two convoys escorting new Iraqi currency to banks in the city.... If the US troops killed 46 and captured 11 of them, only three of the survivors would have been left to pick up the corpses."

To what extent self-delusion, as opposed to simple prevarication, played a role in producing the Samarra "body count" and the US military's general picture of the gun battle is impossible to determine with precision. American commanders undoubtedly feel the need to boost the morale of their troops and supply the Bush administration with "good news" on the military front.

In any event, the Samarra episode contains features that reveal the character of the war as a whole:

1. Massive and ever-growing Iraqi popular opposition to the American occupation. Both US soldiers on the ground and Iraqis

agree that when the US forces started firing at everything in sight, as *Newsday* put it, "some residents went to their homes to retrieve their guns and began firing at the US troops. 'These were normal people who were not involved in the resistance,' [one witness] said. 'But they saw how the Americans were firing their machine guns and tanks in every direction, and they wanted to fight back.'"

By their actions in recent months and Sunday's display of indiscriminate firepower in particular, the US forces have aroused the outrage of Samarra's population, under the old regime a hotbed of anti-Hussein sentiment. A similar process is at work in much of the country.

2. The deterioration in the morale of US troops. The mental state of the increasingly demoralized American forces in Iraq must include many conflicting and contradictory sentiments: opposition to the war, disorientation, bewilderment, fear, frustration, as well as a fury that can take homicidal forms.

The US soldier quoted above at *Soldiers For The Truth* no doubt reflects a common worry among American troops when he writes, in regard to the Samarra fighting, "I am very concerned in the coming days we will find we killed many civilians as well as Iraqi irregular fighters.... We are probably turning many Iraqi[s] against us and I am afraid instead of climbing out of the hole, we are digging ourselves in deeper."

3. The general perplexity of American ruling circles, politically and militarily. US policy in Iraq can take only one of two paths: the withdrawal of American forces from the country, which is strategically unthinkable for the Bush administration and the American ruling elite, or the physical elimination of thousands of Iraqis and the transformation of the country into a vast prison camp.

The launching of "Operation Iron Hammer" and the unleashing of vast firepower given any excuse, as in Samarra, demonstrate that the US military's response to its present predicament is to step up the level of violence and terror against an increasingly sophisticated Iraqi resistance and the population as a whole.

4. The recourse to falsification and wishful thinking, with the full assistance of the American media. The military's lying about the gunfight in Samarra is the sharpest expression of the basic lie at the heart of the entire Iraq operation. This is an illegal war, justified with falsehoods about "weapons of mass destruction" and Saddam Hussein's Al Qaeda connection, carried out against the wishes of the majority of Iraqis and in the face of massive global opposition. The invasion and occupation have predatory, colonial aims, none of which can be acknowledged by the Bush administration or the US press and television.

The Samarra battle is a small foretaste of the disaster the Bush administration is preparing for the Iraqi people, the American population and the population of the entire world.



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