

More casualties of war: US soldiers charged in deaths of Iraqi civilians and fellow servicemen

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The US military has charged seven soldiers, members of the same battalion, with murder in the deaths of four Iraqis and two US servicemen. The charges arise from incidents this August and September that reveal a great deal about the character of the war and its brutal consequences, both for Iraqis and for American soldiers.

Five of these men come from the same unit, Charlie Company of the 1st Battalion, 41st Regiment (1-41), which numbers about 150 soldiers. Evidence presented at the trials begun earlier this month indicates that several of the soldiers from Charlie Company cold-bloodedly murdered unarmed Iraqi civilians. The other two charged are from Bravo Company of 1-41. They allegedly murdered two of their fellow soldiers after returning from Iraq to Fort Riley, Kansas.

The crimes, of course, must be condemned and the perpetrators, if guilty, punished, but simply to denounce the soldiers—as the military prosecutors are doing—serves to obscure the larger question: what is the source of such horrific actions? While the media has reported the events, and has even voiced a degree of concern about the number of crimes charged to the members of one unit, it has not and cannot deal with the broader implications of the case.

The first incident occurred on August 18, as Charlie Company of 1-41 was fighting in the Baghdad district of Sadr City, the predominantly Shiite and working-class area of Iraq's capital.

According to Sergeant Michael Williams, 25, the leader of the squad and one of those facing the most serious charges, the unit received word of a dump truck that was laying bombs in the middle of the night. When a dump truck approached the unit, Williams ordered his men to fire on it without any warning shots.

In fact, the truck was operated by Iraqi civilians, mostly teenagers, who had been hired to help clean the streets. According to a report in the *Washington Post* published December 14, after the assault “a man emerged from the truck and ran toward the Americans. Some soldiers on the rooftop testified that he appeared to be waving something white. Someone shouted for the man to stop, and he obeyed.”

According to Gary Romriell, a member of the unit and the soldier who first charged that some of his fellow soldiers had carried out atrocities, the man “was trying to inform us that we were shooting a truck full of children.”

However, after fire erupted from another direction, Williams ordered his men to resume shooting at the dump truck. “What should we do with this guy?” Specialist Tulfono Young said he asked Williams, referring to the unarmed man who was now standing in the street. According to several of the soldiers who testified, Williams responded with the order to “light him up.” The man was then shot and killed.

In total, seven Iraqis were killed and eight wounded in the incident. One of the individuals was shot by Staff Sergeants Johnny Horne, 30, and

Cardenas Alban, 29. According to Horne's testimony, he approached the truck after it had been subjected to the barrage. One teenager was still alive in the truck, but according to Horne he was so badly wounded that his intestines spilled out after Horne turned him over. Horne claims that he and Alban both shot the youth in order to “put him out of his misery.”

Horne pleaded guilty to unpremeditated murder on December 10 and has been sentenced to three years in prison. The other soldiers involved, including Williams, Alban and the platoon leader Erick Anderson, are facing murder charges.

Romriell has exposed two other incidents that took place just over a week later, on August 28, also in Sadr City.

In the first, Williams and his men entered a home of an Iraqi man and discovered an AK-47 rifle. According to a law authored by the American-backed regime in Iraq, each person is allowed to possess one AK-47. Nevertheless, Williams ordered the man, who was handcuffed and kneeling outside the house, to be taken inside. Soldiers involved in the incident testified that Williams removed the handcuffs, declaring, “I feel my life has been threatened,” and shot the man in the head. After being told that the man was still alive, he said, “I'll take care of it,” and shot him again.

Less than half an hour later, according to soldiers' testimony, the unit entered another home and detained the family outside, including a man, his wife, daughter, son and baby. After two weapons were found, Williams brought the father inside the house. Williams told Specialist Brent May, 22, “You know what you have to do.”

“Can I shoot this one?” May is said to have asked Williams. “Shoot him,” Williams replied. May then executed the Iraqi. In a sworn statement made to an Army investigator, May said, “I shot him in the head twice, took a picture of him, and walked outside.” According to testimony, May was summoned to perform the task by Williams because May had indicated a desire to kill someone. Specialist Young stated, “May looked like he was excited that he got to shoot somebody.”

The final two alleged murders took place on September 13. Two members of that same battalion, Aaron Stanley, 22, and Eric Colvin, 23, are charged with shooting and killing two fellow soldiers in Kansas. Both Stanley and Colvin had served as part of Bravo Company of 1-41 in the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003, but had been held back when the company was redeployed. Both were allegedly involved in drugs, and Stanley had previously been held in a local jail on drug charges.

Only a few details have emerged in the case. Stanley and Colvin were staying at Stanley's rented farmhouse near the base when two fellow soldiers drove up. The two were killed, with Stanley later calling 911 to say he shot two people trying to break into the house. The military has charged both Stanley and Colvin with murder.

There is no doubt that incidents such as these occur far more frequently

than the public realizes. The episodes in Sadr City came to light only because Romriell, who is an opponent of the war, was prepared to expose the atrocities.

No one should conclude from this that every US soldier in Iraq is inclined to carry out such acts. There are no doubt many—including Romriell and others—who are deeply disgusted by the killing that they engage in or witness on a daily basis. Nonetheless, the character of the killings, and not only these killings, suggests a definite pattern.

The psychology of those involved—their contempt for life and even a sadistic pleasure in killing fellow humans—is engendered by the war itself and deliberately fostered by those who have sent US soldiers into battle. From the moment they enter the military, soldiers are trained to be killers. They march to slogans such as “What makes grass grow? Blood, blood, bright red blood.”

Williams, in particular apparently, promoted these sentiments. He is said to have told his squad in Kansas before they returned to Iraq a second time that they would “take no prisoners” while there. Some of the soldiers testified that Williams felt that every fighting-age Iraqi male should be killed. He is also said to have threatened to kill Romriell for reporting the incidents. Some soldiers reportedly participated in a contest over who would make the first confirmed kill after the company was redeployed.

There are some who enter the army with homicidal urges. They choose the military because they want to kill. Such people are not lacking in contemporary America. These individuals are encouraged to realize their basest desires in the US military.

But even among those who commit atrocities, many are simply young people who joined the military for any number of reasons: poor economic prospects, a general lack of direction. Some hope to save money for education. These men and women have been transformed by the process of war itself.

The soldiers of 1-41 were engaged in some of the most intense fighting in the war, including the initial invasion and subsequent urban combat in Sadr City. The most violent impulses of young soldiers have been played upon and promoted.

The Iraq invasion and occupation, like the Vietnam War, is a predatory colonial-style operation. The US ruling elite launched the war to control and plunder Iraq’s natural resources. This aim colors every aspect of the war, including the day-to-day conduct of American forces. The liberal establishment media would like to condemn individual atrocities, while supporting the war as a whole. But the particular acts are merely the inevitable expression, with horrible consequences for both Iraqis and Americans, of the inherently reactionary character of the conflict.

US forces, once they step out of their quarters, now encounter a universally hostile population. Whatever illusions they may have had that they were fighting to liberate the Iraqi people and that they would be greeted with hugs and flowers have vanished. Such conditions, in which the population harbors hatred for the foreign occupiers, are inherently brutalizing for those who carry out the occupation. Thrust into such a situation, ordinary young people can be turned into killers. They have been thrust into a war that they do not understand. They are confused, angry, exhausted and frightened. On any given day, their main concern is to survive.

Mass killings are carried out by the US military on a regular basis. The city of Fallujah has been largely devastated, with no regard for the effect on civilians. Similar measures have been carried out throughout the country, wherever the US encounters significant resistance.

Indiscriminate mass murder from a distance fosters and breeds a mental and emotional derangement that inevitably leads some to murder indiscriminately at close range. As far as we know, there has not yet been a massacre in Iraq on the scale of My Lai, when hundreds of women, children and old people were slaughtered in Vietnam. However, such incidents are bound to take place if the war continues.

The fact that two of the alleged murders took place in the US—and against other US soldiers—is significant. It brings to mind the incidents in 2002 in which four veterans of the Afghanistan invasion shot their wives. (See “The Fort Bragg murders: a grim warning on the use of the military”) The brutalization that takes place on the battlefield is not left on the battlefield. According to Stanley’s mother, the war in Iraq changed her son. “It seems that he was not healthy” after he returned, she said.

Estimates suggest that more than 15 percent of those soldiers who participated in the initial invasion suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety or severe depression. The daily trauma of being shot at and shooting others has its effect. People are crippled: mentally, emotionally and morally, as well as physically. Some will have developed the capacity to do terrible things when they return.

The Vietnam War devastated a large layer of young people in the United States and not simply through the 200,000 casualties. Among those who returned from the war physically intact, many had been psychologically scarred. The increase in social ills such as alcoholism, drug abuse and physical violence within the United States in the decades following the war can be traced back in part to the effects the war had on those who served. A similar process is at work here.

This is in no way to excuse those who committed these murders. If they are found guilty they should be punished. However, there is something immensely hypocritical in the prosecution of these soldiers by the US military. One can imagine the thought process of someone like Williams, who faces the death penalty if convicted: “You trained us to be killers. You sent us to a foreign country to defeat all resistance, to wage war against a population that does not want us there. And now you would convict us for doing precisely what you taught us to do?” The fine distinction that the military would like to make—between the type of murder that is acceptable and the type that is not acceptable—is not a distinction that is easily made by some personalities.

If these soldiers are to be tried, justice demands that those within the ruling elite who have planned, organized and supported the war should be tried for the far greater crimes that they have committed.

Though the Democratic Party and mass media have largely ignored the killings, they have been featured in sections of the media—and in particular the *Los Angeles Times*, which ran a major account on December 13—because they raise certain troubling questions for the military and the US ruling elite. They are a sign of a growing demoralization among soldiers, many of whom have returned to Iraq several times.

There is also a danger that such killings will further discredit the war as a whole. Major General Dennis Hardy, the commander at Fort Riley, where 1-41 is based, was quick to state, “We should not allow these incidents to overshadow the tremendous efforts of our soldiers in Iraq.”

In an effort to counteract the impact of its own article, the *LA Times* shifts the blame for the incidents: “Some military legal experts say the killing of civilians—whether accidental or intentional—can be expected in a war where insurgents use terrorist tactics such as car and roadside bombs, while also blending in with civilians and firing from mosques, schools and hospitals.” In other words, the Iraqis are to blame for US war crimes because they dare to resist!

This cynical rubbish is part of a general operation carried out by the American media and political establishment to obscure the profound connection between the illegal, criminal nature of the war, the daily atrocities committed against the Iraqi people and the long-term effect of the war on those called upon to fight in it.



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