

US soldiers caught on film desecrating bodies of Afghans

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Australian television Wednesday broadcast a truly ugly scene: the bodies of two dead individuals, whose names are not yet known, burning side by side in a field with a group of five US soldiers looking on from a few yards away.

The footage of US troops desecrating two corpses in Khandahar, Afghanistan was filmed by Australian embedded journalist Steven Dupont on October 1. Nothing is known about these two people or the circumstances under which they were killed; however the US military has said they were Taliban fighters.

Another group of US soldiers—part of an Arkansas-based Psychological Operations (PsyOps) unit—are then shown broadcasting crude taunts over a rack of loudspeakers mounted on a military Humvee, apparently directed at the nearby village of Gonbaz, in southern Afghanistan. “Taliban,” one soldier, identified as Sergeant Jim Baker, goads in the local language, “you are all cowardly dogs. You allowed your fighters to be laid down facing west and burned.... This just proves you are the lady boys we always believed you to be.”

Another unidentified soldier shouts: “Your time in Afghanistan is short. You attack and run away like women. You call yourself Talib, but you are a disgrace to the Muslim religion and you bring shame upon your family. Come and fight like men instead of the cowardly dogs you are.”

One group of soldiers, not part of the PsyOps division, said that the bodies were burned for hygienic reasons. Even if they believed this to be the case, the act was clearly intended to intimidate the local population. The practice of exploiting cultural and religious traditions to provoke and humiliate has been an important part of American military procedure. For this reason, the use of dogs in interrogation has been

encouraged, as has the practice of stripping detainees, revealed most graphically in the photographs taken at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

The burning of corpses is prohibited by Islamic tradition. The reference to “facing west” appears to be an attempt to mock the Islamic requirement that Muslims face Mecca, which is west of Afghanistan, during prayers. “They deliberately wanted to incite that much anger from the Taliban so the Taliban could attack them,” Dupont said later in an interview with the Australian-based Special Broadcasting Service.

Dupont also pointed out that the act is in direct violation of the Geneva Conventions, which stipulate that killed enemy combatants must be afforded a proper burial in accordance with their religion.

Like the abuses at Abu Ghraib, this latest incident is a direct provocation on the part of the US military and, like the other acts of terror and intimidation, it has been met with horror and anger throughout the world. Even the US-backed president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, felt compelled to issue a statement expressing his revulsion at the crime. He added, however, that occasionally “things happen in these sort of operations,” and urged the people of Afghanistan to support the US occupation.

The reaction from the American media and political establishment to this latest atrocity highlights the hypocrisy and double standard that underlie US imperialism’s military interventions in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

It is worth recalling the April 2004 incident involving four Blackwater Security mercenaries, in the employ of the US military. After they were ambushed and killed in Fallujah, crowds hostile to the US invasion triumphantly displayed their bodies in the streets. The cheering crowd then suspended their charred remains

from a bridge.

Both the mainstream US media and the military reacted with hysterical denunciations of the moral character of the entire population of Fallujah, and of Iraqis and Muslims in general. “Their deaths will not go unpunished,” Paul Bremer, then supervising the operations in Iraq, declared the day after the ambush, “Yesterday’s events in Fallujah are dramatic examples of the ongoing struggle between human dignity and barbarism.... The acts we have seen were despicable and inexcusable.” White House press secretary Scott McClellan raged, “It is offensive; it is despicable.”

The military response to the ambush in Fallujah was to seek immediate revenge, but after a 10-hour battle the US military was forced out of the center of Fallujah. Later that year, after a massive military buildup, a brutal US offensive practically leveled the entire city, killing or maiming untold hundreds of innocent people, and displacing tens of thousands.

In stark contrast to the events in Fallujah, the burning of the two Afghan bodies is being treated by the US government and the American media primarily as a public relations embarrassment that says nothing about the character of the war itself. The State Department contacted American embassies around the world to make sure that they repeated the line that it was an aberration and not in line with American “values.”

Despite the insistence by the military that this was an isolated case—the conduct of a few “bad apples”—the fact is that war crimes are endemic to the American occupations in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and are directly in line with the policies of the Bush administration. Like the photographed torture at Abu Ghraib, what distinguishes this event from countless others like it is that it was recorded on film. After the numerous accounts of killings and torture, the execution of the wounded in Fallujah, the defilement of the Koran at Guantánamo Bay and now the deliberate desecration of corpses, the real character of the war cannot be denied.

On film, the PsyOps soldiers’ behavior is consistent with that of an imperial army conducting a colonial occupation. In the American military, every form of backwardness is encouraged. The most violent and base instincts are promoted. The video indicates that the soldiers do not seem to be the least bit unnerved by the grotesque bonfire they have created, and show total

disregard for the humanity of their victims. “Wow, look at the blood coming out of the mouth on that one,” says one soldier, “f___ing straight death metal.”

The military brass has announced that it will begin a criminal investigation of the soldiers in the PsyOps unit. As with earlier US war crimes documented by the press, individual soldiers involved may be prosecuted, for appearance’s sake. The architects of the war in the Bush administration, however, as well those who authored these depraved methods of psychological warfare, will go unmentioned and unpunished.



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