

US Marines to stand trial for massacre of Iraqi civilians in Haditha

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US Marines involved in a massacre of Iraqi civilians in Haditha last November will stand trial for murder and dereliction of duty. Twelve soldiers have been returned to Camp Pendleton to await charges in a military trial, and are forbidden to speak to the press.

As yet, no soldiers have been officially named or charged, but comments to the press by senior US military officials indicate that murder charges will soon be brought against three Marines, and dereliction of duty charges, for covering up the crime, will be brought against the others. Critical evidence against the Marines includes photographs taken by military intelligence officials immediately following the murders.

More than four months after the incident, and after numerous official statements lying about what occurred, the Pentagon has officially acknowledged that the massacre took place. Officials briefed selected members of Congress last week. John Warner, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, following a briefing, told reporters, "There are established facts that incidents of a very serious nature did take place."

The legal proceedings could eventually find the lowest-ranking perpetrators guilty of murder, but as with previous US atrocities that have come to light in Iraq and Afghanistan, such as Abu Ghraib, the Bush administration and its loyal "opposition" in the Democratic Party will seek to ensure that none of the high-ranking military and civilian officials who plotted the wars, ordered the killing of tens of thousands in bombing raids, and sanctioned the use of torture are brought to justice.

The Pentagon began to back away from its previous whitewash of the killings in Haditha only after *Time* magazine reporters in January presented it with photographs they had acquired of the carnage as well as interviews with local residents who witnessed the slaughter.

Since then, a clearer picture has emerged of the events, which in their premeditated and homicidal character recall the infamous massacre carried out in March of 1968 by US soldiers against Vietnamese civilians in the village of My Lai.

At 7:15 a.m. on Saturday, November 19, 2005, a convoy of US Marines from Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines was hit by a remote-controlled roadside bomb affixed to a propane tank. The driver of one Humvee, Lance-Corporal

Miguel Terrazas, was killed instantly, while two other Marines in the vehicle were wounded.

After Marines confirmed that the bomb was detonated by remote control, a drone surveillance aircraft was launched, and Marines prepared to conduct house-to-house searches. The *Los Angeles Times* has reported that at this point, "jets dropped 500-pound bombs," but is unclear where the bombs fell, why the bombs were dropped, and with what results.

The dozen Marines involved in the house-to-house searches split into four-man "fire teams." One of these fire teams, led by a sergeant identified by ABC News as Frank Wuterich, began methodically killing innocent civilians over the course of the next five hours.

Five people in a nearby taxi were shot to death immediately, and then the fire team raided three houses. In each house, the Marines broke down the door, grouped the occupants together in a single room, and executed them. The victims included old women, children, men, and infants.

So many bullets were fired at close range that most of the head of one man was obliterated; another woman had both arms shorn off at the elbow. Almost all of the victims were shot point blank in the upper body, execution style. One man was then gunned down as he attempted to flee.

In all, 18 people were killed in the houses, one outside, and five in the taxi, bringing the total to 24.

Nine-year-old Eman Waleed and her younger brother Abdul Rahman survived the attack on their house, as all of the adults in the room shielded the children with their bodies. Hours after the massacre, Iraqi soldiers found the children under the pile of corpses—wounded but alive.

Eman has been quoted recalling the Marines shouting, breaking down doors, and murdering her terrified grandparents as they emerged in their nightclothes. Then, as the Marines turned to her, her parents and relatives leapt to shield her from the bullets. As her parents lay dying on top of her, and even though she had been shot herself, she knew to keep quiet. Abdul, one year younger, has been unable to communicate since November.

Following the massacre, the officer in charge reported to his superiors that his unit had been hit by a roadside bomb and had then come under attack by insurgents with small-arms from the

nearby houses. Not long after the attack, a separate military intelligence unit arrived on the scene and photographed the bodies—a routine military procedure following any engagement. The cover-up began here.

It is likely that the Marines involved in the incident knew that they had not been attacked by insurgents. If nothing else, the Kalashnikov rifles commonly used by insurgents make a distinctive *krak-krak* sound, and US soldiers learn quickly to distinguish this report from the sounds of other rifles.

The intelligence unit that arrived later to photograph the bodies would have noticed the execution-style wounds, the absence of weapons or shell casings inside the houses, and the lack of bullet holes on the houses' exteriors.

The unit's photographs and a report were filed with a military official—most likely a battalion intelligence officer—who would have noticed the discrepancy between the official account and the photographs. Finally, the unmanned surveillance aircraft that was launched after the initial roadside bombing would have recorded from the air the entire battle, or lack thereof, and this footage would have been seen by officials high up in the chain of command.

Nonetheless, an official Marine communiqué from Camp Blue Diamond in Ramadi on November 20 claimed that “a US Marine and 15 Iraqi civilians were killed yesterday from the blast of a roadside bomb... [I]mmediately following the bombing, gunmen attacked the convoy with small-arms fire.”

Lieutenant-Colonel Michelle Martin-Hing is among the military officials who evidently lied about the events of November 19. She claimed that the fault for the civilian deaths lay with insurgents who “placed noncombatants in the line of fire as the Marines responded to defend themselves.”

After the Marines had left the area, a local Haditha journalism student with a video camera arrived and recorded grisly images in the houses, on the streets, and at the hospital morgue. In January, reporters for *Time* magazine acquired these images, as well as interviews with witnesses, and presented them to Colonel Barry Johnson, a US Military spokesman, for comment. Following this exchange, an official military investigation was launched, and the families of those who were murdered were each paid \$2,500.

On March 19, *Time* ran its report, called “One Morning in Haditha: US Marines killed 15 Iraqi civilians in their homes last November. Was it self-defense, an accident, or cold-blooded revenge?” Earlier this month, Congressman John Murtha (Democrat of Pennsylvania), who had been briefed on the events, publicly charged that the civilians had been killed “in cold blood.”

“I understand the investigation shows that in fact there was no firefight,” he said, “there was no explosion that killed the civilians on a bus. There was no shrapnel. There were only bullet holes inside the house where the Marines had gone in.”

In the past week, another murder and cover-up perpetrated by US Marines in Iraq has come to light. Military officials have

charged that in Hamandiya, on April 26, US troops murdered a defenseless man and then planted a Kalashnikov and shovel on his body in an attempt to frame him as an insurgent. The alleged perpetrators have been returned to Camp Pendleton, and a military trial in their case is being prepared.

The men who were directly involved in these killings should stand trial for what they have done, but it is absurd to claim that their prosecution and punishment constitutes “justice” and absolves the political and military leaders who sent them to Iraq on the basis of lies and conditioned them to carry out atrocities in support of an illegal invasion and colonial-style occupation.

All crimes and atrocities in an aggressive war flow from the decision to wage war in the first place, and in a war of colonial occupation and mass oppression, atrocities such as the massacre of November 19 are inevitable. This was the legal principle established at Nuremberg and invoked against senior Nazi military and government officials who planned and carried out military aggression.

Those who are ultimately responsible for the events of November 19 are the architects of the Iraq war itself—members of the Bush administration, beginning with the president, leaders of both houses of Congress, and the top military brass. They continue to wage war in the face of determined popular resistance in Iraq to foreign occupation and massive anti-war sentiment in the US. After Abu Grahib, Fallujah, Haditha and a death toll of more than a hundred thousand Iraqis and nearly 2,500 Americans, no high-ranking official has been held accountable.

For these same officials to lay their own crimes at the feet of the lowest-ranking perpetrators is utter hypocrisy. It is worth pointing out that Saddam Hussein is presently being tried for crimes carried out during his presidency, for which he is being held responsible whether or not it can be proved that he was directly responsible. The US-orchestrated prosecution is arguing that the crimes flowed from his policies, and that he therefore bears guilt.



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