

CBS journalists wounded, killed in Iraq: Where the responsibility lies

David Walsh
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There is genuine human tragedy in the deaths of CBS News cameraman Paul Douglas and soundman James Brolan, who both left families behind, and the serious injuries sustained by reporter Kimberly Dozier, all victims of a car bomb in a Baghdad street May 29. The three-person CBS crew was traveling with the 4th Brigade Combat Team of the US Army's 4th Infantry Division at the time of the explosion. One American soldier and an Iraqi interpreter also died, and six other soldiers were injured.

Dozier, 39, received wounds to her head and lower body. At one point her pulse stopped. "She didn't have a heartbeat. She was as sick as you get," a doctor told a CBS correspondent.

Dozier, Douglas and Brolan, according to the network, "had been riding in an armored Humvee. But at the time of the blast in the Karada section of Baghdad, they were outside on the street, accompanying troops who had stopped to inspect a checkpoint manned by the Iraqi Army. They were wearing helmets, flak jackets and protective eyeglasses when the bomb went off."

Douglas, 48, and Brolan, 42, died at the scene of the explosion. Dozier was flown to the closest US military hospital, about a mile away, where she underwent two operations. She is now in critical but stable condition. One hopes she will make a full recovery.

The US and international media have suffered a considerable number of casualties in Iraq, including several prominent figures: David Bloom of NBC, Michael Kelly, a columnist for the *Washington Post* and, most recently, Bob Woodruff, the co-anchor of ABC's "World News Tonight," who was wounded when an improvised explosive device detonated near his convoy in late January.

As distressing as the deaths and injuries may be, it is necessary to speak unpleasant truths about the role of the American mass media in Iraq. US journalists have in many cases taken their lives in their hands to cover the Iraq war. Physical courage and even recklessness, however, are not the issue here. All the tributes to the 'fearlessness' of this or that individual reporter will not make the central problem go away: The media as a whole has failed abysmally to challenge or criticize the illegal American occupation of Iraq.

A previous generation of journalists, or at least a portion of it,

played a different role. During the Vietnam War the most conscientious correspondents, appalled by the reality of the war in Southeast Asia, uncovered many of the lies of the military and the government. While Pentagon and White House press spokesmen claimed on a daily basis that the US was winning the "hearts and minds" of the people, that there was "light at the end of the tunnel," that the piles of dead Vietnamese were invariably "Viet Cong," honest journalists and photographers exposed the official version of events.

Correspondents and authors such as David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Ward Just, Michael Herr, Peter Arnett, Jonathan Schell, Sydney Schanberg, Seymour Hersch and even CBS's Walter Cronkite presented to the American population the realities of the Vietnam conflict and helped raise popular awareness.

What can be said of the present crowd, with a handful of exceptions? Most of the television and print journalists signed on for war with enthusiasm. They no doubt believed the Pentagon line that the invasion and occupation would be a cake walk, and they wanted in on the action. Harry Smith, co-anchor of CBS's "The Early Show," said Kimberly Dozier "loves this story," referring to the war in Iraq. How can that be?

The Vietnam War confused, tormented and horrified the best observers, and they conveyed these sentiments to their readers or viewers. How else could you get an *Apocalypse Now*?

All great correspondents hate war, all war, even the most just, for what it does to human beings. That's what separates them from the propagandists. Propaganda is at its most heavy-handed during wartime and propaganda is always in support of war.

The deaths and injuries of the American correspondents are not tragic in the conventional sense, except as a private matter for the families involved. The tragic element arises here because at some level the individuals have contributed unwittingly to the disaster that has overtaken them.

The journalists' own ignorance on historical and political questions deadens them in some fashion to the dangers around them. Given their views on Iraq, the military and the war, how could they not fail to develop a sensitivity to the environment in which they are working—the only basis for that instinct that might protect them in difficult circumstances? All wars are dangerous, but why is there such a high death rate in Iraq?

There is such a thing as being in the wrong place at the wrong time, but it is not all bad luck.

The journalists in 2003 allowed themselves to be “embedded” with the American military in Iraq, and the infamous phrase assumed at once the character of a *double entendre*. The US media personnel adopt a worshipful attitude toward the government, the military, toward everything official and ‘powerful.’ They believe or they convince themselves that the criminal enterprise in Iraq is some great patriotic undertaking. And, unhappily, that belief may be getting them injured or killed.

Maureen Dowd in the *New York Times* points out that Dozier and Woodruff have both become casualties “while embedded with the military, trying to do the sort of stories the administration wants.” Dozier, according to an email she wrote the night before the incident in which she was so severely injured, “detailed a Memorial Day story she planned to do about a US soldier wounded in Iraq who insisted on going back to the battlefield, a piece about ‘fighting on in memory of those who have fallen.’” (*Los Angeles Times*)

This kind of piece is not simply dreamt up by an individual correspondent. It is part and parcel of the Pentagon’s propaganda strategy. In October 2005, in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, George W. Bush’s nominee to be the Pentagon’s chief public affairs official, Dorrance Smith (who was eventually confirmed), explained that he hoped to encourage more positive stories about the Iraq war by “reinvigorating” the practice of embedding reporters, which had been widely used during the invasion in 2003, but was only occurring sporadically at that time.

“We’ve got to analyze the security situation as it relates to the communications environment to see what we can do to get these stories out in an open and honest way and a timely fashion,” Smith told the Senate hearing.

Presumably, the new round of “embedding,” in which Woodruff and Dozier took part, is part of this scheme.

Dozier, unlike most of her colleagues, knows something about the region, having taken a master’s degree in foreign affairs, specializing in the Middle East, and having lived in Egypt. She also apparently speaks some Arabic. It is all the more regrettable, therefore, that her dispatches for CBS did not seem to be informed in any serious fashion by a critical view of imperialist intervention in the region or a questioning of US geopolitical ambitions.

One piece from Dozier’s “reporter’s notebook,” posted on *CBS News*’s web site, concerning her interview with Gen. George W. Casey, the top US general in Iraq, is typical. It is a painfully sycophantic account. Dozier begins with an account of a ceremony in Tikrit, during which mortars came “flying over her heads.” Only one man refused to run for cover. “I saw one grey-haired officer surrounded by a small entourage, walking calmly into the building, like an advertisement for ‘Do not run, WALK toward the exits...’ It was Casey.”

Dozier carries on in the same vein, “‘This guy, I gotta interview,’ I said to myself, dusting off the remnants of the sidewalk. Especially as few of the interviews of him that I’d seen before captured his attitude—someone who was honestly undeterred by the whole ‘danger’ thing, just ticked off with it, because it was getting in the way of his day.”

Casey proves “far more forthcoming, forthright and critical, than I’d expected... By the end of the 90 minutes or so, my note-taking hand was screaming for mercy. And I was impressed. Every tough question I’d asked in the chopper, Casey turned and asked of the commanders on the ground. There were some ugly, straightforward things said in that room. No varnish and no rose-colored glasses. No spin.”

A lovely fellow, no doubt. A prince among men.

This is repugnant. Dozier is interviewing a man presiding over a gigantic war crime, who may very well end up on trial, along with other US government and military leaders.

Anyone who exposes the military’s crimes, however, can expect to be grilled, if not pilloried. Congressman John Murtha, a Democrat from Pennsylvania with close ties to the military, has made it his business to denounce the massacre at Haditha, in which US Marines reportedly murdered dozens of civilians—men, women and children.

On ABC’s “Good Morning America” May 30, host Charles Gibson, in an interview with Murtha, repeatedly offered possible excuses for the Marines and honed in on the use of the word “murder.” Finally, Murtha snapped at him, “Charlie, this has been going on six months. I mean, they’ve been trying to... they knew the day afterwards. Don’t make excuses for the military. This thing has been going on for six months.” Gibson mumbled lamely, “I’m not trying to make excuses ...”

The Iraqis who attacked Dozier’s convoys are partisans engaged in a war against the US occupation. No doubt it has not been lost on them that American media personnel function as press agents for the military. There is nothing about the presence of such journalists that would give them pause in their attacks. Hence, the deaths and injuries to the news crew.

The government and the military are responsible, the news conglomerates are responsible, and the correspondents, in a specific, tragic sense, bear a share of the responsibility themselves.



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