

The killing of US soldiers in Yusufiya: who's responsible?

David Walsh
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The principal blame for the killing, reportedly execution-style, of Pfc. Kristian Menchaca, 23, of Brownsville, Texas, and Pfc. Thomas L. Tucker, 25, of Madras, Oregon lies squarely with the US government and military. On the basis of fear-mongering and lies, as part of its drive to dominate the globe, the American ruling elite put these soldiers—along with Specialist David J. Babineau, 25, of Springfield, Massachusetts, who was killed with Menchaca and Tucker when insurgents initially attacked in Yusufiya—in a deadly situation.

While the US media was busy denouncing the “barbarism” of the deaths of Menchaca and Tucker this week, further charges of cold-blooded murder of civilians were being laid against American military personnel.

On Wednesday, the military accused seven marines and a sailor of dragging an unarmed man from his house in Hamdania and executing him. The eight allegedly planted an AK-47 assault rifle and a shovel near the body to make it appear as though the man had been in the process of planting an explosive device. The family of Hashim Ibrahim Awad—a middle-aged man, partially disabled—allege the Americans murdered him after he refused to become an informant.

A fourth US soldier has been charged with premeditated murder in the deaths May 9 of three detainees in a raid at a chemical plant in Salahuddin province. Army SPC. Juston R. Graber, 20, allegedly conspired with three others—Staff Sgt. Raymond L. Girouard, Spc. William B. Hunsaker and Pfc. Corey R. Claggett—to kill the Iraqi prisoners in their custody at the Muthana Chemical Complex north of Baghdad.

Clearly, the ongoing violence against the Iraqi people has brutalized and demoralized a section of US soldiers and rendered them capable of psychopathic acts. The new revelations of American military violence are an indication of both the intensifying ruthlessness of the occupation and its impact on the mentality of the troops. Some are transformed into killers, some are killed.

That the US military has been obliged to charge a handful of its personnel, who are themselves scapegoats for the policies pursued by their superiors in the Pentagon and the White House, is the surest proof of systematic violence, abuse and murder in Iraq. Only as part of an effort to retain some shred of credibility, under conditions in which Iraqis are aware that such atrocities occur every day, would the military act against a few low-level soldiers.

The American people have no idea what is taking place in Iraq.

The Pentagon, the Bush administration and the mass media have conspired to keep the reality from them, and the Democrats have facilitated the cover-up. These murders, and atrocities like the Haditha massacre, are only the tip of the iceberg. The estimated death toll in the subjugation of Fallujah alone runs into the thousands. And now the US military appears poised to do the same to the city of Ramadi.

Meanwhile, the deaths of Menchaca and Tucker are being put to entirely cynical use. For the families and loved ones of the two young men, their deaths are an unspeakable tragedy. This, however, does not justify in any fashion a war of aggression and military occupation.

It is revealing that the elementary right of a people to resist foreign occupation is simply dismissed by the American political establishment. This in a country that owes its origins to an armed struggle against British colonial rule. The Democrats and Republicans and the media pretend this is not even an issue. But then they believe they can turn the conflict in Iraq, whose source lies in American imperialist geopolitical interests, into anything they like, an act of ‘liberation,’ a war for ‘democracy,’ the victory of ‘civilization’ over ‘barbarism.’

We have no way of verifying how the soldiers died, or precisely who killed them. Every word uttered by the US military is rendered suspect by its very source. If it were true that Menchaca and Tucker died a gruesome death, it would not be astonishing. Many forces are at work in Iraq opposing the foreign invaders, with different political agendas, but the American population would make the gravest mistake in underestimating the hatred that foreign military occupation has generated.

More than three years of indiscriminate violence and repressive military operations, the imprisonment and torture of innocent civilians, the destruction of the economy and infrastructure, which has made life unlivable for all but the most privileged stooges of the Americans, the deliberate fomenting of sectarian conflict, with its horrifying consequences—all this has produced levels of popular rage that inevitably find expression. Every ruthless colonial war has been met with popular ruthlessness. In every case, the responsibility lies with the colonizers.

To the extreme right and the fascist-minded, the deaths of Menchaca and Tucker and everything else that happens are further justifications for America’s mission in Iraq. Radio talk show host Michael Reagan, son of the former president, writes that the killings mean the Iraqi insurgents “must be eliminated from the

face of the earth.” He adds, “They are a species with which civilized mankind cannot co-exist.” The irony of the latter comment apparently escapes him. Reagan suggests the US should adopt Confederate general Stonewall Jackson’s attitude toward the enemy: “Kill ‘em; kill ‘em all.”

The *Wall Street Journal*’s editorial of June 22 is pithily headlined “The Savages.” It describes the killers of Menchaca and Tucker as “Not nationalists or extremists or even fanatics, but something like a band of real-life Hannibal Lecters for whom human slaughter is both business and religious fulfillment.” This rant is penned by people, safe in their air-conditioned offices, who revel in seeing cruise missiles and 500-pound bombs dropped on Iraqi towns and villages. They articulate openly the plan of the Bush administration and the military, which is to enormously escalate their violence against the Iraqi population.

The *Journal*’s arguments are nothing new. It is a reversion to the language of imperialist colonialism in its formative years, beginning in the final decades of nineteenth century, when its apologists, in the name of the “white man’s burden,” branded the victims of great power predations as “hordes of savages.” This was true of the European subjugation of Africa, the American suppression of the Filipino independence struggle, the crushing of the Boxer Rebellion in China, the rape of Ethiopia by Italian fascism and the French domination of Algeria. By the time of the US bloodbath in Vietnam the terminology had been adjusted in conformity with the Cold War struggle of the ‘Free World’ against ‘Communism.’

The *Journal*, to bolster its arguments, simply invents an Iraqi population lining up “to fight on our side.”

Not everyone is fooled. Some of the comments from the families of the dead soldiers, grief-stricken, often confused, provided more insight into the present situation in Iraq than the jingoistic clamor about “savagery” offered up by the American media.

Kristian Menchaca’s mother, Maria Vasquez, issued a statement written in Spanish that said, “I am against the war, and I feel very hurt by what has happened to my son.” His uncle, Ken MacKenzie, criticized the Bush administration, alleging that it had not done enough to bring his nephew home safe. “Because the US government did not have a plan in place, my nephew has paid for it with his life,” he said. He suggested that the government should have offered a \$100 million reward for the captives. The US had seized enough money from Saddam Hussein to afford it, MacKenzie bitterly commented.

Thomas Tucker’s father noted that his son’s captors were probably retaliating for US abuses in Iraq. Wes Tucker acknowledged, according to the *Oregonian*, that war breeds atrocities on all sides.

“They [the insurgents] were doing a job, and they probably overstepped the bounds of the job they were supposed to do, just like the ones in our military overstepped the jobs they were supposed to do,” Tucker told the press. He told KTVZ, an NBC affiliate, “Our son and this other fellow were in a bad spot, and they might have been retaliated against. ... Is it right? No, it’s not right. But unfortunately, some of the people in our military have done the same thing.”

In a letters column on June 22, the *Oregonian* published

responses from readers to the deaths that were uniformly hostile to the US war and the government’s propaganda effort. Martha Sleeper of Gaston, Oregon, wrote: “Why are we, the American public, shocked at the ‘brutal’ and ‘barbaric’ torture and deaths of Pfc. Thomas Lowell Tucker of Madras and Pfc. Kristian Menchaca of Houston? Tragically, this outcome was not unexpected, considering the treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and the secret prisons in eastern Europe. ... The citizens of the United States should not support this illegal war and occupation any longer. It is time to pull our troops out of Iraq.”

The second letter, from Arden R. Benson of Portland, began, “It is a terrible thing to contemplate: two of our soldiers in Iraq, captured, tortured and [reportedly] beheaded. At least part of the blame for that atrocity must be placed on the heads of George W. Bush and Dick Cheney. They have scorned the Geneva Conventions, condoned the torture of Iraqi prisoners and have permitted the removal of our prisoners to secret locations in other nations.”

The third letter-writer, Shelly McFarland of Lake Oswego, Oregon, commented: “We have no hope of winning this war because there are too many factions with too many agendas that will never accept compromise. In the interim, we sacrifice our young men and women knowing that if captured, they stand no chance of surviving captivity because we are so hated. Bring our troops home.”

The fourth, Peter Johnson, also of Portland, noted: “It is fairly clear now that certain members of this administration sought to manipulate facts and disregard intelligence that failed to conform to their goal of invading Iraq. Obsessed with their power and filled with an awful hubris of the kind that allows a disregard for the lives they were putting on the line, they sent this country to war.”

And a fifth, John Schmitt of Beaverton, Oregon, wrote, “Are Bush’s and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s egos so warped that they can’t admit they bungled the war and created the need for a multi-year occupation? Or was it the Bush plan to occupy Iraq forever? Either way, our families and communities are left suffering deep personal pain. I hurt for these young men’s families. We must hold Bush responsible for their deaths. This madness must stop.”



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