

Why is the American press silent on the report of 655,000 Iraqi deaths?

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The US media is virtually silent on a new scientific study that estimates the Iraqi death toll from the US war at 655,000. The study, conducted by Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health and funded by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was posted Wednesday on the web site of the British medical journal, the *Lancet*.

The study is the only systematic estimate of the number of Iraqi civilians and military personnel to have died as a result of the US invasion and occupation to be brought to the attention of the American and international public.

Unlike previous estimates, which were based on reviews of media reports or tallies made by the US-backed Iraqi government, the Johns Hopkins study was carried out by Iraqi physicians who interviewed—often at great personal risk—nearly 2,000 families spread across the country, utilizing standard and widely used statistical methods to arrive at an objective estimate of the death toll from the war and occupation. The vast majority of the reported deaths were substantiated by death certificates.

The study concluded with a 95 percent degree of certainty that the number of “excess deaths” in Iraq since the invasion—the number of people who have died in excess of the number that would be expected on the basis of pre-invasion mortality rates—is between 393,000 and 943,000. The figure of 655,000 is given as the most likely number. This represents an astonishing 2.5 percent of the entire Iraqi population.

The researchers further estimated that about 600,000 of the deaths were due to violence in some form, including gunshots, air strikes and bombings. They concluded that US and allied military forces directly caused at least 31 percent—or 186,000—of the violent deaths.

Some 336,000 people, or 56 percent of those killed in violent actions since the invasion, died from gunshot wounds. The study also found that the number of violent deaths in Iraq has steadily increased every year since the invasion. In the period from June 2005 to June 2006, the researchers found a nearly four-fold increase in the mortality

rate relative to pre-invasion levels.

There can be no legitimate doubts about the credibility of the study. *Lancet* is one of the oldest and most prestigious peer-reviewed medical publications in the world. The Johns Hopkins public health school is the largest in the world, and regularly ranks as the top public health school in the United States. The journal article was reviewed and approved for publication by four independent scientific experts in the area.

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of the report, even if one assumes its low-end estimate of 393,000 Iraqi deaths to be correct. It demonstrates that the American intervention in Iraq has produced a social and humanitarian catastrophe of historical dimensions, with vast political implications not only in the Middle East, but throughout the world and, above all, in the United States itself.

By any objective standard, the report merits front-page coverage in every major newspaper in the country and extensive discussion and reporting on television news broadcasts. Yet the response of the US press has been to virtually ignore the report and limit its coverage to news accounts on inside pages which report, uncritically, unsubstantiated statements by government and military officials dismissing the report as “not credible.”

In burying the story, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have played a particularly significant role. The original articles published by these newspapers on Wednesday were relegated to the inside pages: in the *Times* on page 8, in the *Post* on page 12.

The *Post* decided to bury the story in its back pages despite the fact that the article it published vouched for the scientific validity the Johns Hopkins study, noting that it, and an earlier report on Iraqi deaths published by the same team, “are the only ones to estimate mortality in Iraq using scientific methods.” The “cluster sampling” technique used by the scientists, the newspaper wrote, “is used to estimate mortality in famines and after natural disasters.”

Minimal coverage in the press continued on Thursday, despite the fact that the issue was raised by a reporter at a

White House press conference on Wednesday. President Bush contemptuously dismissed the report, stating that it was not credible. He was not challenged and the question was not followed up by any of the other reporters at the news conference.

Bush's remarks were followed by statements from various supporters and architects of the war similarly dismissing the Johns Hopkins study's casualty figures. General George Casey, the commander of US forces in Iraq, admitted that he had not bothered to read the report, but nevertheless concluded that it did not have "much credibility at all."

A spokesman for British Prime Minister Tony Blair said that the figure of 655,000 killed is "not one we believe to be anywhere near accurate." Iraqi government officials likewise declared that the figure was "exaggerated."

On Thursday, neither the *Times* nor the *Post* published an editorial on the Johns Hopkins report, or even a follow-up article on the report and the response of the Bush administration.

There was not one challenge in the establishment media to the official attempts to disparage the report. Instead, the minimal coverage on Thursday was largely devoted to reporting the statements by Bush, Casey, Blair and the Iraqi stooge regime. The *Los Angeles Times*, for example, published a story on its inside pages, "Iraq Disputes Claim of 600,000 War Dead," reporting the statements by the Iraqi government. The newspaper added its voice to the chorus by remarking that it had conducted its own survey and reached a figure of 50,000 killed.

The attempts to discredit the report are not backed up by any factual or methodological arguments. The administration and its supporters assume, correctly, that they can simply make unsubstantiated claims and the media will not challenge them.

Lee Roberts, a co-author of the study, noted in an interview with the radio program *Democracy Now!* on Thursday that the cluster survey approach the researchers used "is the standard way of measuring mortality in very poor countries where the government isn't very functional or in times of war." He pointed out that both the United Nations and the US government have used the method in determining mortality, including after the Kosovo and Afghan wars. "Most ironically," he said, "the US government has been spending millions of dollars per year... to train NGOs and UN workers to do cluster surveys to measure mortality in times of wars and disasters."

With its silence, the media is once again taking its cue from the government. It does not challenge Bush's ignorant and cold-blooded dismissal of the Johns Hopkins report, just as it did not challenge Bush's offhand remark at a December, 2005 press conference that 30,000 Iraqis, "more

or less," had been killed since the March, 2003 US invasion—an absurdly low estimate.

The corporate-owned-and-controlled media have buried this story because they do not want the American people to know the truth of what is happening in Iraq.

They want to conceal this truth—as they have done consistently since the war began—because they are complicit in a massive war crime in Iraq, and continue to support the bloodletting by the US military.

The Johns Hopkins report, by revealing the colossal dimensions of the death and destruction wreaked by the United States in Iraq, shatters the edifice of lies that has been erected in an attempt to deceive the people and justify the war—from the phony claims of weapons of mass destruction and Iraq-Al Qaeda ties, to the current claims of a war for "freedom and democracy" and the overarching deception of the "war on terrorism."

The report inevitably highlights the culpability of the media itself, which has combined an acceptance of unprecedented censorship by the military with self-censorship and deliberate misinformation in order to whitewash an imperialist war for oil and geo-strategic domination of the Middle East.

The scale of mass killing revealed in the Johns Hopkins study published by the *Lancet* stands as an indictment of the entire American ruling elite, both of its political parties—Democratic no less than Republican—and all of its official institutions, among which the media has played a particularly sordid role.

What the corporate, political and media establishment fear are the explosive social and political implications of growing popular revulsion over the crimes of US imperialism in Iraq and around the world, combined with mounting anger over relentless attacks on working people's social conditions and democratic rights. The entire political system is being exposed and discredited before the eyes of the people. Such a process inevitably brings with it revolutionary consequences.



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