

Haditha massacre report: US commanders see killing Iraqi civilians as “cost of doing business”

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An unpublished report commissioned by the US military on the massacre carried out in the Iraqi town of Haditha by American marines in November 2005 is an unintended indictment of the entire war and occupation. In its Saturday edition, the *Washington Post* published an article on Maj. Gen. Eldon A. Bargewell's report, including excerpts from the document, a copy of which the newspaper had obtained. Bargewell makes clear that indifference to the fate of Iraqi civilians is pervasive in the military high command.

On November 19, 2005, a roadside bomb struck an American Humvee near Haditha, in western Iraq, killing one of the marines on board. In response, according to eyewitnesses and local officials, the US forces went on a rampage, killing as many as 24 unarmed Iraqis in their houses, including seven women and three children.

A marine communiqué at the time claimed that the civilians had been killed in the blast and that “gunmen attacked the [US] convoy with small-arms fire.” The Bargewell report, completed in June 2006, makes clear that those who issued the news release knew from the outset that marines had killed the civilians.

Bargewell concluded that the Marine Corps chain of command ignored “obvious” signs of “serious misconduct” in Haditha. The *Post* reports that the general “found that officers may have willfully ignored reports of the civilian deaths to protect themselves and their units from blame.”

While finding no direct evidence of any orchestrated effort above the squad level to cover up the incident, Bargewell wrote in his report, “I did find that individuals above the squad level were complicit, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in attempts to hide criminal conduct. Leaders from the platoon through the 2nd Marine Division level, particularly at the Company and Battalion level, exhibited a determination to ignore indications of serious misconduct, perhaps to avoid conducting an inquiry that could prove adverse to themselves or their Marines ...

“The most remarkable aspect of the follow-on action with regard to the civilian casualties from the 19 November 2005 Haditha incident was the absence of virtually any kind of inquiry at any level of command into the circumstances surrounding the deaths ...

“It also suggests an unwillingness, bordering on denial, on the part of the Battalion Commander to examine an incident that might prove harmful to him and his Marines.”

The general went on, in the most damning portion of the report cited by the *Post*, to underline the hostility and contempt felt by the American military command for the Iraqi population. “All levels of command tended to view civilian casualties, even in significant numbers, as routine and as the natural and intended result of insurgent tactics,” Bargewell commented. “Statements made by the chain of command during interviews for this investigation, taken as a whole, suggest that Iraqi civilian lives are not as important as U.S. lives, their deaths are just the cost of doing business, and that the Marines need to get ‘the job done’ no matter what it takes.”

The *New York Times*, which apparently also obtained or had access to a copy of Bargewell's report, noted Sunday that the captain, Jeffrey S. Pool, who issued the story about the civilians dying in the initial blast, “told General Bargewell's investigators that he was given reports from battalion commanders that accurately described the marines' killing of civilians, said lawyers who read the report. But Captain Pool said he issued a news release blaming insurgents for the deaths because he believed that the killings were ultimately a result of the roadside bombing, the lawyers said.

“‘The way I saw it was this,’ Captain Pool told two colonels questioning him, according to a lawyer who read the report to a reporter. ‘A bomb blast went off, or was initiated, that is what started, that is the reason they're getting this, is a bomb blew up, killed people. We killed people back, and that's the story.’”

Everything points to the fact that the Haditha massacre and its cover-up were not the work of “rogue elements” or “a few bad apples.” The operation in Haditha was defended by the marine chain of command because it was seen, in the final analysis, as an unavoidable course of action. In viewing the terrorizing of the civilian population as the inevitable product of the present occupation, American military commanders have a certain brutal logic on their side.

The *Post* notes that Bargewell was especially disturbed that “nearly all Marines looked the other way when confronted with early reports that many civilians had been shot in fighting on the streets of Haditha after a roadside bomb killed a member of their unit. His investigation found that Marines and officers present that day immediately reported numerous civilian deaths to superiors but that the reports were ‘untimely, inaccurate and

incomplete’—failures he attributed to ‘inattention and negligence, in certain cases willful negligence.’”

No one asked any further questions, the general remarked, “despite gruesome photographs circulating among junior Marines that showed that women and children had been killed in their beds. He cited several opportunities to investigate that were not taken, such as when more than \$40,000 in condolence payments went to Iraqis after the killings.”

If it had been up to the US military the details of the massacre would never have come out. According to the *Democracy Now!* radio program, which ran a segment on the incident and its cover-up in March 2006, the mayor of Haditha led an angry demonstration to a nearby marine camp shortly after the killings. The protesters were stonewalled and the American military stood by its initial lie.

Time magazine reporters obtained an Iraqi journalism student’s videotape of the victims, still in their nightclothes when they were killed. “The scenes from inside the houses show that the walls and ceilings are pockmarked with shrapnel, bullet holes and blood,” commented *Democracy Now!* *Time* presented the footage with eyewitness testimony to the American military in Baghdad and, belatedly, an inquiry was begun.

Aparisim Ghosh, *Time*’s chief international correspondent, was one of those who covered the story. He explained on the radio program, “When we first approached the Marines with this evidence, they responded in quite a hostile fashion. They accused us of buying into enemy propaganda. That aroused our suspicions even further, because it seemed to be excessively hostile on their part. And we dug even more. We spoke to witnesses. We spoke to survivors of this incident. And then we became quite convinced that these people were killed by the Marines.”

Bargewell’s report confirms the resistance on the part of the division, battalion and regimental commanders to any investigation of the incident.

In its lengthy piece on the killings, *Time* provided some of the grisly details. The marines broke into a number of houses in Haditha and killed men, women and children in cold blood. Two children, 9 and 8, only survived in the first house 150 yards from the blast because adults shielded them from the American bullets and died in the process. In a second house, the marines broke down the door and threw in a grenade, blowing up a propane tank in the kitchen. They began firing and killed eight residents—including the owner, his wife, the owner’s sister, a 2-year-old son and three young daughters. In a third house, the US troops allegedly gathered four sons of the owner and killed them inside a closet.

According to the director of the local hospital, the Marines brought 24 bodies to his hospital around midnight. They claimed the victims had been killed by shrapnel from the roadside bomb. “But it was obvious to us that there were no organs slashed by shrapnel,” the hospital director told *Time*. “The bullet wounds were very apparent. Most of the victims were shot in the chest and the head—from close range.”

Eight marines were eventually charged in the massacre. Four officers were accused of failing to investigate and report the deaths of Iraqi civilians, and four enlisted marines were charged with

violations including unpremeditated murder and negligent homicide. The military has reportedly offered immunity to six other marines in the Haditha case, none of whom were charged. This group includes the only officer present during the killings, Lt. William T. Kallop.

On April 23 the military announced that it had dropped all charges against Sgt. Sanick P. Dela Cruz, one of the eight, and that he would be granted immunity. Dela Cruz has apparently made incriminating statements to Naval Criminal Investigative Service investigators about another marine, Staff Sgt. Frank D. Wuterich, the squad’s leader.

The *San Diego Union-Tribune* writes that—according to a Naval Criminal Investigative Service report—Dela Cruz told investigators that before approaching the houses in Haditha, Wuterich first shot five Iraqi civilians, “some with their hands above their heads, who were lined up outside a taxi they had been riding in. Other reports indicated that enemy fire was coming from the direction of the taxis and that Wuterich, who faces 13 counts of unpremeditated murder, told investigators he considered the men a threat.

“Dela Cruz also said, according to the report, that Wuterich asked him to say the men were trying to escape before they were shot, which Wuterich denies. Dela Cruz allegedly told investigators that he fired rounds into the dead bodies and later urinated on one of them.”

The Haditha massacre is a horrific event, but it is the inevitable product of a colonial war fought against a resisting population. How many more such episodes have gone unreported or undetected? Daily violence, often homicidal, is visited on the Iraqi population by US forces, who are themselves demoralized and brutalized.

The BBC reported last June that conditions at the marine company’s base of operations were “feral.” “Four hundred men of the First Marine regiment were based in this decaying rabbit-warren. Conditions were so disgusting, many just moved out. They set up these unofficial shacks alongside it.” One of the few reporters to have been there, reports the BBC, “was shocked by these strange, primitive huts, which lacked even basic hygiene. ‘You walked in and the first words were ‘F off,’ and they were ripping pieces of wood apart to feed the fire,’ he said. ‘You could see the conditions in which they lived. And they were filthy. It was disgusting.’ There seemed to him to be no real discipline.”



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