

May death toll spikes as 10 US soldiers die on Memorial Day

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Ten US soldiers in Iraq were killed on Memorial Day, the military reported Tuesday, bringing the total number of US forces killed so far in May to 115. This month's death toll is the third highest since the war began, trailing only April and November 2004, when 135 and 137 US troops died respectively during the two bloody sieges of Fallujah.

Eight of the soldiers were killed Monday in Diyala, a province bordering Iran about 35 miles northeast of Baghdad. In early March, 700 additional US troops were sent to the area as part of the surge of US troops and joined 3,500 others fighting Sunni insurgents. Two soldiers were killed when their helicopter crashed, while another six soldiers—part of a rapid response team on their way to scene of the downed aircraft—were killed when explosions detonated near their vehicles. The military would not say whether the helicopter crash was caused by hostile fire or a mechanical failure.

The military also reported the deaths of two other American soldiers who were killed Monday when their patrol was hit by a roadside bomb in southern Baghdad.

As of Tuesday a total of 3,467 US soldiers have been killed in Iraq, with another 24,314 troops wounded, according to the web site Iraq Coalition Casualties, which monitors official US Defense Department reports. Some 980 soldiers and Marines have been killed since last Memorial Day. In addition, 325 soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan as a result of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001.

The spike in deaths, which has coincided with the three-and-half-month-old surge, has deepened popular hatred for the war. A poll released last Friday by CBS and the *New York Times* showed 63 percent of those polled supported a troop withdrawal by sometime next year. Another poll earlier this month from *USA Today*

and Gallup found 59 percent backing a withdrawal deadline that the US should stick to no matter what is happening in Iraq.

George W. Bush marked his sixth Memorial Day as president with a perfunctory eight-minute speech at Arlington National Cemetery that repeated the lies that the invasion and occupation of the oil-rich country had been launched to protect America and bring freedom to the Middle East. He suggested those opposed to the war, i.e., the vast majority of the American people, lacked the fortitude and moral will to persevere. Referring to US soldiers in Iraq, Bush said, "Those who serve are not fatalists or cynics," ignoring the fact that the latest polls of US military personnel showed more than half believe the war should never have been launched. Nevertheless, he claimed, the war had secured "the gift of liberty... for millions who have never known it."

In a speech Saturday at the United States Military Academy at West Point, Vice President Dick Cheney made clear the administration's idea of liberty as he encouraged military officers to look with contempt upon Geneva Convention protections against torture and defended government spying against the American people. These measures were necessary, he said, because "We're fighting a war on terror ... the enemy attacked us first, and hit us hard," adding, "Nobody can guarantee that we won't be hit again."

As for the Democrats, their cave-in on the troop withdrawal deadline and vote to fund the ongoing war in the name of "supporting the troops," has only guaranteed that hundreds of other US soldiers will be buried in Arlington and other cemeteries by next year, and tens of thousands of more Iraqis will die.

Among the last US casualties to be identified by the Department of Defense was a 21-year-old soldier

named Francis M. Trussel Jr., of Lincoln, Illinois, who died May 26 in Tahrir, Iraq, of wounds suffered when an improvised explosive device detonated near his position. Also killed Saturday was Sgt. Nicholas Walsh, 26 years old and a father of two young sons, who was killed by enemy fire in Fallujah, his family said.

Last week the Hearst Newspapers reported that the Bush administration is on track to nearly double the number of combat troops in Iraq this year, according to an analysis of Pentagon deployment orders. A second, virtually unreported surge is being executed by sending more combat brigades and extending tours of duty for troops already there. The action, the news outlet said, could boost the number of combat soldiers from 52,500 in early January to as many as 98,000 by the end of this year if the Pentagon overlaps arriving and departing combat brigades. When additional support troops are included, the total number of US troops in Iraq could increase from 162,000 presently to more than 200,000—a record-high number—by the end of the year.

US military commanders acknowledge that the coming months will see an increase in casualties as US troops continue to leave their neighborhood security stations and engage in street battles with insurgents in Baghdad and Anbar Province. The operations, which were supposedly aimed at lowering the number of Iraqi civilian deaths from sectarian violence, have done nothing of the sort.

A report in the British *Telegraph* newspaper cited the comments of Alastair Campbell, the outgoing defense attaché at the British Embassy in Baghdad, who said extra US forces were not achieving a drop in violence. The casualty figures for April—in which 1,500 civilians are believed to have been killed—provided no “encouraging” evidence, Campbell said.

According to the newspaper, Campbell disclosed that American commanders had decided that the criteria for the “success” of the troop surge would be nothing more than a reduction in violence to the level prior to last year’s bombing of the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, which destroyed its golden dome. The destruction of the shrine led to a dramatic escalation in sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia factions, peaking at 3,500 deaths in September last year. Casualty figures had been reported at 800 a month before that.

“While the United States military has made little

secret of its view that the bloodshed in Iraq can now only be contained, rather than stamped out altogether,” the *Telegraph* wrote, “the suggestion that 800 murders a month in the country would be a measure of success is an indication of how far the coalition has been forced to rein in its expectations.”

In fact, the central purpose of the surge has not been to end sectarian conflict—which the US encouraged as a means of dividing and conquering the country—but to destroy popular resistance to the US occupation. The main criticism of Bush administration policy by several leading Democrats, including presidential candidate Senator Hillary Clinton, is that US troops drop any pretense of stopping sectarian violence and be redeployed from urban centers to outlying areas. This, they hope, would serve to reduce US casualties and make the longtime occupation of the country more palatable to the American people. At the same time US troops, in particular special forces and the US Air Force, would be in position to intervene to “fight terrorism” and protect US strategic interests, i.e., Iraq’s oil reserves.



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