

New York Times on Northern Alliance war crime

A cover-up of US massacre at Mazar-i-Sharif

Barry Grey
13 July 2009

The *New York Times* on July 11 published a lengthy front-page article recalling the murder of hundreds of captured Taliban fighters by the US-allied Northern Alliance at the end of November, 2001, during the final days of the American-led invasion that toppled the Taliban regime.

The article, by James Risen, recounts the deaths of mostly foreign Taliban who surrendered to the Northern Alliance at Kunduz and were stuffed into shipping containers for transfer to a prison near the town of Shibarghan. Over a three-day period, the prisoners were kept in closed metal containers and given no food or water. Many suffocated. Others were killed when guards fired into the containers.

According to the *Times*, estimates of the number who died vary between several hundred and several thousand. They were buried in a mass grave in a stretch of desert outside of Shibarghan.

Risen gives details of the cover-up carried out by the Bush administration, which rejected calls by the FBI, the US State Department, the International Committee of the Red Cross and human rights groups for an investigation, "because," Risen writes, "the [Northern Alliance] warlord, Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, was on the payroll of the CIA and his militia worked closely with United States Special Forces in 2001, several officials said."

Risen adds, "The United States also worried about undermining the American-supported government of President Hamid Karzai, in which General Dostum had served as a defense official."

The evident purpose of the article becomes clear as Risen goes to explain that top US officials have been pressing Karzai to reverse his recent reappointment of Dostum to serve as his military chief of staff. Dostum was suspended last year and is living in exile in Turkey after having been accused of threatening a political foe "at gunpoint."

The *Times* writes: "A senior State Department official said that Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Richard C. Holbrooke, the special representative on Afghanistan and Pakistan, had told Mr. Karzai of their objections to reinstating General Dostum. The American officials have also pressed his sponsors in Turkey to delay his return to Afghanistan while talks continue with Mr. Karzai over the general's role, said an official briefed on the matter."

Risen relates US opposition to the reappointment of Dostum to the Obama administration's military escalation in Afghanistan and its efforts to distance itself from Karzai, "whose government is deeply unpopular and widely reviewed as corrupt." It appears that the US fears the elevation of a man tainted by war crimes to head the military of its supposedly democratic puppet government would impede its efforts to crush a growing popular insurgency against the US-NATO occupation.

The article cites "several senior officials" who suggest that the

Obama administration "might not be hostile to an inquiry" into the mass deaths of Taliban POWs at the hands of Dostum and the Northern Alliance. This statement has the character of a threat directed at convincing Karzai to reverse his appointment of Dostum.

However, the *Times* indicates the limited and self-serving parameters of any such investigation, were it to take place, as foreseen by it and the Obama administration. The newspaper quotes a "senior" State Department official as saying, "We believe that anyone suspected of war crimes should be thoroughly investigated." This statement is belied by the remarkable fact that the article omits any mention of another war crime that occurred over the same period as the mass killing of Taliban POWs in the desert near Shibarghan.

At the end of November, 2001, US Special Forces, CIA operatives and US Army troops, backed by British commandos and working with Dostum's militia, carried out a horrific three-day bombardment and mass execution of foreign Taliban POWs at Dostum's Qala-i-Janghi prison fortress near Mazar-i-Sharif. In fact, the Taliban from Kunduz who died in metal containers were originally slated to be shipped to Qala-i-Janghi, but were diverted because of the US-led slaughter that was then underway at the fortress.

The exact number of defenseless POWs who were slaughtered at Qala-i-Janghi remains unknown, but most estimates place the toll in the many hundreds. Unlike the mass murder of Taliban in the desert near Shibarghan, the carnage at Qala-i-Janghi is well documented. News video at the time showed US jets and helicopter gunships dropping bombs on the prison compound, Northern Alliance troops firing from ridges into the prison yard, and dozens of corpses and body parts littering the grounds of the fortress.

Under US direction, Northern Alliance forces poured gasoline into basement hideouts where Taliban prisoners had sought refuge and ignited them, burning scores of people alive. They followed this by flooding the basements with freezing water. On December 1, after three days of mass murder, some 85 survivors surrendered. Most of these were subsequently shipped to the US prison camp at Guantanamo.

Dead POWs were found after the attack with bullets to their heads and their hands tied behind their backs, making clear that they had been executed. A documentary film entitled *House of War: The Uprising at Mazar-i-Sharif*, containing footage shot during the rampage by international journalists, was aired by CNN on August 3, 2002.

The attack began when POWs, provoked by CIA agents who were interrogating them, killed their main tormentor, CIA operative Johnny "Mike" Spann, and his partner fled and called for US air strikes to put down what he called a prisoner revolt.

Top Bush administration officials bear direct responsibility for this war crime, which recalls the My Lai massacre in Vietnam and atrocities carried out by Nazi forces in Europe during World War II. In the days leading up to Qala-i-Janghi, then Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld vetoed an offer from Northern Alliance commanders besieging Kunduz to allow Afghan Taliban to return to their homes and foreign Taliban to be placed under United Nations jurisdiction in return for their surrender.

Rumsfeld on several occasions stated publicly that the US wanted all foreign Taliban to be killed or indefinitely imprisoned. Shortly after the massacre at the fortress near Mazar-i-Sharif, Rumsfeld announced that the United States rejected the Geneva Conventions on prisoners of war in relation to Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters captured in Afghanistan.

This defiance of international law paved the way for all of the crimes that have been committed over nearly a decade in the name of the “war on terror,” from Abu Ghraib, to water-boarding and other forms of torture, to renditions, to secret CIA prisons, to indefinite detention and military kangaroo courts, to the destruction of Fallujah and other cities in Iraq and the escalating military violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The *Times* deliberately excludes mention of the massacre at Mazar-i-Sharif because that raises directly the question of war crimes by the United States and top US officials, beginning with George W. Bush, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Powell, Rice, Cheney and their lieutenants. The *Times* itself has systematically sought to cover up these crimes, and supports the Obama administration’s policy of opposing any serious investigation into them, as well as its continuation, in all essentials, of the illegal policies of the previous administration.

At the time of the Qala-i-Janghi massacre, the *Times* published articles and commentaries suggesting that the prisoners had brought the mass killing on themselves and arguing that their alleged revolt proved them to be incorrigible terrorists.

Particularly revealing was the *Times*’ response to the capture and prosecution of John Walker Lindh, dubbed by the US media as the “American Taliban.” This California youth, then 20 years old, was among the few who survived the mass killing at the Mazar-i-Sharif prison fortress.

Lindh had traveled to Central Asia to study Islam. He joined the Taliban months before 9/11, when the Taliban was fighting the Northern Alliance and before it was targeted for attack and overthrow by the US for its rejection of a US ultimatum that it hand over Osama bin Laden to American authorities.

Captured at Kunduz, Lindh was shipped to the Qala-i-Janghi fortress. There is video showing CIA agent Spann interrogating him at Qala-i-Janghi and threatening him with death if he did not confess.

After surrendering on the final day of the US-led assault on the fortress, Lindh, near death and suffering from a bullet in his leg, was denied medical care and held for days at a Marine compound in a shipping container, strapped to a stretcher by tape. He was denied access to a lawyer for 55 days.

No evidence, outside of a forced confession, was advanced to show that Lindh was a terrorist or that he fired on US personnel. Nevertheless, the *Times*, in a December 21, 2001 editorial entitled “The American Prisoner,” solidarized itself with the decision of the Bush Justice Department to charge Lindh with “aiding a terrorist organization,” a crime punishable by life imprisonment.

“That sounds about right,” declared the voice of American liberalism. The editorial went on to denounce Lindh for “unspeakable

ignorance” and for having “fallen down a rabbit hole of one’s own making.”

The undisguised hatred for Lindh was the reverse side of the newspaper’s support for Bush’s “war on terror,” which would 15 months later expand into Iraq, a further act of aggression that was provided a cover of legitimacy by the *Times*’ copious reports on Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction.”

In an article published on December 22, 2001, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote: “Far from raising the question of [Lindh’s] democratic rights, the *Times* essentially intervenes to further poison public opinion against [Lindh] under conditions in which virtually nothing is known about his case, nothing has been proven against him and the full force of the state, armed to the teeth and in unrestrained military mode, is bearing down upon him—a 20-year-old who has seen things that no 20-year-old should have to see. In this the ‘liberals’ at the *Times* demonstrate a horrifying callousness.”

In July of 2002, Lindh entered into a plea bargain with federal prosecutors, agreeing to plead guilty to aiding a terrorist organization in return for the government’s agreement to drop more serious charges. The Bush administration extorted the agreement from Lindh by threatening to declare him an “unlawful enemy combatant” and lock him away for life without legal recourse in a military prison.

The government was anxious to avoid a trial because it had no serious evidence to back up its major charges other than statements extracted from Lindh under torture, and Lindh’s lawyers were prepared to present evidence of the illegal treatment of their client, as well as evidence of support for the Taliban by a number of companies, including the oil giant Unocal, as well as the US government itself.

The *Times*, in a July 16, 2002 editorial, hailed this travesty of justice as a model of judicial fairness. It wrote that the plea bargain “honors the demands of criminal justice, national security and America’s commitment to constitutional rights.” It added that the Justice Department obtained its guilty plea “without violating Mr. Lindh’s rights.”

The editorial ignored one aspect of the plea bargain which flatly contradicted its efforts to portray the agreement as a testament to American democracy: a provision allowing the government at any time to declare Lindh an “unlawful enemy combatant” and detain him indefinitely once his prison sentence is completed.

Revealing its own bias in the case and its contempt for democratic rights, the newspaper wrote that “by agreeing to the plea, the government eliminated any risk of acquittal.”

In October of 2002, Lindh was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

The *Times*’ suppression of the Mazar-i-Sharif massacre in its July 11 article is of a piece with its role in covering up the crimes of American imperialism and supporting its military aggression abroad. It reflects the indifference of the liberal establishment, and the wealthy and privileged social layers for which the *Times* speaks, to the defense of democratic rights.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact