

US, British media transform tragedies into war propaganda

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With the Obama administration on the verge of announcing an escalation that will almost certainly send tens of thousands more troops into the war in Afghanistan, popular opposition to the war continues to grow.

According to a CNN poll released this week, 58 percent of the American people oppose the war. Across the Atlantic, antiwar sentiments in Britain, which has the second largest troop contingent in Afghanistan, is even higher. The latest poll shows just 21 percent supporting the war and 63 percent in favor of withdrawing British troops.

Casualties have risen sharply, with 288 US and 95 British troops having died so far this year. Many more have suffered wounds, resulting in an increasing number of amputations and cases of brain damage.

The US-led military intervention has faced one reversal after another. Armed resistance has spread throughout most of the country, with large areas now under the effective control of the Taliban and local militias opposed to occupation. Politically, the fraudulent and farcical presidential election has only underscored the corruption of Washington's puppet government headed by Hamid Karzai and deepened the hostility of the Afghan population towards his regime.

America's senior commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, has advocated winning the "hearts and minds" of the Afghan people supposedly by providing them security and reducing the use of air power so as to limit civilian casualties. Two recent reports, however, make clear that these are just fig leaves for a major military escalation.

The Afghans whom US forces would supposedly make "secure" are fleeing them in huge numbers. The *Wall Street Journal* Thursday cited the Afghan regime's ministry of refugee affairs in reporting that

"150,000 people—and possibly many more—have been displaced from their homes due to fighting" that has erupted since US troops have been sent into the country's south. The *Journal* quoted one 60-year-old refugee who complained of "foreign airstrikes" and explained, "Our children were killed; our crops were destroyed; our homes were damaged. There was nothing left for us there."

Such airstrikes have escalated once again, McChrystal's earlier statements notwithstanding. The *Air Force Times* quoted the Air Forces Central Command as reporting that US and other NATO warplanes dropped 647 bombs on Afghanistan last month while flying 2,359 close-air support sorties. It was the highest bomb total since July 2008.

It was in this context of ever growing antiwar sentiment and the deepening crisis gripping the US-led intervention that the American military suffered an unprecedented calamity, when Major Nidal Hasan shot to death 12 soldiers and one civilian at a Fort Hood in Texas.

The incident is a byproduct of the war itself. Hasan, an Army psychiatrist, was opposed to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, apparently traumatized by his six years of counseling of wounded and mentally shattered soldiers at Walter Reed Army hospital and disturbed by anti-Muslim harassment suffered in the military. Former colleagues quoted by National Public Radio described themselves as "deeply troubled" by Hasan's behavior, which they characterized as "disconnected, aloof, paranoid, belligerent and schizoid."

Instead of intervening to prevent Hasan from doing harm to himself or others, the military decided to send him to Afghanistan, knowing that he was desperate to avoid going to war. Last Thursday, Hasan snapped, carrying out his deadly shooting spree.

In response, the political establishment and the corporate-controlled media have intervened to transform the mass shooting into a terrorist attack, supposedly demonstrating the necessity to redouble the “war on terrorism” both at home and abroad.

Right-wing commentators initiated this turn, denouncing the rest of the media for “political correctness” in its failure to make the major’s belief in Islam the motivation for the shootings and proof that they constituted an act of terrorism. The fact that he was manifestly psychologically disturbed was dismissed as beside the point.

In a column published Thursday in the *Wall Street Journal*, the paper’s deputy editorial page director, Daniel Henninger, blamed the Fort Hood massacre on those who had questioned domestic surveillance, “waterboarding, renditions and secret prisons.” The lesson of Fort Hood, he claimed, was that “over there or here at home, they will keep trying to kill us.”

The rest of the media has followed suit, focusing its attention on email messages between Hasan and an imam in Yemen and his statements of religious conviction, while questioning how federal investigators failed to pursue a security investigation involving the major.

The grief over the deaths of the 13 shooting victims at Fort Hood has been milked by the media for all its worth, with the well-heeled television announcers using the tragedy to glorify the military and the wars of aggression that Washington is waging for control of the oil-rich Persian Gulf and Central Asia. In remarks on Tuesday, Obama himself exploited the event to support US militarism, including the planned escalation in Afghanistan.

A similar and in some ways even more tawdry spectacle has been provided by the media in Britain, spearheaded by the *Sun* tabloid newspaper of the right-wing media mogul Rupert Murdoch.

In this case, the mounting combat deaths of British troops, which have intensified hostility to the war, are being exploited to promote its escalation. The instrument chosen for this operation is the poor penmanship exhibited by Prime Minister Gordon Brown in a letter of condolence to the mother of a Jamie Janes, a soldier killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan.

The *Sun* not only published the letter together with

Jacqui Janes’s condemnation of Brown for allegedly misspelling her son’s name and for failing to provide the British troops with adequate equipment. It also put on its site a recording of an acrimonious conversation between Brown and the mother, secretly recorded when the prime minister sought to make a phoned apology.

The patent aim of Murdoch and the *Sun* is to counter opposition to the war by claiming that the problem is military incompetence on the part of the Labour government that can be cured with the election of the Tories and the war’s escalation.

The soldier’s uncle, Ian Cox, an Army veteran, expressed disgust over the entire episode, telling the daily *Mirror*, “It’s very wrong to hijack the grief of a woman who has lost her son to make a political point.”

The point is well made, but such “hijacking” of popular sentiments in order to promote militarism abroad and social reaction at home is the mass media’s stock-in-trade. It was put into practice most infamously with the concerted propaganda campaign to falsely tie the war in Afghanistan and the US invasion of Iraq to the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Now, the deaths of soldiers—those slain by a disturbed officer at Fort Hood as well as those killed in Afghanistan—are being exploited in an attempt to intimidate mass antiwar sentiment and support a military escalation that will lead to many more deaths of both Afghan civilians and those sent by the US and British military to suppress opposition to foreign occupation.

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