

US soldier on Baghdad massacre: “Not out of the ordinary in Iraq”

Bill Van Auken
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Iraq war veteran Josh Stieber, whose company is seen in the video posted by WikiLeaks of a July 2007 massacre of civilians in Baghdad, talked to the World Socialist Web Site about his experiences in Iraq and why he has chosen to speak out.

Stieber, together with another former member of the company, Ethan McCord, have addressed an open “Letter of Reconciliation” to the Iraqi people taking responsibility for their role in this incident and other acts of violence. Both soldiers deployed to Iraq in 2007.

In the interview, Josh Stieber, who left the Army last year, declaring himself a conscientious objector, stressed that the incident depicted in the leaked videotape should not be seen as an aberration. Rather, such acts have occurred on a daily basis and are the inevitable product of rules of engagement set by the military, deliberately dehumanizing training of US soldiers and the very nature of the colonial-style war and occupation in Iraq.

What was your reaction when you saw the “Collateral Murder” videotape posted by WikiLeaks?

When I first saw the tape, I was startled to find out what it was. When I started to see the way the video was framed and the discussion flowing from it, I guess I was surprised too at how extreme it was made out to be. Coming from my background, I can see why the common viewer could see it as pretty extreme, but for me it wasn’t really anything out of the ordinary.

Obviously, on a moral level I object to what is shown and to a lot of what went on over there, but the reality is that what was shown in the video was not really that out of the ordinary in Iraq.

Why do you think that the video did get such a reaction, with millions of people viewing it and expressing horror at what it depicted?

I think it is the visuals of it. There have definitely been people trying to talk about this kind of thing before. You may be familiar with the Winter Soldier hearings in 2008 when 200 veterans gave eyewitness accounts of similar and worse events in Iraq. They tried to warn people about what was going on, but were given hardly any mention in the US media.

And this very same incident was depicted in the book *The Good Soldiers* written by a Washington Post reporter who was embedded with our unit. He pretty much wrote out what was shown in the video word for word.

So the story has been out there, but I think it is the visual images of it that really shock people. It goes from being something you can turn the page or change the channel from to being right up in your face. And people are forced to think about these things, when a lot of them don’t want to think about it.

It’s been in the media that innocent civilians have been killed before. But you don’t see it; it’s words at the bottom of a TV screen or words in a newspaper, without seeing what it actually looks like.

You’ve seen Defense Secretary Robert Gates’s remark about the video not providing any context of the military situation. You were a member of the unit that is shown in the video on that day in Baghdad. What was the context as you saw it?

I was in the same company that is shown on the ground in that video. It is important to understand the larger context. On a regular basis we were getting attacked, whether it was IEDs [improvised explosive devices] or sniper fire, and we were all questioning more and more what exactly it was that we were doing there.

Most of us saw the mission as pretty pointless. As we were doing it we would get attacked and have no idea where it was coming from. You never knew where an attack might come from. Somebody would be standing next to you one second and blown up the next.

That’s the broader perspective. On that day, there were soldiers on the ground going house-to-house searching houses, and the helicopter was assigned to watch over them and eliminate any threats. There were troops a couple of blocks away from where those men were gathered.

It is not to morally justify it, but military speaking, from what I see in the video, I know I would be expected to report what I saw and probably would have been told to open fire.

Gates’s comment is very telling. He said that there is no wrongdoing in the video. So the nature of the discussion about it has to be based on that someone that high up is putting his stamp of approval on everything that was shown in the video. So this is not just an instance of a couple of soldiers behaving badly, but rather it is a system that is training people to act in a certain way and putting them in situations where, for one reason or another, they feel they have to do this kind of thing.

In your letter, you state that this was an everyday occurrence. Could you give some examples of what you experienced while you were in Iraq?

One policy that we had that was fairly similar or even more extreme than this was that if a roadside bomb went off then we were supposed to shoot anyone standing in that area. So it pretty much got to the point that the philosophy was to out-terrorize the terrorists. We were told that we needed to make the local population more afraid of us, so that maybe if they see someone trying to plant a bomb they’ll try and stop them rather than having to face whatever we might do afterwards.

Do you think that this kind of thing is almost inevitable given the character of the war itself?

I would definitely say so. A lot of people lost their idealism pretty quickly and would say that the only thing they were fighting for was to make it home alive. There was a lot of pressure to act a certain way and there definitely were some very real threats.

All of this exposes so clearly the fallacy of using war as a tool of foreign policy or as a way to supposedly spread “freedom and democracy” around the world, or whatever other rhetoric you want to attach to it. Even if you do something that may be militarily justifiable and harm civilians, it doesn’t take a whole lot of imagination to understand why the local population is not going to look at you as “liberators” or somebody trying to help their country.

Did this lead to a sense that literally anyone and everyone in Iraq could be your enemy?

Yes, definitely. Again, we were primarily chasing threats from snipers

and roadside bombs, and you had no idea who planted it or who fired the shot. So the sense was that an attack could come from anywhere.

You say that people lost their idealism. Do you feel that you went into the military for idealistic reasons?

When I enlisted, I kind of bought into all of the rhetoric that I would be making the world a better place and would be spreading freedom and democracy. I grew up pretty religious, and there was a lot of religious language attached to the arguments that were made as to why this war was a good thing. So from the advice I was given from people that I trusted at the time, I believed I would be doing something positive.

At what point did those beliefs begin to break down?

There were different things that came up in training that would definitely trouble me. But I would always excuse it and say that it really didn't matter, as troubling as it was.

Hopefully, after seeing this video people can better understand that the way people are trained is usually how they're going to act. A lot of our training was very dehumanizing and very psychological.

While I made excuses for it, when I got to Iraq I saw that the training really does take effect. When I got there I had to put myself in other people's shoes and realize that if it was my country and I was watching everything that we were doing to the people of Baghdad, I probably wouldn't be very happy about it.

So your training was essentially designed to make you view the people of Iraq as less than human?

Yes, this was a definite part of it. We'd have battle cries like "Kill them all, and let God sort them out." They'd have us sing very dehumanizing songs as we were marching around, talking about killing women and children. There were so many things that were designed to eat away at your common humanity and to stop you from thinking in those terms.

[One of the cadences that Josh and fellow soldiers marched to in training included the words:

I went down to the market/where all the women shop
I pulled out my machete/and I began to chop
I went down to the park/where all the children play
I pulled out my machinegun/and I began to spray]

You hear a song like that one day, and then you hear a chaplain at church blessing what you're doing the next day. And then you have people back home writing that you're protecting them and helping them. You can get all caught up in it, and it can definitely mess with your psychology.

You talk in your letter about the US war and occupation depriving the Iraqi people of their humanity. What about the US soldiers, has it also deprived them of their humanity?

I would definitely say so. What moved me first to write and talk about this video is that a lot of the dialogue about it was kind of putting everything on the shoulders of the soldiers. Of course everybody does have a choice and is responsible for it. But on another level, it is wrong to put it all on them when soldiers are told that they are doing what their country expects of them.

If you just look at this one instance and not at the bigger system that has produced it, these things are just going to keep happening. We have to look at the system that is creating them.

I have a number of different friends who have ended up in mental institutions. There are others whose families have fallen apart. It takes a terrible toll on the personal level and on the national level. More and more people, if they had it before, have lost faith in the judgment of the US government and what it decides to get involved with.

Just about everyone I knew thought they would never reenlist, but then a lot of them end up doing it. You go through an experience like we went through and try and come back and reintegrate; a lot of times it's very challenging. As conflicted as people might be about staying in the

military, for one reason or another they don't feel that they can properly transition back into society, that they lack support or that people can't understand them.

Hopefully, after seeing this video, young people can see that going into the military is a lot more than about getting a paycheck or getting help with college. You might not make it back in one piece, but even if you do, the things you are forced to do or choose to do to other people can have psychological consequences that you have to live with for the rest of your life.

You became opposed to the war in Iraq while you were deployed there. Was this a widely shared view? What was the response of your fellow soldiers?

It was pretty widely shared. Just about everybody I knew said that what we were doing was at the very least a waste of time. Some of them went further to say that it was morally wrong, and some people went so far as to say that if the same thing was being done in their country that they themselves would become insurgents.

Most people adopted the mindset that they were stuck in this awful situation, and it was not what they had expected. So the battle just becomes about making it home alive rather than anything on a grand scale. But being able to step outside the system and say not only that this is wrong, but that we can do something about it; that's the bigger, more challenging leap for a lot of people.

The killing of civilians in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan goes on. Did you think that this would change, particularly with the 2008 election?

I tried to be optimistic. I guess I have been disappointed that the same logic keeps getting pushed that we can win hearts and minds at the barrel of a gun. And the more you see of it, the less sense it makes.

It all points to much larger things behind war. It's a mistake to put so much hope in one person or even one party. It seems that so much of it gets back down to money and just how entrenched different corporations and businesses are in the political process. When profit becomes a bigger priority than people, it's a recipe for disaster.

The video can be viewed below:



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