

Photos of US troops defiling corpses expose Afghan war's savagery

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On Wednesday, the *Los Angeles Times* published horrific photographs of American troops in Afghanistan posing with dead and dismembered insurgents.

The grisly images expose Washington's claim that the occupation of the country is aimed at liberating the Afghan people. They reflect the savage reality of the US-led operation, intended to crush popular opposition to foreign rule and establish Afghanistan as a base from which the US ruling elite can pursue its efforts to dominate the geo-strategically critical region.

The *Los Angeles Times* photos, recently supplied to the newspaper by an unnamed US soldier, were apparently taken on two separate occasions in 2010. Soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division were first dispatched to a police station in Zabul Province in southern Afghanistan in February 2010 to examine the remains of a suicide bomber for identification purposes. As the newspaper describes it: "The paratroopers posed for photos next to Afghan police, grinning while some held—and others squatted beside—the corpse's severed legs."

A few months later, in April 2010, the same platoon was sent to a morgue in Qalat, Zabul's capital, to investigate the remains of three insurgents who had blown themselves up. The soldiers again posed with the body parts, "grinning and mugging for photographs."

Describing this set of photos, the *Times* wrote: "Two soldiers posed holding a dead man's hand with the middle finger raised. A soldier leaned over the bearded corpse while clutching the man's hand. Someone placed an unofficial platoon patch reading 'Zombie Hunter' next to other remains and took a picture."

The images are an indictment of the American political and military establishment, which has unleashed untold humiliation, death and destruction on the Afghan people for more than a decade. The soldiers involved deserve to be prosecuted, but the principal criminals are to be found in the White House, the Pentagon and the US Congress.

After the exposure of each US atrocity—including the slaughter of civilians, the abuse and torture of prisoners, the mutilation of corpses for trophies, Marines urinating on the

Afghan dead, the desecration of the Koran—American officials express dismay and describe the incidents as the actions of "individuals" who have perverted a righteous cause.

This is a lie. First, considering the unprecedented level of censorship of the war in Afghanistan, the episodes that come to light are undoubtedly only the tip of the iceberg. It can be asserted without hesitation that these sorts of crimes occur on virtually a daily basis. The exposure of the Qalat desecrations depended entirely on one soldier's courageous act.

Second, the incidents that have been publicized make clear a pattern of barbaric behavior on the part of US and allied troops. This flows inevitably from the predatory character of the war and the situation in which American and other occupying forces find themselves: resented and hated by the Afghan population (the brigade lost 35 members during the year-long deployment, 23 of them to homemade bombs or suicide bombers), the soldiers' increasing demoralization finds expression in acts of brutality.

How many individual atrocities have to take place before it becomes clear that an entire operation is criminal to its core?

The military and the White House claim an investigation will be launched. Why should anyone place the slightest confidence in this transparent effort to placate Afghan and American public opinion? There have been inquiries before into various murderous incidents. No one responsible has been punished and the atrocities continue and grow worse.

An Afghan human rights activist in Kabul, Nadir Nadiry, told the *New York Times*, "Each time they [American and NATO officials] say they will conduct a thorough investigation, but these investigations are not being made public so the results are not known to the Afghan people. So it's hard for them to believe the investigations were real and that measures were taken to change things."

The various mainstream media outlets cautioned nervously Wednesday that the new scandal comes at a "particularly sensitive moment" for already "strained" and "tense" US-Afghan relations, as talks continue on how to ensure the long-

term US and foreign presence beyond the official deadline for withdrawal in 2014. The US television network evening news programs relegated the atrocity to third spot, following the death of television and music business personality Dick Clark and the ongoing Secret Service prostitution scandal.

The *Los Angeles Times* has published only a few of the images, withholding the more graphic ones. According to the newspaper, the soldier who provided the 18 photos served in Afghanistan with the 82nd Airborne's 4th Brigade Combat Team from Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He told the *Times* that the photos "point to a breakdown in leadership and discipline that he believed compromised the safety of the troops."

The newspaper added, "The Qalat photos were circulated among several members of the platoon, the soldier said, and soldiers often joked about them. Most of the soldiers in the photos were low-ranking—including six specialists or privates." This type of sadism and backwardness is consciously cultivated by the US military, whose global operations require a mercenary force devoid of conscience and humanity.

The *Times* has come under attack from the Obama administration, the Pentagon and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the official occupying force in Afghanistan, for its decision to release a small portion of the photos. The US military, which was first consulted and shown the pictures, asked the *Times* not to publish them.

In a defensive statement, *Times* editor Davan Maharaj explained, "After careful consideration, we decided that publishing a small but representative selection of the photos would fulfill our obligation to readers to report vigorously and impartially on all aspects of the American mission in Afghanistan."

The various comments by government and military officials in response to the publication of the Afghan images express imperialist arrogance and hypocrisy. While feigning shock over the soldiers' actions, the White House and Pentagon spokesmen made clear that they were angered, above all, by the exposure of further crimes.

White House press secretary Jay Carney told reporters on board Air Force One that President Barack Obama considered the behavior demonstrated in Qalat by the US soldiers to be "reprehensible" and insisted, "Those responsible will be held accountable." On behalf of Obama, however, Carney added that he was "very disappointed" that the *Los Angeles Times* had published the photos.

In Brussels, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta declared that the conduct revealed in the photos "absolutely violates" American regulations and values. "This is not who we are, and it's certainly not who we represent when it comes to the great majority of men and women in uniform

who are serving there," Panetta asserted.

The degraded behavior captured in the photos certainly is who the American ruling elite and its hacks like Panetta are.

The defense secretary explained that he had personally called on the *Times* to suppress the photos, noted CNN, "because the enemy uses these kinds of images to incite violence. Lives have been lost due to publication of similar images in the past, he said."

Panetta told the media that he was not excusing the soldiers involved, "but neither do I want these images to bring further injury to our people or to our relationship with the Afghan people." Other spokesmen for the Pentagon, as well as for NATO, ISAF and the US embassy in Kabul, echoed these sentiments.

The reasoning is fantastic. If we let the Afghan people know the truth about what we are doing in their country, Panetta and the others are saying, they will be more outraged and have even more reason to want to drive us out. True, and they will be completely justified in fighting to oust their foreign oppressors.

Even more to the point, this is an argument for concealing the reality of the war from the American people, in whose name it is being waged. This underscores the link between imperialist aggression abroad and the destruction of democratic rights at home.

The source of American officials' anxiety is not simply or even primarily the state of public opinion in Afghanistan, but the growing disgust with the war within the American population. Polls indicate mass opposition in the US to the war, with a majority of Republican voters for the first time indicating they feel the conflict has not been worth fighting. This will not stop whichever big business politician is elected in November from continuing the bloody neocolonial occupation.



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