

# Washington's real concerns over the Afghanistan atrocity photos

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The images of young American paratroopers playing and posing with dismembered Afghan corpses provide a revolting but accurate reflection of a decade-old war and the demoralizing impact it has had upon the US military.

The Pentagon and the Obama administration exerted intense pressure to block the *Los Angeles Times*' publication of the photographs. Just two of 18 photographs given to the *Times* made it into print. Taken in 2010, one depicts a smirking soldier, a member of the 82nd Airborne Division's 4th Brigade Combat Team, posing with the hand of a dead Afghan placed on his shoulder. The other shows two soldiers grinning and giving thumbs-up while holding the severed legs of a dead suicide bomber in the air.

These were reportedly the least grotesque of the 18 images. One can only imagine what the other photos showed!

After they appeared, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta told the media that he did "not want these images to bring further injury to our people or to our relationship with the Afghan people." White House Press Secretary Jay Carney chimed in: "We're also very disappointed ... about the decision made to publish these photographs two years after the incident."

This refrain, that the overriding concern in Washington was that publication of the photos would inflame Afghan public opinion and provoke an intensification of attacks on US troops in Afghanistan, is based on a lie.

The Afghans do not need to see a picture on the front page of the *LA Times* to hate the foreign occupation of their country, which has lasted for over ten years and inflicted hundreds of thousands of casualties together with daily humiliation and oppression. The Afghans are living it, not merely reading it in a newspaper.

The real concern in Washington is the impact that the latest photographs, together with the unending succession of atrocities in Afghanistan, will have upon American and

world public opinion. In the United States, opposition to the war is at record levels, with barely 30 percent of the population believing that it is worth fighting.

Internationally, people who are incessantly told that the US is engaged in a global crusade for "human rights" can see through these photos what American soldiers and their commanders in Afghanistan are really up to: murder and brutality on a massive scale.

To counter antiwar sentiment, the government and the military have done their best to control the reporting on the war and, above all, the photographic images that are accessible to the American public.

Such attempts at controlling the images of war are nothing new. The Nazi regime worked tirelessly to ensure that only positive representations of German militarism were made public. It concealed the real nature of the concentration camps and the crimes carried out by Hitler's armies. Soldiers' snapshots from the Eastern Front played a role in acquainting the broader German public with the monstrous scale of Nazi criminality.

The White House and the Pentagon, no less than the Third Reich, are well aware that photographic images are a powerful means of exposing the real character of a war. So it was in Vietnam, with the photos of a nine-year-old girl severely burned in a napalm attack, or the shocking pictures of hundreds of corpses piled into a ditch in My Lai. The war of aggression in Iraq ultimately is inseparable from the grotesque images of torture and sexual humiliation at Abu Ghraib.

The American news media, controlled by powerful corporations and conditioned to act as the lapdog of the wealthy and powerful, has acted as a full partner in this exercise. It faithfully repeats the official story put out by the Pentagon and readily trades any independence for the privilege of "embedding" itself in the US war machine.

Thus, while nearly 2,000 US troops have died in the more than 10 years since "Operation Enduring Freedom"

was launched, virtually no photographs have been published of soldiers or Marines bleeding in Afghanistan. Until recently, similar discretion was routinely exercised towards the mountain of corpses and legions of wounded Afghan men, women and children produced by the war.

Where there have been exceptions—the video of laughing US Marines urinating on the bloodied bodies of slain Afghan resistance fighters and the photos published in the *LA Times*—they surfaced not out of the work of the media, but rather from the determination of individual soldiers to expose crimes that they had witnessed.

Despite the angry denunciations of the White House and the military command, the *LA Times* is hardly an exception to this rule. In its own account of its decision to publish the two photographs, it admits to protracted negotiations with Pentagon officials, repeated delays and a decision to self-censor the majority of the images. Some of the images showed American troops playing with a human head, and all of them were more shocking than those that appeared in print.

The reaction of official Washington to the photographs is equal parts intimidation and damage control. On the one hand, there is the heavy-handed message to the press that it will be held responsible for the armed resistance of the Afghan people. In addition, there are strong reasons to believe that Pentagon's promised "investigation" will initiate a concerted effort to identify and punish the soldier who gave the photos to the *LA Times*. There is a real threat that he will face the same treatment as Private Bradley Manning, detained under conditions tantamount to torture and facing a possible life sentence for allegedly providing WikiLeaks with a secret video documenting the massacre of Iraqi civilians by a helicopter gunship.

Then there is the attempt to deny that the photos mean anything. Panetta, the top US commander in Afghanistan General John Allen, the White House, and NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen all have issued statements that are variations on the same theme, insisting that the photographs "are not us" and in no way represent "the standards of the US military", the "core values of the United States" or the "principles and values that are the basis of our mission in Afghanistan".

This is all bunk; the pictures do not lie. One sees in these photos the staggering levels of brutality that characterize the Afghanistan war and the demoralization of the troops who are sent to wage it. These sorts of atrocities are historically associated with a breakdown in military command and discipline that are the inevitable product of colonial wars waged to subdue entire

populations.

The photographs reveal not only the nature of the war, but more essentially, that of the society that produced it. This undoubtedly is a matter of deep concern within the American ruling elite, as the seemingly unending exposures of massacres, torture and crimes carried out by the American military abroad provoke growing alienation from the social and political order at home.

Who is responsible? Defiling human remains is a violation of the Geneva Conventions—a war crime. But it, like countless other atrocities, is the product of a war of plunder and geo-political interests.

At the Nuremberg Tribunal following the Second World War, it was argued, by American prosecutors, that all of the crimes of the Nazis flowed from the Hitler regime's use of aggressive war as a means of achieving its political and strategic aims, precisely what the United States has done in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. Up to this point, however, not one high-level American official has been held responsible for any of this.

These crimes have been carried out in the name of the American people, though the great mass of working people in the United States are outraged by and ashamed of these atrocities. It is high time for the revival of the struggle against war. This must be based upon a mass, independent movement of the working class against militarism's source, the capitalist profit system. This movement must include in its demands that those responsible for the crime of aggressive war—in the Bush and Obama administrations—be held accountable, both politically and legally.

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