

Guernica, Lidice, My Lai ... and now Talon Anvil

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On Sunday, the *New York Times* published a detailed report chronicling the systematic, years-long mass murder of civilians by the United States in Iraq and Syria, carried out by a death squad called Talon Anvil.

The unit directed air strikes and drone-fired missiles at crowds and residential buildings, “killing people who had no role in the conflict: farmers trying to harvest, children in the street, families fleeing fighting, and villagers sheltering in buildings.”

Three incidents in particular are recounted by the *Times* as examples:

- Three men “all with canvas bags, working in an olive grove near the city of Manbij in the fall of 2016. The men had no weapons, and were not near any fighting, but the strike cell insisted they must be enemy fighters and killed them with a missile.”

- In early March 2017, “Talon Anvil sent a Predator drone over a Syrian farming town called Karama,” and the operator claimed all civilians had fled, and anyone left was a legitimate target. The Predator dropped a 500-pound bomb on a house, and when the smoke cleared, “The infrared cameras showed women and children staggering out of the partly collapsed building, some missing limbs, some dragging the dead.” At least 23 died, with dozens more wounded.

- During the US-backed attack on Raqqa, the largest Syrian city held by ISIS, in June 2017, civilians sought to flee the fighting and “boarded makeshift ferries to cross the Euphrates River.” The cell ordered strikes that hit multiple boats, “killing at least 30 civilians, whose bodies drifted away in the green water.”

Analysts looking at the footage of the drone-missile strikes began to dispute Talon Anvil claims, such as labeling as “ISIS fighters” bodies that were clearly those of children. In response, like American cops who turn off their body cameras before shooting or beating someone, Talon Anvil operators “started directing drone cameras away from targets shortly before a strike hit, preventing the collection of video evidence,” one former officer told the *Times*.

Talon Anvil also labeled more and more strikes as “self-defense,” which did not require justification based on intelligence, as opposed to offensive operations, which did.

Talon Anvil was the name of a Delta Force unit within the larger Task Force 9, which coordinated US military operations against the Islamic State (ISIS) forces in Iraq and Syria from 2014 to 2019. The actions of Task Force 9 were exposed by the *Times* in a previous front-page report, published last month, which included details of an air strike on the town of Baghuz in which at least 80 women and children were incinerated by 500-pound and 2,000-pound bombs.

The account provides so much evidence of deliberate mass killing of civilians that it demands comparison to some of the most notorious war crimes of the 20th century.

- Guernica—This Basque town was laid to waste by Italian and German bombers on April 26, 1937, at the request of Francisco Franco, leader of the fascist uprising against the Spanish Republic. Bombs rained down for nearly four hours, killing 1,654 men, women and children. It was the first test of the new Luftwaffe tactic of saturation terror bombing, soon to be taken up by both sides in World War II. The deliberate mass murder shocked the world and was memorialized in Picasso’s famous painting.

- Lidice—This Czech village was destroyed by the Nazis on June 10, 1942, in reprisal for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, the Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia, by Czech partisans. Under orders from Hitler and Heinrich Himmler, German forces surrounded the village, killed every male inhabitant 15 years and older and deported all the women and children to concentration camps. A total of 173 men and boys were shot. Some of the women survived years of slave labor, but 82 children were gassed within weeks at the Chelmno extermination camp. Every building in the village was demolished and the land plowed over.

- My Lai—This is the US military designation for Song My village, the site of the most infamous US massacre of the Vietnam War. A force commanded by Lt. William Calley

surrounded the village on March 16, 1968, and began systematically killing more than 500 men, women and children. Some women were gang-raped and then bayoneted. The exposure of this atrocity in November 1969 caused worldwide outrage and revealed that a “democratic” imperialist power employed methods as monstrous as those of the Nazis. Only Calley was ever tried, and he offered the same defense as Hitler’s officers: He was just “following orders.”

While the *Times* claims that the Talon Anvil murders were carried out by “rogue” or junior-level operatives, the fact was that the systematic promotion of “special forces” death squads was a central aspect of the Obama and Trump presidencies, with both presidents viewing them as necessary to achieve the United States’ war aims.

The *Times* report claims that one factor in the multiplying body count of civilians was the decision by the US commander of the anti-ISIS war to allow lower-level officers to order strikes, without going all the way up the chain of command. This reached the point that “the senior enlisted Delta operator on shift in the strike room—usually a sergeant first class or master sergeant” could give the go-ahead.

While such accounts may represent an effort by higher-ranking officers to push blame for the mass killings down to lower-ranking figures, or “rogue” individuals in the ranks, such scapegoating is in vain. The entire operation was in the service of a policy decided at the highest levels of the American government. The Obama administration responded to the sudden crisis of the US puppet regime in Iraq, whose troops fled before an ISIS offensive and abandoned Iraq’s second largest city, Mosul, by rushing American troops, warplanes and Special Forces operatives to the region.

It is well-known that Obama participated in weekly meetings at the White House where his counterterrorism team, headed by John Brennan, later CIA director, presented lists of targets for drone missile strikes for the president’s approval. These “terror Tuesdays,” as they were known, set in motion such attacks as the murder of Anwar al-Awlaki, the US-born Yemeni American who became a fundamentalist preacher, killed in Yemen by a missile fired by a US drone.

It is worth pointing out that the main location of the crimes detailed in the *Times* account was Syria. The American government and media have waged a 10-year-long campaign to demonize Syrian President Bashar Assad as the new Hitler, an effort which has been supported by the international pseudo-left, including groups like the now-disbanded International Socialist Organization and *Jacobin* magazine. These groups have supported the US-

backed Islamic fundamentalist groups at war with Assad, while remaining silent on the atrocities these forces, and the US military, have carried out against the people of Syria.

Similarly, over the past year, the American media has been full of charges against the government of China, claiming, with no evidence, that Beijing is guilty of genocide because of its repression of Uyghur nationalists in Xinjiang. According to the State Department, China is engaged in the systematic suppression of Muslim culture in Xinjiang. It is worth comparing the number of Muslims killed by China with the number killed by American imperialism in the bloody wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen.

For the ultimate hypocrisy, the *Times* itself will suffice. Its news pages detail atrocities committed by the American government in Syria. More than 10 years ago, however, Julian Assange and WikiLeaks made public the Iraq and Afghanistan war diaries, internal US military reports that documented countless cases of the American military killing civilians, including the haunting “Collateral Murder” video that shows an Apache helicopter gunship slaughtering a dozen people in Iraq, including two Reuters journalists.

But the *Times* says not a word in defense of Assange, who is in imminent danger of extradition to the United States for trial, imprisonment and potential execution by the very government that is responsible for the crimes detailed by the *Times*.

The two lengthy articles in the *Times* provide irrefutable evidence of US war crimes. The principal US war criminals are well known: Barack Obama, Donald Trump, George W. Bush, Joseph Biden, Richard Cheney, Mike Pence, John Brennan, Donald Rumsfeld, Leon Panetta, Condoleezza Rice, to name only those civilian officials with the top command responsibility. A future Nuremberg tribunal dedicated to exposing the war crimes in the Middle East and Central Asia would put all of these in the dock.



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