

After Afghan Massacre: Media Treat Killings as PR Problem for Occupation

By [Global Research](#)

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [Media Disinformation](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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The news that a U.S. Army sergeant killed 16 civilians, most of them children, in southern Afghanistan early Sunday morning was treated by many media outlets primarily as a PR challenge for continued war and occupation of that country.

"Afghanistan, once the must-fight war for America, is becoming a public relations headache for the nation's leaders, especially for President Barack Obama," explained an **Associated Press** analysis piece ([3/12/12](#)). **Reuters** ([3/12/12](#)) called it "the latest American public relations disaster in Afghanistan."

On the **NBC Today** show (3/11/12) the question was posed this way: "Could this reignite a new anti-American backlash in the unstable region?" The answer: "This is not going to bode well for the U.S. and NATO here in Afghanistan," explained reporter Atia Abawi. "Obviously people here very fearful as to what's going to happen next, what protests will come about throughout different parts of Afghanistan, and how the Taliban are going to use this to their advantage." "People," as used here, would not seem to include Afghans, who are presumably less frightened by protests against a massacre of children than they are by the massacre itself.

The front-page headline at **USA Today** ([3/12/12](#)) read, "Killings Threaten Afghan Mission." The story warned that the allegations "threaten to test U.S. strategy to end the conflict." In the **New York Times** ([3/12/12](#)), the massacre was seen as "igniting fears of a new wave of anti-American hostility." The paper went on to portray occupation forces as victims:

The possibility of a violent reaction to the killings added to a feeling of siege here among Western personnel. Officials described growing concern over a cascade of missteps and offenses that has cast doubt on the ability of NATO personnel to carry out their mission and has left troops and trainers increasingly vulnerable to violence by Afghans seeking revenge.

The fact that the massacres occurred two days after a NATO helicopter strike killed four civilians was "adding to the sense of concern."

Another **Times** piece ([3/12/12](#)) began with this:

The outrage from the back-to-back episodes of the Koran burning and the killing on Sunday of at least 16 Afghan civilians imperils what the Obama administration once saw as an orderly plan for 2012.

That sounds as if "outrage" is the most serious problem—the reaction to the actions, not the actions themselves.

Treating the killing of civilians as chiefly a PR problem is not a new phenomenon. As FAIR noted ("The Bad PR of Dead Civilians," [5/11/09](#)), the news that dozens were killed in NATO airstrikes brought headlines like "Civilian Deaths Imperil Support for Afghan War" (**New York Times**, [5/7/09](#)), "Claim of Afghan Civilian Deaths Clouds U.S. Talks" (**Wall Street Journal**, [5/7/09](#)) and "Afghan Civilian Deaths Present U.S. With Strategic Problem" (**Washington Post**, [5/8/09](#)).

Covering the latest atrocity, the **Washington Post** ([3/12/12](#)) reported that "the killings Sunday threatened to spark a new crisis in the strained relationship between the United States and Afghanistan." A separate piece quoted an anonymous U.S. official complaining that massacres "plays to the absolute worst fears and stereotypes" of the U.S. military, and that "it's the type of boogeyman [Afghan President Hamid] Karzai has always raised, but we've never had an incident like this."

But there have been similar single incidents, most notably a 2007 attack by Marines that killed 19 civilians. And night raids by NATO forces have killed Afghans throughout the war.

On the Sunday talkshows, Republicans and Democrats spoke about the massacre—often with little to distinguish their points of view. On **ABC's This Week** ([3/11/12](#)), Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham told viewers that "unfortunately, these things happen in war.... You just have to push through these things." He added that "the surge of forces has really put the Taliban on the defensive.... We can win this thing. We can get it right." Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-New York) remarked:

I think the president has a good plan. Obviously, it's a very difficult situation because we have real terrorism that emanated from Afghanistan. The president doesn't get enough credit. He's done an amazing job with the drones and Al-Qaeda.

On **NBC's Meet the Press** ([3/11/12](#)), Virginia Gov. Robert McDonnell, a Republican, said the news was "tragic because we have so many brave men and women, David, for now 10-plus years in the global war on terror, have done marvelous work for the cause freedom in Iraq, Afghanistan and other places.... It's too bad and we'll have to see the details. But I'm really proud of what our kids are doing there."

Is it too much to expect that the dominant reaction after a grisly atrocity should involve sympathy for its victims rather than pride in the forces whom the perpetrator belonged to?

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