

Haditha and the Farrago of Lies: War Crimes Start at the Top

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“[W]e must understand that we’re in a global war against a totalitarian group of people who will kill innocent life, there or here, in order to achieve an objective.”

George W Bush (At the National Restaurant Convention in Chicago), May 22, 2006.

“The ultimate cause of why civilians were injured and killed is because the Taliban knowingly, willfully chose to occupy homes of these people.”

US spokesman in Afghanistan, Colonel Collins, May 24, 2006.

“A military investigation into the deaths of two dozen Iraqis last November is expected to find that a small number of marines in western Iraq carried out extensive, unprovoked killings of civilians . . .”

New York Times, May 25, 2006.

The United States military conducted air strikes in Afghanistan on May 21-22 that killed at least 16 civilians. Women and children were ripped to pieces by a hail of bullets and bombs. Over a dozen other civilians were injured and the US military’s justification for the slaughter is that some (“between 20 and 80”) Afghan fighters against the US occupation were killed, too, in the yippee shoot. US forces blasted an Afghan village and then claimed they did everything that could be done to “prevent killing civilians”.

Hogwash.

There was not the slightest effort made by the US military in Afghanistan to “prevent killing civilians” in that air blitz. They first announced that the aim of their operation was “to detain individuals suspected of terrorist and anti-Afghanistan activities.” Just how do you “DETAIN individuals suspected of terrorism” by having airplanes spray bullets at them? But then, as

pointed out at <http://lefti.blogspot.com/> (always worth a visit), the robo-spokesmen dropped the word “suspected” and announced that “These individuals were active members of the Taliban network and have conducted attacks against coalition and Afghan forces as well as civilians”.

How could the US Command in Afghanistan know these “individuals” were “active members of the Taliban network”? Did they carry identity cards? Was any American or Afghan government official present at their burial to verify their identity? Can the US Command give an example of an attack by these people on civilians? Why did the military at first say they were suspects then declare later they were active Taliban?

None of the conventional media ever ask such questions about massacres in Afghanistan or Iraq. Tame newspapers like the New York Times carry things like “[it] is expected to find that a small number of marines in western Iraq carried out extensive, unprovoked killings of civilians” on November 19, 2005. Note the words “small number”, as if this made the murders not quite so horrible. We’re back to the “few bad apples” rubbish spouted by Rumsfeld and his pathetic hand-puppet generals about US troops’ torture and murders in prisons, and the killing of unarmed and innocent civilians.

Marines are said to have murdered 24 or more civilians in the “incident” (what a nice word) in Haditha last November. If they did, they were, in the words of Bush, “a totalitarian group of people who will kill innocent life, there or here, in order to achieve an objective.” And the objective of this group of marines was slaughter for revenge. A marine had died in a roadside bombing, so there was a killing spree. After firm denials that deliberate murder of civilians had taken place, evidence was produced (not, of course, by the US military), that a major war crime had been committed.

The LA Times, which seems to be better than most newspapers at providing hard facts, reported on May 26 that “In its initial statement to the media, the Marine Corps said the Iraqi civilians were killed either by an insurgent bomb or by crossfire between Marines and insurgents. But after Time Magazine obtained pictures showing dead women and children and quoted Iraqis who said the attack was unprovoked, the Marine Corps backtracked on its explanation and called for an investigation.” One military spokeswoman had said that guerrillas “placed non-combatants in the line of fire as the Marines responded to defend themselves”, which was an outrageous concoction of lies, and in a bizarre attempt to deflect journalistic investigation Marine Captain Jeffrey S Poole — he who retailed the original fabrication — emailed the Time reporter to tell him his story was based on al-Qaeda propaganda.

The American armed forces have descended to new and horrible depths of dishonesty. The instant automatic response to an accusation of evil-doing by its members is strong denial. There is no consideration given to saying something honest like “We don’t know what happened and we’ll have a good look at it.” The plain fact is that nobody can trust the US military to tell the truth, ever again, until there is eradication of the culture of deceit. There has to be a cleansing of the stables, a weeding-out of those who are devoted to the ethos of killing for the sake of killing and lying for the sake of lying.

Do you remember the story of Pat Tillman? The US Army, from top to bottom, told or ignored deliberate lies about the circumstances of his death in Afghanistan. Pat was a great man and he served his country well. But his memory was dishonored by vile people who used his

death for propaganda.

Pat Tillman, may he rest in peace, was killed by soldiers of his own side in an episode of gross military incompetence. But the US Army didn't only try to cover up the whole squalid shambles : it told lies to make the US public believe that a soldier who was shot by his own comrades had died as a result of enemy action, and compounded the insult by awarding him a posthumous medal. Generals of the US Army knew the truth about the affair, but decided that the army should have a well-publicized hero and told lies to put Pat Tillman in the headlines--and they succeeded because Time magazine featured him on its cover. Mere words cannot describe the filth who thought up this deception. Their action didn't only dishonor all concerned : it showed the world that the Decider-in-Chief, George Bush, had sent his amoral message down the chain of command. And that message was that lies can be endorsed by his Administration, providing the story doesn't eventually fall apart.

Of course there are many in the US Army and Marines who behave honorably, and they are probably in the majority. (And let it be placed on record that the US Marine medics in earthquake-devastated Kashmir were efficient and enormously popular. I've just returned from a visit to Pakistan and was greatly impressed by tales of their dedication.) But please reflect on this military truth: When uniformed people, supposedly under military discipline, behave like berserk demons from hell, killing the innocent and torturing at will, the final responsibility lies AT THE TOP.

There used to be a saying that there were no bad soldiers, only bad officers. This is a simplistic way of looking at things, because bad soldiers can exist even when officers are good. But when bad soldiers behave in a fashion that would have the Nazi SS nod in approving admiration at their mindless ferocity, than the blame rests squarely with those in authority : their leaders, the officers. If they didn't know what was going on (be that murder, torture or lying for propaganda), they are incompetent nitwits. If they knew what was going on and ignored it they are weak and pathetic cretins. If they approved evil or attempted a cover-up, then they are depraved monsters who should be prosecuted with the full force of law.

Your call.

If you wonder about the military's commitment to morality, please reflect on this exchange between General Michael V Hayden, the new CIA Director, and Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA):

Senator Feinstein: Is waterboarding an acceptable interrogation technique?
[Waterboarding is a torture designed to make victims believe they will die by drowning if they do not provide correct answers to their interrogators.]

General Hayden: Let me defer that to closed session, and I would be happy to discuss it in some detail.

The general wants to DISCUSS torture? The only possible answer by a human being to the senator's question is a flat NO, followed by a withering observation to the effect that "I am surprised you should ask such a question of a United States military officer". Any answer other than a flat 'No' means that Hayden is not prepared to state he does not approve of torture by semi-drowning.

That's the way the US military thinks, these days, and Hayden is the Bush appointee who will have ultimate responsibility for the CIA's interrogation chambers in secret jails around the world. He will be responsible for "rendition" of helpless non-persons to these prisons where there is no accountability for waterboarding or who knows what other hideous torment. (There are people who actually make a living, as US government employees, by thinking up new tortures. Just think about that.)

From the fabrication of pro-war propaganda, such as the farrago of lies about the "heroism" of poor Private Jessica Lynch, to the war crimes of killing women and children, the US military seeks new depths to conquer. The Marines who murdered Iraqis last November might have been motivated by their president's "war against terror", but they showed their support in a weird way. Consider this statement from a little Iraqi girl:

"I couldn't see their faces very well – only their guns sticking into the doorway. I watched them shoot my grandfather, first in the chest and then in the head. Then they killed my granny."

There is an inquiry being conducted into the murders, but we should remember another investigation about a Marine atrocity. In November 2004 a Marine murdered an unarmed helpless Iraqi who was lying defenseless and comatose on the floor of a building. The murder was filmed by an NBC cameraman who was later vilified for being anti-American. The Marine was not charged with any offence.

It should be borne in mind that no Iraqi government agency or official has been permitted to join in the investigation into the deaths of their citizens. So much for Bush "democracy" and his support for the "independent" Iraqi government. Remember his words on May 27?: "The formation of a democratic government in Iraq marks a victory for the cause of freedom in the Middle East." What democratic government in the world has to bow the knee to an invader whose soldiers kill its people? What democratic government in the world is prevented by an occupying military power from independently investigating the murder of its citizens?

Not one of the war crimes by US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan has resulted in prosecution of those who are ultimately responsible. Those who personally killed or tortured "innocent life", as Bush has it, received token tiny sentences in prisons in which, be assured, they will be treated as honored warriors. (One killer of an innocent civilian in a US military prison in Afghanistan was fined six thousand dollars.) Their superior officers receive presidential plaudits, promotion, and even more medals on their chests for their success in buck-passing-downwards. The announcement by Bush on May 31 that he is "troubled" by reports of atrocities in Iraq and that "If in fact the laws were broken there will be punishment", can be taken with a very large spoonful of salt.

Congressman John Murtha summed it up by saying "It goes right up the chain of command. Who ordered the cover-up? Who said, 'we're not going to publicize this thing, we're not even going to investigate it'?"

War crimes have been committed with near-impunity, and there is an important side effect : most citizens of the countries in which the US military massacred civilians will detest America and Americans for ever. The Taliban in Afghanistan have been given an enormous boost by US atrocities. This is part of the Bush legacy. The next administration is going to

have a hard job to restore world confidence in American justice, and it may never succeed. But at least it could make a start by getting rid of officers who want to “discuss” torture rather than declaring it to be evil and those whose first reaction to a war crime is to try to hush it up.

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