

Obama's Unspoken Trade-Off: Dead US/NATO Occupation Troops versus Dead Afghan Civilians?

By [Marc W. Herold](#)

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Buried in the public relations blather of U.S. Marine legions “liberating” Helmand and Afghan (sham) “elections” as democracy-restored is an unspoken trade-off over who disproportionately dies in America’s modern wars in the Third World. Under George W. Bush, U.S politico-military elites chose to fight the Afghan war with minimal regard for so-called collateral casualties. But the soaring toll of killed Afghan civilians swayed world public opinion and stoked the Afghan resistance as grieved Afghan family members sought revenge. Enter Barack Obama. Faced with the prospect of NATO forces being withdrawn as restless NATO country citizens mobilized against the war, the Obama war machine took the decision to trade-off (mostly) lower-class U.S. “volunteer” soldiers from rural America for fewer rural Afghan civilians killed. The decision had nothing to do with valuing Afghan lives and everything to do with a careful political calculation. In outlying areas such as in the Pakistan borderlands or in isolated rural areas of Afghanistan, Obama’s war machine cavalierly slaughters innocent civilians with the same impunity and at the same rate as his maligned predecessor did as drone strikes in Pakistan and U.S air strikes in Farah and Logar have demonstrated.

What has also changed is the public face of the war as one might expect from a President skilled in diction and possessed with the persuasion skills of a well-trained lawyer. On the other hand, behind the soothing words, the rationales are identical: in Phoenix recently, Obama reiterated the Bush of September 2001,

“This is not a war of choice. This is a war of necessity. Those who attacked America on 9/11 are plotting to do so again. If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which al-Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans. This is not only a war worth fighting. This is fundamental to the defense of our people.”

So much for the current U.S. rationale for war. So much for “Change We Can Believe In.”

The Obama approach finds strong support amongst U.S. liberals, the U.S corporate media and the UNAMA (in Afghanistan). As I have documented elsewhere, the UNAMA coughs up statistics on Afghan civilian deaths which cannot be fact-checked and which conveniently grossly underestimate the carnage caused by U.S/NATO actions. Sadly, the superficial impartiality of the U.N. gives such “faith-based” data credibility in the international media which widely cites them. Former President Bush must look on with envy at how the U.S. media including such “liberal” pillars as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (e.g., the McNeill Lehrer News Hour) or MoveOn.org now toe the Pentagon line on Obama’s Afghan war.

Almost eight years ago, I pointed out a trade-off taken by the U.S. military in its original bombing and invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001,

From the point of view of U.S policy makers and their mainstream media boosters, the ‘cost’ of a dead Afghan civilian is zero as long as these civilian deaths can be hidden from the general U.S public’ view. The ‘benefits’ of saving future lives of U.S military personnel are enormous, given the U.S public’s post-Vietnam aversion to returning body bags.... But, I believe the argument goes deeper and that race enters the calculation. The sacrificed Afghan civilians are not ‘white’ whereas the overwhelming number of U.S. pilots and elite ground troops are white. This ‘reality’ serves to amplify the positive benefit-cost ratio of certainly sacrificing darker Afghans today [and Indochinese, Iraqis yesterday] for the benefit of probably saving American soldier-citizens tomorrow. What I am saying is that when the “other” is non-white, the scale of violence used by the U.S. government to achieve its stated objectives at minimum cost knows no limits.

Years have since gone by, bodies and destruction multiplied. The Taliban and allies now control vast swaths of Afghanistan. The Afghan post-conflict regime planned at the U.N-sponsored Bonn conference (December 2001) has shown itself to be nothing more than a fig leaf for a collection of rapacious warlords, corruption and the violence of daily life know no bounds, the status of Afghan women never a serious Western consideration has remained as-before, some schools have been built then blown up, an NGO-mafia has descended upon Kabul pursuing its own agendas, palatial villas have sprouted-up and luxury hotels mushroomed, etc.

All these are asides: today, the politics of making war (in Afghanistan) have reversed the killing trade-off. The obvious military failure of Bush’s seven-year Afghan war and the rising aversion NATO countries’ public support of what was has increasingly been perceived as an American Afghan war, motivated the change. The Bush administration very effectively pressured certain NATO countries after 2004 to increasingly bear the costs In terms of human casualties of the Afghan war (Table 1).

As I shall now document using data on Afghan civilian deaths from the publically available Afghan Victim Memorial Project data base and on US/NATO occupation soldier deaths from the website <http://www.icasualties.org/oef/> , the Obama regime by relying less upon air power and more upon ground forces is tilting the relative mix of who dies on the ground in Afghanistan. Table 1 presents annual data for 2005-9, whereas Table 2 gives monthly totals for January-July 2009.

What needs first to be clearly understood is that is that Obama’s Pentagon has been much more deadly for Afghan civilians than was Bush in comparable months of 2008. During Jan-June 2008, some 278-343 Afghan civilian perished at the hands of US/NATO forces, but for comparable months under Team Obama the numbers were 520-630. For the month of July, the respective figures were 134-155 versus 47-56. We see the Obama trade-off kicking-in as US/NATO troop deaths in July 2008 were 30 versus 76. The ratio of Afghan civilians killed per occupation soldier death fell from 3.7 during January-June to 0.7 during July 2009 (Table 1).

Table 1. Afghan Civilian and US/NATO Military Deaths in Afghanistan, 2005-9

U.S deaths

NATO deaths

Total military deaths

Afghan civilians killed

Ratio of civs/mils

2005

99

32

131

408-478

(mid-point 443)

3.4

2006

98

93

191

653-769

(711)

3.7

2007

117

115

232

1010-1297

(1154)

5.0

2008

155

139
 294
 864-1017
 (941)
 3.2
 2009
 (Jan-Aug)
 158
 119
 277
 520-630
 (575)
 3.7
 Jan-July
 July
 156
 76
 47-56
 (52)
 3.7
 0.7

Table 2. Afghan Civilian and U.S/NATO Military Deaths during 2009

Total military deaths
 Afghan civilians killed
 Ratio of civs/mils
 January

25

98-106

(102)

4.08

February

24

50

(50)

2.08

March

28

36

1.28

April

14

70-75

(73)

5.21

May

27

147-220

(184)

6.81*

June

38

119-143

(131)

3.45

July

76

47-56

(52)

0.68

*This high number is attributable to the massacre in Farah during May resulting from a massive U.S aerial strike.

Predictably, the mainstream media led by the Associated Press spinned the new Obama approach as “new strategy restricting air power may be working.” As I have pointed out, the new approach does not involve reducing overall Afghan civilian deaths but merely shifts who causes them: U.S/NATO ground forces instead of U.S/NATO air power. But such “details” escape the mainstream press as well as some critics of the U.S. war.

In late July, a spate of articles in the mainstream press surfaced seeking to minimize the number of civilians by US/NATO actions. The Associated Press led the way (as usual) claiming that (no details provided naturally which could be fact-checked) proclaiming that

An Associated Press count of civilian deaths based on reports from Afghan and international officials, shows that 453 civilians have been killed in insurgent attacks this year. The count also shows that 199 civilians have died from attacks by Afghan or international forces. An Afghan human rights group says an additional 69 civilians died during a U.S. attack in Farah in May, but the U.S. disputes those deaths.”

Other sources with on-the-ground sources reported 147 civilians had perished in the Farah air attack and provided names, gender and ages.

In other words, truth only comes from “U.S sources.” In my Afghan Victim Memorial Report data base (and in Table 2) I report 567-686 Afghans killed by U.S/NATO actions during January-July 2009; in other words, the A.P. reports less than a third of the actual civilians killed by the U.S and NATO.

For its part, the UNAMA stated that U.S and allied forces had killed 265 civilians during the first six months of 2009. This compares with my figures of 520-630 (midpoint @ 575), that is the UNAMA undercounts by 54%. In service to General McChrystal.

The Obama administration has decided that the way to avoid outright defeat on the ground and to continue America’s Afghan war is to accept more U.S. military casualties in order to keep NATO in the fight. No exit strategy exists and the revealed preference of the Imperial City on the Potomac is for a long low-burning conflict with tolerably low casualties and extremely high overhead. Should NATO’s Canadian and European citizens support such a scenario?

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Articles by: [Marc W. Herold](#)

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