

The Orwellian Warfare State of Carnage and Doublethink

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After the bombings that killed and maimed so horribly at the Boston Marathon, our country's politics and mass media are awash in heartfelt compassion — and reflexive “doublethink,” which George Orwell described as willingness “to forget any fact that has become inconvenient.”

In sync with media outlets across the country, the New York Times put a chilling headline on Wednesday's front page: “Boston Bombs Were Loaded to Maim, Officials Say.” The story reported that nails and ball bearings were stuffed into pressure cookers, “rigged to shoot sharp bits of shrapnel into anyone within reach of their blast.”

Much less crude and weighing in at 1,000 pounds, CBU-87/B warheads were in the category of “combined effects munitions” when put to use 14 years ago by a bomber named Uncle Sam. The U.S. media coverage was brief and fleeting.

One Friday, at noontime, U.S.-led NATO forces dropped cluster bombs on the city of Nis, in the vicinity of a vegetable market. “The bombs struck next to the hospital complex and near the market, bringing death and destruction, peppering the streets of Serbia's third-largest city with shrapnel,” a dispatch in the San Francisco Chronicle reported on May 8, 1999.

And: “In a street leading from the market, dismembered bodies were strewn among carrots and other vegetables in pools of blood. A dead woman, her body covered with a sheet, was still clutching a shopping bag filled with carrots.”

Pointing out that cluster bombs “explode in the air and hurl shards of shrapnel over a wide radius,” BBC correspondent John Simpson wrote in the Sunday Telegraph: “Used against human beings, cluster bombs are some of the most savage weapons of modern warfare.”

Savage did not preclude usage. As a matter of fact, to Commander in Chief Bill Clinton and the prevailing military minds in Washington, savage was bound up in the positive attributes of cluster bombs. Each one could send up to 60,000 pieces of jagged steel shrapnel into what the weapon's maker described as “soft targets.”

An unusually diligent reporter, Paul Watson of the Los Angeles Times, [reported](#) from Pristina, Yugoslavia: “During five weeks of airstrikes, witnesses here say, NATO warplanes have dropped cluster bombs that scatter smaller munitions over wide areas. In military jargon, the smaller munitions are bomblets. Dr. Rade Grbic, a surgeon and director of Pristina's main hospital, sees proof every day that the almost benign term bomblet masks a tragic impact. Grbic, who saved the lives of two ethnic Albanian boys wounded while other boys played with a cluster bomb found Saturday, said he had never done so many amputations.”

The LA Times article quoted Dr. Grbic: “I have been an orthopedist for 15 years now, working in a crisis region where we often have injuries, but neither I nor my colleagues have ever seen such horrific wounds as those caused by cluster bombs.” He added: “They are wounds that lead to disabilities to a great extent. The limbs are so crushed that the only remaining option is amputation. It’s awful, awful.”

The newspaper account went on: “Pristina’s hospital alone has treated 300 to 400 people wounded by cluster bombs since NATO’s air war began March 24, Grbic said. Roughly half of those victims were civilians, he said. Because that number doesn’t include those killed by cluster bombs and doesn’t account for those wounded in other regions of Yugoslavia, the casualty toll probably is much higher, he said. ‘Most people are victims of the time-activated cluster bombs that explode some time after they fall,’ he said.”

Later, during invasions and initial periods of occupation, the U.S. military dropped cluster bombs in Afghanistan and fired cluster munitions in Iraq.

Today, the U.S. State Department remains opposed to outlawing those weapons, declaring on its official website: “Cluster munitions have demonstrated military utility. Their elimination from U.S. stockpiles would put the lives of its soldiers and those of its coalition partners at risk.”

The State Department [position statement](#) adds: “Moreover, cluster munitions can often result in much less collateral damage than unitary weapons, such as a larger bomb or larger artillery shell would cause, if used for the same mission.” Perhaps the bomber(s) who stuffed nails and ball bearings into pressure cookers for use in Boston had a similarly twisted rationale.

But don’t expect explorations of such matters from the USA’s daily papers or commercial networks — or from the likes of NPR’s “Morning Edition” and “All Things Considered,” or the PBS “NewsHour.” When the subject is killing and maiming, such news outlets take as a given the presumptive moral high ground of the U.S. government.

In his novel 1984, Orwell wrote about the conditioned reflex of “stopping short, as though by instinct, at the threshold of any dangerous thought . . . and of being bored or repelled by any train of thought which is capable of leading in a heretical direction.”

The doublethink — continually reinforced by mass media — remains within an irony-free zone that would amount to mere self-satire if not so damaging to intellectual and moral coherence.

Every news report about the children killed and injured at the finish line in Boston, every account of the horrific loss of limbs, makes me think of a little girl named Guljumma. She was seven years old when I met her at an Afghan refugee camp one day in the summer of 2009.

At the time, I [wrote](#): “Guljumma talked about what happened one morning last year when she was sleeping at home in southern Afghanistan’s Helmand Valley. At about 5 a.m., bombs exploded. Some people in her family died. She lost an arm.”

In the refugee camp on the outskirts of Kabul, where several hundred families were living in squalid conditions, the U.S. government was providing no help. The last time Guljumma and her father had meaningful contact with the U.S. government was when it bombed them.

War thrives on abstractions, but Guljumma was no abstraction. She was no more or less of an abstraction than the children whose lives have been forever wrecked by the bombing at the Boston finish line.

But the same U.S. news media that are conveying the preciousness of children so terribly harmed in Boston are scarcely interested in children like Guljumma.

I thought of her again when seeing news reports and a chilling [photo](#) on April 7, soon after 11 children in eastern Afghanistan were even more unlucky than she was. Those children died from a U.S./NATO air strike. For mainline American journalists, it wasn't much of a story; for American officials, it was no big deal.

"Circus dogs jump when the trainer cracks his whip," Orwell observed, "but the really well-trained dog is the one that turns his somersault when there is no whip."

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