

# *"ON Team" or "OFF Team" reporting in Afghanistan, Iraq?*

*A tale of two different media when support for US troops clashes with coverage of civilian casualties*



[Marla Ruzicka, who worked with both media and military to help put civilian casualties "on the map"](#)

*Human rights "crimes" get more attention when media technology catches "Blood on the Shovel"*

**By Frederic A. Moritz**

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*Reporting torture, imprisonment, massacre  
can bring to life the victim;  
dissolve overseas complexities into  
gripping emotions of human suffering.*

Overseas "human rights abuses" have become part of a global "crime scene."

The crystal clear images of television can bring bloody, distant atrocities into the living room and make them as riveting as a rape in an American back alley. Colorful images can bring to life the human face of suffering.

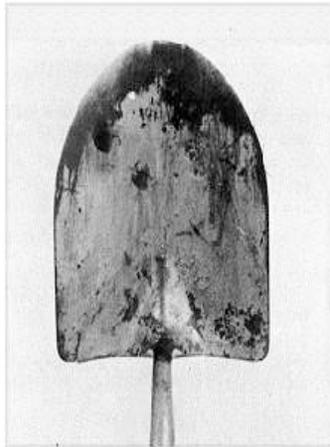
It now seems harder than ever to hide the "blood on the shovel."

**Yet coverage of what advocates see as "human rights abuses" is deeply selective. Suffering can be highlighted or filtered out by "gate keeping" editors -- despite the many ways in which technology has speeded and made more vivid coverage of overseas suffering,**

**Governments around the world, including the American, seek to manipulate journalists, to restrict their information and movements, to hide the "blood on the shovel."**

**Even when the United States is deeply involved, American journalists may lack the physical access or the motivation to spotlight suffering, especially when it results at least in part because of American actions. For example, when civilians died in American bombing raids in Afghanistan and Iraq.**

**To cover civilian casualties inflicted by Americans can seem unpatriotic, assisting the enemy, insensitive to the deaths of American soldiers, "off team." That can offend patriotic media consumers and even cost advertising. American media may sometimes ignore what the media of other countries consider newsworthy human rights issues.**



**Human rights reporting is most likely to receive wide play if there is major violence, suffering, visual and statistical documentation of large numbers of victims. The more distant the country and the less direct the "American angle," the greater is the need for widespread, graphic violence before a story can grab American media attention.**

**The personal values and experience of journalists and**

**editors can be as important as standards of proof in shaping the emphasis given to civilian casualties from American military action.**

**Some would insist on reporting civilian dead from American actions precisely because the "human angle" is so classic to journalism, the suffering so graphic, the plot line so entertaining and appealing to human emotions. US reporters sometimes see greater news value in relatively few American atrocities than in more frequent enemy abuses since journalists frequently focus on the rare "man bites dog" story rather than the the more every day "dog bites man story."**

**The "watchdog" tradition in American journalism also encourages reporters to expose "hypocrisy" by reporting if Americans commit atrocities or harm civilians despite official proclamations of adhering to the highest standards of humane warfare.**

**Still other American reporters and editors might view such casualties as a painful, but normal part of war, too routine for major emphasis, less frequent than in previous wars -- and a detour from coverage of the "core" of the story: Americans fighting (and taking casualties) overseas.**

**Civilian deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq seem relatively minor when compared civilian casualties in [WWII](#), history's most costly war. Of total war dead of 55.5 million, 27.3 million are estimated to be civilian.**

**One of the costliest American wars in terms of civilian deaths was [The Philippine-American War](#) between the armed forces of the United States and the Philippines from 1899 through 1913. An estimated 250,000 to 600,000 civilians died in this war. Many were victims of American reprisals, often from disease and starvation resulting from moving civilians into the controversial [reconcentration camps](#), the subject of much American newspaper debate.**

**Despite differences over what to cover and how, "overseas crime coverage" can outrage international public opinion and bring sanctions against governments seen as offenders. The long arm of modern media coverage is a fact of life for many governments which need international acceptance and**

**financial aid.**

## **TECHNOLOGY'S PART**

**This was not always the case. The spiraling speedup in communications technology has helped create rapidly spreading visual images which break down national walls.**

**The technology stages can be broken into two:**

**A) The grand age of the foreign correspondent. Telegraph cable, and later the newsreel provided first speed and then visual imagery around foreign news coverage from the Victorian Age all the way up to World War II.**

**B) The "high tech" age of television, radio, and the internet. This "began" after World War II, intensified during the Cold War and evolved into the present age of human rights coverage. Satellite transmitted television and radio voice feeds have revolutionized this coverage.**

Explore a more detailed [Timeline](#).

**The combination of exploding technology and the emotional imprint of World War II are major foundations for modern human rights reporting. Yet its foundations go back to the emergence of the foreign correspondent beginning in the Crimean War of the 1850's-- right up through the Balkan Wars of the 1870's, then the Spanish American War of 1898 and the Boer War of 1900.**

**Telegraph cable brought dispatches speedily home to mass circulation newspapers competing with often graphic headlines for newly literate readers in the world's growing cities.**

**The 19th Century foreign correspondent used cable to open Western newspapers to coverage of what seemed to be violation of civilized standards. By World War II, the movie newsreel joined in to make distant lands gripping and visual.**

**The technology revolution intensified after World War II. The horrors of that war and the holocaust intensified the "never again" sentiment which sometimes made reporters and editors sensitive to issues involving genocide or violation of the "laws of war."**

**The internet facilitates the international reporting, networking and lobbying which sustains the human rights movement. This is all one evolving "continuum" toward more rapid and graphic communications.**

### **NO WIGGLE ROOM**

**It is often said that in military operations things never go precisely as planned. Hence a rule of combat is that "no plan survives first contact with the enemy." It was traditionally accepted as normal that doctrine and tactics would need modification when confronted with changing combat conditions on the battlefield.**

**Today's intensive media scrutiny gives policy makers and military leaders very little "wiggle room" for battlefield tactics or mistakes which cost either civilian or military lives. "Mistakes" once taken as a normal part of the uncertainties of war tend to get blown up as signs of incompetence, negligence, or even crime.**

**As technology makes the world smaller, "abuses" seem harder to hide. It becomes increasingly likely that current technology will allow someone with an interest or commitment to spotlight what now is far less remote, far more graphic.**

**Yet media exposure of human rights abuses is inherently selective:**

### **A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS**

**Human rights reporting is more likely to flourish if there is a public, visual dimension which can be caught and transmitted by TV cameras. This may be street violence, corpses, starving persons, refugees fleeing across borders or on ship, burning villages, or dying children. Visual images**

**give immediacy, human interest, movement, and a sense of credibility in accordance with the maxims "one picture is worth a thousand words" and "a picture never lies."**

**This phenomenon can have a major impact on formation of national stereotypes. European television viewers have sometimes noted how television images of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, together with video cassette images of the earlier police beating of Rodney King, crowded out other images of the United States overseas . For many the visual image of America centered on racial violence.**

**Human rights reporting is more likely to thrive when governments allow entrance to journalists and human rights investigators. Thus a country which is relatively open may develop a more negative human rights media image than a more repressive government which restricts reporters' access and refuses to cooperate with organizations such as Amnesty International. This tendency sometimes acts to protect the worst offenders.**

**Exposure of human rights abuses is more likely when victims of violence are either permitted or forced to leave. Concentration of refugees in camps supervised by international bodies such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) provides relatively easy access for journalists who need to interview and photograph victims of war and repression - as in the case of Cambodian refugees in Thailand following the 1978 Vietnamese invasion and Afghan refugees in Pakistan following the 1979 Soviet invasion.**

**The development of post World War II international relief agencies to house and protect such mass refugee movements tends to provide camp "magnets" where packs of journalists can descend, interview refugees, and dramatize a problem.**

**In the absence of easily visited outside camps, human rights reporting is more easily conducted where language, culture, and travel conditions allow reporters to enter a country, travel freely, interview residents on scene and develop visual and compelling emotional portraits of suffering and abuse.**

**The ability to turn an abstract accusation or abuse into colorful feature writing involving graphic suffering,**

**personality profiles and anecdotal reporting and storytelling narrative can make the difference between prominent coverage and "burying the story." One example is the San Jose Mercury News featurized coverage of poverty and human rights abuses in the Philippines as the era of President Ferdinand Marcos gave way to the "people power" of Corazon Aquino.**

### **IMPORTANCE OF AN AMERICAN ANGLE**

**Human rights issues are most likely to be defined as newsworthy where there is an "American angle," - where a debate centers on what American policy should be, or where American soldiers and civilians are involved or affected by events.**

**Human rights reporting is more likely to flourish where victims have relatives or organized champions or lobbyists living in the United States to bring their case before government and media. A distant, abstract cause becomes more newsworthy if a compelling local spokesperson can bring immediacy and human interest to a story.**

**The tradition that government activities are "news" makes coverage more likely if such a person testifies before a US government agency. Local spokespersons can give examples, anecdotes, and understandable "sound bites" and quotations - all useful to counteract the frequently distant, abstract nature of overseas human rights issues.**

**A story grows in stature where reporters and editors can relatively quickly have access to credible academic or government experts, or human rights organizations with respectable and credible records.**

**Credibility of an accusation which might otherwise seem anecdotal or partisan is enhanced if an organization such as Amnesty International has done a major inquiry and issued an official report. The availability of such sources help news organizations to bolster their credibility, portray a story as based on multiple sources, and draw upon sustained research which a news organization would have neither the finances nor the expertise to conduct.**

**"Private sector" lobbying groups such as Amnesty International, Africa Watch, Americas Watch, Asia Watch, and Helsinki Watch have sought to encourage international pressure against human rights abuses by research, publications, grass roots organization and lobbying of governments. They have often sought media coverage as one way of influencing both public opinion and government action. All this has helped make human rights a catchy and continuing issue. Politicians and pressure groups of many persuasions can seize on to push their causes both in public debate and in the halls of government.**

**In this environment reporters and editors are more likely to define allegations and debates over human rights issues as news - especially when politicians, entertainment celebrities, and others deemed "newsworthy" join in what can be an emotional debate involving graphic examples of human suffering.**

**Conflict, debate, and graphic examples of human suffering often involving violence are natural stories for a "gatekeeper" of a news organization to choose, especially if these human rights issues have become the language of argument over American policies in political debate both within and outside government.**

### **"ON TEAM" OR "OFF TEAM": WHICH WAY TO GO?**

**Another way of accounting for the growth of international human rights reporting is to look at the qualities of stories which "gatekeepers" are more likely to define as "news."**

**Such reporting is more likely to be published, prominently displayed, promoted and rewarded when it reinforces the values, political goals, and pocketbooks of readers, viewers, and publishers. It is most likely to thrive if it reinforces existing prejudices, blackens unpopular governments, and spotlights sympathetic victims with vivid and emotional images. Reporters who do this successfully may win fame and promotion, and may even be seen as heroic - especially if they take risks to get out the story.**

**Human rights reporting may be seen as "on-team" when it tends to build popular support for the country's foreign**

**policy, especially during time of war or near-war when abuses by an external enemy help unify the country by rallying patriotic support.**

**American news reports on allegations of Spanish atrocities in Cuba, German atrocities in Belgium, and Iraqi atrocities in Kuwait helped mobilize public support for the Spanish-American War, World War I, and American intervention against Saddam Hussein. At other times it may simply express a national consensus or outrage over practices deemed immoral or corrupt - such as burning of brides in India, or looting of relief supplies in drought stricken Somalia.**

**By contrast "off-team" human rights reporting may undermine official policy by spotlighting human rights abuses of an ally - or even by American soldiers in time of war. Such reporting may still be published, prominently displayed, promoted, and rewarded, but this is less likely unless Americans are divided over official policy so that there is a "market" for news which undermines the official position.**

**Human rights reporting which becomes "high profile" by being cited in a national debate brings the reporting media stature, quotability, and thus power. But, if it steps on the toes of intense emotions, important policies, or powerful interests it may open the media to charges of bias -- or even of endangering the lives of American soldiers. Some examples are media coverage of US. pacification of the Philippines at the turn of the century, the Vietnam War, and US. support for the government of El Salvador against leftist guerrillas in the 1980's.**

**"Off-team" human rights reporting is less likely if it embarrasses a widely popular national policy without strong internal opposition. In this case the "bearer of bad news" is unlikely to be welcome. Both editors and reporters of mainstream publications are less likely to risk finances, popularity and credibility to report something which few want to hear, especially if information is sketchy and difficult to verify by sources widely accepted as credible.**

**This situation is likely to prevail in popular wars such as World War II, the Gulf War, the Afghanistan War, the**

**American occupation of Iraq (at least in its early stages), or in the early phases of wars which later become unpopular such as Vietnam.**

**Alternate media, or media appealing to less mainstream audiences, may sometimes break such taboos. This sometimes causes a "ripple effect" leading to mainstream coverage. Seymour Hersh broke the story of the My Lai massacre in the Dispatch News Service, a marketing service for free lance writers. Thirty- six papers agreed to purchase the story at \$100. each.**

### **"ON TEAM" IN AFGHANISTAN: FOCUS ON TALIBAN ABUSES**

**With Afghanistan, as with many other wars, American "on-team" media focused on human rights abuses by the enemy. Whether balanced or "hyped" out of context, such reporting serves to unify the public behind the patriotic cause.**

**Thus the near saturation coverage in American media of Taliban repression of women. Such reporting reaches out to the feminist impulse so strong in American society.**

**Women, often less likely than men to endorse military solutions, may find themselves far more comfortable with a war which targets a regime clearly abusive to women. And easily obtainable visual footage of women being beaten, shot, or confined humiliated at home has all the emotional power to hold a mass audience.**

**Gripping images of abused women, rather than bombed civilians, became the "blood on the shovel" for an "on-team" American media.**

### **"ON TEAM" IN AFGHANISTAN: PLAY DOWN BOMBING CIVILIANS**

**Much of the American media made a conscious or unconscious decision that the death of Afghan civilians by American bombs should not in any way compete with the deaths of thousands American civilians from the destruction**

**of the World Trade Center.**

**In major American media there was some coverage of civilian deaths from American bombing. But mainstream American media carefully restrained the ingrained journalistic tendency to go for the "blood on the shovel," the graphic, that which stirs compassion.**

**American media coverage of the popular war in Afghanistan has stayed almost completely "on-team." It has focused almost exclusively on covering the mission to win, "cheer leading" the path to victory, the hunt for bin Laden. There has been almost no serious in-depth media coverage of anything with might embarrass the American government -- or appear unpatriotic.**

**FAIR (Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting) has summarized some American media efforts to downplay civilian Afghan casualties.**

**The best known example is the formal policy of CNN contained in a memo reported by Washington Post media reporter Howard Kurtz. According to Kurtz, CNN Chair Walter Isaacson "has ordered his staff to balance images of civilian devastation in Afghan cities with reminders that the Taliban harbors murderous terrorists, saying it 'seems perverse to focus too much on the casualties or hardship in Afghanistan.'"**

**The New York Times reported (11/1/01) that these policies were already being implemented at CNN, with other networks following a similar, though perhaps not as formalized, strategy.**

**"In the United States," the Times noted, "television images of Afghan bombing victims are fleeting, cushioned between anchors or American officials explaining that such sights are only one side of the story." In other countries, however, "images of wounded Afghan children curled in hospital beds or women rocking in despair over a baby's corpse" are "more frequent and lingering."**

**When CNN correspondent Nic Robertson reported from the site of a bombed medical facility in Kandahar, the Times noted, US anchors "added disclaimers aimed at reassuring**

**American viewers that the network was not siding with the enemy." CNN International, however, did not add any such disclaimers.**

**During its US broadcasts, CNN "quickly switched to the rubble of the World Trade Center" after showing images of the damage in Kandahar, and the anchor "reminded viewers of the deaths of as many as 5,000 people whose 'biggest crime was going to work and getting there on time.'"**

### **SPOTLIGHTING THE US BOMBING OF AFGHAN CIVILIANS**

**Personal values and experience can be as important as standards of reporting proof in shaping the emphasis given to civilian casualties.**

**Some would see repeated reports of dozens, hundreds of dead as demanding coverage. Others might view such casualties as a painful, but normal part of war, too routine for major emphasis, less frequent than in [previous wars](#).**

**The bottom line: media managers in America at the height of the Afghan war (and later with Iraq) were aware too much such coverage could appear unpatriotic, embarrass the American military, hurt ratings, offend advertisers and be vulnerable to charges of aiding the enemy.**

**Only slowly did that change.**

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**For the most part, up to July, 2002, only media critics on the American political Left had explored in depth issues such as civilian casualties of bombing in Afghanistan.**

**Their research was closely enter twined with an overall "off-team" critique of the war. That, together with their ideological assumptions about American society, could undermine their credibility with the wider public. This was especially true for a vastly popular war where outrage over terrorism was overwhelming and where American war casualties were almost nonexistent.**

**Explore, for example, an exhaustive criticism of American media coverage of US bombing of civilians by Prof. Marc Herold of the University of New Hampshire. Herold's detailed tallies and supporting photos may be downloaded in Excel database format from a University of New Hampshire server.**

**For the details see Prof. Marc Herold's writings on the [Cursor](#) website. Detailed, if controversial, documentation by Prof. Herold can be downloaded from University of New Hampshire [website](#). Prof. Herold gives his analysis of the differences among civilian casualty conclusions in an August 20, 2002 [Cursor posting](#).**

**Seumas Milne writing in [The Guardian](#) (UK) on December 20, 2001 noted:**

**Now, for the first time, a systematic independent study has been carried out into civilian casualties in Afghanistan by Marc Herold, a US economics professor at the University of New Hampshire. Based on corroborated reports from aid agencies, the UN, eyewitnesses, TV stations, newspapers and news agencies around the world, Herold estimates that at least 3,767 civilians were killed by US bombs between October 7 and December 10. That is an average of 62 innocent deaths a day - and an even higher figure than the 3,234 now thought to have been killed in New York and Washington on September 11.**

**It was not until July of 2002 that [The New York Times](#) weighed in systematically to deal with allegations that there might be serious problems with American bombings of Afghan civilians.**

**This came at a later stage of the war, after American victory seemed assured. US forces were mopping up bin Laden and Taliban forces at a time it was harder to argue media scrutiny would help the enemy. The article did not deal with the broader question of bombing of civilians during the peak campaigns of the war.**

**But The Times article helped make the issue "mainstream."**

**The scale of the reported bombing errors of the last six months made them harder to ignore, especially as an Afghan backlash began to develop against the American military and threatened to injure Washington's war on terrorism. With the passage of time it became safer for American media to spotlight such issues with less danger of being accused of aiding the enemy.**

**Dexter Filkins wrote in The Times published [July 21, 2002](#):**

**"KABUL, Afghanistan - The American air campaign in Afghanistan, based on a high-tech, out-of-harm's-way strategy, has produced a pattern of mistakes that have killed hundreds of Afghan civilians.**

**"On-site reviews of 11 locations where air strikes killed as many as 400 civilians suggest that American commanders have sometimes relied on mistaken information from local Afghans. Also, the Americans' preference for air strikes instead of riskier ground operations has cut off a way of checking the accuracy of the intelligence.**

**"The reviews, over a six-month period, found that the Pentagon's use of overwhelming force meant that even when truly military targets were located, civilians were sometimes killed. The 11 sites visited accounted for many of the principal places where Afghans and human rights groups claim that civilians have been killed."**

**"Pentagon officials say their strategy has evolved in recent months away**

**from air strikes to the use of ground forces to hunt down remaining fighters for the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Since then, air power has been deployed in mostly a supporting role; still, the effects have often been disastrous.**

**"The American attack this month on villages in Oruzgan Province, where air strikes killed at least 54 civilians, has crystallized a sense of anger here is undermining the good will the United States gained by helping to dislodge the Taliban. That anger is threatening to frustrate America's ability to hunt down Taliban and Qaeda forces that still survive. "**

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**The Herold studies are based on compilation of press reports on American bombing raids from reporters of various nationalities who covered the war. The aggregate figures add up, even though many of these bombing incidents were reported to have killed relatively few civilians.**

**By contrast, American bombings of civilians in the attacks in the last six months, as described by The New York Times on [July 21](#), 2002 appear sometimes to be more bloody incidents in which larger numbers of civilians died in a smaller number of individual attacks.**

**The Times reporting protected itself from US government or military criticism by relying on more traditional reporting techniques, emphasizing on the spot verification, rather than on aggregate tallying of media bomb casualty reports. The Times approach combined visits to villages by reporters with information from village visits by on the scene aid representatives.**

**To further protect its credibility the article by Dexter Filkins included the contributions and bylines of well seasoned, widely respected correspondents John F. Burns and Carlotta Gall.**



**Herold's estimates of 3100 to 3600 bomb impact deaths can be debated as to specifics and methodology.**

**Defenders of today's relatively well targeted high tech weapons tied into satellite based information technology argue they reduce civilian casualties, compared to Vietnam, Korea, and World War II.**

**But these raids can still kill civilians, especially when intelligence is confused or military targets and civilian populations are close together.**

**[Carl Conetta](#), of the Project on Defense Alternatives, addressed in detail the question of civilian bombing casualties in Afghanistan in his "[Operation Enduring Freedom: Why a Higher Rate of Civilian Bombing Casualties?](#)," January 24, 2002.**

**Conetta concluded:**

**"The high likelihood that 1000-1300 civilians were killed in the Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) bombing campaign directly contradicts the notion that the campaign was "cleaner" than other, recent ones. Instead, in terms of the rate of civilian deaths per bomb or missile expended, there seems to have been a distinct deterioration from the standard set in Operation Allied Force (1999, Kosovo), in which fewer civilians were killed and more munitions**

used."

(See similar conclusions in an [analysis](#) by Scott Peterson of The Christian Science Monitor, October 22, 2002 suggesting that the ratio of civilian casualties to American bombs dropped has grown, despite the development of "smart bombs.")

Conetta came up with a lower civilian bombing death toll in Afghanistan than did Prof. Herold. He estimated between 1000 and 1300 civilians killed in the bombing campaign through January 1, 2002.

Conetta noted that his estimate "relies on a press review that is less extensive than the Herold review, but that applies a more stringent accounting criteria in order to correct for likely reporting bias."

He added:

"The estimate of civilian bombing casualties used in this report -- 1000-1300 -- draws on media sources much as the Herold study does, but it applies a stricter criteria to screen these sources and correct for likely reporting errors and distortions. In deriving the 1000-1300 estimate only Western press sources were used for hard numbers -- principally wire services (Reuters, Associated Press, and Agence France-Press) and the British press (BBC News, the Independent, The Times, and the Guardian). These sources seemed more attuned to the issue of civilian casualties than were US newspapers, while also being disinclined to accept on face value official Taliban reports or accounts from the Pakistani press."

Prof. Herold has rejected the approach of counting only "Western" reports as ethnocentric and unfairly discriminating against media and journalists from the Third World.

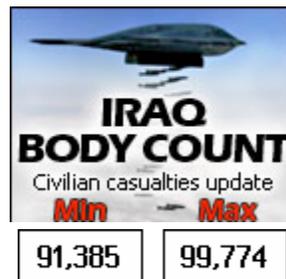
On Conetta's findings he has [written](#) in a study analyzing the

**variety of civilian casualty conclusions:**

"The study compiled statistics from only Western sources. Whereas this made it more palatable to the mainstream Western media, it also necessarily involved a smaller universe than my own dossier, and it indirectly further strengthened a pernicious view in the United States that truth can only come through a Euro-American lens."

**IRAQ: TWO DIFFERENT MEDIA, TWO DIFFERENT WARS**

Looking ahead to a war against Saddam Hussein, a group of British peace activists established a [website](#) to track civilian bombing deaths in Iraq, using a method similar to Herold's. The team monitored a wide range of sources to produce a daily and cumulative toll. This continuously updated site was designed to function as "alternate media" available worldwide.



[CLICK ICON FOR DETAILS](#)

See [Iraqi Combatant and Noncombatant Fatalities in the 2003 Conflict](#)

for more conservative estimate;

See [Off Target: The Conduct of the War and Civilian Casualties in Iraq dealing](#), for Human Rights Watch analysis of American efforts to limit civilian casualties, as well as deaths from cluster bombs ([overall conclusions](#))

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In late May, 2003, civilian casualties in Iraq were still being

tallied. A May 22 article in [The Christian Science Monitor](#) put the deaths at five to ten thousand and noted, "Such a range would make the Iraq war the deadliest campaign for noncombatants that US forces have fought since Vietnam."

According to Reuben Brigety, a researcher for Human Rights Watch, quoted in the article, "The biggest contrast between Afghanistan (where an estimated 1,800 civilians died during the US-led campaign there in 2001) and Iraq is that Afghanistan was predominantly an air war and this was a ground/air battle."

"Air wars are not flawless, but if you have precision weapons you can do a lot to make them more accurate," he was quoted as saying. "The same is not yet true of ground combat. It is clear the ground battle took a toll; ground war is nasty."

[Carl Conetta](#), of the Project on Defense Alternatives, addressed Iraq war fatalities in a study entitled, "[The Wages of War: Iraqi Combatant and Noncombatant Fatalities in the 2003 Conflict](#)," October 20, 2003. Click [here](#) for a .pdf version.

It concluded that between 10,800 and 15,100 Iraqis were killed in the war. Of these, between 3,200 and 4,300 were noncombatants -- that is: civilians who did not take up arms. Conetta's estimates of civilian deaths are considerably below those of the website [Iraq Bodycount](#), based on Prof. Herold's methodology.

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Once again, as with Afghanistan, just how deadly this war appears is largely in the eye of the beholder.

For Americans and others critical of the war, the American invasion and occupation of Iraq can seem an exercise in "unilateral" brutality. For those who are pro war -- and to many of those who remember the death of millions of civilians in Twentieth Century wars -- this latest war may seem almost extraordinarily humane.

For most Americans there was no way of knowing the civilian toll in Iraq. In general American media coverage of

**the Iraq war played down civilian deaths -- reflecting a patriotic "on team" news judgment. US television systematically screened out footage of civilian suffering, whether on the street or in Iraq's hospitals -- presumably to avoid charges of undermining the war effort. By contrast "off team" media in Europe or anti-American media in the Middle East such as Al-Jazeera played up the graphic images of wounded and dead civilians.**

**Americans "glued" to their TV's would see a "safe," almost humane war, with almost no images of civilian deaths and very few American losses. Viewers in Europe and the Middle East were more likely to see a destructive "blitzkrieg."**

**Two different media, two different wars.**

### **COMPARING "SLANTS" IN AFGHANISTAN**

**It is no accident that the British newspaper The Guardian sympathetically covered the Herold study on civilian bombing deaths in Afghanistan.**

**Beyond The Guardian's liberal orientation, British media have tended to reflect their own government's focus: how to play a reconstruction peacekeeping role in post war Afghanistan. From a British point of view the more brutal the destruction, the deeper the grudges, and the harder the reconstruction ahead.**

**This came through consistently for weeks on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in the form of an often leading emphasis on the suffering of civilians and on international efforts to prevent the possible massacre of prisoners of war.**

**By contrast, during the war itself American media paid much less attention to issues concerning possible massacres of Taliban prisoners. Finally, in August, 2002 a Newsweek investigation by Babak Dehghanpisheh, John Barry and Roy Gutman raised the issue in a major way. (Gutman won a Pulitzer prize for uncovering Serbian massacres in Bosnia in 1992)**

**Newsweek's account suggested one faction of the**

**anti-Taliban Afghan Northern Alliance had buried in mass graves bodies of Taliban prisoners it systematically suffocated in unventilated cargo containers ("Death by Container").**

**An American human rights group, [Physicians for Human Rights](#), protested that the US government had failed to take action because the prisoners were killed by one of its "proxy" allies in the Afghanistan war.**

### **MASTERING PR: THE HUMAN RIGHTS LOBBY COMES OF AGE**

**With this growing focus on human rights, an increasing number of human rights lobbying and information groups such as Amnesty International learned how to conduct themselves in a manner thought "newsworthy." Human rights issues assumed a higher news profile as these groups issued annual reports, special releases and organized a variety of activities designed to influence government action and public attitudes.**

**The more attention such domestic activities received, the more likely were editors and foreign correspondents to spotlight allegations and issues with reporting from abroad. Domestic news coverage of Congressional hearings and debates dealing with human rights and of reports by the Office of Human Rights Reporting established in the State Department by President Carter and continued by later presidents continued to raise the new profile of overseas human rights issues.**

**Concern over overseas human rights issues tended to remain an important source of news coverage even as the events which spawned these developments receded into the past. This was especially true of acts of repression caught visually by television cameras and transmitted by satellite, such as China's repression of student demonstrators at Peking's Tiananmen Square in 1989.**

**Once a visual impression was left through millions of TV sets, the newsworthiness of such an overseas human rights issue seemed firmly established among editors and viewers and also among the politicians and pundits who would argue**

**about what the United States should do. The internationalization of TV news through satellite transmission and the growth of networks like CNN meant that human rights issues which at one time might seem distant and abstract were now visual, immediate, and emotionally explosive. Technology such as the telephone transmitted FAX, and the videocassette allowed dissidents to communicate human rights accusations as well as video recordings of police or army repression.**

**Growing awareness of human rights issues in the United States itself has tended to spill into coverage overseas. The civil rights movement of the 1960's, the increasingly diverse ethnic composition of US population, increased sensitivity to problems of minority rights, and the issue of equal rights for women has forced both editors and reporters to spotlight such issues at home, thus reinforcing the concept both in the media world and among the public that coverage of these areas is important news.**

**With improved communication between home office and the field reporters can more easily follow the guidance of their editors to shape and meet the tastes of the American public. By spotlighting issues which echo at home they are more likely to advance their own careers by having their dispatches prominently displayed.**

**With near instantaneous television coverage and improved communications high profile international human rights violations can quickly become the subject of domestic political debates both in Congress and in the media, thus increasing the incentive for editors to quickly direct their reporters overseas to further cover human rights issues as something likely to gain attention at home.**

**The tendency to increasingly cover foreign crises and long-term overseas issues by dispatching home-based reporters on quick overseas "parachute" missions means journalists are more likely to view overseas issues through the lens of American domestic debates. It is natural that editors sensitized to domestic issues such as child abuse and exploitation of women should define as "news" parallel issues overseas.**

## **LEGACY OF THE HOLOCAUST: LAW AND LOBBIES**

**American overseas human rights reporting has grown rapidly since the 1970's. But it's roots are deeper. There has been a major shift in political, cultural, and legal consciousness, receiving perhaps its biggest boost from the legacy of Nazi genocide during World War II. Since 1945 and the establishment of the United Nations, the issue of human rights has become an international fixture as the subject of international legal conventions and as an area of litigation and debate in organizations such as the World Court, the UN's Security Council, and a host of regional organizations, as well as in the US Congress.**

**The widespread acceptance of some form of universal human rights as part of the international legal and ideological language since 1945 has meant that countries of virtually all ideologies and economic systems have used human rights arguments to justify sometimes controversial policies ranging from economic development to military invasions of their neighbors.**

**The loftiest idealist, the most literal legalist, and the most cynical propagandist can all embrace the umbrella of human rights to justify their actions in international forums, in domestic political debates, and to an inquiring media. In the years since 1970 virtually no foreign policy issue or any major election could be discussed or fought out in the absence of some discussion of human rights. Even today, a story is more likely to "catch" fire if the testimony of eyewitnesses, survivors and photos evokes the ["archetype"](#) image of Nazi atrocities.**

## **AN ACID TEST: SOME KIND OF NAZI THING**

**American newspaper reports, including vivid television coverage of the shooting of children by snipers in Sarajevo, helped interject the issue into the American presidential election. Newsday's account of August 2, 1992 by Europe Correspondent Roy Gutman cast Serbian atrocities in the imagery of the holocaust and created a "fire storm" of reaction as other newspapers and broadcast media honed in on the question of whether the Nazi experience was repeating itself.**

**Newsday's allegations of The Nazi imagery stuck even though other dispatches made it less vivid and emotional. Unlike previous accounts of Serbian atrocities, and unlike many which followed in the next few days, the Newsday account explicitly and emotionally evoked "archetypal" memories of Nazi extermination camps with this lead:**

**"The Serb conquerors of northern Bosnia have established two concentration camps in which more than a thousand civilians have been executed or starved and thousands more are being held until they die, according to two recently released prisoners interviewed by New York Newsday.**

**Challenger Bill Clinton was quick to stake out the "hawk" position, calling for possible American air strikes on Serb positions and criticizing President Bush for being too passive in the Yugoslav crisis. Involvement of the issue in the presidential race built a strong "American angle," guaranteeing even more intensive media coverage of atrocities in Yugoslavia. The Bush Administration response of pushing for action in the UN. still further raised the visibility of the Yugoslav crisis as "news."**

**The Newsday overseas story continued to echo as a Washington story when a former camp prisoner quoted in the story was invited to testify before a Senate committee. Alija Lujinovic, a 50 year old Muslim testified August 12 behind closed doors before the Senate Armed Services Committee. He described in chilling detail seven weeks of captivity in a Serb run camp in which by late June just 150 of the 1500 people originally in the camp were left alive. In his testimony, followed by a news conference, he described day after day of throat slittings in a vivid first hand account that could not help but get wide attention. As often happens in human rights reporting, a distant overseas story had become the subject of an American government proceeding - thereby virtually guaranteeing it would be defined as "news."**

### **THE 1970'S: WATERGATE AS WATERSHED**

**While the seeds of American journalism's growing interest in human rights reporting go back to World War II and the holocaust, the vast expansion of such reporting can be traced**

**to the 1970's. Several trends in the American media and in the nature of the domestic and international political environment reinforced this reporting.**

**Since the Vietnam War, but most especially since the Watergate scandal of the early 1970's, that aspect of the American journalism tradition which stresses the mission of investigating and exposing abuses of power. Widespread public skepticism toward government and other established institutions has encouraged editors and reporters to adopt a "watchdog" posture to find a profitable and receptive audience.**

**Public skepticism frequently extends to the media in a backlash against what are sometimes seen to be its excesses. Still, it is only natural that widespread public acceptance of media's role as a domestic "watchdog" should lead to an extension of that mission to overseas coverage. Editors and reporters who have accepted the notion of acting as "watchdogs" at home will have an easier time defining as "news fit for coverage" human rights abuses overseas.<sup>3)</sup>**

### **HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE LANGUAGE OF AMERICAN POLITICS**

**Since the administration of President Jimmy Carter raised strengthening of human rights overseas into a central objective of American foreign policy, human rights issues have frequently become primary debating points in American politics for both defending and criticizing the administration in power, first under President Carter and later under Presidents Reagan and Bush.**

**Even before the Carter presidency, Congressional legislation aimed at what was seen as the blindness toward human rights of President Nixon's imperial presidency began to attach human rights requirements on issues such as the granting of foreign aid and trade concessions to both communist and noncommunist countries. Those disillusioned with American backing of an authoritarian South Vietnamese government during the Vietnam War were especially likely to raise human rights objections to US backing of other repressive anticommunist governments, thus making arguments over human rights a frequent test of what post Vietnam policy should be.**

**President Carter's critics attacked him for downplaying communist human rights abuses as his administration prodded friends of America such as Chile toward human rights improvements. Reagan's critics could similarly criticize him for attacking communist abuses while looking the other way from human rights violations by an anticommunist government in El Salvador and by anticommunist Contra rebels in Nicaragua.**

**The tendency for internal political debates to be argued around human rights issues made it more likely that reporting on such issues from overseas would be welcomed as "news" both by media editors and media consumers. Indeed Congressional critics of American Cold War policies could cite in debate media reports detailing human rights abuses by US. allies while hard-line Cold Warriors could cite and read into the Congressional Record reporting on communist human rights abuses.**

### **A COLD WAR ENDS: WHAT KIND OF LITMUS?**

**With the end of the Cold War human rights reporting entered a new stage. The virtual end of that ideological struggle forced the United States to redefine its interests, its world view, and its concept of where human rights issues fit. Gone was a simpler world in which anti-Communists argued the defense of human rights required containment of Soviet totalitarianism while critics of American policy condemned American policy for too often supporting repressive regimes simply because they were allies against the Soviet Union.**

**The collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe quickly demonstrated how human rights reporting could stimulate controversy around these issues. Human rights journalism could become intimately enmeshed in both international and domestic US politics.**

**The decline of communism opened the way for bitter ethnic-religious battles within nations like the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia - battles which brought civil war between Azerbaijani and Armenian; Serbs and Croats, Christians and Muslims. Moves to enlarge and "cleanse" these new states by terrorizing and expelling ethnic and religious**

**minorities grabbed international headlines as individual provinces sought to get greater autonomy or break away from larger formerly communist nations.**

**In the summer of 1992 Red Cross and UN sources could use American reporters to publicize charges of atrocities against Croatian and Muslim civilians in Serb run camps in hopes such coverage would pressure both sides in the civil war to admit Red Cross officials in camps to deter violations and cut into a cycle of atrocities. By getting the story out to both American and European reporters, Red Cross officials could hope to win support of Western governments to press both sides for Red Cross entry at the camps.**

**As the Cold War confrontation disappeared, attention shifted to other threats of violence: civil war, violent ethnic conflict, and famine. Cold War related human rights issues almost always had an "American angle." But in the post Cold War period violent abuses might break out in unfamiliar areas with few Americans present and where American interests seem uncertain. American media coverage could be expected to influence public attitudes on human rights related issues such as these:**

**1) Should the United States unilaterally or in cooperation with other nations patrol the world to prevent brutal human rights abuses? How large a US military should be maintained and where and under what conditions should American lives be expended in combat? In the absence of a Soviet threat should the US continue as "world policeman?"**

**2) Should friends of the United States be required to pass some sort of human rights "litmus test" that is more stringent in the post Cold War era? Without the simplifying guide that "enemies of our enemies are our friends," how should such tests be devised and enforced? Is it possible to be consistent? In the absence of an overwhelming Soviet threat and a correspondingly great need for allies, how should the US choose its friends?**

**3) Did the end of the Cold War open the way for**

**a United Nations collective security system involving international sanctions and even joint military action to restrain massive human rights abuses? The end of the Cold War resurrected hopes the UN Security Council could be more effective in this area less impaired by the veto often exercised in the past by the Soviet Union.**

**4) In a world where human rights abuses may be frequent and widespread and where American resources are limited, on what grounds should decisions to intervene be made? Human rights violations during Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait combined with threats to world oil supply were a reason for the US led military intervention. But where strategic interests are less clear, how far should the US and other nations go to intervene in defense of human rights?**

### **HUMAN RIGHTS REPORTERS: YOUR AWARD IS YOUR REWARD**

**One measure of growing American overseas human rights journalism is the increased frequency with which this work receives prestigious awards. Since 1970 the Pulitzer and the Overseas Press Club (OPC) Awards have increasingly recognized entries dealing with human rights related topics such as torture, political prisoners, ethnic killings, and the plight of refugees from war and political persecution. They have also increasingly spotlighted conditions which are sometimes seen as violations of economic and social human rights: such as hunger and the abuse of women and children.**

**The OPC has even created two new competitive categories which spotlight human rights issues: the Madelaine Dane Ross award for reporting showing great concern for humanitarian issues, established in 1973 and a special award for the category of human rights created in 1989.**

### **BEFORE THERE WERE AWARDS**

**A survey of Pulitzer prizes [The Pulitzer Prizes](#) awarded since the establishment of that competition in 1917 amply**

demonstrates the much greater premium placed on human rights coverage since 1970.<sup>5)</sup> Early awards for international reporting most frequently went to war coverage or daily correspondence on political developments - rather than to focused efforts to spotlight political or economic abuses. Awards granted for international reporting placed almost no emphasis on human rights issues until 1957 when Russell Jones of United Press received the honor for front-line eyewitness reports of "the ruthless Soviet repression of the Hungarian people" after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Even when the Pulitzer competition recognized coverage of topics which by today's standards would be ripe for human rights emphasis, the focus was clearly more general with no apparent mission to act as an international "watchdog."

Indeed one reward went to an entry which modern historians have cited as an abject failure to address human rights issues: the 1932 correspondence award to Walter Duranty of the New York Times for a series of dispatches on the practical operation of the Five Year Plan in Russia. A number of writers have argued Duranty, privately aware of the brutalities of Stalin's policies, openly discussed these with American diplomats at the time, yet systematically tailored his reporting in the *Times* so that no reader would be aware of Stalin's widespread human rights abuses.<sup>4)</sup>

During the 1930's and 1940's, at the height of repression by Hitler and Stalin, Pulitzer awards for international reporting emphasized war coverage or political coverage which may have cited some of the brutalities of the period - but did not take up the goal of alerting the world to the systematic abuses these regimes sought to cover up.<sup>6)</sup>

By today's standards Pulitzer Awards showed little human rights focus even as the Cold War broke and peaked. So it was that Edmund Stevens of The Christian Science Monitor took the 1950 international reporting award for three years of reporting from Moscow entitled, "This is Russia - Uncensored; Harrison E. Salisbury of the New York Times took the 1955 award for a series of articles "Russia Reviewed" and Jim G. Lucas of Scripps-Howard Newspapers took the award in 1954 for human interest reporting of the Korean War. The "exposee," "watchdog," mission, if present, was generally downplayed.<sup>7)</sup>

## **FEEDING THE WATCHDOG MORE REWARDS**

By the 1970's all this had changed. Authors granted awards had more frequently chronicled or exposed the abuses of war, racism, and poverty. Topics and approach more frequently seemed inseparable from issues of human rights. In 1970 the Pulitzer in international reporting went to Seymour M. Hersh, of Dispatch News Service for his exclusive exposure of a US. military massacre of Vietnamese civilians in the hamlet of My Lai.

In 1971 it went to Jimmie Lee Hoagland of The Washington Post for his coverage of the struggle against the apartheid system of racial separation in South Africa. More recent examples include the 1985 award to Josh Friedman and Dennis Bell of Newsday for their series on the plight of the hungry in Africa; the 1986 award to Lewis M. Simons, Pete Carey, and Katherine Ellison of the San Jose Mercury News for their 1985 series documenting massive undercover transfers of wealth abroad by Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos; and the 1990 award to Nicholas D. Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn of The New York Times for reporting on suppression of the student move for democracy at Tiananmen Square.

The annual awards of the Overseas Press Club (OPC) are an even more graphic example of growing emphasis on human rights coverage in the last two decades.

Some examples: the 1977 Madeline Dane Ross Award for the foreign correspondent showing a concern for the human condition to June Goodwin of The Christian Science Monitor for her reporting on racial change in southern Africa; the 1979 first of its kind award for best editorial series disclosing human rights abuses to Paul Heath Hoeffel and Juan Montalvo for their story "Missing or Dead in Argentina" in The New York Times Magazine ; the 1981 award for disclosure of human rights abuses to Betty De Ramus of the Detroit Free Press for her series "Hungry People," focusing on "the right to eat" both in the US. and in Third World Countries such as Ethiopia; the 1985 Madeline Dane Ross Award to the foreign correspondent showing a concern for the human condition to photographer Stan Grossfeld and reporter Colin Nickerson of the Boston Globe for pictures and reporting on the tragedy of Ethiopian

**famine; and the 1986 Madeline Dane Ross Award to Kristin Helmore of The Christian Science Monitor for a series "The Neglected Resource: Women in the Developing World."**

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**NOTES:**

1) On news judgment see Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: a Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1979; for an early analysis see Gerald White Johnson, *What Is News? A Tentative Outline*, A.A. Knopf, New York, 1926; for an examination of news judgment in international reporting see Mort Rosenblum, *Coups & Earthquakes*, Harper Colophon, New York, 1979.

2) On archetypes, see Carl Gustav Jung, *Archetyp und Unbewusstes*, Olten: Walter, 1984, a collection of addresses and essays on archetypes and the subconscious; for a less graphic treatment see an earlier New York Times page one story of June 21, 1992 by John F. Burns cited allegations of mass ethnic killings but without an intense focus on events in particular camps. The Nazi comparison was more analytical in tone, outlined in paragraph six as, "The raid was one of a growing number of attacks across the newly independent state that have drawn comparisons among survivors and in human rights organizations with the killings of civilians in Nazi occupied Europe

3) for an historical survey of the investigative tradition in American journalism see David L. Potess et. al., *The Journalism*

*of Outrage: Investigative Reporting and Agenda Building in America*, The Guilford Press, New York, 1991, pps. 3-55.

4) Columbia University in the City of New York, *The Pulitzer Prizes, 1917-1982*. p. 28.

5) University in the City of New York, *The Pulitzer Prizes, 1917-1982*, p. 22; for analysis of Walter Duranty's reporting from the Soviet Union, see James W. Crowl, *Angels in Stalin's Paradise: Western Reporters in Soviet Russia, 1917-1937*, University Press of America, Washington, D.C., 1982; Sally J. Taylor, *Stalin's Apologist: Walter Duranty, the New York Time's Man in Moscow*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1990.

6) for example, 1933 to Edward Answel Mowrer, *Chicago Daily News*, for day-by-day coverage of the rise of Hitler in 1932; 1940 to Otto D. Tolischus, *New York Times* for dispatches from Berlin, Columbia University in the City of New York, *The Pulitzer Prizes, 1917-1982*. p. 22.; for a detailed analysis of why American media were so slow to cover Nazi human rights violations see Deborah Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief: the American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933-1945*, Free Press, 1986.

7) Edmund Stevens did write of the Soviet citizen's "serf like bondage to his job, noted many attributes of the police state and emphasized the "common denominator" of Nazism and Communism as "the conviction that violence and coercion can settle any issue," see John Hohenberg, *The Pulitzer Prize Story*, Columbia University Press, pp 185-188.); Columbia University in the City of New York, *The Pulitzer Prizes, 1917-1982*, p. 282.

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