

Off Topic War Stuff Still hurts my heart Bill

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Tomgram: Judith Coburn on the Unnamed Dead of Iraq

On July 23, 2003, not quite four months after Baghdad had been occupied by American troops, Tomdispatch published a piece by Jack Miles, author of the Pulitzer Prize winning book *God: A Biography*, entitled *How Many Iraqis Have We Killed?* At that time, less than 100 Americans had died in the "post-war" era in Iraq, while untold numbers of Iraqis were dying in those same months. The Bush administration and the Pentagon were already invested in not counting, or even acknowledging, Iraqi deaths, and the media had already established a habit of leaving those deaths largely unconsidered and unnamed. Miles suggested that "at stake was American honor." He asked: "Will it be said --- years from now, perhaps even months from now --- that in the first preemptive war in American history, Americans did not ask and did not want to know how many Iraqis they had killed and did not consider it their responsibility to so much as notify the orphans, the widows, and the bereaved parents?"

The answer to that question has long been in and, as Judith Coburn, a journalist who once covered the carnage of the Vietnam War, indicates below, it's a sorry answer indeed. Back in that now-distant time, to introduce Miles' piece, I wrote:

"Each day, for instance, a modest box labeled 'Names of the Dead' --- yesterday with five names: Bertoldie, Joel L, Garvey, Justin W, Jordan, Jason D., Rozier, Jonathan D, and Whetstone, Mason Douglas --- is nestled on the inside page devoted to Iraq stories in my hometown paper the New York Times. Our casualties have, in fact, turned into a kind of countdown --- or count up --- though to what still remains in question."

What our casualties were already a countdown to seems horrifically clearer today, while the casualties of the people we claimed to be

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liberating still remain largely missing in action.

Two years later, the latest "Names of the Dead" box at the bottom corner of page 9 of Friday's Times notes: "The Department of Defense has identified 1,752 American service members who have died since the start of the Iraq war. It confirmed the death of the following American yesterday. YAHUDAH, Benyahmin B. 24, Specialist, Army; Bogart, Ga.; Third Infantry Division."

Benyahmin B. Yahudah was killed when a suicide bomber detonated his SUV near a U.S. military vehicle surrounded by Iraqi children, many of whom died in the blast. We are told in reports from Iraq that, in the last few days, two Marines, whose names will in due course be included in one of those boxed announcements, were killed when their vehicle struck an IED near the Jordanian border, and seven Americans were wounded in a string of suicide bomb blasts and explosions across the Baghdad area which killed at least 29 Iraqis, many (but hardly all of them) policemen and soldiers, and wounded perhaps another 104.

Of those Iraqis — as opposed to the Londoners who died (or survived) the recent subway and bus bombings — there will be no stirring portraits of stiff-upper-lip courage or of horror. Hardly even the odd name. Not here anyway. In this country, there is something impersonal, numbingly distant, and unreal about Iraqi deaths, even though the dead Iraqis too had parents and relatives, friends and neighbors, husbands, wives, or lovers, possibly children of their own.

When it comes to Iraqis, in fact, even the simplest official figures have been hard to come by. As a result, the carnage we unleashed in the now failed-state of Iraq in the wake of our invasion is hard even to grasp. Based on rare figures for Iraqi deaths that Sabrina Tavernise of the New York Times succeeded in getting the Iraqi Health Ministry to release, Juan Cole recently concluded the following at his Informed Comment blog:

"[The ministry officials] estimate about 8,000 [dead Iraqi civilians] in the past 10 months, or 800 per month. This number appears not to include persons killed by US military action. Even if the figure of 300,000 for the number of civilian victims of the Baath regime [of Saddam Hussein] is not an exaggeration, that would be over 37 years, or 8,000 per year. That is, American Iraq is presiding over a civilian death rate greater than the highest estimates per month per capita for that of the Baath regime."

As he notes, even those figures are exceedingly partial, leaving out as they do the deaths of Iraqi soldiers as well as those of Iraqis who have died due to U.S. military action. Consider now Judith Coburn's in depth look at just how we have treated Iraqi civilian deaths. Tom

Unnamed and Unnoticed
Iraqi Casualties
By Judith Coburn

How many Iraqis have died in our war in their country? Is there a better symbol of how the war for Iraq has already been lost than our ignorance

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about the cost of the war to Iraqis?

"Cost of the war": a cliché to normalize the carnage, like the anaesthetizing term "collateral damage" and that new semantic horror, "torture lite." And yet the "cost of the war" report, by now a hackneyed convention of American journalism, includes only American casualties — no Iraqis — itself a violation of the American mainstream media's own professed commitment to "objectivity." Three years of "anniversary" articles in the American media adding up the so-called "cost of the war" in Iraq have focused exclusively on Americans killed, American dollars spent, American hardware destroyed, with barely a mention of the Iraqi dead as part of that "cost."

The dead are counted. But they are Americans. The names are named. But they are Americans. The names and numbers of the dead are intoned aloud or their photographs papered on media "walls" and they are always only American.

Publishing or pronouncing the names of the American dead everyday without ever mentioning the names of the Iraqi dead offers a powerful message that only American dying matters. In Indochina, during the years I covered that war, we counted but didn't name Americans. That wasn't done until after the war was over. We never counted and never named the Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Lao dead. Still today, though the estimates run into the millions, there is no reliable count of how many Indochinese died or were hurt in our war there. Not to mention El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, Haiti, and the First Gulf War.

But there's no way to count, protest American journalists. What they mean is that the Pentagon doesn't count for them — "We don't do counts," was the way General Tommy Franks put the matter during our Afghan war. But Iraq Body Count (IBC) counts as does the Brookings Institute among others. As of July 13, IBC estimated Iraqi civilian casualties to be between 22,838 and 25,869, an extremely conservative number. (The range between the two figures represents occasional discrepancies in the number of civilian casualties reported by different media sources about the same incident). So what journalists really mean is that only Pentagon counting counts and that the prosecutor of the war is the only "reliable" source on the magnitude of its own killing. Pentagon casualty figures are rarely questioned. When anyone else counts, these figures are given short shrift.

Who Counts

The alternative media, bloggers included, have seized on Gen. Franks' words with outrage. But the fact is the Pentagon does count. It just doesn't care to add those dead bodies up, let alone tell the American public or the rest of the world how many dead Iraqis there have been or how many more are being killed at this very moment. In Iraq, as in Vietnam and the first Gulf war, every unit of the American military must file "after action" reports about any "contact" with the enemy. Most of these include injuries and deaths to civilians (even if these are often counted as enemy-soldier deaths to cover them up, a practice the media eventually exposed in Vietnam, but has not yet explored in Iraq). Also, any injury or death of a suspected civilian is supposed to be reported in a separate "incident" report. "We do keep records of innocent civilians who are killed accidentally by coalition force soldiers,"

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Brig. Gen. Mark Hertling, assistant commander for the First Armored Division, told New York Times reporter Jeffrey Gettleman last year.

"And, in fact, in every one of those innocent death situations, we conduct internal investigations to determine what happened."

The military also has a compensation program for victims injured or killed by American soldiers under the Foreign Claims Act. The bar for qualifying for this program is absurdly high — the victim must know and be able to prove which specific military unit injured or killed her or his relative, have a claim form filled out by that unit admitting its responsibility, have two witnesses and produce copies of medical reports, not to mention being willing in the first place to approach the very forces who inflicted the suffering. Compensation is apparently approved for only 50% of those who get up the nerve to file for it. But the military does at least have figures on how many Iraqis have been compensated, which it has refused to release, even to Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy, who requested them. CNN, Newsday, the Associated Press, and the Christian Science Monitor have managed to ferret out a partial count: the Pentagon doled out \$2.2 million to Iraqis between May, 2003 and February, 2004 with 5,700 out of 11,300 cases approved. (But since such compensation includes damage to property and people wounded as well as killed, this figure doesn't translate into numbers of civilian casualties).

Under another American government program, the Iraqi War Victims Fund, mandated by Congress and renamed for young aid worker Marla Ruzicka after her death in a car-bomb attack in Baghdad, \$2.4 billion in relief and reconstruction funds will include compensation for Iraqi civilian casualties. Once details are worked out of how the victims will be found, there might be figures of some sort, should the Bush administration deign to release them.

As for Iraq Body Count's methods, to be added to their count of civilians killed, each civilian death must be reported by two separate media sources from IBC's approved list of media websites and then cross-checked by two different IBC staffers from the original compiler. More important, IBC counts only civilian deaths inflicted by US-led coalition forces, so civilians killed by suicide bombers, insurgent attacks, or the increasing number of assassinations and kidnappings by insurgents and others are not reflected in their totals. As a result, the IBC figures certainly now greatly underestimate the actual toll of the ongoing war on Iraqi civilians— by far the highest "cost" of the war.

Human Rights Watch reports that while coalition forces killed more Iraqi civilians than the insurgents did in the early months of the war, now insurgents are killing many more civilians than coalition forces. The Education for Peace in Iraq project, a non profit group of antiwar Gulf War veterans, Iraqis, and others, reports that insurgents are now killing 15 times the number of civilians killed by coalition forces and that the number of civilians killed by insurgents has doubled since the first six months of 2004. Just last week, the New York Times front-paged rare Iraqi Interior Ministry figures showing insurgents are now killing an average of 800 Iraqi policemen and civilians a month.

It's hardly surprising that the Pentagon is loath to tell us how many

innocent Iraqis it has killed. It's a political issue. Early in the war, the Iraqi Health Ministry ordered morgues and hospitals to count the number of war dead and wounded coming in. They reported 1,764 civilians killed in the summer of 2003. But the American occupation's Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) ordered them to stop counting. After the interim Iraqi government took over, the Health Ministry tried again to count but was ordered in October, 2004 by the new government of Prime Minister Iyad Allawi to stop releasing the figures. Last week's Interior Ministry figures, given to the Times at its request, are the first official Iraqi counts to be released since then.

The lack of "official" figures, however, shouldn't absolve the media — or Americans — from their blindness to Iraqi suffering, since available figures, incomplete as they are, are staggering for a guerrilla war.

Reliable sources have certainly done their best to count, sources like IBC, Brookings, and the Iraqi and American epidemiologists who estimated in a study published in the British medical journal the Lancet that 100,000 Iraqis might have died in the war by September, 2004.

These sources are admittedly critical of the war. But as such, are they less "objective" than the Pentagon? The American media apparently thinks so. Yet Iraq Body Count's figures are clearly conservative exactly because they depend on media reports. Because it is now so dangerous for journalists to travel outside Baghdad or even the capital's "Green Zone" where Westerners huddle, many Iraqi deaths go unreported and are thus uncounted by IBC. (Using hospital or morgue records also results in an undercount since Iraqis often don't bring their dead, or near-dead, to chronically overwhelmed, understaffed hospitals and morgues).

Ironically, IBC, once heralded as a brilliantly conceived breakthrough in monitoring war casualties — impossible without the Internet — is now an object of some dismay among anti-war activists because its methodology inevitably leads to a casualty undercount.

"Collateral Damage" as a Collateral Story

Most of the American media have now had their one dutiful piece on IBC. But is it such a radical idea for, say, the New York Times to have a box next to its daily listing of Americans killed in Iraq with IBC's or Brookings' Iraq Index count of how many Iraqis have been killed by coalition forces? A header could explain the source, just as one now cites the Pentagon as the source for Americans killed. Why, when Ted Koppel read the names of the American dead on Nightline on the anniversary of the war, couldn't he have added at least a few Iraqi names to the list?

The politics of counting got thick the week before the American presidential election when the Lancet, the British medical journal, put on line a study by American and Iraqi epidemiologists comparing death rates before and after the March 2003 invasion. The study estimated that at least 100,000 Iraqis (and possibly many more) had died in the 18 months that followed the invasion of Iraq who would not have died had the war not happened. Coalition air strikes were the largest cause of violent death. The international media has generally misreported the 100,000 as estimated civilian deaths. But the study actually makes clear that the 100,000 estimate includes all Iraqi dead — police, soldiers and insurgents as well as civilians. Last week, Swiss researchers

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announced at a UN press conference that, using the data from the Lancet study, they estimated that, out of the estimated 100,000 dead Iraqis, 39,000 were civilians who had been killed since the war began.

The Lancet study was based on interviews by a team of Iraqi scientists. It made headlines in Europe but dropped like a stone in the U.S. (as did the recent Swiss report). The study's lead American author Johns Hopkins Professor of Public Health Les Roberts may have shot himself in the foot by rushing the study out in the midst of 24/7 election coverage in the U.S. He admitted to Lila Guterman of The Chronicle of Higher Education that he was anti-Bush and hoped to swing votes away from the President. Had the study been released after the election, however, in a more sober, scientific way, the American media might still have buried it, as it has the whole issue of civilian casualties. Only the Washington Post took much notice. But the Post got Human Rights Watch military expert Mark Garlasco on the record opining that the figure was way too high (even though he hadn't read the report). Without the respected HWR imprimatur, there was even more reason than election mania for the rest of the American media to spike the report. Ironically, it may have been the American media's own longstanding blindness to the suffering of Iraqi civilians that made the 100,000 estimate seem too shockingly high to be credible to American reporters and their editors.

Only the enterprising Lila Guterman followed up, interviewing other epidemiologists around the country, who found the methodology and the study itself to be sound. Guterman also underlined the incredible bravery of the Iraqi scientists who risked their lives traveling throughout Iraq — even to radical Sunni strongholds like Fallujah — to interview Iraqis about how many of their families had been killed or injured in the war. (What does it say about the mainstream media that — except for the Associated Press and recently the New York Times — crucial stories about Iraqi civilian casualties are being broken here by publications like Editor and Publisher and the Chronicle of Higher Education?)

Granted, it's impossible for any individual journalist in Iraq to count how many Iraqi civilians have been hurt in the war. You'd have to visit every battle site, every morgue, and every hospital every day — in a country where, for reporters, it's dangerous just to leave your hotel. Then there is the problem of distinguishing who is a civilian and who is an insurgent in a guerilla war where combatants don't wear uniforms. But a few American journalists haven't taken that as an excuse not to try to count as best they can. The Associated Press, under New York editor Richard Pyle (AP'S longtime Saigon Bureau Chief during the Vietnam War), was the first and only news organization to ask its reporters in Iraq to try to count the civilian dead soon after the invasion. On June 11, 2003, AP reported that 3,240 Iraqis civilians had been killed up to that moment in the war, based on a survey of 60 of Iraq's largest hospitals. AP reporters, especially Niko Price, have stayed on the civilian casualty story, continuing to monitor civilian casualties regularly, reporting soaring casualties in hard fought battles like one for Hillah or the siege of Fallujah last November where approximately 600 civilians reportedly died.

AP broke the story of the CPA suppression of the Health Ministry's count

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of civilian deaths, reported the huge increase in car bombs after the handover of sovereignty and — alone in the mainstream American media — included Iraqi casualty figures as well as American ones in their "anniversary" pieces about "the cost of the war." The New York Times — especially reporter Sabrina Tavernise — has recently stepped up coverage of civilian casualties. One ingenious survey effort for the Times, written by Norimitsu Onishi with reporting by the paper's Iraqi staff (unnamed, perhaps for their safety) reported that in one week — October 11–17, 2004 — 208 Iraqis died, including policemen, civilians, journalists, politicians and soldiers. (It did not include deaths in Kurdish areas). The story pulled together sources from hospitals, the Iraqi and American military, news sources and reporting by Iraqi reporters for the Times.

But stories highlighting the magnitude of Iraqi suffering have been rare indeed. A study by George Washington University researchers found that American television coverage of the invasion of Iraq itself was remarkably sanitized. Only 13.5% of the 1,710 TV news stories they reviewed from the start of the war to the fall of Baghdad on April 9, 2003 included shots of wounded or dead Americans or Iraqis. Only 4% showed any dead. One reason the war may seem so inconsequential to so many Americans is that the casualties, as reported in the American media, are almost exclusively American and so are relatively modest (though hardly inconsequential, of course, to those who knew and cared for the dead). "Collateral damage" has lived up to its name. Iraqi casualties have been collateral to the story of the war told by most American journalists — just as they have been to the warmakers in Washington and London.

War in Another Galaxy

Counting the dead, however, may not finally be the point. Numbers seldom convey human suffering in a way that moves the distant onlooker. Most coverage of Iraqi civilian casualties is anecdotal — the daily carnage of yet more suicide bombs, the daily photo of ripped-up cars and ripped apart bodies. Unnamed victims, and all of them — except rarely — Iraqi. While there has been some fine reporting out of Iraq by journalists like the Washington Post's Anthony Shadid, there is no one in Iraq like Gloria Emerson, the New York Times' prize-winning reporter in Vietnam, with her boundless outrage against the war and her novelist's eye. Emerson's war wasn't the "bang bang" (as she called it). She covered war from the graveyards where Vietnamese mourned their dead and from the streets where homeless kids hustled GIs and lepers held out their babies for alms. Her story was how the Vietnamese got by day-by-day in the war, simply how they could stand it. So far in Iraq there has been no Gloria Emerson listening, as she did one night in Saigon, to her Vietnamese interpreter Nguyen Ngoc Luong and his office mates recite from memory verses from "The Tale of Kieu", Vietnam's great epic poem, their psychic bulwark against the mayhem that was devouring their country. But that kind of passionate identification with the people of a war-torn country, that kind of —dare we call it personal — journalism which might help summon American empathy for the Iraqi victims of our war machine, isn't in fashion these days. Media cool and caution rule in our culture of fear.

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There are photographs, even a few great war photographs, coming out of Iraq. Peter Turnley's photo essay in Harper's, "The Bereaved," which matched images of Iraqis and Americans mourning their dead is magnificent. But this isn't Vietnam -- the first "television war," as Michael Arlen so aptly named it. East Timor, Somalia, the first Gulf War, Bosnia, Rwanda, Chechnya, Darfur, Congo... The list goes on and on. By now, there have been so many TV wars, so many grisly scenes, that they all blur together. Star Wars is so much more exciting anyway, closer to home in the cineplex or on DVD, and it's all happening far away in another galaxy. There's no military draft to concentrate kids' and parents' attention. And it isn't the Sixties -- cynicism reigns rather than the reach for freedom that led so many Americans then to take on the powers that be. Should the war intrude? Follow the advice of Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt, who, when asked about images of Iraqi civilians killed by Americans on TV, recommended: "Change the channel."

Patterns of Brutality

Another part of the civilian casualty story neglected by our media involves American military tactics that have inflicted unnecessary suffering on civilians. The indispensable Human Rights Watch, which has staff specialists in military affairs, has done two detailed research reports on some of these patterns. The October, 2003 report Hearts and Minds charged that American soldiers often used "indiscriminate force," especially at checkpoints after insurgent bombings, and also in raids on civilian houses, causing many civilian casualties. Few of these injuries to civilians are investigated by the military, HWR found. The report pointed out that many checkpoints were manned and house searches conducted by soldiers who had been trained for combat, not policing, and called for more training in police techniques.

Although a December, 2003 HRW report, Off Target, found that "US-led coalition forces took precautions to spare civilians," it decried the use of cluster munitions (launched both from the air and the ground) by the American military. These particularly vicious weapons, which pepper victims with shrapnel so small that the shards shred flesh and are impossible to remove, are being used in Iraqi cities. They can maim long after their original use. The unexploded bomblets remain live and go off, often in the hands of children. "Tens of thousands of duds" litter Iraq -- as they still do Vietnam, Cambodia, and many other war-torn countries -- the report charges. HRW reported that cluster bombs had caused "at least hundreds of civilian casualties" by June, 2003.

Besides cluster munitions, a new and improved version of napalm, the Vietnam War's other most grisly weapon, and its chemical cousin white phosphorous, have been used by American forces in Iraq, a fact known to few Americans because our media has barely reported on the subject. The Pentagon has admitted that it used napalm near the Kuwaiti border during the invasion, though the use seems to have been more widespread than the Pentagon said. For instance, the Bush Administration reportedly lied to its British allies about its use. (In Europe, the evident use of napalm by the U.S. in its assault on the Iraqi city of Fallujah last November sparked headlines and furious opposition in the British Parliament.) Almost nothing has been reported in the American media about bombing operations in Iraq and especially the use of bunker-buster bombs to

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target what the U.S. military calls "high value targets" or insurgent leaders, who are often dug deep in heavily populated urban neighborhoods. HWR's "Off Target" examined four such attacks and charged that they caused "dozens of civilian casualties" while failing to kill the targeted leaders. Six months after "Off Target" was released, a front-page piece in the New York Times on such targeted attacks actually quoted Human Rights Watch. But the piece focused on the spectacular "zero success rate" of the leadership raids, not civilian casualties caused by the bombing.

Such Human Rights Watch reports usually receive dutiful but cursory one-time coverage in the American media. A few hundred words on page 14, a few seconds on the evening news. Hardly the kind of media spotlight that could turn Iraqi suffering into a burning issue for most Americans. So far, these laudable reports haven't been able to change the nature of the Iraq War story in the United States. The Faces of the Fallen, as the Washington Post calls its daily count, remain American.

Still, a few million Americans in today's antiwar movement care how many Iraqis are dying and are committed to honoring them. When the American Friends Service Committee put its exhibit Eyes Wide Open on the road with a pair of boots for every American soldier who has died in Iraq, it also had a "Wall of Remembrance" with the names of more than 11,000 Iraqis who have died in the war. The Iraqis' names, as well as the American ones, were read at ceremonies at the AFSC wall, the way veterans read the names of the American -- but not the Indochinese -- dead at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington.

While in the Capitol these days there may be no Sen. William Fulbright (whose hearings on the Vietnam War galvanized official Washington), there is some eloquence and even some action about Iraqi suffering from a few politicians like West Virginia Sen. Robert Byrd, Massachusetts Sen. Edward Kennedy, who also campaigned vigorously to help Vietnamese war victims forty years ago, and Vermont's Sen. Patrick Leahy. As Leahy reminded his colleagues in a speech on the Senate floor this May 10: "More than 90% of the casualties in World War I were soldiers. That changed in World War II and since then, it is overwhelmingly civilians who suffer the casualties. Yet while rosters are kept of the fallen soldiers, no official record is kept of the civilians. This is wrong. It denies those victims the dignity of being counted, the respect of being honored and it prevents their families from receiving the help they need."

Journalist Judith Coburn has covered war and its aftermath in Indochina, Central America, and the Middle East for the Village Voice, Pacifica Radio, the Far Eastern Economic Review, Mother Jones, the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, and the San Francisco Chronicle, among others.

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Tomdispatch.com is researched, written and edited by Tom Engelhardt (bio), a fellow at the Nation Institute, for anyone in despair over post-September 11th US mainstream media coverage of our world and ourselves. The service is intended to introduce you to voices from elsewhere (even when the elsewhere is here) who might offer a clearer sense of how this imperial globe of ours actually works.

An editor in publishing for the last 25 years, Tom is the author of *The End of Victory Culture*, a history of American triumphalism in the Cold War era. He is at present consulting editor for Metropolitan Books, a fellow of the Nation Institute, and a teaching fellow at the journalism school of the University of California, Berkeley.

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Garden Shade Zone 5 in a Japanese Jungle manner.

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