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The Pentagon's Fantasy Numbers on Afghan Civilian Deaths

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The Politics of Counting Dead Afghan Civilians: Responses by the Libertarian Right and Obama Liberals to McChrystal's Numbers



The ever-so-faithful stenographer of Pentagon truths, *USA Today*, printed numbers put forth by General McChrystal on Afghan civilians who perished at the hands of NATO.[1] The article headlined “NATO Strikes Killing More Afghan Civilians,” noted that such deaths rose from 29

during the first three months of 2009, to 72 during 2010. But, figures for just the first three weeks of 2009 under the Bush clock, reveal 63-77 Afghans killed by US/NATO forces:

date	time	male	female	children	undet.	village	province
Jan 2	day			1		Deh Sabz	Kabul
Jan 5	day	2	7	2		Qala-Naw	Uruzgan
Jan 5/6	night	7	1	5	6	Kaferkoh	Helmand
Jan 6/7	night		2	3	12-16	Masamut	Laghman
Jan 19	2 A.M		5	4	6-16	Inzeri	Kapisa
Totals		9	15	15	24-38		

Source: Afghan Victim Memorial Project data base

Aside from McChrystal's fantasy numbers which demonstrate the utter incapacity (or unwillingness) of the U.S and NATO militaries to compile accurate civilian casualty figures, the responses from the Right and Obama cultists are revealing.

The following Table presents two sets of comparable data on civilians killed by US/NATO action in Afghanistan during the first three months of 2010. I have omitted the widely cited (by Obama cultists) and flawed data of the United Nations' UNAMA which is criticized elsewhere.[2]

Afghan Civilians Killed by US/NATO Actions, January-March

source	2009	2010
NATO/ISAF	29	72
Herold	193-201, midpoint @ 197	175-196, midpoint @ 186

The figures cited by McChrystal suggest a large increase (though very small absolute numbers) of civilians killed by NATO actions, when in fact the level of deaths has remained stable. Secondly, the NATO figures are gross, "fantasy" undercounts, e.g., during the first three months of 2010 they captured at most 39% of the actual deaths. My own data represents a minimum count insofar as no doubt many incidents have gone unreported, especially those carried out by the JSOC Special Forces which are unaccountable to anyone other than General McChrystal.[3] Interestingly, the NATO figures for 2010 and the UNAMA ones for the year 2009 reveal the same magnitude (@ 60%) of undercounting. As I wrote,

In 2008, the UNAMA captured about 70% of Afghans killed by foreign forces, but in 2009 the figure was under 40%, justifiably earning UNAMA's performance as being faith-based (or ideologically-inspired) counting.[4]

The right-wing blogosphere commentary on the USA Today report (highlighting the 250% rise in civilian casualties caused by NATO action from 2009 to 2010) notes that if George Bush was president, the level of antiwar protest and left media attention would be palpable. But since Obama is president, no protests, no outrage in left media outlets, only silence. The U.S antiwar

movement had quickly fallen in line behind its Dear Leader in early 2009.[5] Exceptions do exist, e.g. Glenn Greenwald, William R. Polk, and Cindy Sheahan.[6]

Under the Obama clock, the efforts expended to manage the news coming out from Afghanistan - or to spin the war - have soared as compared to during the administration of his predecessor.[7] Most of the press is content to simply parrot the releases and statements made by US military spokespersons.[8] A long history exists of mainstream U.S media being megaphones for the Pentagon, e.g., Laura King of the Associated Press and the Los Angeles Times being a case in point.[9] The McChrystal dogma of “protecting Afghan civilians” as a central component of counter-insurgency tolerates no blemish. When an intrepid, independent reporter such as Jerome Starkey of the London Times (not the New York Times) reveals damaging accounts of civilians murdered by U.S forces, no effort is spared to attack and discredit him.[10] The independent Italian medical charity, Emergency, offices in Helmand were raided on April 10, 2010, by foreign and Afghan forces who allegedly found weapons there and uncovered a plan to kill the governor of Helmand. The raid was swift pay-back for Emergency staffers reporting upon the true civilian toll of the U.S-led Marja offensive.[11] The Obama cultists remain silent about the revenge meted out upon Italy’s Emergency.

The liberal and ex-radical supporters of Obama have been mesmerized by the Obama-McChrystal news management effort. McChrystal proclaims reducing civilian casualties is critical to the US/NATO counterinsurgency war effort and at the same time greatly increases the use of secretive US Special Operations troops. These forces are linked with deadly night-time, out-of-sight killer raids, the results of which go largely unreported.[12] The media parroted the U.S/NATO fiction that the Marja assault in February 2010 was a military success, when in fact it was a successful information battle.[13]

Some on the libertarian right, on the other hand, decry how Obama liberals smear those who reveal the U.S military’s depredations abroad such as Wikileaks.[14] Other libertarians for example at the Lew Rockwell website, the CATO Institute or The Independent Institute provide trenchant critiques of the nation-building chimera (so dear to left liberals) in America’s Afghan War.[15] But with Obama in office, liberals have learned to love the “good” war.[16] Much of the left-liberal community in the United States had initially supported the U.S bombing of Afghanistan in 2001.[17] A glaring case in point was Christopher Hitchens, frequent contributor to The Nation magazine.[18] Most of the liberal Obama cultists and U.S antiwar left today remain comfortable citing the serious underestimates of Afghans killed by US/NATO action put forth by UNAMA.[19] All the more so if Afghan casualties are light and the level of U.S military casualties remain politically tolerable. Thus, the UNAMA falsehoods indicating that “civilian deaths at the hands of U.S-led troops dropped 28% in 2009 to 596,”[20] are incessantly repeated as implicit evidence that things are getting better under Obama. All research and work demonstrating exactly the contrary was ignored in the liberal, U.S antiwar media during 2009, in marked contrast to its wholesale embrace of the dubious half million plus Iraqi civilian casualties proclamation put out by John Hopkins researcher Les Roberts some years ago, casualties meted out by Team Bush.[21] For too many, the lens of a preferred politics determines the numbers of a casualty count or estimate.[22]

On the other hand, the benchmark reached in early 2010 of 1,000 US dead soldiers in America's Afghan war drew attention in the U.S mainstream media and the antiwar movement.[23] National Public Radio, the various Indymedia outlets, UnitedforPeace headlined the "milestone" and Catholics for the Common Good lamented "no end in sight." Historically, the U.S public has been far more swayed by U.S military deaths than of those on the other side (whether civilian or military).[24] Early in America's Afghan war this was clearly demonstrated with the Bush Administration making great effort to hide the visibility of U.S soldier deaths by banning reports from Dover Air Force Base and the U.S. general public simply ignoring the approximately 3,000 Afghan civilians who perished in the U.S bombing war of October - December 2001.[25] Other means employed by the United States to hide and minimize U.S military casualties include relying upon military contractors (whose numbers now far exceed those of U.S soldiers on the ground in Afghanistan[26]), failing to include in the death count those soldiers who die from wounds when getting treatment outside the Afghan war theater, and most tellingly since 2004 having NATO forces (many being part of the "coalition of the bribed and bullied"[27]) participating in the fighting. As old NATO allies withdraw from Afghanistan, Obama plans to rent support from a gaggle of small states such as Croatia and Mongolia.[28] Finally it is worth remembering that U.S. efforts to develop precision-guided munitions had nothing to do with sparing innocent civilians but rather with sparing U.S pilots.[29] As I wrote on 9/11, 2002,

The absolute imperative to avoid U.S. military casualties meant flying high up in the sky, increasing the probability of killing civilians:

...better stand clear and fire away. Given this implicit decision, the slaughter of innocent people, as a statistical eventuality is not an accident but a priority -- in which Afghan civilian casualties are substituted for American military casualties.

The documented Afghan civilians killed were not participating in war-making activities [e.g., working in munitions factories, etc] and, therefore, had not forfeited their right to immunity from attack. In effect, as an astute scholar has noted, I am turning Michael Walzer's notion of 'due care' upside down: that is, far from acknowledging a positive responsibility to protect innocent Afghans from the misery of war, U.S. military strategists chose to impose levels of harm upon innocent Afghan civilians to reduce present and possible future dangers faced by U.S. forces.[30]

Though sometimes swayed by military casualties, the American public has been consistently indifferent to collateral damage, in effect mirroring the U.S military stance.[31] But at least the U.S military recognized in 2009 that high levels of "collateral damage" in Afghanistan fuelled the resistance and consequently did reduce the number of airstrikes. These were simply replaced by escalating numbers of deadly ground raids.[32] The U.S military has justified such night-time raids as being necessary to better protect the attacking U.S. forces. For an Afghan family, it matters little whether execution of relatives comes from the skies or Special Operations Forces breaking down doors at midnight.

Conclusion

General McChrystal's data provided an opportunity to reveal Pentagon lying (or incompetence) to all, but only the libertarians rose to the occasion. The mainstream U.S media, Obama cultists, and much of the U.S antiwar movement persist in blithely quoting UNAMA and consuming

Pentagon and embedded “patriotic” U.S. reporters’ characterizations of America’s War in Afghanistan. Where is the American like Jerome Starkey (of the Times of London) or Chris Sands (of the UAE’s The National) or the intrepid reporters of Pajhwok Afghan News presenting the uncomfortable, un-embedded truths from on-the-ground in Afghanistan?

Notes

- [1] Paul Wiseman, “NATO Strikes Killing More Afghan Civilians,” USA Today (April 15, 2010) at http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2010-04-15-afghan-shooting_N.htm?csp=34
- [2] Marc W. Herold, “One Month of the Obama Killing Machine in Afghanistan: Data and a Lesson for the UNAMA and its Groupies,” RAWA News (March 10, 2010) at <http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2010/03/10/one-month-of-the-obama-killing-machine-in-afghanistan-data-and-a-lesson-for-the-unama-and-its-groupies.html>
- [3] Gareth Porter, “McChrystal’s Support for Afghan Raids Belies New Image,” Inter Press Service (March 31, 2010) at <http://www.truthout.org/mcchrystals-support-afghan-raids-belies-new-image58181>
- [4] Herold, op. cit.
- [5] Justin Raimundo, “The Silence of the Liberals,” Antiwar.com (February 27, 2009) at <http://original.antiwar.com/justin/2009/02/27/the-silence-of-the-liberals%C2%A0/>
- [6] John V. Walsh, “The Silence of the Antiwar Movement is Deafening. Cindy Sheahan’s Lonely Vigil in Obamaland,” Information Clearing House (August 28, 2009) at <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article23379.htm> . See the excellent analysis of William R. Polk, “Legitimation Crisis in Afghanistan,” The Nation (April 19, 2010) at <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20100419/polk>
- [7] Discussed for example in Matthew Nasuti, “America’s Happy War in Afghanistan: American Government Sugar-Coating Afghan War News for Sweet-Toothed U.S. Media,” The Atlantic Free Press (December 25, 2009) at <http://www.atlanticfreepress.com/news/1/12512-americas-happy-war-in-afghanistan-american-government-sugar-coating-afghan-war-news-for-sweet-toothed-us-media.html>
- [8] Glenn Greenwald, “The Joys of Airstrikes and Anonymity. No matter how many times government claims about attacks turn out to be false, the American media repeats them,” Salon.com (December 26, 2009) at http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn_greenwald/2009/12/26/airstrikes
- [9] See her “Afghan Civilian Deaths Decline under New U.S. Tactics,” Los Angeles Times (August 28, 2009).
- [10] See “NATO Smears a Truth-Teller in Afghanistan,” Rainbowwarrior.com (March 25, 2010) at <http://rainbowwarrior2005.wordpress.com/2010/03/27/nato-smears-a-truth-teller-in-afghanistan/>
- [11] Tom Mellen, “Still No News from Italian Medics in Afghanistan,” Morning Star (April 16, 2010) at <http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/index.php/news/content/view/full/89269> and Massimiliano Di Giorgio, “Italian Charity Sees UK Behind Afghan Medic Arrests,” Reuters India (April 17, 2010) at <http://in.reuters.com/article/southAsiaNews/idINIndia-47766720100416>. For an example of the kind of independent reporting by Emergency, see Enrico Piovesana, “Bambini di Marjah,” Peace Reporter (March 3, 2010) at <http://it.peacereporter.net/articolo/20520/Bambini+di+Marjah>
- [12] Eric Schmitt, “Elite U.S. Force Expanding Hunt in Afghanistan,” New York Times (December 27, 2009) and James Cogan, “US/NATO Death Squads Killing Indiscriminately in

Afghanistan,” WSWS.org (March 18, 2010) at <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=18194>

[13] Details in Gareth Porter, “The Fiction of Marja as a City Was U.S Information War,” Inter Press Service (March 8, 2010) at <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=50581>

[14] Justin Raimundo, “Liberals Smear Wikileaks,” Antiwar.com (April 13, 2010) at <http://original.antiwar.com/justin/2010/04/13/liberals-smear-wikileaks/>

[15] as for example see “Obama is wrong – It’s Time to Leave Afghanistan,” The Patriot’s Mind (December 3, 2009) at <http://www.patriotsmind.com/2009/12/03/obama-wrong-time-leave-afghanistan/>

[16] Justin Raimundo, “With Obama in Office, Liberals Learn to Love War,” The American Conservative (April 20, 2009) at <http://www.amconmag.com/article/2009/apr/20/00020/> and especially Justin Raimundo, “ ‘Progressive’ Warmongers,” Antiwar.com (April 7, 2009) at <http://original.antiwar.com/justin/2009/04/07/progressive-warmongers/print/>

[17] One might recall that The Nation was a supporter of the initial U.S. bombing of Afghanistan in late 2001 as, for example, expressed in an editorial by Massing (see Michael Massing, “Grief Without Portraits,” The Nation (January 17, 2001) and the rebuttal by Abu Spinoza, “The (In)Humanity of a Progressive Intellectual,” Press Action (September 12, 2003) at http://www.pressaction.com/news/weblog/full_article/spinoza09122003/).

[18] See Edward Herman, “Christopher Hitchens and the Uses of Demagoguery,” ZNet (September 22, 2002) at <http://www.zcommunications.org/christopher-hitchens-and-the-uses-of-demagoguery-by-edward-herman>

[19] A case in point being Tom Engelhardt writing often for The Nation magazine, see his “Questions to Ask in the Dead of Night,” Mother Jones (April 23, 2009) at <http://motherjones.com/politics/2009/04/questions-ask-dead-night>

[20] Quote is from Wiseman, op. cit.

[21] For example, my article “The Real World vs Obama’s Imagery,” Frontline. India’s National Magazine 26, 09 (April 25 – May 8, 2009) at <http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl2609/stories/20090508260904400.htm> . See also Engelhardt, op. cit. who ignores my research.

[22] A topic I examined in 2002 in “Counting Dead Afghan Civilians: the Counters Disrobed,” The Guardian (August 8, 2002) at: <http://www.cursor.org/stories/noncounters.htm> .

[23] As for example in Code Pink’s Medea Benjamin, “With 1000 US Soldiers Dead in Afghanistan, Time to Revive the Anti-War Agenda,” CommonDreams.org (February 23, 2010) at <http://www.commondreams.org/print/53117>

[24] Edward Herman, “Mere Arabs,” Z Magazine 4, 2 (February 1991): 72-73

[25] On the Dover ban, see Brian Gran, “The Dover Ban: Wartime Control over Images of Public and Private Deaths” (Berkeley: paper presented at Unblinking: New Perspectives on Visual Privacy in the 21st Century. A Cross-Disciplinary Symposium, University of California, Berkeley, November 3-4, 2006) at <http://www.law.berkeley.edu/institutes/bclt/events/unblinking/unblinking/Gran.pdf>

[26] “Report: Contractor Deaths Up in Afghanistan,” Stars and Stripes (April 16, 2010) at <http://www.stripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=69397>

[27] Lolita C. Baldor, “Pentagon Pays to Train, Equip Afghan Partners,” Air Force Times (April 1, 2010) at http://www.airforcetimes.com/news/2010/04/ap_afghanistan_partners_040110/

[28] Doug Bandow, “Bad Investments,” The National Interest online (April 15, 2010) at <http://www.nationalinterest.org/PrinterFriendly.aspx?id=23236>

[29] As I argue in “ ‘Unworthy’ Afghan Bodies ‘Smarter’ U.S. Weapons Kill More Innocents,” in Stephen J. Rockel and Rick Halpern (eds), *Inventing Collateral Damage. Civilian Casualties, War, and Empire* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2009): 303-327, as well as seven years earlier in “

[30] “The Bombing of Afghanistan as Reflection of 9/11 and Different Valuations of Life,” Cursor.org (September 11, 2002) at <http://cursor.org/stories/heroldon911.htm#28>

[31] See for example, the article by a staff member in comparative military studies at the School of Advanced Airpower Studies, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, Dr. Karl P. Mueller, “Politics, Death, and Morality in US Foreign Policy,” *Aerospace Power Journal* (Summer 2000) at <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj00/sum00/mueller.htm> where the author wrote, “the American public is conditionally tolerant of casualties and consistently indifferent to collateral damage.”

[32] This is analyzed in my “Afghan Tragedy. Obama’s Afghan War, the U.S Media, and the United Nations: the New Metric of Civilian Casualties,” *Frontline. India’s National Magazine* 26, 13 (June 20 – July 3, 2009): 4-16 at

<http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl2613/stories/20090703261300400.htm>