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The Logic of War Crimes in a Criminal War

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When U.S. marines carried out the savage and systematic execution of Iraqi families and small children in Haditha last November, it was initially reported as a “battle” with “insurgent casualties.” A photo of a kneeling Iraqi civilian moments before he was murdered was taken by a Marine using his cell phone camera. Other pictures of the corpses of small children, families lying in pools of blood in their homes, students gunned down in a taxi are all part of the documentary evidence.

The massacre in Haditha took place one year after a much larger massacre of civilians in Fallujah. Four to six thousand civilians are estimated to have been killed in Fallujah in November 2004, according to credible independent sources reporting from the ground. The truth of Iraq is that there were other massacres almost every week in between the events that have made Haditha and Fallujah famous cities: famous in the way no city wants to become well known throughout the world. The attack on the people of Iraq and ensuing occupation by the United States government has caused the deaths of well over 100,000 Iraqi people (the British medical journal, The Lancet, reported an excess of 100,000 dead eighteen months ago).

“Ethics Training” to Prevent Massacres

Now that the butchery in Haditha is making headlines in the United States, high ranking officials in the Pentagon as well as the President are promising an investigation. They have even announced “ethics training” for combat troops. The implication is that something unusual happened when unarmed civilians, including terrified small children and their mothers who were trying to shield them, were riddled with bullets by U.S. soldiers. Were they rogue soldiers lawlessly breaking ranks from an otherwise pristine mission aimed at liberating Iraqis? That is pure fiction. Those who criticize the management of the war are talking complete nonsense when they say that the actions of these Marines will make it “harder to carry out the mission in Iraq.”

The Haditha massacre will not make the Iraqis think differently about the United States or Bush. It will only confirm their view, an outlook shaped by the cruel, cold-hard reality of the past years.

A Routine Phenomenon

Just this week, on May 31, US soldiers in Iraq “killed two Iraqi women — one of them about to give birth — when the troops shot at a car that failed to stop at an observation post in a city north of Baghdad.” The AP reports that Nabiha Nisaif Jassim, 35, was being raced to the maternity hospital in Samarra by her brother when the shooting occurred Tuesday. Jassim, the mother of two children, and her 57-year-old cousin, Saliha Mohammed Hassan, were killed by the U.S. forces, according to police Capt. Laith Mohammed and witnesses. Her husband was waiting for her at the maternity unit of the hospital when Jassim, pregnant with their child, and her cousin were murdered.

Yesterday, the BBC disclosed new video evidence that U.S. forces massacred another group of Iraqi civilians in the town of Ishaqi in March. The story, carried by Knight-Ridder in March, and denied by the U.S. government thereafter, stated that U.S. troops had rounded-up villagers into a single room of a house and then “executed 11 people, including a 75-year-old woman and a 6-month-old infant.” BBC reported June 1 that of the eleven people murdered by U.S. troops, five were children. The soldiers then, “burned three vehicles, killed the villagers’ animals and blew up the house.”

In Afghanistan this week, large masses of people took to the streets throwing rocks at U.S. military vehicles following another incident in which U.S. military personnel raced through Kabul and then rammed passenger vehicles killing at least three people. A top Afghan police officer reported that U.S. soldiers then opened fire indiscriminately directly into the crowd killing at least four more people.

Rejecting the Disney Version of U.S. Foreign Policy

The perception of the U.S. in the Arab world is based on actual information and knowledge of the Iraq war and the war in Afghanistan. The U.S. financing and support for the ongoing war waged by the Israeli military against the Palestinian people also contributes to the understanding of the U.S. role among the people of the Middle East. This perception is 100 percent different than the fantasy promoted in the United States. In the United States, facts are not allowed to stand in the way of the official legend.

All the mainstream media, the politicians and even some in the “peace movement” in the United States uphold the Disney version of U.S. imperialism: a fundamentally benign force, motivated by democratic values and a vision of freedom, that is suffering an unexplained outburst of criminality based on stress caused by poor management of the war. Haditha, and Fallujah before it, or Abu Ghraib, are registered as deviant behavior by out of control people. Conveniently they are all rank and file enlisted men and women. No Generals, Secretary of Defense or President need worry.

That every exposed crime is widely accepted to be “deviant” or aberrational in the United States is only a testament to the power of political indoctrination by the media and the government whose economic resources for “opinion-molding” are greater than that of any previous empire in human history.

The Perception of U.S. Imperialism from The Middle East

“The deaths in Haditha, a volatile town in western Iraq, have barely caused a stir in Iraq and much of the Arab world — where American troops are reviled as brutal invaders who regularly commit such acts,” writes AP reporter Hamza Hendawi, in a story filed on May 30, 2006.

The next day a dispatch from AP reporter Kim Gamel, reports the same sentiment, “People in Samarra are very angry with the Americans not only because of Haditha case but because the Americans kill people randomly especially recently,” Khalid Nisaif Jassim said.

Closely connected by language, historical and geographic knowledge, and access to more comprehensive media reporting, the Arab people consider the entire war, including its unprovoked initiation by Bush on March 20, 2003, to be a criminal endeavor by large powers against a small but oil-rich nation. The racist character of the war itself is well recognized throughout the region. Having battled for a century against colonial and semi-colonial domination, the Arab people don’t derive their knowledge about the intentions of Britain or the United States from FOX News or the New York Times.

In the U.S. media, Iraq is treated as a low-intensity war. When U.S. soldiers are killed their deaths are

accompanied by a small article. The fact that well more than 100,000 Iraqis have died does not merit blazing headlines. Iraqi suffering is minimized or usually attributed to “terrorists.” Thus, the people of the United States are shielded from that which the Arab people know all too well about the criminal character of the war of aggression.

Fallujah and Hue City, Vietnam

The issue of Fallujah is a case in point. Fallujah is emblematic of the war. It is well understood throughout the Arab world but treated like ancient history by the U.S. media.

On the eve of the assault on Fallujah, the A.N.S.W.E.R. Coalition sent out an email to anti-war activists (November 7, 2004) under the headline: “Top U.S. Marine in Iraq Calls for Massacre in Fallujah.” It reported that Sgt. Major Carlton W. Kent gave an emotional pep-talk to 2,500 Marines who were poised to attack the city. The marines had just notified the people of Fallujah that any male between the age of 15-55 who dared go outside would be automatically killed. “You’re all in the process of making history,” the Sgt. Major exhorted his soldiers. “This is another Hue City in the making. I, have no doubt, if we do get the word, that each and every one of you is going to do what you have always done kick some butt.” (AP, November 7, 2004)

Evoking the events in Hue by U.S. officers, as a motivation for today’s troops, shows the macabre criminality inherent in imperialism’s war for conquest.

Hue was a city in South Vietnam that was a scene of horrific war crimes by military personnel when it was captured by U.S.-led forces in March 1968. U.S. Under-Secretary of the Air Force, Townsend Hoopes, admitted that Hue was left a “devastated and prostrate city. Eighty percent of the buildings had been reduced to rubble, and in the smashed ruins lay 2,000 dead civilians ...” (Noam Chomsky’s forward to the papers of the 1967 International War Crimes in Vietnam Tribunal.)

The Machinery of Racism

How can 100,000 people die, how can children be murdered, how can the devastation and destruction of an entire society occur at the hands of the U.S. government without there being a huge outpouring of indignation and condemnation in the U.S. mass media, much less even acknowledgment by so many in the “loyal opposition”? Because the U.S. mainstream media is a corporate dominated propaganda machine that is part and parcel of the imperial establishment and shares its interests. It uses the instrument of racism, a tool that has been fine-tuned by the forces of militarism in the United States for nearly four centuries. The racist demonization of conquered and targeted people has been crafted with the idea of dehumanizing the victims so as to prevent the forging of human solidarity in opposition to the crimes of conquest and Empire. The mass media, always willing to exploit the emotional appeal of death and tragedy that occurs within the United States, can ignore or define the experiences of the people of Iraq as somehow less worthy, the death of Iraqi children as less agonizing, their lives less valuable.

Bush Proclaims that Iraq “is only the beginning” of Endless War

The day after the NY Times front page story revealing the graphic details of the Haditha massacre, George W. Bush said these words about the Iraq war to the West Point graduating class of 2006: “This is only the beginning. The message has spread from Damascus to Tehran that the future belongs to freedom, and we will not rest until the promise of liberty reaches every people, in every nation.” Reiterating his and Cheney’s theme that the U.S. is now engaged in “endless war,” Bush told the young cadets: “The war began on my watch, but its going to end on your watch.”

While Bush was exhorting the next generation of privileged military officers to enthusiastically embrace his imperial crusade, the reality is that this administration sees in every rank and file enlisted man and woman nothing more than pawns. For the working class youth who make up the bulk of the military, the Bush administration has only callous disregard. Bush is willing to send these young people to kill and be killed while it carries out vicious cut-backs in education, job training and veterans benefits. The rich are always ready to have the working class and poor people do their fighting and dying.

The crimes of the U.S. soldiers in Iraq are as inevitable as the crimes committed by soldiers in imperial armies throughout history. The conquered people refuse to accept their fate. They rise up, they form resistance organizations. They take up arms and conspire to oust the foreign occupiers. They are then branded as terrorists and criminals by the Empire. To the extent that they enjoy popular support among the indigenous population, the population itself is considered “suspect” by the occupiers.

Civilians thus become a danger. Children and young teenagers can become the “enemy.” The vehicles carrying expectant mothers to the hospital can thus become a threat because they must travel quickly, too quickly for the comfort of the occupying soldiers who are fearful of car bombs.

A Pertinent Revelation this Week: 50 Years After the Fact

In the Korean War, U.S. soldiers gunned down hundreds and possibly thousands of South Korean civilians as they tried to escape the horrors of war. For five decades, the Pentagon and each successive U.S. administration denied these facts. South Korean survivors who tried to press their claims against the United States were labeled traitors and North Korean spies and put into prison for many years. After the killings of No Gun Ri in July 1950 were exposed decades later in the U.S. media, the Pentagon even carried out an “exhaustive” investigation and concluded that the actions were those of inexperienced soldiers. “The deaths and injuries of civilians, wherever they occurred, were an unfortunate tragedy inherent to war and not a deliberate killing.... Soldiers were not ordered to attack and kill civilian refugees in the vicinity of No Gun Ri.” (Department of the Army Inspector General, No Gun Ri Review, Jan. 2001)

But just this week, as the Pentagon begins its new “investigation” into Haditha, a document has come to light that not only reveals the truth of the massacre of Koreans but that it was an act of official U.S. war policy. The day of the mass killings, the US Ambassador to South Korea sent a letter to State Department official Dean Rusk about the military decision arrived at a meeting on July 25, 1950 announcing that Korean war refugees would be shot if they approached US lines. The day after the decision the 7th U.S. Cavalry Regiment killed hundreds of civilians at No Gun Ri in South Korea.

The Logic of War Crimes

There was a military rationale for killing the civilians at No Gun Ri and in scores of other sites throughout Korea during the war. The U.S. soldiers could not tell whether the civilians were sympathetic to the North Koreans or whether they would permit North Korean soldiers into their midst.

The Geneva Conventions expressly prohibit the targeting of civilians under any circumstances. But the Pentagon had a bigger political concern than adhering to international law. The fundamental fear of the Pentagon and the White House in Korea, as it was in Vietnam and during the first and current war against Iraq, was that public opinion at home would turn against the imperialist adventure and tie the hands of the warmakers. The logic of their political calculus was that U.S. public opinion would turn against the war directly as a result of a large number of U.S. casualties. This thought took them to the next murderous conclusion: if civilians pose even a remote risk to U.S. soldiers it is better to shoot the civilians first and ask

questions later. Dead Korean or Vietnamese or Iraqi civilians will not be as politically damaging back home as dead American soldiers.

There is one more side to the logic of war crimes. If the civilian population is sympathetic to the resistance fighters it is necessary to terrorize the civilians as punishment for providing aid or shelter to a guerrilla army. This is not a new story. The Japanese wiped out whole villages and nearly some cities in China as a warning against aiding the communist-led resistance during World War II. The Nazi's policy in Serbia was to kill one hundred Serbs for every German soldier killed by the resistance. Under the direction of John Negroponte, current Director of US Intelligence services, the Salvadoran military carried out large-scale massacres of peasant communities that were considered supportive of the FMLN resistance fighters in El Salvador during the 1980's. In Vietnam, the CIA organized the Phoenix Program, a clandestine war that assassinated as many 50,000 south Vietnamese who were considered to be members or sympathizers of the National Liberation Front.

The People of the United States Must Act to Stop Imperialist War

There is no investigation, no new training, or change in the way the war and occupation is administered that can stop massacres like Haditha, Fallujah and the day in and day out killings of Iraqis and destruction of their society. The only change that can bring about the hope of building a new future for Iraqis, one of self-determination and eventual peace, is to end the foreign occupation of Iraq and remove the invading army. Every day the U.S. and other troops remain in Iraq the situation grows more dire for the Iraqi people. We must demand that the troops be brought home now and reach out to our friends, families, co-workers and schoolmates to make this demand a powerful and undeniable force. The majority of people of the U.S. now oppose the war in Iraq - but at this very moment, many in the peace movement are urging that all focus turn towards the elections, just as they did two years ago. This is the road to irrelevance and it must be rejected.

The war in Vietnam was not ended because "better politicians" were elected. No one could assert that Richard Nixon was better than anything or anyone. What mattered was that millions of people used every avenue to intensify the mass struggle in the streets and in every community throughout the country. The Vietnamese people were clearly determined to fight until their homeland was free from foreign occupation. Ultimately, the U.S. soldier was only fighting to return to his or her home. The congruence of these factors and the ever-widening mass anti-war movement made the nearly genocidal conflict unsustainable for the Pentagon brass and the occupant of the White House. We must learn and re-learn these lessons and apply them to today. That is the challenge and obligation of the next period.

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