

America: “The Leading Terrorist State And Proud Of It”

Civilian Casualties, more than a Numbers Game

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Our refusal to acknowledge the human cost our violence blinds us to the malevolence of US imperialism

According to the Pentagon, US led airstrikes against ISIS have killed only two civilians: both children – “likely in Syria”.

A new report compiled by the non-profit group [Airwars](#), which tracks coalition airstrikes in the Middle East, documents up to 591 civilian deaths from more than 50 credible incidents – involving 5,600 airstrikes.

In 1928, when [Arthur Ponsonby](#), a British politician, said, “When war is declared, the first casualty is the truth” – he never specified what the distorted “truth” might be. If one were to examine all wars the US has engaged in modern history, however, one might conclude the casualty to be civilian death counts.



Photo: Archive picture of an Islamic State fighter in Iraq – not in the United States (AFP)

The US government and its ever-reliable mainstream media cheerleaders rarely, if ever, discuss, debate, or dwell on civilian casualties. To do so would be to acknowledge our own sins. To acknowledge our sins would be to acknowledge the US is as barbaric and uncivilised as those the US pretends pose an existential threat.

“When enemies commit crimes, they’re crimes. In fact, we can exaggerate and lie about them with complete impunity,” says Noam Chomsky in an interview featured in *Imperial Ambitions: Conversations in a Post-9/11 World*. “When we commit crimes, they didn’t happen.”

Now even if you file US-caused civilian casualties under the horribly euphemistic moniker “collateral damage,” you must, at the very least, file those casualties accurately. But the US has a history of underreporting civilian casualties at best, and proactively concealing at worst.

In 2004, [The New York Times](#) ran a piece about the tapes that recorded conversations between President Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. In one exchange, Kissinger says he wants to sweep the 1969 [My Lai massacre](#), where US Marines mass murdered as

many as 500 civilians, “under the rug”.

As the air campaign against North Vietnam and the South Vietnamese Viet Cong continued to fail, Nixon angrily expressed his frustration. “They’re not only not imaginative but they are just running these things – bombing jungles,” Nixon said. “They have got to go in there and I mean really go in. I want them to hit everything. I want them to use the big planes, the small planes, everything they can that will help out there, and let’s start giving them a little shock.”

Kissinger immediately relayed the order to the Pentagon: “A massive bombing campaign in Cambodia. Anything that flies on anything that moves.”

Chomsky says this is the “most explicit call for what we call genocide when other people do it that I’ve ever seen in the historical record”.

More than a numbers game

So how many civilians did the US kill in both Vietnam and Cambodia? Well, it depends on whom you ask. If you ask the US government, “official records,” you get to a number around [2 million](#). If, however, you ask NGOs that track civilian casualties, you get to a number closer to [4 million](#).

While there’s a big difference between 2 and 4 million, there’s an even bigger discrepancy between 4 million and the number of civilian casualties the average American believes were killed in Vietnam by US military actions. In [The Gulf War: A Study of the Media, Public Opinion, and Public Knowledge](#), the authors conducted a poll in which Americans were asked to estimate the number of Vietnamese killed in the war. The mean answer was 100,000, which represents 5 percent of official US estimates, and 2.5 percent of more credible estimates.

Of course, neither the above official and credible figures include the estimated 500,000 who have died slow and painful deaths over the course of the post-war decades from exposure to chemical weapons – [Agent Orange](#) and other dioxins.

More recently, the story of the 2003–2010 US invasion and occupation of Iraq is a story of Bush administration officials fudging the numbers on Iraqi casualties. In a [2005 press conference](#), President Bush was asked about the Iraqi death toll. With what became his typical befuddled and dismissive manner, Bush declared that only “30,000 Iraqi citizens” had been killed in the conflict thus far.

Lancet, a highly regarded British medical journal, however, published an “epidemiological study” in November 2004 that concluded more than 100,000 Iraqis had been killed in “violent actions” since the invasion. In 2006, [two household surveys](#) – considered to be the most accurate methodology for calculating casualties – put the Iraqi death toll at somewhere between 400,000 to 650,000 – thus making a mockery of Bush’s “30,000.”

“This inattention to civilian deaths in America’s wars isn’t unique to Iraq,” observes John Tirman, author of [The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in American Wars](#). “There’s little evidence that the American public gives much thought to the people who live in the nations where our military interventions take place.”

Tirman likens US indifference to civilian casualties to what social psychologists call the “just

world theory,” which argues, “Humans naturally assume that the world should be orderly and rational. When that ‘just world’ is disrupted, we tend to explain away the event as an aberration” and that when wars start to go badly for the US, Americans tend to “ignore or even blame the victims”.

US indifference

America’s indifference to civilian casualties is also rooted in racism via what cultural historian [Richard Slotkin](#) calls “the myth of the Frontier,” which posits America is always trying to subdue a “savage enemy” and that it is this myth that drives the way Americans see themselves and the world around them. “The savage enemy kills and terrorises without limit . . . in order to exterminate or drive out the civilised race (and) the civilised race learns to respond in kind. A cycle of massacre and revenge is thus inaugurated that drives both sides toward a war of extermination,” writes Slotkin.

Indifference to foreign “savages” and suffering is even codified into the US public education system. [Susan Fujita](#), an assistant professor of US modern history, carried out a study of US history textbooks that were published in the United States between 1949 and 2010.

Of 58 textbooks that mentioned the atomic bomb, only 42 mentioned the civilian death toll of Hiroshima and only 18 mentioned the civilian death toll of Nagasaki. For Hiroshima, 35 of the textbooks gave a lower figure than official United Nations estimates. For Nagasaki, nearly all gave a lower figure than official United Nations estimates.

So what were the United Nations estimates? For Hiroshima, 140,000 killed civilians. For Nagasaki, 70,000 killed civilians. Now compare these estimates to official US estimates, which were carried out by the US Strategic Bombing Survey, which had killed civilians at 70,000 and 35,000, respectively.

Our refusal to acknowledge the human cost our violence inflicts upon those we seek to dominate, subjugate and occupy blinds us to both the realities of war and the malevolence of US imperialism. “It is in the nature of imperialism that citizens of imperial power are always among the last to know – or care – about circumstances in the colonies,” wrote the late philosopher Bertrand Russell.

Chomsky says we’re the last to know because of “massive propaganda campaigns” that keep us from knowing and that “when you’re silent about your own crimes, that’s propaganda, too”.

Go ahead. Conduct your own poll the next time you’re chatting with Americans. Ask how many civilians were killed in Vietnam, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Iraq, Syria, Panama, Cuba, Nicaragua, Korea, etc. I bet they either don’t know or care. And that’s what – as Chomsky wrote in a 2014 [op-ed](#) – makes America the “leading terrorist state and proud of it”.

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