

Civilian Casualties in Afghanistan: No Coincidence

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NATO bombs killed at least 45 civilians in Afghanistan the other day. If you get your news from the front pages of the U.S. mainstream media, you wouldn't know it. The New York Times did run news from Afghanistan on its front page the next day — a rather ghoulish piece about Muslims refusing to give Taliban suicide bombers a religious burial, because suicide bombing is morally reprehensible. And so it is.

But what about pushing a button in an airplane to drop bombs that fall on people's homes? Not so reprehensible, apparently. The Times buried its report on the slaughter in Helmand province back on an inside page, as did the Washington Post. The LA Times relegated to a "World in Brief" notice.

If you take the time to read those back-page articles, they all tell you that NATO faces a dilemma: not a moral dilemma — when Westerners kill Afghans, the moral issue does not seem to arise — but a strategic dilemma. On the one hand, "our boys" have to kill Taliban. That's a given. On the other hand, if we kill too many civilians in the process, we'll alienate the locals and send them over to the Taliban side. All the mainstream reports agree that the string of recent bombings, killing sizeable numbers of civilians, is already creating a growing problem for NATO's effort to win hearts and minds.

So what's a poor NATO commander to do? American General Dan McNeill, who took control of all NATO forces in Afghanistan this spring, seems to have an answer: Bombs away, and let hearts and minds fall where they may. The spike in civilian deaths from NATO bombs is no coincidence. It reflects a major change in strategy, which has gone totally unreported in the American media.

The British public knows about it. Journalists Jason Burke and Robert Fox think it's a story the Brits need to know, because it could well put the lives of British — as well as American — NATO troops in greater danger. And it will put British — as well as American — tax dollars to work paying for more bombs that kill more innocent civilians.

Senior British officers told these journalists that Gen. McNeill, with too few troops on the ground to hold off the Taliban offensive, plans to rely on massive aerial bombing to do the job. "Bomber McNeill," the Brits call him bitterly, because they know that his heavy-handed strategy will be counter-productive in the long run. "Every civilian dead means five new Taliban," a British officer recently returned from southern Afghanistan told Jason Burke. "This could lose the entire south of the country to the Taliban, alienating them permanently from the Karzai government and its international supporters," Robert Fox adds. "In that case, the future of Hamid Karzai and his nemesis in Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf, looks dim."

The British are unhappy because they are losing too — losing control of the Afghan war

effort. Before McNeill took command of NATO forces, they were headed by a British General, David Richards. He focused more on economic reconstruction and building good relations with the Afghan people. But the Americans and Karzai criticized him for being too soft. Now they've got the tough guy they want in charge.

The British saw it coming long ago. Back in December, Robert Fox reported that Karzai had removed Gen. Richards' local protégé in Helmand, provincial governor Mohammed Daud. British intelligence officers and military commanders "blamed pressure from the CIA. ... The Americans knew Daud was a main British ally, yet they deliberately undermined him and told Karzai to sack him." Gen. Richards had also come in for American criticism as "too political," Fox added. "The American supreme commander of NATO, General Jim Jones, has let it be known, according to sources, that General Richards would have been sacked if he had been an American officer."

Now he's been sacked. So now our tax dollars, and the Brits', will be used not to win hearts and minds, but to drop bombs that destroy hearts and minds and lives.

In the U.S., the mainstream media agree that it's all the fault of those evil Taliban, who attack NATO forces then scurry for cover inside local villages. The Taliban actually want to get more civilians kill, we are told, because it helps turn the locals against NATO and its puppet government in Kabul. It may be true. There is plenty about the Taliban that is reprehensible. It would be tragic if they returned to power.

But "Bomber McNeill" would be the first to tell you that, when you are at war, you use whatever tactics work best. The Taliban are guerilla fighters. Of course they live and hide among the people. Do we expect them to fight only in open fields, far away from villages, where NATO bombers can pick them off effortlessly?

If we want to keep the Taliban out of power, Gen. Richards' "soft" strategy is the only one that has a chance. Richards and his supporters say that his strategy was working, that the Taliban made few real gains last year. Perhaps the Americans, who call the shots, are afraid of appearing (or feeling) too "soft." Perhaps they are impatient.

Or perhaps something else is going on, too. This week Robert Fox reported that, in addition to stepped up bombing, "there is also to be a US-led campaign of indiscriminate aerial spraying of poppy fields, triggered by the UN report that last year's poppy yield was 60 per cent higher than the year before.." But back in December, when Mohammed Daud was sacked, he wrote: "Governor Daud was appointed to replace a man the British accused of involvement in opium trafficking ... Mr. Daud, who had survived several Taliban assassination attempts, was seen as a key player in Britain's anti-drugs campaign in Helmand." Will the poppy spraying really be "indiscriminate"? The CIA's notorious record in poppy-growing regions should make us wonder.

Helmand is Afghanistan's richest opium-producing province. Opium is at the heart of its economy, and its tangled politics. To get just a taste of how tangled, check out this long analysis by "Zmarial," a resident of Helmand — not necessarily a very objective observer, but an insider who knows how many different interests are playing against, and with, each other in the province.

Though Daud was supposedly a key player in the British anti-drug campaign, this writer notes, "poppy production hit a record level in 2006 while Daud was governor of the province

and enjoyed the full support of Britain.” What’s more, he cites one source claiming that “260 million dollars have been exchanged as bribery between locals and governmental officials. This is the figure which is tracked, but the untracked amount is unclear. The survey shows 58% of people who are anti-government are so because of domestic corruption.” All that money goes mainly to cover up and protect the opium trade. Can we really believe that the CIA, so determined to take control from the British in Helmand, is uninvolved?

It’s unlikely that even the best journalist can see the whole picture in Helmand, much less in all of Afghanistan. It’s way too complex. But NATO bombardiers thousands of feet above the ground certainly don’t know anything about the reality of the towns and villages — and human lives — they are destroying. They are just following “Bomber McNeill’s” simplistic “good guys” versus “bad guys” script, which the British find so typically American — with good reason. It’s the only story we are told in our mainstream media.

If we ever have journalists who tell the story in a more complex realistic way, we’ll see that it’s the same old story: the more we take sides in a civil war, the more harm we do, especially when we rely on massive aerial bombing as our main weapon. A heavy-handed U.S. intervention in the 1980s helped to create the Taliban. Now another heavy-handed intervention seems likely to help bring them back to power — and kill countless civilians along the way. All that (and perhaps opium too) paid for with our tax dollars.

And as the Afghans bury their dead, the whole story is buried in the back pages of our newspapers, as if the people our tax dollars killed just didn’t matter very much. While we denounce the immorality of the Taliban, let’s take a moment to look in the mirror.

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