

George Bush and the Haditha Massacre

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On Wednesday, President George Bush broke his silence on the unprovoked killing of 24 unarmed Iraqi civilians by US Marines in the town of Haditha. More than six months after the event, some two months after he was briefed on the atrocity by his national security adviser, and two months after a detailed account appeared in Time magazine, Bush muttered that he was “troubled by the initial news stories.”

Speaking at a White House photo op following a meeting with Rwandan President Paul Kagame, Bush added, “I’m mindful that there’s a thorough investigation going on. If, in fact, laws were broken, there will be punishment.”

On Thursday, Bush reiterated the same theme, saying, “If there is a wrongdoing, people will be held to account.” He went on to praise a program of “ethical training” ordered for US troops and declared, “This is just a reminder—for troops in Iraq or throughout our military—that there are high standards expected of them and that there are strong rules of engagement.”

With these statements, Bush signaled his intention to reprise the approach of his administration and the military brass to the exposure two years ago of sadistic torture at Abu Ghraib prison: throw the lowest-level soldiers involved in the crimes to the wolves, and absolve their top-ranking superiors of any responsibility.

Bush’s remarks evinced his contempt and indifference not only for the Iraqi victims of his administration’s aggression, but also for the American soldiers who have been pitched into the nightmare of a colonial-style military occupation. For all his politically expedient invocations of “America’s finest” fighting on the “front lines in the war against terrorism,” he has no problems laying the entire blame for war crimes in Iraq on individual soldiers, so as to divert attention from the authors of the war, including himself, whose policies make such atrocities inevitable.

“If laws were broken there will be punishment.” Really? The war itself is a violation of international law, along with the abuse and torture of prisoners, the kidnapping of alleged terrorists, their rendition to torture regimes allied with Washington, the network of secret CIA prisons, and the denial of due process and Geneva Convention rights to those swept up in America’s international dragnet.

Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell, Rice, the military chiefs and others who plotted and launched a war based on lies are the prime law-breakers. And the Republican and Democratic leaders and media yes-men who promoted the war and continue to defend the occupation are their accomplices.

Haditha was a war crime, and of a particularly gruesome sort, because the perpetrators systematically cornered and executed men, women and children over a span of five hours. But what of the destruction of entire towns, such as Fallujah and Tal Afar, in which thousands of innocent civilians died? These are hailed by Bush and the media as great victories.

Such is the carnage inflicted by the American occupation upon the Iraqi people that, at least according to some US press reports, the horrors that occurred in Haditha have not yet made a major impact on the consciousness of the Iraqi population. The Los Angeles Times in a June 1 report on the massacre quoted Hassan Bazzaz, a political analyst in Baghdad, as saying, "It doesn't mean that much to hear that 20 people were killed by the Americans. Every single day people are killed and thrown in the streets, in the garbage cans. They're scared to death. They don't even have time to think about what happened in Haditha."

On the same day as Bush's remarks, US military authorities in Iraq reported that American forces had killed two Iraqi women, one of them about to give birth, when troops shot at their car in Samarra.

In its report June 1 on the official investigations into the Haditha events, the Washington Post hinted at the political and military reality that underlies all of the atrocities that are being committed by US forces or their Iraqi proxies. "And is the military prepared," the newspaper asked, "to carry out the long and arduous process of putting down an insurgency as part of the first US occupation of an Arab nation?"

The soldiers who executed 24 people in Haditha are culpable and should be punished for their crimes. But there is a tragic, as well as criminal, element in their deeds. These perpetrators are themselves victims, something that cannot be said of Bush and the rest of the clique that authored the war.

Many of the Marines from Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines who rolled into Haditha just after dawn on November 19 were on their third deployment to Iraq. They were well aware that more than three years after the invasion, the security situation facing US forces in largely Sunni Anbar Province had deteriorated. Haditha itself is a center of popular resistance to the US occupation and its puppet government in Baghdad. Three months earlier, 20 Marines from a different unit had been killed around the rural town over a three-day span.

Like the rest of the US forces in Iraq, these men had been put in the position of having to repress and subjugate a population that is motivated by a deep and legitimate desire to liberate itself from foreign invaders. Sent to fight on the basis of false premises, they had been inundated with propaganda and lies that have no relationship to Washington's real war aims or the reality of the situation that exists in Iraq.

Struggling to survive in a constant state of anxiety and fear, obliged to kill and see their comrades mangled and killed, the mostly young men sent to Iraq are inevitably psychologically and emotionally scarred for life, even if they are lucky enough to escape serious physical injury.

The murderous rampage that occurred in Haditha was evidently the response of some of the members of Kilo Company to the sudden death of Lance Corporal Miguel Terrazas, who was killed instantly by an improvised explosive device that destroyed his humvee. It would be a

mistake to assume that those who carried out the massacre are simply monsters. But one thing is clear: they were put in a position that fosters monstrous acts.

The same cannot be said for their superiors, military and civilian, who sought to conceal the atrocity. Now that the first stage of the coverup has unraveled, the second stage is underway. It takes the form of "thorough" investigations, both criminal and administrative, being conducted by the military command.

Pentagon officials have made it clear that at least twelve of the Marines from Kilo Company will face criminal charges, with three likely to be charged with homicide or murder and the rest charged with dereliction of duty. At the same time an administrative investigation is being conducted under the supervision of Army Maj. Gen. Eldon Bargewell to determine those responsible for giving false statements about the events in Haditha and obstructing an inquiry.

The selection of Bargewell to head this internal investigation is highly significant. A veteran Special Operations officer, Bargewell was decorated for his role in Vietnam in 1971, when he was a member of a reconnaissance team that operated deep behind Vietnamese lines. The Washington Post on June 1 reported: "One of Bargewell's conclusions is that the training of troops for Iraq has been flawed... with too much emphasis on traditional war-fighting skills and insufficient focus on how to wage a counterinsurgency campaign."

In other words, Bargewell's remit is to make the US military force in Iraq a more disciplined and deadly tool for smashing the Iraqi resistance, and preparing it for a long-term presence in the country.

General Michael Hagee, the Marine commandant, has been touring Iraq, ostensibly to lecture Marines stationed there "on the importance of our core values"-as if pep talks on "morals" and the law will alter the nature of the war or the conditions that breed eruptions of homicidal fury. There is, however, a serious military and political motive behind such high-profile actions. The exposure of events such as Haditha is highly detrimental both to the military situation facing the US in Iraq and the international political and diplomatic position of Washington. Damage control is required.

Moreover, incidents such as the rampage in Haditha are symptomatic of a military force that is verging on demoralization and despair. There is undoubtedly genuine concern within the military brass on this score.

At the same time, the Marine Corps has, according to the Post, issued a directive to its generals telling them not to discuss details of the Haditha case because "it is not in the interests of the Marine Corps to 'further this story'..."

That the civilian side of the official coverup is underway was signaled by Senator John Warner, the Virginia Republican who chairs the Senate Armed Services Committee. On ABC Television's "This Week" talk show last Sunday, Warner said his committee would hold hearings on Haditha after Congress reconvenes. "I'll do exactly what we did with Abu Ghraib," he declared.

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