

Iraq Vets: Coverage of Atrocities Is Too Little, Too Late

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The WikiLeaks video [footage from Iraq](#) taken from an Apache helicopter in July 2007 showing soldiers killing 12 people and wounding two children has caused an explosion of media coverage. But many Iraq vets feel it is too little and too late.

In contrast to most of the coverage that favors the military's stated position of forgiving the soldiers responsible and citing that they followed the Rules of Engagement (ROE), [Iraq war veterans who have spoken to the media previously](#) about atrocities carried out against innocent Iraqis have largely been ignored by the mainstream media in the United States.

Also See: [Iraq War Vet: "We Were Told to Just Shoot People, and the Officers Would Take Care of Us"](#)

This includes Josh Steiber, a former US Army specialist who was a member of the Bravo Company 2-16 whose acts of brutality made headlines with the WikiLeaks release of the video "Collateral Murder."

Steiber told Truthout during a telephone interview on Sunday that such acts were "not isolated incidents" and were "common" during his tour of duty. "After watching the video, I would definitely say that that is, nine times out of ten, the way things ended up," Steiber was quoted as saying in an earlier press release on the video, "Killing was following military protocol. It was going along with the rules as they are."

Steiber was not with his unit, who were the soldiers on the ground in the video. He was back at his base with the incident occurred. While not absolving of responsibility those who carried out the killing, Steiber blames the "larger system" of the US military, specifically how soldiers are trained to dehumanize Iraqis and the ROE.

"We have to address the larger system that trains people to respond in this way, or the same thing will probably happen again," Steiber told Truthout.

However, Steiber explained that during his basic training for the military, "We watched videos celebrating death," and said that his leaders would "pull aside soldiers who'd not deployed, and ask us if somebody open fired on us in a market full of unarmed civilians, would we return fire. And if you didn't say 'yes' instantly, you got yelled at for not being a good soldier. The mindset of military training was one based on fear, and the ability to eliminate any threat."

Steiber was released from the military as a conscientious objector, and is now a member of the group Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW).

"I saw many instances, frequently, of the military killing civilians," Steiber added, "One thing we were told was that if a roadside bomb went off, anybody in the area was considered an enemy. Obviously those are innocent civilians since most of them, if not all of them, are not involved with the bombing. So I would consider those innocent civilians as lives lost. That policy came down from high up [the chain of command]."

When Truthout asked Steiber how many times this happened with his unit, he said, "Between five and ten times, and each time we'd end up killing people."

The group to which Steiber belongs, IVAW, sponsored the Winter Soldier hearings that took place March 13-16, 2008, in Silver Spring, Maryland. The hearings provided a platform for veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan to share the reality of their occupation experiences with the media.

While the hearings garnered major coverage from foreign media outlets, they were ignored by mainstream US media outlets. The censorship of that event is reflective of an overarching censorship by the mainstream media in the US of veterans from both occupations who have tried to tell their stories to the public.

Garret Reppenhagen, who testified at the Winter Soldier hearings, served in Iraq from February 2004-2005 in the city of Baquba, 40 kilometers (about 25 miles) northeast of Baghdad.

"There are so many incidents like this that happen in Iraq it's bound that eventually one of them hits the vein of public attention, like this one," Reppenhagen told Truthout of his opinion of the WikiLeaks footage, "Film helps - like this, and Abu Ghraib - the video and film documentation helps spurn public attention. So, it's sad that these instances happen, and they are occurring and it has to do with how we conduct ourselves in this conflict - clearly there are things that need to be done for soldiers to adhere to the Geneva Conventions."

Reppenhagen doubted the media uproar caused by the leaked video would change how soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan conduct themselves. "I still doubt enough support will be garnered to change how we operate in theater. Eventually I hope there'll be a critical mass of people coming out and telling their stories about these things."

Bryan Casler, a corporal in the Marines, who served both in Iraq and Afghanistan, has also spoken out publicly about atrocities committed by US soldiers he'd witnessed in Iraq.

"First, my response to the video is utter disgust," Casler told Truthout, "You watch it and the first thing you see is them blow away a group of men who are obviously not hostile - obviously breaking any ROE they had. Then you watch them blow away a van coming to rescue the wounded people ... a van that happens to have kids in it."

Casler admitted that he has experienced some frustration in not having had mainstream media coverage when he has spoken out about what he witnessed in Iraq. "You have to share this, because as an Iraq veteran, and talking with other vets, we know this is happening all the time. This is damning video for a propaganda machine trying to say we're over there trying to save the Iraqi people. But this isn't happening just in Iraq, but anywhere the military is engaged in fighting with the local population."

The US military's response to the WikiLeaks video has been to claim that it was an isolated

incident, and the soldiers were properly following their ROE.

In an interview on the ABC News "This Week" program on Sunday, US Secretary of Defense [Robert Gates said](#) the soldiers were operating in "split second situations," and that, "It's unfortunate. It's clearly not helpful. But by the same token, I think - think it should not have any lasting consequences."

Casler begs to differ with Gates' response.

"The argument about this being just a few bad apples - pilots are known for keeping their cool in tough environments, but the whole time you have to remind yourself, it's not these pilots committing the atrocities - these guys had years of training and practice to do this, and loads of money making it happen," Casler told Truthout, "This is what they are trained to do. American taxpayer money was paid to make them into this. This is not a few bad apples."

In a response similar to Steiber's, Casler added, "I don't think anybody is murderous by nature - this is why the military trains you every day, both when you're deployed or not, because people are not naturally killers - so the training is to have no barrier to killing. And that's what you see in the video."

When asked how he felt about the incident getting the coverage it has, Casler said he was pleased.

"I'm happy the average person might see this," he told Truthout, "So I'm happy this is finally getting the coverage it deserves, and every vets story coming back needs this type of coverage. The military is censoring what is happening over there - but this video blows this apart. I hope more videos like this get leaked to the media, because people need to know about this."

Casler may not have to wait long.

WikiLeaks.org is now [poised to post another damning video of US forces slaughtering civilians](#) - this time in Afghanistan.

On May 5, 2009, US aircraft bombed a number of homes in the Afghan village of Abdul Basir Khan in Farah Province. According to Afghan officials, the death toll was upwards of 140 civilians. The Pentagon initially claimed the entire incident was fabricated, but then later conceded that people were killed by the airstrike, but that "no one will ever" know the exact number. They also claimed that the pilots had no idea civilians were in the area.

More recently, on April 12, four Afghan civilians were killed in Kandahar when US troops fired on a bus in Afghanistan. The slaughter [sparked furious protests](#) and an expression of "regret" from the military. The Afghan government said a woman and child were among the dead, and that at least 18 others were wounded in the shooting.

After serving a tour in Iraq, Staff Sgt. Camilo Mejia became the first conscientious objector to the Iraq war.

Mejia claimed that he left his post in order to avoid duties that he considered to be war crimes, particularly citing the torture and abuse of Iraqi prisoners by US soldiers. He was court-martialed and listed as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International while

serving his prison sentence.

“It was sad,” Mejia said of his reaction to the WikiLeaks video from Iraq, “You talk to other people, and they are shocked and can’t believe it. The fact that people are surprised and it’s getting so much coverage like it’s isolated and new – this is stuff we’ve been talking about for a long time, we know this is happening.”

Mejia, in addition to talking with people about atrocities he committed and witnessed in Iraq, told Truthout he was surprised at the reaction to the video, given that he and others had shared similar information at the Winter Soldier hearings two years ago.

“We’re talking a couple of years from when we talked about this stuff and exposed it – and here it is getting coverage ... it’s like we live in a twilight zone where people don’t pay attention to when things actually happen, but then longer after the fact, when somebody else says the same thing, it’s huge news,” Mejia added.

Two of the Iraqis shown being murdered in the WikiLeaks video were employees of the Reuters news agency: photographer Namir Noor-Eldeen and driver Saeed Chmagh.

While most mainstream media in the US has reported on the Pentagon’s statements saying that two internal investigations have cleared the soldiers of any wrongdoing, and that they were following the ROE, international media like [Al-Jazeera English have reported](#) on reactions from the families of the victims of the attack.

In particular, the families of the slain Iraqi civilians are seeking justice for the deaths, and want the military personnel responsible for the deaths to be taken to court.

Two young children, whose father was killed in the attack, could not understand why they were targeted. “We were coming back and we saw an injured man,” said Sajad Mutashar, whose father was killed in the attack while he and his sister were wounded, “My father said, let’s take him to hospital. Then I heard only the bullets ... Why did they shoot us? Didn’t they see we were children?”

His uncle, Satar, is demanding that the pilot be taken to court. “Nobody gave the children anything, their rights are gone and the Americans didn’t even compensate for the destroyed car. I sold it for \$500 to spend the money treating them,” Satar told Al Jazeera.

The family of Saeed Chamgh, one of the Reuters employee killed in the attack, is also demanding justice for his death. “The pilot is not human, he’s a monster,” Safa Chmagh, Saeed’s brother, said, “What did my brother do? What did his children do? Does the pilot accept his kids to be orphans?”

Salwan Saeed, Saeed’s son, said, “The American has broken my back by killing my father. I will not let the Americans get away with it. I will follow the path of my father and will hold another camera.”

Mark Taylor, an international law expert and a director at the Fafo Institute for International Studies in Norway, told reporters the evidence so far “indicated that there’s a case to be made that a war crime may have been committed.”

Taylor said US authorities, and especially the US military, have to take a closer look at this investigation. “There are questions about the way the investigation was conducted and

whether or not it was done in a proper manner,” he said, adding, “There are precedents of US soldiers being prosecuted for crimes in Iraq, for crimes of murder, rape and manslaughter. So it’s not unprecedented that this could go forward both in military courts as well as in civilian criminal courts in the US.”

Taylor believes the case raises larger questions about the laws of war, and added, “I think what this video shows is really a case that challenges whether the laws of war are strict enough.”

Marjorie Cohn is a former president of the National Lawyer’s Guild, a professor of law at Thomas Jefferson School of Law and co-author of the book “Rules of Disengagement: The Politics of Honor and Military Dissent.” She spoke with Truthout about possible war crimes committed by the soldiers in the WikiLeaks video.

“I think there’s clearly enough there to warrant an investigation,” Cohn said, referring to the need for an investigation of war crimes committed by US soldiers in the video, “I’m distraught and disappointed the US government refuses to launch an investigation about whether or not there’ve been violations of the law.”

Cohn cited the three possible violations to Truthout. “What I thought after watching the video, is that it looks like there were three possible violations of the Geneva Conventions. There were civilians standing around, there was no one firing at the US soldiers, and at least two people with cameras ... there may have been people armed, like there are many people armed in the US, but this does not create the license to fire on people. That’s one violation of the Geneva Conventions – targeting people who are not a military necessity who do not pose a threat.”

Cohn said that the second and third possible violation of the laws of war are evident in the scene on the tape when the van attempts to rescue the wounded and a later scene of a US tank rolling over a body on the ground. “The soldiers shot him and those in the van, another possible violation of the Geneva Conventions – preventing the rescuers,” she added, “Third, when the wounded or dead man was lying on the ground, and a US tank rolled over him, effectively splitting him in two – and if he was dead, that was disrespecting a body – another violation of the Geneva Conventions.”

In that scene that occurs at 18:50 into in the full version of the WikiLeaks video, a soldier is heard saying, “I think they just drove over a body.” To this another soldier is heard laughing before he respond, “Really?”

Shortly thereafter, a soldier is heard saying, “Well, they’re dead, so.”

Cohn concluded, “So I see several possible violations, certainly enough to warrant an investigation by the US military.”

View Coverage of Winter Soldier:

[Camilo Mejia](#) speaks on a panel at Winter Soldier titled “Racism and War: the Dehumanization of the enemy.”

[Garret Reppenhagen](#) discusses the evaporation of the Rules of Engagement upon his arrival

to Iraq.

[Bryan Casler](#) on his experience in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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