Responsibility for War Deaths: U.S. Political Leaders or War Protesters?

By Edward S. Herman

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It has long been a practice of members of the war party, including people like New York Congressman Peter King, to assail critics of ongoing wars for allegedly doing injury to our fighting men by their hostile, unpatriotic and even traitorous actions and statements. The targets of the anti-war protesters may be the killing or torturing of foreign soldiers and civilians by U.S. military personnel, or telling lies about these and other actions, or questioning the military plans and intentions of U.S. leaders. These hostile criticisms are said to jeopardize our troops by disclosing military secrets. They also purportedly undermine public support of the war effort at home by calling into question its effects and rationale.

One difficulty with these lines of attack on war critics is that they may be easily applied to any disclosure of military events, even pro-war propaganda. Reports of battle casualties, even if understated, may cause the public to react negatively to the war, and some war propagandists have assailed the media for reporting straightforward facts, including official reports. Peter Braestrup'sBig Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington (Westview: 1977), a Freedom House-sponsored study of media coverage of the Tet offensive during the Vietnam War, was notable for its accusations of excessive media negativism and failure to actively support the war effort.

Braestrup explicitly accused the media of responsibility for losing the war. In his view, a properly working media would suppress negative news, stress the positive, and serve as a propaganda arm of the military establishment. This book, highly regarded in the mainstream, would have made CBS's Walter Cronkite and many of his media associates traitorous for reporting discouraging Pentagon handouts. Logically the high level military personnel who provided these handouts, or made even more pessimistic assessments of the war's progress, should have kept quiet or lied, and they also should have been condemned and shared with the media the guilt of losing the war through failed news management. (For details on Braestrup's errors and contradictions, and the warm and uncritical reception given him by the pundits, see Manufacturing Consent, pp. 211-221 and Appendix 3.)

U.S. governments have often lied about war casualties, underplaying both U.S. casualties and, especially, the number of civilians killed in "collateral damage." If they do lie, the eventual uncovering of these lies may hurt the war effort, so that the lies themselves, likely to backfire, may possibly have been an antiwar move engineered by antiwar plotters intending to discredit government claims! In short, featuring the media's role in military failures opens a Pandora's box that can reach far into the media and military-political establishments.

Another difficulty with the claim that antiwar actions and disclosures are responsible for U.S. military casualties is the regular failure to show any such effects.. The military has not been able to supply a single piece of evidence that the massive disclosures of U.S. diplomatic and military actions in its recent wars by WikiLeaks and Bradley Manning resulted in a single U.S. casualty. Those documents described events of the past, and apparently disclosed no military plans that would be of logistical interest to enemy forces.

The most dramatic release in the WikiLeaks trove was a video showing a U.S. helicopter marksman in Iraq machine-gunning civilians on the ground, and doing this gleefully. The war-makers would never have released and/or shown such a video, which displays the unpleasant reality of "collateral damage," which in this case was clearly not very collateral (and Wikileaks gives it a more honest designation: "Collateral Murder," April 5, 2010). This video would certainly not have enlightened the insurgents fighting U.S. forces in Iraq, but it might well have affected the public at home. It is just such kinds of reality and truth hidden behind the war party's and media's filtered and vetted version of U.S. wars that poses the real threat. Those hidden truths, if allowed to proliferate, might prevent, shorten, or terminate wars. But by the same token, if those hidden truths can be kept out of sight, wars can flourish.

So who was responsible for the 58,000 U.S. soldiers' deaths during the Vietnam war? Hardly the protesters, who if they had any affect on U.S. casualties reduced them by their social disturbances and threats of greater disruption at home, which almost surely contributing to the decisions of the leaders to disengage (see Noam Chomsky, For Reasons of State [Vintage: 1973], chap. 5, "On the Limits of Civil Disobedience"; Gabriel Kolko, Anatomy of a War [Pantheon: 1985], chap, 25, "The Tet Offensive's Impact on Washington"). The responsibility for the 58,000 U.S. military deaths, as well as that of several million Vietnamese, clearly must be allocated to the U.S. national leadership, from Truman to Johnson and Nixon and their top advisers and underlings like Walt Rostow and Robert McNamara. It was these men (and they were all men) who made the decisions to support the French reoccupation of Indochina after World War II, and then took over the task of imposing a minority government on that distant country by violence. These officials made up a substantial cohort of war criminals, if Nuremberg principles were universally applied, which they clearly are not.

This official cohort pursued a long war of aggression in Vietnam because the United States had great and superior military power and its leaders were determined to use it to prevent the spread of communism or any independent locus of power. They were (and remain) arrogant, ideological, and almost proudly ignorant, and they were (and remain) willing to expend very large resources and kill almost without limit in pursuit of domination. In their ideological system "communism" was an integrated global monolith seeking to control the world (a pretty case of transference). They underestimated the seriousness of the split between the Soviet Union and Communist China, as well as the strength of Vietnamese nationalism and distrust of China, points which they were prepared to recognize openly only after a long and costly war, the devastation and mass killing of Vietnamese, and the sacrifice of 58,000 Americans. (See David K. Shipler, "Robert McNamara and the Ghosts of Vietnam," New York Times Magazine, August 10, 1997.)

While steadily escalating the violence in Vietnam, the U.S. leaders pretended to offer negotiations for a compromise settlement, but they were unwilling to make serious concessions because of the domestic political costs of losing to Communists, the weight

they gave to "credibility," and their belief that the enemy must eventually surrender to the vastly greater U.S. military and killing capability. This was an illustration of the "perils of dominance," which impels a dominant power to underestimate the willingness of a target to resist and accept devastation and death. (See Gareth Porter, Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam [Univ. of California Press, 2006].) The U.S. leadership marveled at the willingness of the Vietnamese leaders to absorb large casualties, regarding this as a moral failing on their part, while never recognizing that the willingness to kill and devastate to avoid loss of face and the power to control a distant land had a moral component.

It was also part of the genius of the managers of the U.S. death machine, which included (and includes) a supportive mass media, that they were able to pretend that this country was combating North Vietnamese "aggression," seeking to preserve an "independent South Vietnam," and trying to allow the South Vietnamese populace "freedom of choice" and "self-determination." They even coined the phrase "internal aggression," that allowed the fact that South Vietnam and the South Vietnamese–the home and population base of the National Liberation Front, the main oppositional military force–were fighting the U.S. and mercenary forces, to constitute aggressing against the invader of their own territory!

The most quoted phrase arising from the Vietnam war was possibly that "It became necessary to destroy the town [BenTre] in order to save it." (See Peter Arnett, Live From the Battlefield: From Vietnam to Baghdad, 35 Years in the World's War Zones [Touchstone: 1995], p. 255). Save it for what? Control of any remnants by the real aggressor and his imposed minority regime! The free elections on integration of the artificially divided North and South Vietnam called for by the 1954 Geneva Accords were not held because Ho Chi Minh would have won and ruled the integrated segments, as Eisenhower conceded in his autobiography. But this could be expunged in a Free Press and the true aggressor could be combating that internal aggression in the interest of free choice. We may note that back in 1966 the State Department stated as regards Vietnam that "We seek to insure that the South Vietnamese have the right and opportunity to control their own destiny," which it announced in the same time frame as U.S. forces helped crush Buddhist and other non-communist elements within South Vietnam that opposed the military puppets the U.S. military had installed. [See George Kahin, Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam [Knopf: 1986], chap 16, "The Final Polarization"). And in the classic of Orwellian truth inversion, theNew York Times's James Reston could claim that we were in Vietnam to demonstrate "that no state [i.e., North Vietnam] shall use military force or the threat of military force to achieve its political objectives." In fact, military force was all that the United States brought to that distant land in its pursuit of domination.

In the case of the Iraq invasion-occupation of 2003-2012, here again it was hardly the protesters who were responsible for the 4,488 U.S. military deaths (let alone the million or so Iraqi deaths), it was George Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, the politicians like Joseph Biden and Peter King who supported and voted for the war, and Bill Keller, Judith Miller, Rupert Murdoch and the rest of the media cohort that helped offset the opposition of the masses of protesters who didn't want our boys to be sent abroad to participate in a war of aggression based on big lies, and get killed in the process. The weapons of mass destruction were not there, and the follow-up idea that the war was in the interest of Iraqi democracy was as laughably fraudulent as the U.S. quest for self-determination in Vietnam.

These issues have risen again with Edward Snowden's release of National Security Agency

documents showing that organization's massive collection of electronic communications of U.S. and foreign citizens as well as officials at home and abroad. The position of NSA and other officials is that the NSA information-gathering programs were an instrument of the war on terror and aimed at terrorists, so they were therefore legitimate and Snowden's action was not only illegal but traitorous. Secretary of State John Kerry said on CNN that "People may die as a consequence of what this man did. It is possible the United States will be attacked because terrorists may now know how to protect themselves, in some way or another, that they didn't know before." ("CNN Newsroom," June 25, 2013.) Kerry, of course, is familiar with deaths in war, having admittedly killed women and children during his stint as al soldier in Vietnam. He offers no evidence now that Snowden's released information is likely to aid the terrorists, and he does not discuss the possibility that what had been released might save lives by providing the public with war information that the war-makers try to keep under cover.

Congressman Peter King has also come forward with assertions that not only Snowden but his media interrogator and information transmitter Glenn Greenwald have been "putting American lives at risk" and that Greenwald himself should very possibly be subject to legal charges. ("Anderson Cooper 360°," CNN, June 11, 2013.) King says that Greenwald has threatened to release the names of CIA agents abroad and "The last time that was done in this country, you saw a CIA station chief murdered in Greece." In fact Greenwald has never made such a threat, and King is also wrong about the Greek killing of the CIA station chief, Richard Welch, which he attributes to the release of the victim's name by Counterspy Magazine. But Welch's cover was blown well before the Counterspy publication, among other reasons by his occupation of a residence well-known to be that of the CIA's station chief. ("CIA Press Exploitation Scored," Facts on File World News Digest, Jan. 13, 1978). But the Counterspy-Welch murder tie is a well-embedded patriotic untruth, and King can use it freely.

In sum, as with Vietnam and Iraq (among many others) those responsible for the deaths of American boys fighting wars in distant locales are not the protesters, whistleblowers, and journalists like Greenwald, who call attention to the bases of war decisions and the lies and suppressions that hide from the public the real reasons and results of those decisions. On the contrary, it is the decision-makers and their spokespersons and apologists who bear primary responsibility for American deaths.

Daniel Somers, a 30-year old Iraq war veteran who committed suicide on June 10, 2013, was also very clear in his suicide note that the blame for his own death and the horrors that he helped inflict on Iraqis go to the government deciders, and nobody else. He says that his recollections of what he had done were unbearable; that to resume ordinary life after what he did "would be the mark of a sociopath….To force me to do these things and then participate in the ensuing coverup is more than any government has the right to demand. Then, the same government has turned around and abandoned me." He went on to write, "Any blame rests with them." ("I Am Sorry That It Has Come To This," Gawker, June 22, 2013.) Daniel Somers confirms that the mainstream has the villains and heroes upside down.

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