

US soldiers: Iraq massacre not exception

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The response of the Pentagon and White House to the massacre of more than 20 Iraqi civilians by US marines in Haditha last year has followed a familiar pattern. Official investigations into the incident were finally forced by the publication in *Time* magazine of details of the killings. The massacre has been presented as a horrifying aberration of US policy in Iraq.

However, on May 20 US group Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) issued a statement that explained: “The massacre at Haditha is not an exception to the situation in Iraq, it is a punctuation mark in a longer atrocity — the war itself.”

The statement said that foreign troops “cannot simultaneously be empathetic to a population and be obliged to control that same population by pointing guns at them, breaking into their homes, turning them into collateral damage, and taking vengeance on them out of the inevitable frustration of fighting an urban counter-insurgency”.

At the World Social Forum, held in the Venezuelan capital of Caracas in January, *Green Left Weekly* spoke to IVAW member Geoff Millard. Millard explained that US soldiers are forced to dehumanise Iraqis to carry out Washington’s brutal occupation policy.

He told *GLW*, “US soldiers are put into a situation where they are forced to brutalise, forced to racialise, forced to sexualise everyone in order to dominate and control a people”.

“The way that has to be done is that you are forced to dehumanise that person. That’s what they are doing in Iraq. You see this brutalisation factor whenever you talk to World War 2 veterans about ‘Japs’. In Vietnam they were ‘gooks’ and in Iraq the people are called ‘haji’ [among Muslims, haji refers to a person who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca and is used as a term of respect, but among US soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan it has been turned into a racist epithet]. So the racist, class brutality continues. The real Iraqis getting bombed are the poor. It’s the poor in Iraq who make up the resistance, just like anywhere, because the rich are still going to get their’s, whatever.”

Millard said that when soldiers who go home to the US suffer post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), “the first thing the government does is deny all claims. Then they put you through an evaluation process, where doctors poke and probe — they’re not actually treating you. This can go on for a number of months, possibly years. Then they diagnose you as having bi-polar disorder, not PTSD, because with bi-polar disorder, you don’t get a disability pension ... or they say you have depression.

“Then they finally diagnose something, after god knows how long. Then they throw medication at you. You can take Prozac, or Xanax ... Whatever they prescribe is not working.

They medicate and drug the veteran. Once this medication doesn't work, they might look into real treatment for PTSD."

"Vietnam Veterans Against the War have been working on this for 40 years, and have a solution that works, and are counselling returned soldiers on this problem", he told *GLW*. But the Department of Veterans Affairs isn't doing it and at the same time, "the government is closing all the veterans' centres".

Veterans of the Iraq war "want to go somewhere else for treatment, but all their records stay with Veterans Affairs. There are no medical records and no funding for treatment elsewhere".

A 2004 United Press International article revealed that, as of July that year, almost 28,000 Iraq veterans had sought health care from Veterans Affairs. "One out of every five was diagnosed with a mental disorder, according to the VA", UPI reported.

"We have spent US\$440 billion on a war on Iraq to brutalise and destroy our own people at the same time. They are closing down hospitals and overworking the staff, both nurses and doctors, and are denying PTSD claims", Millard said.

Another issue facing veterans of Washington's wars in the Persian Gulf is so-called Gulf War Syndrome, often linked to the use by US forces of "depleted uranium" munitions. The use of DU weapons in the 1991 Gulf War is believed to be a cause of the dramatic increase in cancer and birth defects among Iraqis in the war's aftermath.

"We don't see the problem of depleted uranium straight away. It takes five, 10, 12 years down the road before you see the main effects", Millard said. "Right now there is a ward full of people dying of Gulf War Syndrome in my town in Buffalo, New York. Most of that has been traced to depleted uranium." "For years, the government denied [GWS] existed", he explained .

GLW asked Millard his opinion of Cindy Sheehan, the woman who became a high-profile anti-war activist after her son was killed while serving in the US military in Iraq. In August 2005, Sheehan set up camp near US President George Bush's ranch in Texas, demanding Bush explain what "noble cause" her son had died for. Sheehan was a guest at the WSF.

Millard said that the "whole time Cindy was in Crawford ... I was in Iraq. I followed Cindy's press reports really closely over there." He told *GLW*, "We had a huge contingent of Iraq Veterans Against the War there with her ... at Crawford ... She lost her son. We think of her as our mother. For god's sake, for any one of us, she could be our own mom.

"My mom could be standing there at Crawford, so that when I give [Cindy] a hug, she's my mother for that moment. [Sheehan] acts on behalf of all mothers so they don't have to go through all this grief. In a way, she sees herself as our mom, so even though I only met her three days ago, she is one of the most kind and wonderful women I have met in years."

Back in the US, Millard explained, he had to "fight for press coverage in my local town of Buffalo". In contrast, at the Caracas WSF, "I just sit in an area and they line up to talk to me. Our media doesn't tell people there are Veterans for Peace and Veterans Against the War. They say that our veterans are flag-waving, country-loving Americans, who would put a boot in your arse for the nation.

“In reality, Veterans for Peace is a huge organisation. Our veterans have seen the war, are fed up with war ...”

“We’ve been there”, he explained. “We’ve been under fire, we take the mortar attacks, the gunshots. We have members who are in wheelchairs because they were shot in the back. We’ve got members who’ve got PTSD so crippling they can’t make it through the day. They commit suicide. We know the struggle of the Iraqi people, because we know what they are going through.”

Millard favourably contrasted Venezuela’s left-wing president, Hugo Chavez, to Bush. “[Chavez] made references to Noam Chomsky [in his WSF address]. I found a politician who can read! Unlike our president — I wonder if he is a functional illiterate. The man almost died eating a pretzel.”

Millard didn’t agree with everything Chavez said at the WSF, but told *GLW* “this is a man who is starting to look out for the interests of his people, who’s telling the corporate interests a big ‘no’. He’s saying that my job is for the people first and foremost.

“Imagine if we had a president who said ‘no’ to McDonald’s, ‘no’ to Microsoft, ‘no’ to Exxon, Haliburton and Bechtel”, Millard said. “If he said ‘yes’ to people, ‘yes’ to poor people, ‘yes’ to homeless people ... where would that leave our society in the US? ...

“As long as the US is a military superpower, the world is going in the wrong direction. But the hope of Venezuela is that the people from the grassroots level can oppose all that. If they can do it here, then we can do it in the USA.”

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