

# Wars Are Not Fought on Battlefields

By [David Swanson](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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## Note to Truthout Readers From David Swanson

*Truthout is publishing chapter eight of my new book "War Is A Lie." I should explain where it fits in the overall argument I've made. The book strives to make a comprehensive case against the very idea that there can ever be a good or just war, any more than there can be a good slavery or a just rape. While Americans often turn against particular wars after cheering for them, many people maintain the fantasy that there could be a really good or necessary war next month. This delusion helps to keep around what President Eisenhower 50 years ago this week called the military-industrial complex, which is itself a large source of pressure for more wars.*

*The book argues against the various common types of lies used to justify wars: lies about the evil of opponents, lies about the defensive nature of aggressive wars, lies about the humanitarian benefits of wars, and so forth. But the very term "war" can be a lie if it brings to mind the wrong images. The United States has not suffered modern warfare on its soil, making it easier for us to image that terms like "surgical strike" carry real useful meaning. Given the glorious motivations suggested for wars, most of us would be inclined to think a surgical strike was merited. But most of us would not be inclined to think that anything at all could justify actual warfare if we pictured it as it is. Chapter eight is part of that argument, addressing specifically what we think is meant when we hear reports from "the battlefield." Even as the legal "battlefield" is expanded without limit as a means of eliminating civil liberties, the actual battlefield has ceased to exist in recognizable form.*

*I've been overwhelmed by the response to this book, the number of schools and colleges that are already using it, the peace and counterrecruitment groups that are distributing it. This may be the most satisfying project I've attempted, but it has a long way to go. Libraries and GI cafes need more books, which I can't afford to supply. If you can help, or if you'd just like to learn more about the book, visit <http://warisalie.org>.*

We talk of sending soldiers off to fight on battlefields. The word 'battlefield' appears in millions, possibly billions, of news stories about our wars. And the term conveys to many of us a location in which soldiers fight other soldiers. We don't think of certain things being found in a battlefield. We don't imagine whole families, or picnics, or wedding parties, for example, as being found on a battlefield — or grocery stores or churches. We don't picture schools or playgrounds or grandparents in the middle of an active battlefield. We visualize something similar to Gettysburg or World War I France: a field with a battle on it. Maybe it's in the jungle or the mountains or the desert of some distant land we're "defending," but it's some sort of a field with a battle on it. What else could a battlefield be?

At first glance, our battlefields do not appear to be where we live and work and play as civilians, as long as “we” is understood to mean Americans. Wars don’t happen in the United States. But for the people living in the countries where our wars have been fought since, and including, World War II, the so-called “battlefield” has quite clearly included and continues to include their home towns and neighborhoods. In many cases, that is all the battlefield has consisted of. There hasn’t been any other, non-residential area constituting part of the battlefield. While the Battles of Bull Run or Manassas were fought in a field near Manassas, Virginia, the Battles of Fallujah were fought in the city of Fallujah, Iraq. When Vietnam was a battlefield, all of it was a battlefield, or what the U.S. Army now calls “the battlespace.” When our drones shoot missiles into Pakistan, the suspected terror plotters we’re murdering are not positioned in a designated field; they’re in houses, along with all of the other people we “accidentally” kill as part of the bargain. (And at least some of those people’s friends will indeed begin plotting terrorism, which is great news for the manufacturers of drones.)

### **It’s Everywhere**

At second glance, the battlefield or battlespace does include the United States. In fact, it includes your bedroom, your living room, your bathroom, and every other spot on the planet or off it, and possibly even the thoughts that are in your head. The notion of a battlefield has been expanded, to put it mildly. It now encompasses anywhere soldiers are when they’re actively employed. Pilots speak of being on the battlefield when they have been great distances above anything resembling a field or even an apartment building. Sailors speak of being on the battlefield when they haven’t set foot on dry land. But the new battlefield also encompasses anywhere U.S. forces might conceivably be employed, which is where your house comes in. If the president declares you an “enemy combatant,” you will not only live on the battlefield — you will be the enemy, whether you want to be or not. Why should a desk with a joystick in Las Vegas count as a battlefield on which a troop is flying a drone, but your hotel room be off limits?

When U.S. forces kidnap people on the street in Milano or in an airport in New York and send them off to be tortured in secret prisons, or when our military pays a reward to someone in Afghanistan for handing over their rival and falsely accusing them of terrorism, and we ship the victims off to be imprisoned indefinitely in Guantanamo or right there in Bagram, all of those activities are said to take place on a battlefield. Anywhere someone might be accused of terrorism and kidnapped or murdered is the battlefield. No discussion of releasing innocent people from Guantanamo would be complete without expression of the fear that they might “return to the battlefield,” meaning that they might engage in anti-U.S. violence, whether they had ever done so before or not, and *regardless of where they might do it*.

When an Italian court convicts CIA agents in absentia of kidnapping a man in Italy in order to torture him, the court is staking the claim that Italian streets are not located in a U.S. battlefield. When the United States fails to hand over the convicts, it is restoring the battlefield to where it now exists: in each and every corner of the galaxy. We will see in chapter twelve that this conception of the battlefield raises legal questions. Traditionally killing people has been deemed legal in war but illegal outside of it. Apart from the fact that our wars are themselves illegal, should it be permissible to expand them to include an isolated assassination in Yemen? What about a massive bombing campaign with unmanned drones in Pakistan? Why should the smaller expansion of an isolated murder be less acceptable than the larger expansion that kills more people?

And if the battlefield is everywhere, it is in the United States as well. The Obama

administration in 2010 announced its right to assassinate Americans, presuming to already possess by common understanding the right to assassinate non-Americans. But it claimed the power to kill Americans only outside the United States. Yet, active military troops are stationed within the United States and assigned to fight here if so ordered. The military is used to clean up, or at least guard, oil spills, to assist in domestic police operations, and to spy on U.S. residents. We live in the area of the globe policed by Northern Command. What's to stop a battlefield over yonder in Central Command from spreading to our towns?

In March 2010, John Yoo, one of the former lawyers in the Justice Department who had helped George W. Bush “legally” authorize aggressive war, torture, warrantless spying, and other crimes, spoke in my town. War criminals today usually go on book tours before the blood is dry, and sometimes they take questions from the audience. I asked Yoo if a president could shoot missiles into the United States. Or could a president drop nuclear bombs within the United States? Yoo refused to concede any limits to presidential power, except perhaps in time rather than place. A president could do anything he chose, even within the United States, as long as it was “wartime.” Yet, if the “war on terror” makes it wartime, and if the “war on terror” lasts for generations, as some of its proponents desire, then there really are no limits.

On June 29, 2010, Senator Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.) questioned then Solicitor General and successful Supreme Court nominee Elena Kagan. “The problem with this war,” Graham said, “is that there will never be a definable end to hostilities, will there?” Kagan nodded and simply agreed: “That is exactly the problem, Senator.” That takes care of the time constraints. What about place constraints? A bit later, Graham asked:

The battlefield, you told me during our previous discussions, that the battlefield in this war is the entire world. That is, if someone were caught in the Philippines, who was a financier of al Qaeda, and they were captured in the Philippines, they would be subject to enemy combatant determination. Um, because the whole world's the battlefield. Do you still agree with that?

Kagan ducked and dodged, while Graham asked her this three times, before she made clear that, yes, she still agreed.

So a battlefield turns out to be more a state of mind than a physical location. If we are always in the battlefield, if marches for peace are in the battlefield too, then we had best be careful what we say. We wouldn't want to assist the enemy somehow, while living in the battlefield. Wars, even when the battlefield was not, like a god, present everywhere, have always had a tendency to eliminate hard-won rights. This tradition in the United States includes President John Adams' Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, Abraham Lincoln's suspensions of habeas corpus, Woodrow Wilson's Espionage Act and Sedition Act, Franklin Roosevelt's rounding up of Japanese-Americans, the madness of McCarthyism, and the many developments of the Bush- Obama era that really took off with the first passage of the PATRIOT Act. On July 25, 2008, the pressure for accountability for abuses of power had grown too great for silence to continue. The House Judiciary Committee finally agreed to hold a hearing on the impeachment of George W. Bush.

Chairman John Conyers had held similar hearings in 2005 as the ranking minority member, advertising his aim to pursue accountability for the War on Iraq if he were ever given the power. He held that power from January 2007 forward, and in July 2008 — having obtained

the approval of Speaker Nancy Pelosi — he held this hearing. To make the similarity to the unofficial hearings he'd held three years earlier complete, Conyers announced before the hearing that, while the evidence would be heard, no impeachment proceedings would go forward. The hearing was just a stunt. But the testimony was deadly serious and included a statement from former Justice Department official Bruce Fein from which this is excerpted:

After 9/11, the executive branch declared — with the endorsement or acquiescence of Congress and the American people — a state of permanent warfare with international terrorism, i.e., the war would not conclude until every actual or potential terrorist in the Milky Way were either killed or captured and the risk of an international terrorist incident had been reduced to zero. The executive branch further maintained without quarrel from Congress or the American people that since Osama bin Laden threatens to kill Americans at any time and in any location, the entire world, including all of the United States, is an active battlefield where military force and military law may be employed at the discretion of the executive branch.

For instance, the executive branch claims authority to employ the military for aerial bombardment of cities in the United States if it believes that Al Qaeda sleeper cells are nesting there and are hidden among civilians with the same certitude that the executive branch knew Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction....

The executive branch has directed United States forces to kill or kidnap persons it suspects have allegiance to Al Qaeda in foreign lands, for instance Italy, Macedonia, or Yemen, but it has plucked only one United States resident, Ali Saleh Kahlah al-Marri, from his home for indefinite detention as a suspected enemy combatant. But if the executive branch's constitutional justification for its modest actions is not rebuked through impeachment or otherwise, a precedent of executive power will have been established that will lie around like a loaded weapon ready for use by any incumbent who claims an urgent need. Moreover, the Founding Fathers understood that mere claims to unchecked power warranted stern responses."

No stern responses were forthcoming, and President Obama maintained and expanded upon the powers established for presidents by George W. Bush.<sup>208</sup> War was now officially everywhere and eternal, thereby allowing presidents even greater powers, which they could use in the waging of even more wars, from which yet more powers could derive, and so forth to Armageddon, unless something breaks the cycle.

### **It's Nowhere**

The battlefield may be all around us, but the wars are still concentrated in particular places. Even in those particular locations — such as Iraq and Afghanistan — the wars lack the two basic features of a traditional battlefield — the field itself and a recognizable enemy. In a foreign occupation, the enemy looks just like the supposed beneficiaries of the humanitarian war. The only people recognizable for who they are in the war are the foreign occupiers. The Soviet Union discovered this weakness of foreign occupations when it tried to occupy Afghanistan during the 1980s. Oleg Vasilevich Kustov, a 37-year veteran of the Soviet and Russian military, described the situation for Soviet troops:

Even in the capital, Kabul, in most districts it was dangerous to go more than 200 or 300 meters from installations guarded by our troops or detachments of the Afghan army, internal forces, and secret services — to do so was to put

one's life at risk. To be completely honest, we were waging war against a people.

That sums it up perfectly. Wars are not waged against armies. Nor are they waged against demonized dictators. They are waged against peoples. Remember the U.S. soldier in chapter five who shot a woman who had apparently been bringing a bag of food to the U.S. troops? She would have looked just the same if she had been bringing a bomb. How was the soldier supposed to tell the difference? What was he supposed to do?

The answer, of course, is that he was supposed to not be there. The occupation battlefield is full of enemies who look exactly like, but sometimes are not, women bringing groceries. It is a lie to call such a place a "battlefield." One way to make this clear, and which often shocks people, is to note that a majority of those killed in wars are civilians. A better term is probably 'non-participants.' Some civilians participate in wars. And those who resist a foreign occupation violently are not necessarily military. Nor is there any clear moral or legal justification for killing those fighting a truly defensive war any more than there is for killing the non-participants.

Estimates of war deaths vary for any given war. No two wars are the same, and the numbers change if those who die later from injury or disease are included with those immediately killed. But by most estimates, even counting only those immediately killed, the vast majority of those killed in war in recent decades have been non-participants. And in wars involving the United States, the vast majority of those killed have been non-Americans. Both of these facts, and the numbers involved, will seem crazy to anyone getting their war news from American media outlets, which routinely report the "war dead" and list only Americans.

The "good war," World War II, is still the deadliest of all time, with military deaths estimated at 20 to 25 million (including 5 million deaths of prisoners in captivity), and civilian deaths estimated at 40 to 52 million (including 13 to 20 million from war-related disease and famine).<sup>210</sup> The United States suffered a relatively small portion of these deaths — an estimated 417,000 military and 1,700 civilian. That is a horrendous statistic, but it is small in relation to the suffering of some of the other countries.

The War on Korea saw the deaths of an estimated 500,000 North Korean troops; 400,000 Chinese troops; 245,000 – 415,000 South Korean troops; 37,000 U.S. troops; and an estimated 2 million Korean civilians.

The War on Vietnam may have killed 4 million civilians or more, plus 1.1 million North Vietnamese troops, 40,000 South Vietnamese troops, and 58,000 U.S. forces.

In the decades following the destruction of Vietnam, the United States killed a lot of people in a lot of wars, but relatively few U.S. soldiers died. The Gulf War saw 382 U.S. deaths, the highest number of U.S. casualties between Vietnam and the "war on terror." The 1965-1966 invasion of the Dominican Republic didn't cost a single U.S. life. Grenada in 1983 cost 19. Panama in 1989 saw 40 Americans die. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo saw a total of 32 U.S. war deaths. Wars had become exercises that killed very few Americans in comparison to the large numbers of non-U.S. non-participants dying.

The wars on Iraq and Afghanistan similarly saw the other sides do almost all of the dying. The numbers were so high that even the proportionately tiny U.S. death counts climbed into

the thousands. Americans hear through their media that over 4,000 U.S. soldiers have died in Iraq, but rarely do they encounter any report on the deaths of Iraqis. When news of Iraqi deaths is reported, the U.S. media usually cites totals collected from news reports by organizations that openly and prominently stress the likelihood that a large proportion of deaths are not reported. Fortunately, two serious studies have been done of Iraqi deaths caused by the invasion and occupation that began in March 2003. These studies measure the deaths that exceeded the high death rate that existed under international sanctions before March 2003.

The Lancet published the results of household surveys of deaths through the end of June 2006. In 92 percent of households asked to produce a death certificate to verify a reported death, they did so. The study concluded that there had been 654,965 excess violent and nonviolent deaths. This included deaths resulting from increased lawlessness, degraded infrastructure, and poorer healthcare. Most of the deaths (601,027) were estimated to be due to violence. The causes of violent deaths were gunshot (56 percent), car bomb (13 percent), other explosion/ordnance (14 percent), air strike (13 percent), accident (2 percent), and unknown (2 percent).<sup>212</sup> Just Foreign Policy, a Washington-based organization, has calculated the estimated deaths through the time of this writing, extrapolated from the Lancet report based on the relative level of deaths reported in the media in the intervening years. The current estimate is 1,366,350.

The second serious study of deaths caused by the War on Iraq was a poll of 2,000 Iraqi adults conducted by Opinion Research Business (ORB) in August 2007. ORB estimated 1,033,000 violent deaths due to the War on Iraq: “48 percent died from a gunshot wound, 20 percent from the impact of a car bomb, 9 percent from aerial bombardment, 6 percent as a result of an accident, and 6 percent from another blast/ordnance.”

Death estimates from the War on Afghanistan were much lower but rising swiftly at the time of this writing.

For all of these wars, one can add a much larger casualty figure for the wounded than those I’ve cited for the dead. It is also safe to assume in each case a much larger number for those traumatized, orphaned, made homeless, or exiled. The Iraqi refugee crisis involves millions. Beyond that, these statistics do not capture the degraded quality of life in war zones, the usual reduced life expectancy, the increased birth defects, the rapid spread of cancers, the horror of unexploded bombs left lying around, or even the U.S. soldiers poisoned and experimented upon and denied compensation. Zeeshan-ul-hassan Usmani, an assistant professor at Ghulam Ishaq Khan Institute in Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province who recently completed five years as a Fulbright scholar in the U.S., reports that the ongoing and illegal U.S. drone strikes into Pakistan have killed 29 suspected terrorists and 1,150 civilians, wounding 379 more.

If the numbers above are correct, World War II killed 67 percent civilians, the War on Korea 61 percent civilians, the War on Vietnam 77 percent civilians, the War on Iraq 99.7 percent Iraqis (whether or not civilians), and the Drone War on Pakistan 98 percent civilians.

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On March 16, 2003, a young American woman named Rachel Corrie stood in front of a Palestinian home in the Gaza strip, hoping to protect it from demolition by the Israeli

military which claimed to be destroying guerrilla hideouts. She faced a Caterpillar D9-R bulldozer, and it crushed her to death. Defending against her family's civil suit in court in September 2010, an Israeli military training unit leader explained: "During war there are no civilians."

## **Women and Children First**

One thing to remember about civilians is that they are not all military-age men. Some of them are senior citizens. In fact those in the weakest condition are most likely to be killed. Some are women. Some are children, infants, or pregnant women. Women and children combined probably make up a majority of war victims, even as we think of war as an activity primarily for men. If we thought of war as a means of killing large numbers of women and children and grandparents would we be less willing to allow it? The primary thing war does to women is the very worst thing possible: it kills them. But there is something else war does to women that sells a lot more newspapers. So, sometimes we hear about it. War rapes women. Soldiers rape women in isolated, but usually numerous, incidents. And soldiers in some wars systematically rape all women as a form of planned terrorism.

"Hundreds, if not thousands, of women and girls have been and continue to be the victims of widespread and, at times, systematic rape and sexual assault committed by a range of fighting forces," said Véronique Aubert, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Africa Program, in 2007, speaking about a war in Cote d'Ivoire.

*Taken by Force: Rape and American GIs in Europe during WWII* by American sociologist Robert Lilly was finally published in 2007 in the United States. Back in 2001 Lilly's publisher had refused to publish the book because of the crimes of September 11, 2001. Richard Drayton summarized and commented on Lilly's findings in the Guardian:

Lilly suggests a minimum of 10,000 American rapes [in World War II]. Contemporaries described a much wider scale of unpunished sex crime. Time Magazine reported in September 1945: 'Our own army and the British army along with ours have done their share of looting and raping...we too are considered an army of rapists.'

In that war, as in many others, rape victims were not always provided assistance by their families, if their families were alive. They were often denied medical care, shunned, and even murdered.

Those who commit rape during war are often so confident of their immunity from the law (after all, they receive immunity and even praise for mass murder, so surely rape must be sanctioned too) that they brag about their crimes and, where possible, display photographs of them. In May 2009, we learned that photos of U.S. troops abusing prisoners in Iraq showed an American soldier apparently raping a female prisoner, a male translator raping a male prisoner, and sexual assaults on prisoners with objects including a truncheon, wire, and a phosphorescent tube.

Numerous reports have surfaced of U.S. soldiers raping Iraqi women outside of prison as well. While not all accusations are true, such incidents are not always reported, and those reported to the military are not always made public or prosecuted. Crimes by U.S. mercenaries, including crimes against their own employees, have gone unpunished, since they have operated outside any rule of law. Sometimes we learn after-the-fact that the

military has investigated rape allegations and dropped the case. In March 2005, the *Guardian* reported:

Soldiers from the 3rd Infantry Brigade...were under investigation last year for raping Iraqi women, U.S. Army documents reveal. Four soldiers were alleged to have raped two women while on guard duty in a Baghdad shopping precinct. A U.S. Army investigator interviewed several soldiers from the military unit, the 1-15th battalion of the 3rd Infantry Brigade, but did not locate or interview the Iraqi women involved before shutting down the inquiry for lack of evidence.

Then there was the gang rape participated in by Paul Cortez, mentioned in chapter five. The victim's name was Abeer Qassim Hamza al-Janabi, age 14. According to a sworn statement by one of the accused,

The soldiers noticed her at a checkpoint. They stalked her after one or more of them expressed his intention to rape her. On March 12, after playing cards while slugging whisky mixed with a high-energy drink and practicing their golf swings, they changed into black civvies and burst into Abeer's home in Mahmoudiya, a town 50 miles south of Baghdad. They killed her mother Fikhriya, father Qassim, and five-year-old sister Hadeel with bullets to the forehead, and 'took turns' raping Abeer. Finally, they murdered her, drenched the bodies with kerosene, and lit them on fire to destroy the evidence. Then the GIs grilled chicken wings.

Female U.S. soldiers are even in serious danger of rape by their male comrades, and of retribution by their "superiors" if they report assaults. While rape is more common during a hot war, it's a regular occurrence during cold occupations as well. If the U.S. soldiers never leave Iraq, their rapes never will either. U.S. soldiers rape, on average, two Japanese women per month as part of our ongoing occupation of Japan, begun at the end of "the good war."

Children make up a large percentage of the fatalities in war, possibly as many as half, thanks to their presence on the "battlefield." Children are also conscripted to fight in wars.<sup>223</sup> In such a situation, the child is legally a victim, although that doesn't stop the United States from throwing such children into prisons like Guantanamo without charge or trial. Primarily, however, children are non-participants killed by bullets and bombs, injured, orphaned, and traumatized. Children are also common victims of land mines, cluster bombs, and other explosives left behind after warfare. During the 1990s, according to the United Nations Children's Fund, two million children died and over six million were permanently disabled or seriously injured in armed conflict, while wars uprooted over 20 million children from their homes.

These aspects of war — the bulk, in fact, of what war is — make it sound rather less noble than an agreed upon duel between daring adversaries risking their lives in an effort to kill each other. Killing a brave adversary who is armed and attempting to kill you can absolve guilt in a sort of sportsmanship. A World War I British officer praised German machine gunners: "Topping fellows. Fight until they are killed. They gave us hell."

If their dying was noble then so was the killing of them.

This helpful mental trick is not so easily done when one is killing the enemy with long-range sniper fire or in ambushes or surprise attacks, actions that were once considered



dishonorable. It's even harder to find nobility in killing people who very well may not be participating in your war at all, people who may be trying to bring you a bag of groceries. We still like to romanticize war, as discussed in chapter five, but the old ways of war are gone and were truly indecent while they lasted. The new ways involve very little jousting on horseback, even if groups of soldiers are still called "cavalries." There's also very little trench warfare. Instead, fighting on the ground includes street battles, house raids, and vehicle check points, all in combination with the hurricane of death from above that we call aerial warfare.

### **Street Fights, Raids, and Checkpoints**

In April 2010, a website called Wikileaks posted online a video of an incident that had occurred in 2007 in Baghdad. U.S. helicopters are seen shooting a group of men on a street corner, killing civilians including journalists, and wounding children. The voices of the U.S. troops in the helicopters are heard.

They are not fighting on a battlefield but in a city in which both those trying to kill them and those they are supposedly defending are all around them, indistinguishable from each other. The soldiers clearly believe that if there's the slightest chance a group of men might be combatants, they should be killed. Upon discovering that they've hit children as well as adults, one U.S. troop comments "Well it's their fault for bringing their kids into a battle." Remember, this was an urban neighborhood. It's your fault for being on the battlefield, just as it's your fault Adam ate that forbidden apple: you're born at fault if you're born on this planet.

U.S. forces were also on the ground that day. Former Army Specialist Ethan McCord is seen in the video helping two wounded children after the attack. He talked in 2010 about what had happened. He said he was one of about six soldiers to first arrive at the scene:

It was pretty much absolute carnage. I had never seen anybody shot by a 30-millimeter round before, and frankly don't ever want to see that again. It almost seemed unreal, like something out of a bad B-horror movie. When these rounds hit you they kind of explode — people with their heads half-off, their insides hanging out of their bodies, limbs missing. I did see two RPGs on the scene as well as a few AK-47s.

But then I heard the cries of a child. They weren't necessarily cries of agony, but more like the cries of a small child who was scared out of her mind. So I ran up to the van where the cries were coming from. You can actually see in the scenes from the video where another soldier and I come up to the driver and the passenger sides of the van. "The soldier I was with, as soon as he saw the children, turned around, started vomiting and ran. He didn't want any part of that scene with the children anymore.

What I saw when I looked inside the van was a small girl, about three or four years old. She had a belly wound and glass in her hair and eyes. Next to her was a boy about seven or eight years old who had a wound to the right side of the head. He was laying half on the floorboard and half on the bench. I presumed he was dead; he wasn't moving.

Next to him was who I presumed was the father. He was hunched over sideways, almost in a protective way, trying to protect his children. And you could tell that he had taken a 30-millimeter round to the chest. I pretty much knew that he was deceased.

McCord grabbed the girl and found a medic, then went back to the van and noticed the boy moving. McCord carried him to the same vehicle to be evacuated as well. McCord went on to describe the rules he and his fellow troops were operating under in this urban war:

Our rules of engagement were changing on an almost daily basis. But we had a pretty gung-ho commander, who decided that because we were getting hit by IEDs [improvised explosive devices] a lot, there would be a new battalion SOP [standard operating procedure].

He goes, 'If someone in your line gets hit with an IED, 360 rotational fire. You kill every motherfucker on the street.' Myself and Josh [Stieber] and a lot of other soldiers were just sitting there looking at each other like, 'Are you kidding me? You want us to kill women and children on the street?'

And you couldn't just disobey orders to shoot, because they could just make your life hell in Iraq. So like with myself, I would shoot up into the roof of a building instead of down on the ground toward civilians. But I've seen it many times, where people are just walking down the street and an IED goes off and the troops open fire and kill them.

Former Army Specialist Josh Stieber, who was in the same unit with McCord, said that newly arrived soldiers in Baghdad were asked if they would fire back at an attacker if they knew unarmed civilians might get hurt in the process. Those who did not respond affirmatively, or who hesitated, were "knocked around" until they realized what was expected of them, added former Army Specialist Ray Corcoles, who deployed with McCord and Stieber.

Although it is extremely difficult, when occupying a city, to distinguish violent resisters from civilians, the laws of war still distinguish between civilians and combatants. "What these soldiers are describing, tit-for-tat retaliation against civilians, is a clear war crime which has been successfully prosecuted after WWII in the case of German SS Obersturmbannführer Herbert Kappler," writes Ralph Lopez.

"In 1944 Kappler ordered the mass execution of civilians in the ratio of 10 to 1 for every German soldier killed in a March 1944 hidden bomb attack by Italian partisans. The executions took place in the caves of Ardeatine in Italy. You may have seen a movie about it starring Richard Burton."

One quick way to turn non-participants in a war into active combatants is to kick in their doors, smash their possessions, and insult and terrify their loved ones. Those who have resisted such frequent incidents in Iraq and Afghanistan have been shot or imprisoned — later, in many cases, to be released, often filled with a desire for vengeance against the occupiers. One such raid in Afghanistan is described by Zaitullah Ghiasi Wardak in chapter three. No accounts of any raids depict anything resembling a glorious battlefield.

In January 2010, the occupied government of Afghanistan and the United Nations both concluded that on December 26, 2009, in Kunar, U.S.-led troops had dragged eight sleeping children out of their beds, handcuffed some of them, and shot them all dead.<sup>230</sup> On Feb. 24, 2010, the U.S. military admitted that the dead were innocent students, contradicting its initial lies about the incident. The killings led to student demonstrations across Afghanistan, a formal protest by the President of Afghanistan, and investigations by the Afghan government and the United Nations. The Afghan government called for the prosecution and

execution of American soldiers who kill Afghan civilians. Dave Lindorff commented on March 3, 2010:

Under the Geneva Conventions, it is a war crime to execute a captive. Yet in Kunar on December 26, US-led forces, or perhaps US soldiers or contract mercenaries, cold-bloodedly executed eight hand-cuffed prisoners. It is a war crime to kill children under the age of 15, yet in this incident a boy of 11 and a boy of 12 were handcuffed as captured combatants and executed. Two others of the dead were 12 and a third was 15.

The Pentagon did not investigate, passing the buck to the U.S.-dominated NATO force in Afghanistan. Congress has no authority to compel testimony from NATO, as it does — at least in theory — with the Pentagon. When Lindorff contacted the House Armed Services Committee, the press officer was not familiar with the incident.

Another night raid, on February 12, 2010, targeted the home of a popular policeman, Commander Dawood, who was killed while standing in his doorway protesting the innocence of his family. Also killed were his pregnant wife, another pregnant woman, and an 18-year-old girl. The U.S. and NATO claimed their soldiers had discovered the women tied up and already dead, and also claimed the soldiers had faced a firefight from several “insurgents.”<sup>232</sup> In lying, sometimes less is more. Either lie would have worked, but both together smelled fishy. NATO later backed off the insurgents story and concisely stated the approach our military takes to occupied nations, an approach that cannot possibly succeed:

If you have got an individual stepping out of a compound, and if your assault force is there, that is oft en the trigger to neutralise (sic) the individual. **You don't have to be fired upon to fire back.**[emphasis added]

It took until April 2010 before NATO admitted to killing the women, revealing that U.S. special forces, in an attempt to cover up their crimes, had dug bullets out of the women's bodies with knives.

In addition to raids, the new battlefield involves countless vehicle checkpoints. In 2007, the U.S. military admitted to having killed 429 civilians in a year at Iraqi checkpoints. In an occupied country, the occupier's vehicles must keep moving, or those inside might be killed. The vehicles belonging to the occupied, however, must stop to prevent their being killed. War on Iraq veteran Matt Howard remembers:

An American life is always worth more than an Iraqi life. Right now, if you're in a convoy in Iraq, you do not stop that convoy. If a little kid runs in front of your truck, you are under orders to run him over instead of stopping your convoy. This is the policy that's set in how to deal with people in Iraq.

I had this Marine friend who had set up a checkpoint. Car loaded with six people, family going on a picnic. It didn't stop immediately at the checkpoint. It was kind of coming to a rolling stop. And rules of engagement state, in a situation like that, you are required to fire on that vehicle. And they did. And they killed everyone in that car. And they proceeded to search the car, and just found basically a picnic basket. No weapons.

And, yes, absolutely tragic, and his officer comes by and [my friend] is like, 'You know, sir, we just killed a whole family of Iraqis for nothing.' And all he

said was, 'If these hajis could just learn how to drive, this shit wouldn't happen.'

One frequent problem has been miscommunication. Soldiers were taught that a raised fist meant "stop," but nobody told the Iraqis, who had no idea and in some cases paid for that ignorance with their lives.

Checkpoints are also a frequent location for killing civilians in Afghanistan. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, then the senior American and NATO commander in Afghanistan, said in March 2010: "We have shot an amazing number of people, but to my knowledge, none has ever proven to be a threat."

## **Bombs and Drones**

One of the most significant legacies of World War II has been the bombing of civilians. This new approach to war brought the front lines much closer to home while allowing those doing the killing to be located too far away to see their victims.

For the residents of German cities, survival 'beneath the bombs' was a defining characteristic of the war. The war in the skies had erased the distinction between home and front, adding 'air terror psychosis' and 'bunker panic' to the German vocabulary. Urban dwellers could also claim 'moments of a life at the front,' in a war that had transformed Germany's cities into a 'battlefield.'

A U.S. pilot in the War on Korea had a different perspective:

The first couple of times I went in on a napalm strike, I had kind of an empty feeling. I thought afterward, Well, maybe I shouldn't have done it. Maybe those people I set afire were innocent civilians. But you get conditioned, especially after you've hit what looks like a civilian and the A-frame on his back lights up like a Roman candle — a sure enough sign that he's been carrying ammunition. Normally speaking, I have no qualms about my job. Besides, we don't generally use napalm on people we can see. We use it on hill positions or buildings. And one thing about napalm is that when you've hit a village and have seen it go up in flames, you know that you've accomplished something. Nothing makes a pilot feel worse than to work over an area and not see that he's accomplished anything.

Both of the above quotes are from a collection of essays called *Bombing Civilians: A Twentieth Century History*, edited by Yuki Tanaka and Marilyn B. Young, which I recommend.

While the Germans had bombed Guernica, Spain, in 1937, the bombing of cities took on something closer to its current form and current motivation when the Japanese bombed Chongqing, China, from 1938 to 1941. This siege continued, with less intense bombing through 1943, and included the use of fragmentation and incendiary bombs, chemical weapons, and bombs with delayed fuses that caused long-term physical and psychological damage similar to the cluster bombs used 60 years later in Iraq. Just the first two days of this systematic bombing killed almost three times the number of people killed in Guernica. Unlike later bombing campaigns against Germany, England, and Japan, the bombing of China was a completely one-sided slaughter of people who had no real means to fight back, similar in this way to many later campaigns, including the bombing of Baghdad.

Proponents of aerial bombing have argued from the start that it could bring a faster peace, discourage a populace from continuing a war, or shock and awe them. This has always proved false, including in Germany, England, and Japan. The idea that the nuclear destruction of two Japanese cities would change the Japanese government's position was implausible from the start, given that the United States had already destroyed several dozen Japanese cities with firebombs and napalm. In March 1945, Tokyo consisted of

... rivers of fire...flaming pieces of furniture exploding in the heat, while the people themselves blazed like 'matchsticks' as their wood and paper homes exploded in flames. Under the wind and the gigantic breath of the fire, immense incandescent vortices rose in a number of places, swirling, flattening, sucking whole blocks of houses into their maelstrom of fire.

Mark Selden explains the importance of this horror to the decades of U.S. war making that would follow:

[E]very president from Roosevelt to George W. Bush has endorsed in practice an approach to warfare that targets entire populations for annihilation, one that eliminates all distinction between combatant and noncombatant with deadly consequences. The awesome power of the atomic bomb has obscured the fact that this strategy came of age in the firebombing of Tokyo and became the centerpiece of U.S. war making from that time forward.

A spokesman for the Fifth Air Force put the U.S. military's view succinctly: "For us, there are no civilians in Japan."

Unmanned drones are becoming the new centerpiece of war, distancing soldiers more than ever from those they kill, increasing the one-sidedness of casualties, and terrorizing everyone who must listen to the drones buzzing overhead as they threaten to explode one's house and end one's life at any moment. The drones are part of an array of deadly technologies imposed on the countries where we take our wars.

My thoughts drift to the Emergency Surgical Center for Victims of War, in Kabul," Kathy Kelly wrote in September 2010.

A little over two months ago, Josh [Brollier] and I met Nur Said, age 11, in the hospital's ward for young boys injured by various explosions. Most of the boys welcomed a diversion from the ward's tedium, and they were especially eager to sit outside, in the hospital garden, where they'd form a circle and talk together for hours. Nur Said stayed indoors. Too miserable to talk, he'd merely nod at us, his hazel eyes welling up with tears. Weeks earlier, he had been part of a hardy band of youngsters that helped bolster their family incomes by searching for scrap metal and unearthing land mines on a mountainside in Afghanistan. Finding an unexploded land mine was a eureka for the children because, once opened, the valuable brass parts could be extracted and sold. Nur had a land mine in hand when it suddenly exploded, ripping four fingers off his right hand and blinding him in his left eye.

On a sad continuum of misfortune, Nur and his companions fared better than another group of youngsters scavenging for scrap metal in the Kunar Province on August 26th.

Following an alleged Taliban attack on a nearby police station, NATO forces

flew overhead to 'engage' the militants. If the engagement includes bombing the area under scrutiny, it would be more apt to say that NATO aimed to puree the militants. But in this case, the bombers mistook the children for militants and killed six of them, aged 6 to 12. Local police said there were no Taliban at the site during the attack, only children.

... In Afghanistan, thirty high schools have shut down because the parents say that their children are distracted by the drones flying overhead and that it's unsafe for them to gather in the schools.

The damage of our wars in the global battlefield outlasts the memories of elderly survivors. We leave landscapes pock-marked with bomb craters, oil fields ablaze, seas poisoned, ground water ruined. We leave behind, and in the bodies of our own veterans, Agent Orange, depleted uranium, and all the other substances designed to kill people quickly but carrying the side-effect of killing people slowly. Since the United States' secret bombing of Laos that ended in 1975, some 20,000 people have been killed by unexploded ordnance.<sup>240</sup> Even the war on drugs begins to look like the war on terror when the spraying of fields renders regions of Colombia uninhabitable. When will we ever learn? John Quigley visited Vietnam after the war and saw in downtown Hanoi,

... a neighborhood we had bombed in December 1972, because President Nixon said that bombing would convince North Vietnam to negotiate. Here thousands had been killed in a short time....An elderly man, a survivor of the bombing, was caretaker for the exhibit. As he showed it to me, I could see he was straining to avoid putting awkward questions to a guest whose country was responsible for the bombing. Finally, he asked me, as politely as he could, how America could do this to his neighborhood. I had no answer.

*David Swanson is the author of "War Is A Lie" from which this is excerpted:  
<http://warisalie.org>*

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