

Disappearing the Dead: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Idea of a “New Warfare”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In Brief (465 words): During the course of the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts the US Department of Defense (DoD) conducted “perception management” campaigns that obstructed the public’s appreciation of the wars’ human toll. The casualty issue was not alone in suffering such treatment during the prologue to the Iraq conflict. Distortion and miscalculation affected the official discourse on many of the key issues surrounding the war, including: the nature, magnitude, and immediacy of the threat; the likely financial cost of the war; the troop requirement for both the combat and post-war phases of the operation; and the difficulty and expense of post-war reconstruction and stabilization efforts.

The casualty issue is one of strategic import. In addition to US and allied losses, approximately 18,000 Afghan and Iraqi combatants and non-combatants were killed during the main combat phases of the two wars. (About one-third of the total were non-combatants.) This toll bears directly on (1) the threat environments in post-war Iraq and Afghanistan; (2) the regional and global reactions to US operations, (3) the prospects for building multinational security cooperation on Iraq, Afghanistan, and terrorism; and, (4) the appeal, influence, and growth of terrorist organizations and extremist movements.

Official efforts to shape the public’s appreciation of the issue may have included the pre-war placement of suspect stories meant to cast doubt on subsequent casualty reports. During the wars, perception management included efforts to “spin” or frame casualty incidents and stories in ways that minimized their significance, cast doubt on their reliability, or shirked responsibility for the occurrence of casualties. DoD and armed services officials often (but inconsistently) refused to divulge casualty estimates, although relevant intelligence was available at every level ranging from the Office of the Secretary of Defense down to field units.

DoD and other US officials also promoted more general concepts to frame public discussion and media coverage of the casualty issue. One of these frames -- the concept of a new low-risk “precision warfare” -- created unrealistic expectations that war would produce very low casualties on all sides. Another frame -- what might be called “casualty agnosticism” -- implied that it was impossible to derive usefully accurate estimates of casualties, despite the presence of prodigious investigative resources in the

field (both governmental and non-governmental). DoD was fairly successfully in projecting these framing concepts into US media coverage of the wars and war casualties.

Polls of foreign public opinion indicate that the perception management campaigns were distinctly unsuccessful in influencing their putative primary target: foreign public opinion. They may have been more successful in influencing domestic US opinion -- insofar as a "perception gap" now separates Americans from much of the rest of the world on war-related issues. Distortion of the casualty issue can only serve to impede the sober assessment of US policy, policy options, and their consequences. It is antithetical both to well-informed public debate and to sensible policy-making.

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Central to the rationale for recent US military actions abroad is the notion that America has developed a new way of war -- a "new warfare" -- that promises minimal collateral damage and civilian casualties. President Bush summarized the essentials of this proposition in a speech before workers at a Boeing aircraft plant in April, 2003:

By a combination of creative strategies and advanced technologies, we are redefining war on our terms. In this new era of warfare, we can target a regime, not a nation.¹

The casualty issue engages not only moral and legal concerns, but strategic ones as well. The human cost of a war -- including the cost imposed on one's adversary -- bears on the perceived legitimacy of a war, its immediate after-shocks, and its longer-term repercussions. These factors can negatively affect the freedom of action and strategic influence of the victor, thus subtracting from the benefits of victory and possibly even negating them. Thus, the human cost of war (broadly conceived) and the prospect of collateral damage must figure centrally in any free decision to go to war.

US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld partially elucidated the strategic significance of the casualty issue in a November 2001 interview with Jim Lehrer of the *PBS Newshour*. Referring to the prospect of Afghan civilian casualties, Rumsfeld said:

[I]f you kill a lot of civilians, the people inside Afghanistan will believe you're not discriminating and that you are against the people of Afghanistan... [I]nstead of defecting and leaving Taliban and leaving al Qaeda, they're going to be more supportive and they're going to be against the United States and the coalition forces. And we don't want that. ... [T]here are a lot of Muslims in the world. To the extent you behave in a way that suggests that you don't really care about whether or not you're killing soldiers and people that are terrorists or civilians...it makes life difficult for countries that are supporting us that have large Muslim populations.²

One concern here is that collateral damage may drive members of the aggrieved identity group into the arms of the opposition or, at least, into an anti-American stance. The effect can be to strengthen America's adversaries, weaken America's alliances, or both. A backlash can also take the form of diffuse, revenge attacks on America's interests and those of its friends -- a "cycle of violence" dynamic.

More generally, civilian casualties and collateral damage can sap the legitimacy of a military operation (especially if it has been rationalized as a "human rights" enterprise) and they can tarnish the reputation of the prosecuting power. This can broadly undermine cooperative relationships and even prompt counter-balancing behavior (that is, nations coming together to constrain the war-making power).

What constitutes "acceptable casualties" from the vantage point of containing such effects depends on the war in question, its rationale, how it is fought, and how it articulates with existing fault lines in the global community. If there is a secular trend evident in world attitudes regarding war, it is a steady lowering of the ceiling on the number of casualties considered acceptable.

Casualty-related repercussions of recent military operations

It is probably the case that the negative repercussions of America's post-9/11 military operations would have been minimal had these operations focused narrowly on destroying Al Qaeda and had they claimed no more than one or two hundred non-combatant lives. In the actual case, US-led operations went far beyond the hunt for Al Qaeda to include two conventional wars whose objectives were regime change. By February 2004, neither war had yet produced a stable peace in the subject countries, but they had imposed more than 18,000 fatalities including perhaps 6,000 non-combatant deaths.³ Based on historical experience, it is reasonable to assume that they additionally involved as many as 50,000 non-fatal casualties, both military and non-military.

Effects on the ground

In both Afghanistan and Iraq, expressions of anger and even hatred toward the United States, although a minority sentiment, have been frequent and visceral among those who have lost family members, suffered injury, or tangled with coalition troops. Many thousands of families have been directly affected. And such sentiments can spread to even broader numbers along village, kin, and tribal lines, serving to intensify political, cultural, and nationalist tensions with occupation forces. This can feed terrorist and insurgent activity, providing a base of support, if not recruits.

More than 300 coalition troops were killed in Afghanistan and Iraq during the period between the end of major combat in those countries and 1 February 2004. Regarding Iraq, the US Central Command has cited a frequency of anti-coalition activity since 1 May that indicates a total of more than 4,700 attacks -- an average of approximately 17 per day. This may reflect the activity of no more than 5,000 active insurgents, as estimated by General John Abizaid, but a broader discontent is also evident:

- A four-city poll by Zogby International conducted in August 2003 found that 49 percent of Iraqis described the attacks on US troops as "resistance operations," while only 29 percent saw them as attacks by "Baath loyalists."⁴
- A poll of Baghdad residents conducted by the Gallup Organization in September and October 2003 found that 36 percent of the city's inhabitants thought the attacks on the United States were either completely, somewhat, or sometimes justified.⁵

The ambivalence of Iraqis also is made clear in an October-November 2003 poll by Oxford Research International (ORI). The ORI poll found that 42 percent of respondents felt that Saddam's fall was the best thing to have happened in 2003, while 35 percent identified the worst thing to have been the war, bombings, and defeat.⁶ The Zogby poll also found that over 55 percent of Iraqis gave a negative rating to "how the US military is dealing with Iraqi civilians," while 20 percent gave the US military a positive rating.

Impact on world opinion

A series of polls show that world reaction to the post-9/11 wars has been distinctly negative in most places and often correlated with opposition to the bombing campaigns.⁷ Following the Iraq war, a Pew Research Center poll found that majorities in 13 out of 21 major countries surveyed (including the United States) thought the United States had not tried hard enough to limit

casualties. Parallel to negative attitudes regarding the military campaigns, support for the United States has declined worldwide:

- The June 2003 Pew survey found that, since the year 2000, the proportion of citizens having a favorable view of the United States fell from 78 to 45 percent in Germany, 56 to 34 percent in Brazil, 50 to 38 percent in Spain, 76 to 60 percent in Italy, and 58 to 46 percent in South Korea.
- Majorities in six of seven reported European countries want to loosen their ties to the United States; the six are France, Germany, Russia, Italy, Spain, and Turkey. A September 2003 poll by the German Marshall Fund found that support among Europeans for strong US leadership had declined from 64 percent to 45 percent, while opposition had grown from 31 percent to 49 percent.
- The Pew report also concluded that “the bottom has fallen out of support for America in most of the Muslim world” -- a conclusion well supported by other surveys and sources. According to the Pew survey, support for the United States in Turkey had dropped from 52 to 15 percent since 1999-2000; in Morocco, from 77 to 27 percent; in Indonesia, from 75 to 15 percent; in Pakistan, from 23 to 13 percent; and among Muslims in Nigeria, from 71 to 38 percent. In seven of eight Islamic nations surveyed, majorities perceived a significant degree of military threat from the United States

Strategic consequences

Correlated with the decline in international public support for the United States and US leadership have been a variety of strategic developments that bear negatively on US security interests:

- Among the most serious of these has been the convergence of several major US allies and several potential US competitors -- France, Germany, Russia, and China -- in opposition to US policy regarding Iraq.
- Negative public reactions to US war campaigns also limited the capacity of Pakistan, Turkey, and India to fully cooperate with or aid US efforts
- More generally, anger in the Muslim world translated into significant electoral gains for Islamic parties in Pakistan, Turkey, Morocco, and Malaysia, and greater influence for Islamist organizations in Southeast Asia and East Africa.

- There has been a resurgence of terrorist activity after a brief recession following the Afghan war. Between December 2001 and early January 2004 there were 31 major terrorist incidents possibly related to Al Qaeda, its affiliates, or kindred groups *excluding* attacks in Russia/Chechnya, Kashmir, Israel, the West Bank, or Iraq.⁸ In addition: Russia and Kashmir have suffered several major incidents during this period; Israel and the West Bank, dozens; and Iraq, more than 20 since 1 May 2003.

The negative effects associated with war fatalities affirms the need to keep the numbers of casualties very low. It also helps motivate US efforts to shape how publics worldwide perceive and understand casualties. The experience of America's post-9/11 wars suggests that the ability of the US armed forces to wage wars with acceptably low casualty levels still falls short by more than a full order of magnitude. The manifest limits of precision warfare increase the importance of perception management campaigns as a complement to US military operations.

Perception management and the public affairs “battlespace”

Increased international and domestic attention to the collateral effects of military operations has been a persistent concern of the US defense community since the Vietnam war. The increased capacity of the global media to inflame “casualty sensitivity” -- either in support of or opposition to foreign intervention -- has also been a subject of broad concern in the US defense community. Since the early 1990s, the US strategic literature has been filled with ruminations on the evolving capacity of adversaries to exploit the CNN effect in seeking an asymmetric advantage over the United States. This has inspired some in the defense establishment to reconceptualize the public media as a “battlespace” and public affairs as a “weapon.”

Beginning with the 1999 Kosovo war, US efforts at “perception management” have become more sophisticated and energetic as well as more central to the conduct of war. Especially since 11 September 2001, the Pentagon has been more aggressive in attempting to manage the media, control the flow of information, and shape the coverage of American operations abroad. The Bush administration has borrowed from the Kosovo experience the practice of maintaining multiple information management centers -- “war rooms” -- that cut across time zones. This with the aim of coordinating media messages and dominating the 24-hour news cycle during operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. Also active in the “public information battlespace” has been the office of the Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, the DoD's Office of Special Plans, and the short-lived Office of Strategic Influence (OSI). These supplement and guide the routine activities of public affairs offices in the State Department, Defense Department, and the individual armed services.

It is not unusual for governments to attempt “perception management” campaigns during war time. The real focus of concern regarding the post-9/11 campaigns has been their methods, choice of targets, and effectiveness. Especially controversial has been the possibility that false or misleading information might have been spread to Western and allied electorates. And, in fact, both US and British authorities have disseminated some intelligence data known to be weak or unreliable when they made the case for war.

Looking more broadly, an analysis by USAF Colonel Sam Gardiner (retired) has identified more than 50 suspect stories on the Iraqi conflict -- all of which the author argues show signs of being products of a media manipulation campaign.⁹ The subjects of these stories include Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, Iraqi contact with Al Qaeda, Iraqi violations of the laws of war, the surrender of Iraqi divisions, the Private Lynch episode, Iraqi execution of POWs, infrastructure attacks and civilian casualties during the war, the post-conflict situation in Iraq, and the purported support of the Russian, French, German, and Syrian governments for the Iraqi regime.

Spinning the marketplace bombings

Among the active efforts of the US coalition to frame coverage of casualties were suggestions by Defense and State Department officials that (1) the Hussein regime had procured military uniforms resembling those of US forces so that Iraqi personnel might enact atrocities that would be blamed on Americans and that (2) the regime was stockpiling cadavers before the war to be used to create an inflated impression of wartime civilian casualties. Similarly, Vice Admiral Lowell Jacoby, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, testified to Congress before the war that Iraq would likely destroy its own food, energy, and transportation infrastructure in order to create a humanitarian disaster that it could blame on US forces.

A more effective and consequential example of news management was the coalition effort to “spin” the coverage of the two marketplace bombings in Baghdad that together claimed more than 70 lives early in the war.¹⁰ American and British authorities quickly suggested that these tragedies might have been the result of Iraqi air defense missiles falling back to earth, rather than the direct result of coalition air attacks. Although this scenario is not entirely implausible, it is substantially less likely than the competing one, for two reasons: (1) the relative numbers of suitable weapons used by the two sides in the Baghdad area and (2) the attack vectors and performance characteristics of these weapons.

In light of these two factors, the “prior probability” of a US air-to-surface weapon being the culprit in each of the marketplace bombings could easily have been ten or more times greater than that of an air defense missile being the culprit. This would have been known to coalition military leaders even before an enterprising British reporter traced serial numbers on debris found

at one of the sites to the Naval Air System Command and Raytheon, manufacturer of AGM-88 HARM anti-radar missiles. Nonetheless, coalition military and civilian leaders sought to rivet media attention on the off-chance that Iraqi air defense weapons were to blame. Indeed, coalition leaders continued to espouse uncertainty even in the face of the material evidence found at the site.

The news media's willingness to adopt an agnostic stance with regard to the marketplace bombings and to give the coalition "the benefit of the doubt" divided along predictable lines. While the bombings reverberated loudly in the Muslim and Arab worlds, the story had no "legs" in the United States and only short ones in Britain.

Framing the air attack on Baghdad

Since the Second World War the practice of strategic bombing and, especially, aerial attack on cities, has been dogged by a growing body of international law that seeks to constrain it. This can pose a special, asymmetric concern for the US armed forces who have come to rely uniquely on air power. US air campaigns incorporate operational concepts such as "decapitation" and "shock and awe" and they put significant emphasis on attacking dual-use and political targets. In this light, DoD sought to frame the air attack on Baghdad in ways that would deny the Hussein regime any claim to the legal high ground.

The coalition complemented its aerial bombardment of Baghdad with consistent complaints about the legality of Iraq's placement of air defense systems in and around residential and industrial areas of the city. Notably, the coalition insisted that Iraq not place air defense systems within 300 feet of residences, schools, mosques, or hospitals. But this is a standard that would have made effective air defense of the city impossible -- an outcome not consonant with the intent of international law. In fact, it is not uniformly illegal to operate in or near civilian areas if such operations are militarily necessary. For better or worse, international law gives wide berth to military necessity. (The law does require, however, that armed forces balance military necessity against the risk to civilians when conducting operations. And, of course, international law strictly forbids placing military assets near a civilian structure simply in order to take advantage of its protected status.)

The coalition's objections to Iraqi air defense tended to obscure or distract from the determinant factors that shaped the threat to civilians, which were:

- A war that aims to topple a regime is likely to entail some sort of urban combat or attack -- at least involving the capital city;

- Wars fought for maximum objectives -- such as national sovereignty or regime survival -- tend to be fought intensely, even desperately. In such cases, considerations of military necessity will weigh heavily against concerns about collateral damage.
- Regardless of political objectives, any method of war that emphasizes aerial bombardment including attacks on urban, political, and dual-use targets is going to turn cities into air combat zones, involving intense duels between ground attack and air defense systems.

Within these parameters, combatants can pay more or less attention to the plight of civilians -- and it is important to require, as humanitarian law does, that they do the best they can to spare the innocent. But even under the best of circumstances, the exchange of thousands of warheads and bombs, hurled downward into and upward from populated areas, is going to claim a serious toll in innocent life. This puts a heavy burden of responsibility on those who initiate wars of the type described above. The deciding factor is whether and to what extent the wars in question are defensive in nature and necessary.

Framework propositions on casualties and collateral damage

The coalition efforts to spin the Iraqi marketplace bombings (in terms of “uncertainty”) and to frame the bombardment of Baghdad (in terms of the illegality of Iraqi air defense operations) represent *ad hoc* attempts at managing specific controversies over the war’s blood cost. DoD also has advanced several ideas of broader scope to frame its recent conduct of war overall. These framework propositions are meant to influence how the US public evaluates the option of going to war and how the entire world assesses its costs once war commences. The four framing propositions are:

- (1) *Precision warfare*: US precision attack capabilities have revolutionized warfare, making it possible to wage war with greatly reduced casualties and collateral damage;
- (2) *Damage limitation*: US armed forces go to incomparable lengths to limit collateral damage and civilian casualties: they are doing the best they can to spare the innocent and more than anyone else has done before;
- (3) *Casualty agnosticism*: The number of war casualties cannot be known with certainty, at any rate, and
- (4) *Casualty irrelevance*: the number of casualties is not especially meaningful in assessing the success or progress of a war effort.

Assessing the claims: precision warfare and damage limitation

Claims about “precision warfare” derive from the increasing reliance of the United States on aerial weapons that can strike within 40 feet of their targets 50 percent of the time. By contrast, US damage limitation efforts pertain not to technological capabilities, *per se*, but instead to the choice of targets and the care exercised in attacking them. US efforts along these lines include vetting targets with DoD lawyers and relying on computer simulations -- the so-called “bug splat” program -- to predict the likely “spill over” or collateral effects of an attack.

While the new warfare has been touted as “low risk” and “low cost,” the capabilities and procedures that are supposed to distinguish it cannot by themselves guarantee either of these outcomes. Neither the precision of US weapons nor the care with which they are delivered can tell us how many people will be killed in wars by these weapons. For this, there are several reasons.

First, the two standards upon which expectations about the new warfare are based -- weapon precision and care in targeting -- *do not reflect actual casualty and damage outcomes on the battlefield*. They are not based on comprehensive empirical surveys of war casualties and collateral damage.

Typically, the basis for making claims about low-risk bombardment is the technical performance parameters of the weapons, such as their CEP or Circular Error Probable. At best, this measures the relationship between aim points and impact points *as determined in controlled tests, not on the battlefield*. Also, there is an obvious difference between hitting one’s intended target and not causing unintended casualties or damage in the process. Targeting protocols are meant to mitigate this problem -- by vetting targets and fine-tuning the attack, as noted above. But the actual effectiveness of this process also has not been tested or quantified empirically with regard to actual casualty outcomes.

Second, weapon performance parameters and procedures for limiting collateral damage are only two variables in a complex equation that determines the extent of collateral death and destruction caused by weapon use.

The other factors that determine the extent of casualties are:

- Operational plans and methods, which determine what types of missions will be attempted and how much they will “stress” weapon capabilities and targeting procedures. These determine how much a nation depends on aerial bombardment and whether its weapon capabilities will be tested in urban and populated areas.

- Political-strategic factors, which include the goals for which a war is fought. These might be more or less ambitious, ranging from efforts to foil or punish aggression to efforts to topple regimes.
- Issues of national strategy, which determine the role of force in a nation's foreign policy: A nation's use of force may be purely reactive (ie. defensive), preemptive, or even precautionary, and its threshold for using force may be high or low. These factors will determine how often a nation goes to war, why, and under what circumstances.

Depending on how a nation's policy registers with regard to these three factors, it can generate any number of war casualties over a decade regardless of precision attack capabilities or adept targeting procedures.

Have America's recent wars been "low casualty" events?

For many observers, the crux of the new warfare is the capacity to win while incurring historically low numbers of casualties. In the case of Operation Iraqi Freedom, however, this characteristic actually attained in only one respect: the highly favorable attrition ratio achieved by coalition forces in their contest with Iraqi fighters during the main combat phase of the war. During the period 19 March – 1 May, between 7,600 and 10,800 Iraqi combatants were killed by coalition forces, while only about 150 coalition troops died due to enemy action. This represents an average attrition exchange ratio of 60:1, which is far better than the best achieved by Israeli armies (4:1) in their contests with Arab armies.

The characterization of the new wars as "low casualty" events is supposed to extend also to adversary casualties -- especially noncombatants. By this measure, however, the outcome of the 2003 war clearly does not set it apart as distinctly revolutionary. Indeed, the war's death toll registered within the range of those suffered in many of the strategically significant international wars of the past 40 years -- including among them the 1965 and 1971 India-Pakistan wars and the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars.

The limits of damage limitation protocols

A key limit on the extent to which careful targeting procedures can reduce collateral damage is that they are subordinate to considerations of military necessity. As one military lawyer active in the targeting process put it, "I've approved targets that could have caused some 3,000 civilian casualties, and I've raised questions about targets predicted to risk fewer than 20 civilian lives. The issue is the importance of the target."¹¹ Similarly, a senior Defense Department official said

in the opening days of the Iraq war: “If it’s a high enough value target, you accept a higher risk of casualties.”¹²

It is important to recognize that the value of a target is not a fixed quantity. Nor is “military necessity” fixed. These both are defined in terms of *chosen* operational methods, campaign plans, and war objectives. What presents itself as tactical necessity is partly a matter of choice on another level. And these choices weigh heavily in balancing military necessity against civilian protection. Thus, campaign plans that depend heavily on very high-speed operations, or on large-scale aerial bombardment, or on urban combat, or on attacking leadership (ie. political) targets are going to pose military imperatives that might not exist in other approaches. These imperatives are no more “necessary” in an absolute sense than the operational concepts that produce them.

Results may vary: How measures of precision mislead

Why the difference between the promise and the practice of “precision warfare”? Weapon malfunctions and human error play a major role in standard explanations of collateral damage and civilian casualties. But this exaggerates the precision of current weapons and depreciates their destructive power. Apart from malfunctions and mistakes, the inaccuracy inherent in current systems, the destructive power they possess, and the chaotic dynamics of war itself are sufficient to make it likely that substantial collateral damage and civilian casualties will occur when tens of thousands of bombs are used. These attributes -- and not errors and malfunctions -- are what weigh most heavily on the civilian victims of war.

Almost 20,000 guided air-delivered weapons were used in the Iraq war, constituting 68 percent of the total air-delivered munitions used in Iraq. Among these weapons, CEPs ranged between 3 and 15 meters, with the mean being approximately 8 meters or 25 feet. This is sufficiently *inaccurate* to guarantee that a significant percentage of weapons aimed at the center of a building will land in the street -- or in the building next door. Moreover, even given perfect intelligence and accuracy, most guided weapons in the 500- to 2000-pound range are sufficiently powerful to routinely cause some degree of collateral damage. These weapons will destroy almost everything within a radius of 60 to 105 feet.

The brute destructive power of these weapons is not ancillary to the recent success of precision attack, but central to it. *A critical threshold in the development of US capabilities was passed when the CEP for the delivery of bombs in the 500- to 2000-pound class fell significantly below the destructive radius of these weapons.* At that point, weapon delivery became sufficiently precise to ensure that targets would usually be encompassed by the destructive footprint of these weapons, which extends over an area of between one-quarter and one full acre.

The ease with which public discourse has adopted the language and frame of “precision warfare” is surprising. Just a few years ago military professionals would not have described most of the guided weapons used in the Iraq war as “precision” instruments, reserving this adjective instead for systems with a CEP of 3 meters or less. Taking a broader perspective: the coalition expended a total of approximately 6 kilotons of explosives in aerial attacks during the Iraq war. More than this was additionally expended by ground based system. And less than a third of the ground and air total involved guided weapons. That this massive use of explosives should gain the moniker of “precision warfare” reflects a singular triumph in branding.

Casualty agnosticism

Faced with civilian casualty reports in the Afghan war the administration initially dismissed them largely as Taliban propaganda, or minimized them as the unfortunate but unavoidable concomitant of war, or attempted to shift responsibility to the Taliban, arguing that they had made the war (and, by extension, strategic bombardment) necessary.

As reports of civilian casualties continued to erode support for the war nonetheless, the Bush administration attempted a more subtle framing of the casualty issue: *casualty agnosticism*. Rather than making positive claims about casualties, this approach simply implied that no such claims were possible. Casualty agnosticism aims to sink the whole issue of war casualties in an impenetrable murk of skepticism.

Exemplifying this agnosticism were Secretary Rumsfeld’s assertions that it was “next to impossible to get factual information about civilian casualties.” At a 5 December 2001 press conference he counseled reporters “to be sensitive to how difficult it is to know with certainty, in real time, what may have happened in any given situation in Afghanistan.” Similarly, during the Iraq conflict, CENTCOM deputy director of operations General Vincent Brooks asserted that “the number of casualties is a figure that can never be completely well-determined.” Asked to give a preliminary estimate of casualties, Brooks declined, saying that “I don’t think that in any case of recorded history of warfare a full knowledge of all casualties and all secondary effects has ever been gained.

The administration’s espousal of casualty agnosticism turns on phrases like “completely well-determined,” “known with certainty,” and “full knowledge of all casualties and all secondary effects.” Of course, it is true that it is impossible to calculate a casualty figure that is both absolutely certain and precise. But this truth is a facile one; it holds not only for the Afghan and Iraq conflicts but for all wars and genocides. Nonetheless, some of the casualty estimates associated with these events are widely accepted as sufficiently accurate to usefully inform policy.

Casualty agnosticism gains leverage by inflating and exploiting several indisputable facts: battlefield reporting is difficult, casualty accounts cannot be accepted wholesale or on face value, and aggregate casualty estimates are imprecise. Of course, none of these facts entail that it is “next to impossible” to gather usefully accurate aggregate data on war fatalities -- although this is what the administration implies. In fostering casualty agnosticism the administration distorts the casualty issue in two ways:

- It posits an unnecessarily high standard for what constitutes a useful degree of precision in aggregate casualty estimates, and
- It depreciates the value of the information flow from recent battlefields, categorically dismissing hundreds of detailed casualty reports.

The relevance to policy of a casualty toll does not hinge on achieving a zero margin of error or producing a discrete total (ie. a single number, rather than a range). *In strategic terms*, the difference between 9,000 and 15,000 fatalities, for instance, is only marginally significant. In other words: the degree of precision reflected in an estimate of “9,000 to 15,000 dead” is sufficient to usefully inform policy. And the degree of proof required to support such a statement is much less onerous than that needed to support a precise number.

Turning to the second point: Contrary to the Pentagon’s frame, the flow of open source information from the battlefield has never been richer than in the Afghan and Iraq conflicts. Both the number of reporters at work in the field during the Afghan and Iraq wars and the technology at their disposal allowed unparalleled coverage. Indeed, these wars represent the most intensively reported in history.

Aggregate casualty estimates are usually extrapolations based on the analysis of demographic trends or on the sampling of direct and indirect evidence (human remains, killing sites, survivor and eyewitness testimony, hospital records, and field accounts by journalists, military personnel, and others). Other types of information -- for instance, population density, bombing data, or records of troop movements -- can serve to test the plausibility of casualty claims and help in the formulation of good estimates.

In the case of the Afghan and Iraq wars, there were more than 85 incidents involving multiple civilian fatalities (sometimes running into the dozens) whose particulars were supported by multiple Western sources, on-site reporting, substantial visual records, and interviews with eyewitnesses, survivors, and sometimes hospital and aid workers. Many more incidents were less thoroughly or less reliably reported. All told, more than 350 individual incidents in the two wars gained some Western press attention. In addition, there are many reports from individual hospitals of cumulative fatalities as well as several city-wide or multi-city surveys of hospital and

burial society records. Finally, in both Afghanistan and Iraq, surveys of bombing victims and survivors have been undertaken by non-governmental organization. This constitutes a very rich evidence base.

There is little remarkable in the proposition that the “information technology revolution” would significantly affect the gathering and provision of news. More remarkable is the fact that Pentagon officials would extol that revolution as having provided an ability to wage low-casualty war, while denigrating its impact on efforts to investigate the effects of war. *Of course, an abiding contradiction in the “new warfare” ideology is that it simultaneously maintains that today’s wars are low casualty events while denying that we can know even approximately how many people are being killed in those wars.*

The “casualty agnosticism” frame also gives the false impression that official policy proceeds on the basis of no expectations regarding the likely incidence of casualties. In fact, the strong implication of both the “precision warfare” and “damage limitation” frames is that casualties will be “low” -- not indeterminate. And on numerous occasions coalition officials have asserted as much. This illustrates that the choice we face is not between making or not making estimates, but instead between making them (and their evidentiary base) explicit or leaving them implicit and unexamined.

“We don’t do body counts”: The irrelevance of enemy combatant casualties

The final frame under examination concerns enemy combatant casualties. During the Afghan and Iraq wars Pentagon officials frequently claimed that, as a matter of policy, the enemy’s battlefield dead were not being counted. The public rationale for this omission was that “body counts” are a poor indicator of success in war -- and thus “irrelevant” -- and that using them encourages a simplistic, attrition approach to warfighting. Along these lines Lt. Col. Dave Lapan (USMC), a Pentagon spokesperson explained:

It's not a useful figure to us. It's not a measure of effectiveness.... It doesn't really matter militarily how many Iraqi soldiers may be killed.

Officials commonly traced their reluctance to produce casualty estimates to the Vietnam war experience, during which some military and civilian leaders had used body counts as a leading indicator of success -- a practice that damaged the war effort.

In fact, the strong implication that the US armed forces did not estimate enemy casualties during the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts is false. Estimates were made frequently and at every level. Those made at the division level or below were frequently shared with the press -- often unofficially.

However, there is no evidence or reason to believe that these estimates were used as an indicator of war success.

Based on the Vietnam experience, it is entirely appropriate for military leaders, both civilian and uniformed, to remind the nation and its armed forces that “body counts” should not serve as a measure of progress toward victory. But this does not preclude making such estimates or sharing them with the public. Casualty estimates are relevant for other important reasons, as noted earlier in this executive summary and as known to US military leaders. The Vietnam experience does not justify a refusal to publically disclose casualty estimates, no more than it justifies keeping the other costs and effects of war under wraps. The Pentagon frame on Iraqi combatant casualties served to mask an important variable in the war calculus.

Conclusion: America’s damaged discourse on war

In sum, DoD sought consistently during the Afghan and Iraq conflicts to promote interpretative frames -- ways of understanding war -- that occluded the human cost of these wars. As reviewed in this report, DoD employed four principal frames:

- The *new warfare* and *damage limitation* frames focused attention on weapon performance parameters and targeting protocols as putative indicators of low casualty outcomes -- even though the relationship of these parameters and protocols to actual casualty outcomes had not been empirically quantified and is, at best, only contingent.
- In turn, the *casualty agnosticism* frame impeded serious consideration of empirical evidence from the battlefield, which the frame marks as unreliable. This, it does by positing an unattainable standard for casualty estimates: that they be both certain and precise. Based on this standard, the frame elides the flow of journalistic and other battlefield information on collateral damage and casualties, although the data stream is richer today than ever before. The standard posited by *casualty agnosticism* is not only unattainable, but also unnecessary: Casualty estimates qualified by significant margins of error could still usefully inform policy.
- Finally, the *casualty irrelevance* frame sought to mobilize the memory of the Vietnam debacle in order to rationalize the administration’s refusal to disclose casualty estimates. But the frame misapplies the lesson of Vietnam -- which is that body counts should not be used to measure progress toward victory. This is not an argument against estimating and disclosing casualties.

As summarized earlier, a variety of polls indicate that the Pentagon's recent efforts at perception management have been distinctly ineffective with regard to their putative primary target: foreign public opinion. They may have been more effective in shaping US public opinion, however -- judging from how well they registered in the US media's coverage of the Afghan and Iraq wars. But this manner of engaging the US public is neither necessary nor good.

It was not necessary because the efforts of America's recent adversaries to manipulate US public opinion have proved hopelessly stolid and inept. Moreover, careful assessments of public opinion show that the American public is not especially "casualty intolerant" -- as long as it assents to the purpose and necessity of a war. This seems a healthy degree of caution that can be addressed through regular political discourse. Indeed, this may provide the surest guarantee against misadventures abroad.

The perception management efforts examined in this report could only have impeded a full appreciation of the blood cost of war, thus making difficult a sober assessment of US policy options. In addition to distorting the national discourse on war, these efforts may have damaged America's image abroad -- thus actually contributing to the problem they were meant to mitigate. Any effort that seems designed to "disappear the dead" is bound to broadly alienate world opinion. Finally, these efforts may have contributed to the perceptual divide that separates America from much of the rest of the world, thus undermining international understanding and cooperation.

The tendency to mask the human cost of war involves more than just the debates over the Afghan and Iraq operations. The problem resides, more than anywhere else, in the confident belief that the United States has discovered a new way of fighting wars that is virtually bloodless. This belief seems immune to the fact that these "new wars" (beginning in 1991) have claimed the lives of approximately 50,000 people (of which 10,000 were non-combatants). This conceit pertains significantly to the utility of America's post-Cold War military predominance. Thus, it may be difficult to excise. Be that as it may: Until US political and opinion leaders disabuse themselves of the "new war" ideology, the nation will be brought to war easily, but left unprepared for and perplexed by the consequences that follow.

Notes

1. "Bush' Speech: Remarks by President Bush at Boeing, St. Louis, Missouri," *Voice of America News*, 16 April 2003.
 2. Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, Interview with Jim Lehrer, *PBS News Hour*, 7 November 2001, *DOD News Transcript*, 7 November 2001.
 3. Estimates for fatalities during the main combat phase of the Afghan war are 3,000-4,000 enemy Afghan combatants and 1,100-1,300 Afghan civilians. Estimates for fatalities during the main combat phase of the Iraq war are 7,800-10,700 Iraqi combatants (both regular military and irregular fighters) and 3,200-4,300 non-combatants.
- Sources:** Carl Conetta, *The Wages of War: Iraqi Combatant and Noncombatant Fatalities in the 2003 Conflict* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Commonwealth Institute, October 2003);
- Conetta, *Strange Victory: A critical appraisal of Operation Enduring Freedom and the Afghanistan war*, Project on Defense Alternatives Research Monograph #6 (Cambridge, MA: Commonwealth Institute, 30 January 2002), <http://www.comw.org/pda/0201strangevic.html>. See especially *Section 1.1* and *Appendix I*; and
- Conetta, *Operation Enduring Freedom: Why a Higher Rate of Civilian Bombing Casualties* (Cambridge, MA: Commonwealth Institute, Project on Defense Alternatives Briefing Report #11, 24 January 2002), <http://www.comw.org/pda/0201oef.html>.
- Also see:** "Appendix 2. Guide to Surveys and Reporting on Casualties in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, 2001-2004" in Conetta, *Disappearing the Dead: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Idea of a "New Warfare"*, PDA Research Monograph #9 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Commonwealth Institute, February 2004).
4. James Zogby, "Bend it like Cheney - Polling evidence shows most Iraqis have a negative view of the US-led occupation," *The Guardian*, 29 October 2003, available at: <http://www.zogby.com/search/ReadClips.dbm?ID=6168>; and, Guy Dinmore, "Opinion poll underlines Iraqi distrust of America," *Financial Times*, 11 September 2003.
 5. Richard Burkholder, "Baghdad Views US Troops: Protectors or Justifiable Targets?", press briefing, *Gallup Organization*, 14 October 2003.
 6. Michael McDonough, "Most Iraqis distrust coalition troops, survey indicates," *Associated Press*, 1 December 2003.
 7. German Marshall Fund and Compagnia Di San Paolo, *Transatlantic Trends 2003* (Washington DC: Marshall Fund, September 2003); Paul Richter, "7 of 8 Islamic Nations in Poll Fear US Attack; More than 50% surveyed in those countries are 'very worried' or 'somewhat worried' about a perceived military

threat,” *Los Angeles Times*, 4 June 2003, p. 3; *Views of a Changing World 2003* (Washington DC: Pew Global Attitudes Project, June 2003); *Post War Iraq Poll* (London: Gallup International Association, May 2003); Gay Alcorn, “Resentful Muslims See America As Ruthless, Arrogant And Biased,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 February 2002, p. 9; *2002 Gallup Poll of the Islamic World* (Princeton, New Jersey: Gallup Organization, February 2002); and, Gallup International Association, *Poll on International Terrorism in the United States* (London, IGA, September 2001), available at <gallup-international.com>.

8. Carl Conetta and Melissa Murphy, *Selected major terrorist incidents worldwide since the conclusion of Operation Enduring Freedom*, Project on Defense Alternatives Briefing Memo 31 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Commonwealth Institute, January 2004).

9. Col. Sam Gardiner (USAF, ret.), is now an independent consultant on humanitarian operations and has served as an adjunct professor at the National War College in Washington DC and at the Air War College at Maxwell AFB in Alabama. Gardiner, *Truth from These Podia: Summary of a Study of Strategic Influence, Perceptions Management, Strategic Information Warfare, and Strategic Psychological Operations in Gulf II*; available at: www.comw.org/warreport/fulltext/0310gardiner.pdf

10. The first of the two market bombings occurred on Wednesday 26 March 2003 at the Al Shaab marketplace. The second occurred Friday, 28 March 2003, at the Al-Nasr (Nassar) market in the al-Shuala (Shoala) district.

11. *Report from the Understanding Collateral Damage Workshop*, 4-5 June 2002, Washington, DC (Cambridge MA: Project on the Means of Intervention, Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, JFK School of Government, 2002).

12. Eric Schmitt, “Rumsfeld Says Dozens of Important Targets Have Been Avoided,” *New York Times*, 24 March 2003, p. 12.