

Collateral Damage and the "Incident" at Haditha

Tom Engelhardt

University of California, Berkeley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Engelhardt, Tom. "Collateral Damage and the "Incident" at Haditha." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 9.1 (2007): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1015>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 1455 times as of 11/07/19.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 9 Issue 1 (March 2007) Article 4**Tom Engelhardt,****"Collateral Damage and the 'Incident' at Haditha"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol9/iss1/4>>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 9.1 (2007)**Thematic Issue Representing Humanity in an Age of Terror****Edited by Sophia A. McClennen and Henry James Morello**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol9/iss1/>>

Abstract: In his paper, "Collateral Damage and the 'Incident' at Haditha," Tom Engelhardt provides a comparative analysis of the massacres of innocent civilians in the Viet Nam and Iraqi wars. Focusing on the events of My Lai, Haditha, Abu Ghraib, and Fallujah, Engelhardt traces the uncanny resemblance between the ways that the military attempted to contain the flow of information about these atrocities. Engelhardt analyzes the rhetorical tropes of media coverage via the favored terms of "collateral damage" and "incident" and the preferred statistics that always claim that 99.9% of the military conducts itself professionally. The fact that the media not only accepts but also promotes such specious terms and statistics has dire consequences for the public's ability to make sense of the atrocities of war. Engelhardt's analysis reveals how the practice of war and the language it depends on create a mass of unknowable enemies that are easy to kill and even easier to forget.

Tom ENGELHARDT**Collateral Damage and the "Incident" at Haditha**

First news stories about the My Lai massacre (picked up from an army publicity release), March 1968: *The New York Times* labeled the operation a significant success: "American troops caught a North Vietnamese force in a pincer movement on the central coastal plain yesterday, killing 128 enemy soldiers in day-long fighting." United Press International called it an "impressive victory," and added a bit of patriotic color: "The Vietcong broke and ran for their hide-out tunnels. Six-and-a-half hours later, 'Pink Village' had become a 'Red, White and Blue Village'";

***The New York Times*, November 21, 2005:** "The Marine Corps said Sunday that 15 Iraqi civilians and a Marine were killed Saturday when a roadside bomb exploded in Haditha, 140 miles northwest of Baghdad. The bombing on Saturday in Haditha, on the Euphrates in the Sunni-dominated province of Anbar, was aimed at a convoy of American Marines and Iraqi Army soldiers, said Capt. Jeffrey S. Pool, a Marine spokesman. After the explosion, gunmen opened fire on the convoy. At least eight insurgents were killed in the firefight, the captain said" (http://www.tompaine.com/print/the_man_from_haditha.php);

***Knight Ridder*, March 21, 2006:** "Questions about the incident [at Ishaqi] focus on diverging U.S. military and Iraqi police accounts of the raid, which happened around 2:30 a.m. on March 15 on a house about 60 miles north of Baghdad. Both sides and neighbors agree that U.S. troops were involved in a firefight with a suspected member of al-Qaida in Iraq. But the U.S. account gave the death toll as four and said the house collapsed from the heavy fire it took during the fighting. The al-Qaida suspect was found alive in the rubble and arrested, the U.S. report on the incident said. Iraqi police, however, contend that U.S. troops gathered 11 people in the house into a single room and executed them, before destroying the house as they left the area." (<http://www.realcities.com/mld/krwashington/14153500.htm>)

Charlie Company, which had suffered 28 casualties in its first months in the area without ever seeing the Vietnamese enemy, was bent on revenge when, on March 16, 1968, it entered the sub-hamlet of My Lai 4, known to the soldiers as "Pinkville," on the Battambang Peninsula in Quangnai Province. Looking for the reputed "headquarters" of the 48th Vietcong Battalion, they found only women, children, infants, and old men, none resistant, many finishing breakfast. Almost all were slaughtered, upwards of 500 human beings.

At Haditha, we know that, in the phrase of the soldier who first reported the My Lai massacre, "something rather dark and bloody" -- and, it seems, criminal -- happened. It started with Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, a "feral" unit, living in a "Lord of the Flies" encampment (as described by British journalist Oliver Poole who paid it a frightening visit), on its third tour of duty in Iraq (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2006/06/01/wbush101.xml>). It had already been in some of the darkest, bloodiest, most feral fighting of the counterinsurgency war -- the destruction of much of the city of Fallujah (<http://www.tomdispatch.com/index.mhtml?pid=2124>) in November 2004. After watching a company member die from a roadside bomb that November day a year later, some of the unit's soldiers evidently massacred 24 Iraqi civilians who happened to be living nearby in the town of 90,000 in the heartland of the Sunni insurgency. A My Lai-style cover-up followed.

Other than revealing just how overstretched the American military is in Iraq, such an "incident" (as American officials liked to call such horrors back in the Vietnam era and still do today) is also a kind of confession -- of failure. If, as a soldier, you feel you are protecting anyone in an area, you do not simply slaughter random civilians, no matter how you may "snap." To commit such acts, these Marines must have concluded in the most visceral way that there simply were no Iraqis to protect in Haditha, perhaps in the Sunni provinces of Iraq altogether, perhaps in the whole country. You only slaughter the helpless face-to-face when even small children have become aliens, the enemy, so tainted by evil, by the killing of your people, that there's no hope for them. Think of it as on-the-ground military democracy, the grimmest sort of popular vote on whether you or the insurgents are winning the war. It's a small enough step in such circumstances from the knowledge that the enemy might be anywhere to the thought that the enemy is everywhere, and then to the feeling that every

Vietnamese/Iraqi is an enemy -- or, as the slaughtered were termed in the initial military indictment of My Lai's Lieutenant William Calley, every "Oriental human being" a "VC." Even a baby sucking at its mother's breast might, as one My Lai defendant claimed, be helping to conceal a hidden grenade.

The process by which all human beings in a region transmogrify into the hated and feared enemy works in reverse as well. As in the case of My Lai, the dead by some strange process can change back into aunts, grandfathers, children, babies. It can happen on the spot. As Ryan Briones, the first Marine from Kilo Company to speak out (though evidently not one of the killers), described the scene: "They ranged from little babies to adult males and females. I'll never be able to get that out of my head. I can still smell the blood. This left something in my head and heart" (<<http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2006/05/31/haditha-families.html?ref=rss>>).

Such "incidents" were far more common than we care to imagine in Vietnam and are undoubtedly more common in Iraq as well. Think of this as an endless feedback loop, the ultimate self-fulfilling prophesy (<<http://www.toledoblade.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?Category=SRTIGERFORCE>>). Scholar Juan Cole at his Informed Comment blog speculates "that the number of Iraqis in Anbar Province who said it was all right to attack US troops doubled to 80 percent in 2006 from 40-odd percent in January of 2004. Doubled. And Ishaqi and Haditha and lots of similar such incidents are the reason for this doubling" (<<http://www.juancole.com/2006/06/ishaqi-massacre-emerges-in-wake-of.html>>).

Just this week, the U.S. military concluded a rather hurried investigation of the "rather dark and bloody" events in the town of Ishaqi, also in the Sunni heartland -- and despite protests from the Iraqi government that this represented an unreasonable "rush to judgment" -- described the "incident" (<<http://edition.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/06/03/iraq.inquiries/>>) in the following way: "The [American] forces, upon arrival, began taking direct fire from the building. As the enemy fire persisted, the ground force commander appropriately reacted by incrementally escalating the use of force from small arms fire to rotary wing aviation, and then to close air support, ultimately eliminating the threats: "The investigating officer concluded that *possibly up to nine collateral deaths* resulted from this engagement but could not determine the precise number due to collapsed walls and heavy debris. Allegations that the troops executed a family living in this safe house, and then hid the alleged crimes by directing an air strike, are absolutely false" (<http://newsblaze.com/story/20060603075622tsop.nb/newsblaze/IRAQ0001/Iraq.html>).

Note that, under challenge, the al-Qaeda member and three "terrorist" associates in the initial Ishaqi report multiplied. There are now nine extra "collateral deaths," just as those "insurgents" in the initial military report from Haditha, according to the *Time Magazine* piece that broke the story, had already turned into civilian "collateral damage" in the first Marine probe of what happened there. ("[T]he deaths were the result of 'collateral damage' rather than malicious intent by the Marines" (<<http://www.time.com/time/world/printout/0,8816,1174649,00.html>>). The Iraqi police, who identified the deaths in Ishaqi as execution-style murders beg to disagree with the American conclusions, but let's leave aside the issue of criminal intent. What else do the "incidents" at Ishaqi, Haditha, and My Lai have in common?

As a start, you would never have learned about them from the U.S. military. My Lai took almost a year to make its way out of elaborate layers of cover-up via a then-unknown journalist named Seymour Hersh, and into major newspapers as well as -- in full photographic horror -- *Life Magazine*. Abu Ghraib took months to make it into full digital-photo horror on *Sixty Minutes II* and into the *New Yorker* magazine, thanks again to Seymour Hersh. Haditha took almost four months to make it into *Time*. (Knight Ridder -- a rarity -- reported the Iraqi and American versions of Ishaqi at once.) Imagine what realities may lie behind all the other news reports taken from military press releases or press conferences of "insurgent" or "terrorist" deaths in places no western journalist can venture in Iraq (or Afghanistan) (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Ghraib_prison>).

The American military's mode of response to any "incident" almost invariably turns out to be a long journey from the truth. The dead are always initially "insurgents" or "terrorists" (or "Vietcong" in the

Vietnam era). When, for instance, you see reports of the deaths of "insurgents" in bombing attacks, whether on urban neighborhoods in Iraq or villages in southern Afghanistan -- "Airstrike kills up to 80 Taliban, U.S. officials say" (<<http://www.newschannel5.tv/News/Other/2997/>>) -- there is every reason simply not to believe them, not without knowing who counted and how they identified the dead as the enemy.

Carnage is always portrayed by the military as justified and the death of civilians, if finally admitted, invariably as "accidental" in pursuit of the enemy; hence, "collateral damage." When Iraqis or Afghans (or once upon a time, Vietnamese) claim otherwise, such claims are invariably rejected on the spot by Pentagon spokesmen. On the face of it, the natives are never reliable or objective witnesses to killings in their own country -- the police in Ishaqi, to give but one example, might be infiltrated by or working with the insurgents. American reporters, once they cross certain lines, are no less unreliable. "*Time Magazine*, which first began making inquiries about the [Haditha] incident in January, reported that when one of its staff members asked [Marine spokesman Jeffrey S.] Pool about the allegations, he accused the journalist of being duped by terrorists. 'I cannot believe you're buying any of this,' the magazine said the officer wrote in an e-mail. 'This falls into the same category of any aqi [al-Qaeda in Iraq] propaganda'" (<http://www.hkstandard.com.hk/news_detail.asp?we_cat=6&art_id=19948&sid=8229886&con_type=1&d_str=20060602>). Pool was the Marine spokesman who made the initial, fraudulent announcement about Haditha in November 2005. In fact, to the Pentagon, there is only one objective, reliable investigator of potential U.S. military crimes to be called upon -- and that's the military itself. No genuine outside investigators can ever be brought into such a case. (Recently, the Iraqi prime minister demanded that the U.S. turn over its "investigative files" on the Marines in Haditha, so that his people could pursue their own investigation. Small piece of advice, Mr. Maliki: Don't hold your breath.)

Having rejected on-the-spot claims by locals and asserted that nothing out of the ordinary has happened, should challenges nonetheless persist, official military spokesmen fall back to secondary positions, conforming, at least minimally, to whatever embarrassing information is emerging. If the problem threatens to settle in, an "investigation" will be announced and then allowed to fade into the woodwork. Who, for instance, remembers the results of the investigation into the bombing of a wedding party in the village of Mukaradeeb near the Syrian border back in May 2004 which resulted in 42 deaths, including (according to those who were there) 27 in one extended family, 14 children in all? The U.S. military claimed initially that a "suspected foreign fighter safe house" had been hit. Later, Major General James Mathis asked: "How many people go to the middle of the desert ... to hold a wedding 80 miles from the nearest civilization?" Baghdad military spokesman Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmit finally admitted festivities were ongoing in this fashion: "There may have been some kind of celebration. Bad people have celebrations, too" (<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,4929336-103550,00.html>>).

If the "incident" or "incidents" won't go away, then not one, but multiple military investigations ensue; the fatter their findings, the better. There have already been three on Haditha, two still underway; perhaps twelve on Abu Ghraib. The affair then drags out, growing ever more detailed *and* murkier until, once again, attention fades or the spotlight shifts elsewhere. Already on Haditha, we are being told by all and sundry in official positions not to "prejudge," but to wait until the Naval Criminal Investigative Service finishes its investigation sometime this summer. This is American fairness in action -- though nobody mentions that the whole investigatory process is the equivalent of a corrupt police department being empowered to investigate, charge, and try itself. If an incident simply won't go away, as at Abu Ghraib, then small fry are generally indicted and, under pressure, prosecuted. (Indictments for My Lai only made it up to First Lieutenant Calley; at Abu Ghraib, a single Lieutenant Colonel is finally to be charged in military court) (<<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/04/28/iraq/main1560925.shtml>>). These are, of course,

the "few bad apples," as President Bush termed them (<http://www.villagevoice.com/news/0501_hentoff,59732,6.html>).

Another similarity between the My Lai moment and today is the degree to which language is policed by those in authority in order to separate whatever atrocity is under investigation from the war-fighting around it. So President Nixon was quick to call My Lai an "isolated incident," particularly when compared to the "250,000 churches, pagodas, and temples" he claimed the Marines alone had built "for the people of Vietnam" (just as the Bush administration cites those schools we've constructed or repainted, and other kinds of "good news" the media supposedly refuses to report). When, back in My Lai days, General William R. Peers, heading the official Army investigation of the killings, had a press conference to present his findings, the Pentagon ordered him not to use the word "massacre"; only on threat of walking out was he allowed to refer to a "tragedy of major proportions." After that, the common term, as with Haditha today, would simply be "incident."

Back then, Army Secretary Resor claimed My Lai was "wholly unrepresentative of the manner in which our forces conduct military operations in Vietnam," sentiments regularly seconded by the media. In the case of Haditha, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Peter Pace commented: "Clearly the individuals involved -- if they are responsible for the things they are being accused of -- have not performed their duty the way that 99.9% of their fellow marines have" (<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/5032018.stm>>). And that figure of 99.9% has been repeated across the spectrum of the American high command, civilian and military. Another then-and-now similarity: Responsibility never goes far up the chain of command, since all investigators are functionally sent down from that same chain of command. In fact, we know from My Lai that trials, if necessary, are well-planned out with media impact in mind. After all, cases like these are, as the *Washington Post* recently quoted a congressional aide saying, "a big public relations problem" (<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/02/AR2006060201796.html>>).

In the My Lai case, the military command, with many potential defendants, made every effort to avoid the spectacle of "two dozen or more American soldiers, including generals, lined up in the dock like a little Nuremberg." In discussions with the Justice Department, Pentagon officials emphasized that a "mass trial" was not an option. Instead, the accused were assigned to bases across the country where trial decisions would be made locally by each base commandant. A similar approach seems to have been taken for the scattered Abu Ghraib prosecutions. Above all, in the damage-control phase of such "incidents," what is being avoided is the phrase "war crimes."

Perhaps, however, what the "incidents" have in common -- and what they really tell us about the war in Iraq (as in Vietnam long ago) -- is this: In both Haditha and Ishaqi, the dead were largely or all civilian noncombatants: an aged amputee in a wheelchair holding a Koran, small children, grandparents, students, women, and a random taxi driver all died. These were the "collateral deaths" and what they held in common was simply their civilian-ness, and how civilian -- and so criminal -- war itself has become (<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/02/AR2006060201796.html>>).

We need a new language for this. "Collateral damage" is, of course, a Pentagon euphemism for unintentional or incidental destruction of property, facilities, or noncombatants that crept into our language in the Vietnam years and never left. Collateral means "of a secondary nature" or "subordinate," and "damage" is a description you would apply to wrecked or destroyed property, but not normally to the human body. Who, after all, would say, as a woman lay on the ground, shot through the head, that she had been "damaged." But there's a far deeper problem with the term. Since March 2003, almost 2,500 American soldiers, just over 200 troops from allied forces, and several hundred private contractors or mercenaries have died in Iraq (<<http://antiwar.com/casualties/>>). We have no idea how many insurgents, Iraqi soldiers, or militia members have died in that same period, though the number must be large indeed. But we do know one thing. In modern wars, especially those conducted in part from the air (as both Iraq and Afghanistan have been), there's nothing "collateral" about civil-

ian deaths. If anything, the "collateral deaths" are those of the combatants on any side. Civilian deaths are now the central fact, the very essence of war. Not seeing that means not seeing war.

The lack of decent media coverage of the use of air power in Iraq and Afghanistan -- as in South Vietnam -- as well as artillery, tanks, cluster bombs, and the like, helps obscure both the widespread nature and the centrality of indiscriminate civilian death. At least we do see something of the odd brutal Haditha or My Lai or Ishaqi, when, sooner or later, it rises to the level of media attention. Killing civilians from the air, which automatically seems to fall into the category of "collateral" or "accidental," and never the criminal (no matter how often civilians die from it), is actually far more destructive and so far worse. It should, of course, be obvious that, if you are going to destroy what you believe to be a "terrorist safe house" in the middle of an urban neighborhood, noncombatants who just happen to be living in the environs will be "damaged" (<<http://www.tomdispatch.com/index.mhtml?pid=2047>>). The massacre at Haditha, which just made the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, is one of those singular stories of our 24/7 moment that briefly fills the frame of the screen (and the cover), sucking up all attention. In this way, the needs of our media, as presently organized, fit with the damage-control efforts of the Pentagon (although Donald Rumsfeld and his associates would surely be a good deal happier if the "incidents" at Haditha and Ishaqi had never surfaced in the first place).

If those horrific murders in Haditha become the mother of all "incidents," however, Iraq may not make more sense, but less. So let's widen the Iraq frame and take another look. Those 24 dead non-combatants are not, in fact, an "incident" at all, nor "isolated," nor -- another of those then-and-now terms -- an "aberration." Make no mistake, they are the essence of this war. From the beginning, the continual slaughter of civilians, as well as the destruction of civilian property and livelihoods, has been the *modus operandi* of the American invasion and occupation of Iraq. That most of it didn't happen eyeball-to-eyeball with revenge on the brain certainly made little difference to the many victims, nor should it make too much difference to us.

To be even more accurate, Iraqi civilians were dying long before the invasion of Iraq. Though exact numbers have been much argued about, there can be no question that the unsuccessful American (and British) strategy of strangling Saddam Hussein's regime via severely imposed UN sanctions caused the death rates of Iraqi children to soar before 2003. (<<http://www.thenation.com/docprint.mhtml?i=20011203&s=cortright>; <http://www.tomdispatch.com/index.mhtml?pid=226>>). On March 20th of that year, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld chose to begin the invasion of Iraq with a "shock and awe" campaign of American missile and air wizardry over Baghdad. He meant to shock and awe a waiting world of potential enemies with the news that we were to be the dominatrix of all history. At the same time -- all things for all men -- in one fell swoop the U.S. would also "decapitate" Saddam's regime in downtown Baghdad (and elsewhere). The results: Of fifty "decapitation attacks," as the slaughter that passed for war began, not a single one killed an Iraqi leader of even the most minor sort, but scores of Baghdadi civilians died (<<http://www.commondreams.org/headlines03/1212-01.htm>>). In just four of these attacks that Human Rights Watch was able to investigate, 42 noncombatants were killed and many more wounded. One early missile attack was on "a civilian Baghdad restaurant where faulty U.S. intelligence suggested that Hussein might be having dinner," reports journalist Robert Parry (<<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/usa1203/4.htm>>). "As it turned out, Hussein was not there, but the attack killed 14 civilians, including seven children" (<<http://www.consortiumnews.com/2006/052906.html>>). Not quite Haditha numbers, but close enough; and this would set the tone in "accidental" death for the "liberation" of Iraq that was to follow. It simply never ended.

The invasion itself was largely a military slaughter (as, for anyone who remembers the Highway of Death out of Kuwait, Gulf War I was too). Cluster bombs and depleted-uranium weaponry were left in our wake. We took Baghdad and then let Iraqis loot the city's infrastructure without raising a finger except to guard the Oil Ministry. American troops stood idly by while, at the National Museum and

Baghdad's grand libraries and archives, untold national treasures burned to a crisp and art work of every sort from the origins of humankind was stolen or destroyed. (This represented, of course, cultural death.) (<<http://www.tomdispatch.com/index.mhtml?pid=4710>>).

Before the invasion was over, civilian journalists started dying from coalition "accidents." From early on, checkpoints were set up, manned by jumpy, ill-trained American troops, convinced that Iraq was indeed a land of al-Qaeda terrorists -- talk about self-fulfilling prophesies -- and Iraqi civilians started dying at them (<<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-palestine27apr27,1,3288656.story?coll=la-headlines-nation&ctrack=1&cset=true>>). Just last week at a checkpoint in Samarra, Nahiba Husayif Jassim, pregnant, in labor, and being rushed to a hospital by her brother, as well as her cousin Faliha Mohammed Hassan were shot and killed at such a checkpoint. "The U.S. military is investigating..." Each "incident," another "accident" (<<http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/05/31/iraq.main/>>).

As the President prepared to land on the deck of an aircraft carrier off San Diego and declare "major combat operations ended," American soldiers occupying a school in Fallujah, fired into an angry crowd, killing 10 to 13 people and wounding perhaps 75. Another "incident." (The Americans claimed they had been fired upon.) Just last week, American troops in our other war in the capital of Afghanistan fired into a similarly angry crowd after an out-of-control American vehicle ploughed into cars and killed at least one Afghan. (Typically, American spokesmen first claimed that the Americans had fired over, not into, the crowd in Kabul; then, under the press of evidence, reversed themselves.) From 2003 to now, it's been all accidents all the time (<<http://www.einnews.com/iraq/newsfeed-iraq-accidents>>).

Soon enough, American troops launched extensive urban raids to root out a growing insurgency in which doors were busted in and civilians killed. All of them unfortunate "incidents." Tens of thousands of liberated Iraqis were soon arrested, put into squalid jails, some tortured and humiliated in especially gruesome ways; a few were murdered -- by oversight or accident. We destroyed three-quarters of the city of Fallujah and regularly loosed our air force on the downtowns and neighborhoods of largely Sunni cities from Ramadi to Samarra as well as the Shiite city of Najaf and Sadr City, the vast Shiite slum in Baghdad. Sometimes these were proclaimed "targeted" strikes, with smart bombs being used on "terrorist safe houses." Civilians who nonetheless insisted on dying did so accidentally (<<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2006/01/22/ING9UGQ2701.DTL>>).

We reconstructed the country by deconstructing it. We were unable to deliver potable water, or significant electricity, or repair sewage systems already badly damaged by Gulf War I and the sanctions that followed. More civilians got sick, more died. We couldn't deliver jobs and tried to cut down on Saddam-era state-delivered rations. More childhood malnutrition, more deaths. Unemployment remained sky-high. Less money, less ability to care for families, more deaths. In the process, a raging insurgency as well as a *jihadi* car-bombing campaign of Zargawi-style terrorism grew in Sunni areas, while death-squad-style torture-and-execution murders of vast numbers of Sunnis and Shiites signaled a growing civil war. This finally brings us to the 24 dead noncombatants in Haditha (and any of the other Hadithas that haven't made it into the news). Yet more "incidents," yet more death.

The upshot of all of this is the central fact of the war: a staggering civilian death toll impossible to calculate. Early on, a group of Iraqi academics and political activists tried to study the question of civilian casualties, consulting with hospitals, gravediggers, and morgues, and came up with the figure of 37,000 civilian deaths just between March 2003 and October 2003 (<<http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/66E32EAF-0E4E-4765-9339-594C323A777F.htm>>). A careful study published in the British medical journal the *Lancet* in October 2004 suggested a figure of 100,000 or more civilian "excess deaths" (<<http://www.globalresearch.ca/articles/LAN410A.html>>). Iraq Body Count, an organization which relies largely on Western media reports of civilian casualties for its count, now offers 38,000-42,000 as a conservative but confirmed range of noncombatant

deaths ("civilians reported killed by military intervention in Iraq" including in "insurgent and terrorist attacks" <<http://www.iraqbodycount.org/background.php>>).

But what does any of this mean when most of Iraq is beyond the view of the media, when many deaths may never be reported at all. Louise Roug of the Los Angeles Times, for instance, reports that this May, "1,398 bodies were brought to the central morgue [in Baghdad], according to Ministry of Health statistics, 243 more than April." In other words, the two-month total for Baghdad's central morgue alone was 2,553 victims of "shootings, stabbings and other violence." And note that this doesn't include either dead Iraqi soldiers or dead civilians who were victims of explosions (including suicide bombings)! Put another way, "since 2003, at least 30,240 bodies have been brought to the morgue, the vast majority of them shot by gunmen who are seldom caught or prosecuted" (<<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2006/06/04/MNGBSJ89RK1.DTL>>). And remember, that's just certain categories of death in Baghdad. Though there is no way to know the real figures on invasion and occupation-related civilian deaths in Iraq, they are the essence of what's happened. They are both modern war and a crime. Given the history of war (and of American warfare) in the last half of the last century, they were largely predictable. They represent neither a set of isolated incidents, nor collateral damage, nor -- over three years later -- can they be ascribed to accident. Neither can Haditha.

Under the pressure of a strengthening Sunni insurgency which has gained some control over large parts of al-Anbar province, the Bush administration, instead of drawing down American forces, has just called in reinforcements -- the 1,500 troops of the 1st Armored Division, kept in reserve in Kuwait. Let me suggest that, if these troops garrison Ramadi or move on Haditha or Ishaqi or Tal Afar or any other rebellious community, certain things are predictable -- and there will be nothing accidental about them: More IEDs will go off under American vehicles; more Americans will die without eyeballing the enemy; more angry, frustrated, increasingly feral troops on their third, fourth, or fifth tours of duty, with a sense that every Iraqi anywhere in sight is an enemy, will act accordingly. We already know what will happen. More civilian bodies, more atrocities, more horrors, and Ramadi, Haditha, Ishaqi and other such communities will not be subdued in the process. The only thing that can possibly alter this course of events isn't to send our soldiers back to morals school for Intro 101B in "core warrior values" -- at the next Haditha, maybe they'll just send in the planes -- but to begin to end the hapless American occupation of Iraq, to ratchet the war down, not up (<<http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/06/01/military.training/>>). Our President, in March 2003, just couldn't resist opening the Pandora's Box of Iraq. Since then, from that box has emerged every horror with which we are now familiar. Unlike in Greek myth, however, at the bottom of the box wasn't Hope, but another H-word: Haditha.

The Bush administration ran its numbers quickly after the Haditha story broke big-time in the media -- and word of those numbers went around fast. In fact, in the last week, was there a major military or civilian Pentagon figure who didn't manage to use them? Here's a sampling:

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld: "We know that 99.9 percent of our forces conduct themselves in an exemplary manner. We also know that in conflicts things that shouldn't happen, do happen" (<<http://www.house.gov/inslee/issues/iraq/index.html>>); Army Lt. Gen. Peter Chiarelli, commander of multinational forces in Iraq: "The allegations of Haditha are troubling to all of us [but] out of those 150,000 soldiers, I'd dare to say that 99.9 percent of them are doing the right thing" (<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/01/AR2006060101808.html>>);

Army Brig Gen. Donald Campbell, chief of staff for Multi-National Corps-Iraq: "While the bulk of our forces, 99.9 percent, serve with honor, there are a small number of individuals who sometimes choose the wrong path" (<<http://www.estripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=36736&archive=true>>).

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen Peter Pace: "Clearly the individuals involved -- if they are responsible for the things they are being accused of -- have not performed their duty the way that 99.9% of their fellow marines have" (<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/5032018.stm>>).

Marine Commandant Gen. Michael Hagee: "Regardless of the outcome of these investigations, 99.9 percent of the servicemen and service women are doing what we expect them to do" (<<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/06/04/iraq/main1680094.shtml>>).

MNFI (Multinational Forces) spokesman in Iraq: "Defended the record of the US-led troops in Iraq, saying that '99.9 per cent of all men and women' in the forces adhere to the highest standards and any violations will be punished" (<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/1f0212a6-f1bc-11da-940b-0000779e2340,dwp_uuid=c1a5b968-e1ed-11d7-81c6-0820abe49a01.html>).

Okay, but that's where they all stop. Now, let's do the rest of the math for them. If Rumsfeld and others are right, then only .1% of American forces in Iraq have not conducted themselves in "an exemplary manner," did not do "the right thing," serve "with honor," or "adhere to the highest standards." Let's assume, despite Lt. Gen. Chiarelli's figure above, that there are actually about 135,000 American troops in Iraq at the moment. That means that only 135 of them are not doing "the right thing," etc. If it's only the Marines, who make up less than one-quarter of our troops in Iraq, the figure is obviously far lower. It seems the military won't need to invest in many teachers for that "core warrior values" retraining of theirs, given such numbers.

"The Marine Corps issued a directive to its generals telling them not to discuss details of the Haditha case because such comments could compromise 'the integrity of the investigative and legal processes'" (<http://www.prospect.org/horsemouth/2006/06/post_53.html>).

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen Peter Pace: "I understand it's going to be a couple of more weeks before those investigations are complete and we should not prejudge the outcome" (<http://www.jcs.mil/chairman/speeches/060529interview_CNNAmericanMorning.html>).

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld: "We don't know what -- quite what happened there [at Haditha] yet, and it strikes me that it's appropriate to get the facts and see what took place. We in the United States hold our forces to a very, very high standard, and it's proper that we should. And General Hagee is out meeting with the Marines and talking to them about this subject. And I don't know that I could add anything else. Furthermore, it's not proper for me to discuss these types of things since I'm in the chain of command, and there is a legal phrase called 'command influence,' which if I say something by mistake, it could adversely affect the outcome of a trial, for example, in one way or another, either favorably to a defendant or unfavorably to a defendant. And I wouldn't want to be involved in anything like that, so I am not going to get beyond what I've suggested" (<<http://www.military.com/NewsContent/0,13319,99154,00.html>>).

White House spokesman Tony Snow: "Because the Marines are actually conducting an inquiry and it's a very vigorous one. I would ask you to suspend any judgment about what happens. I mentioned this morning that there are two tracks. Number one is what happened with the reporting of the incident, and what happened. And the Marines are taking both of those very seriously and they're proceeding very aggressively. So I think rather than trying to prejudge it -- the second thing, and this is equally important, is that when you have an ongoing criminal proceeding, to try to characterize it on my part or anybody within the chain of command within the Department of Defense could very well prejudice and injure any attempts to engage in a prosecution should it be necessary. So you've got to be very careful about how you do this" (<<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/05/20060531-4.html>>).

Baker Spring, a military expert at the Heritage Foundation: "If soldiers [or Marines] are acting inconsistently with these requirements, there's no doubt the military will take disciplinary actions. It's always wrong to prejudge the outcome of this procedure" (<<http://www.military.com/NewsContent/0,13319,99154,00.html>>).

This sampling of restatements of essential American fairness in the face of a judicial process should actually be amended for the sake of accuracy to read in the following way: When any "incident" is first reported, American military spokespeople should always immediately prejudge the outcome by denying in the strongest possible terms that any account other than the military one is in any way accurate. The fallback position, once that "incident" won't go away, is that judgment should be suspended and no prejudging should go on until, hopefully, it fades from sight.

George Bush wanted to be "commander-in-chief" and, with the help of his Vice President and fervent followers, to create a commander-in-chief presidency. Now he has something approaching that and, it seems, he wants out of the mix: "Q: Have you gotten updates on the [Haditha] situation? THE PRESIDENT: Well, I'm not involved with the investigation, and you shouldn't expect me to be. I expect this investigation to be conducted independent of the White House, with a full and thorough investigation" (<<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/06/20060601-1.html>>).

Note: The above essay was first published Tom Engelhardt, "Collateral Damage: The 'Incident' at Haditha," in *tomdispatch.com* (6 June 2006); republished by permission of the author.

Author's profile: Tom Engelhardt is editor (founding) of *tomdispatch.com*, a website affiliated with the magazine *The Nation*. The website began as a mass emailing to about three hundred and fifty friends about world news in the wake of the September 11 2001 attacks and Engelhardt's opposition to the invasion of Iraq. Since 2001, the project has developed into a website that reaches over eight thousand subscribers and has been called "a regular antidote to the mainstream media." An editor in publishing for thirty years, Engelhardt is the author of *The End of Victory Culture*, a history of US-American triumphalism in the Cold War era, and *The Last Days of Publishing*, a novel. Engelhardt is also co-founder of The American Empire Project and he is a fellow of the Nation Institute and a teaching fellow of the School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley. E-mail: <tomdispatch@yahoo.com>