12 Reversed negatives: how the news media respond to “our” atrocities

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“It never happened and besides they deserved it.” The title of Edward Opton’s (1971) article on responses to the My Lai massacre succinctly captures the acute psychological discomfort that his respondents felt when presented with graphic evidence of the atrocities US soldiers had committed in that unfortunate Vietnamese village. Their simultaneous desire both to deny and justify what their own countrymen had done has no cognitive logic but does have an emotional constancy – the reluctance to believe that their own troops had committed such terrible acts.

War – despite the manifest immoralities it typically brings – is a moral commitment, and evidence of immorality by one’s own side undermines that commitment. Public support for war is usually premised on the idea that the threat is so terrible and so imminent that waging war is a lesser evil than letting the enemy triumph, that the current loss of life will prevent larger tragedies later (see Bellamy, this volume, about a related point concerning torture). And yet, as the responses to My Lai show, this moral calculus does not rest on a dispassionate dissection of evidence. So we need to probe the dynamics of the emotions and perceptions that accompany the moral decision making.

The fusion of affective and cognitive dynamics in the support for war was insightfully explored in the work of a pioneering psychologist in this area, Ralph K. White. White was a founder of Psychologists for the Study of Social Problems in 1946, and had a career that moved between the United States Information Agency and academic social psychology. He was one of several psychologists during the following decades who developed the analysis of the psychology of participants in conflicts (White, 1986). One of the group, Uri Bronfenbrenner (1986), for example, developed the mirror image hypothesis showing how adversaries each tend to attribute to the other similar characteristics and motives. (It was this type of thinking – of trying to see how issues looked from both sides of a divide – that perhaps later gave rise to charges by conservatives of moral equivalence. As Carmen Lawrence

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indicates elsewhere in this volume, attempts to consider both sides threaten the binary thinking that accompanies the dehumanization of enemies.)

Invoking these psychologists is not to endorse psychological reductionism. Perhaps the most egregious example of such reductionism – and hence the inadequacy of its explanatory framework – is Sigmund Freud's (1966) essay "Why war?" The essay resulted from a magazine's gimmick where Albert Einstein was able to ask anyone in the world a question. Einstein asked Freud "Why war?" Freud's reply – shorn of its complexities – was to conjure up a death instinct.

Such an explanation, however, utterly fails to explain why people under the influence of this death instinct join into large, often cohesive, social units to fight, rather than, for example, all individuals waging war against all other individuals. Moreover, although there is a mix of emotions involved when people go to war, the sense of social obligation, of a grim duty, is at least as apparent as any blood lust. Finally, such a universal and constant death instinct is unable to explain the long periods of peace that nations often enjoy, and which some nations have enjoyed for generations.

White and his colleagues come at the problem from an ideologically opposite approach. While Freud stresses the inevitability of war, White has, if anything, a pacifist bias, and is always looking for grounds to be optimistic, to posit alternative ways of resolving conflicts. However, while his view is not nearly as sweeping as Freud's generalizations about instincts, at times there is a tendency to explain all conflicts in terms of fear and insecurity and misperception, to see everyone as "fearful warriors" (White, 1984).

White offers much more penetrating and historically grounded explanations than Freud, but sometimes his approach also shares problems about levels of analysis. Like many social psychologists when they explain political phenomena, there is a de-emphasis on the importance of institutions and of historical and political variations. In White's work on misperception, nation states – both governments and public opinion – are often treated as undifferentiated unities. There needs to be more attention to whether everyone shares the perceptions, and how social structures and political institutions create channels of information, which pattern those perceptions.

Nevertheless, despite these problems it would be wrong to underestimate White's achievements. His work is suffused by an old-fashioned tolerance and decency, and his manifest empathy for many different viewpoints is an impressive intellectual and imaginative achievement. Moreover his work is grounded in a close attention to historical

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documentation. Here I particularly want to draw on White's theses about how misperception can lead into war.

White and misperception in wars

White (1970) distinguished six "typical, recurrent forms of misperception" (p. 32):

(1) *The diabolical enemy image*. This refers to the tendency to view the other side as motivated purely by evil and aggressive designs. The enemy's actions are interpreted in the worst possible light. Ambiguities are interpreted with an often false presumption about the enemy's aggressive intentions. There are two somewhat contrasting themes in White's work on this dimension. The first refers to a negative image of the whole nation. "The enemy, if he is to be tortured or killed, must first be dehumanized. He must be viewed as a devil or the dupe of a devil, not as a full human being" (White, 1970, p. 242). On the other hand, there is also what he terms the "black top image," where only the leaders are bad; and their people are oppressed (White, 1970, p. 30).

(2) *The virile self-image*. This refers to how patriotic pride becomes a pre-occupation with prestige, and how then the prospect of humiliation becomes intolerable. The self-image of being courageous, firm, indomitable is often accompanied by a rigidity of thinking, and a bias toward action images and strong responses that make escalation more likely. Similarly the virile self-image makes it more difficult to reverse a course once decided upon – we must honor our commitments; see it through to the finish, "stay the course" – because to back down or retreat is ruled out.

(3) *The moral self-image*. While only evil is attributed to the enemy, only good is attributed to the self. Our side is seen as fighting for noble reasons – patriotism, democracy – and there is an inability to see how anyone could interpret our actions otherwise.

(4) *Selective inattention*. This is something of a catch-all category, but White's main concern is how a narrowing of consideration of possibilities occurs, including a failure to think through how the other side may respond. Black and white thinking, and the inability to see shades of grey – you're either with us or against us – lead to a failure to make crucial distinctions. It also involves a concentration on the short term, and an exaggeration of the immediate stakes (e.g., Vietnam and the domino theory).

(5) *Absence of empathy*. This involves the inability to see how the situation looks from the other's perspective. This inability leads to a failure to predict accurately how they will respond, and in turn is a force for escalation. An early and compelling demonstration of the role of misperception in crisis decision making was the 1970 study by Ole R. Holsti and his colleagues of cabinet documents in the five major European powers in the lead-up to World War I. Each thought that its actions were driven by necessity, but interpreted its adversaries as acting through choice (Holsti, 1972). White quotes from a memoir by a former official under President Kennedy, Roger Hilsman:

> Statesmanship is a higher art than partisan leadership, and Kennedy could reach across and establish a relationship with adversaries. It was based not only on an instinct that one ought to avoid cornering an enemy but a reasonableness, an openness, a largeness of spirit that permitted him to understand how the other fellow might see things differently (White, 1970, p. 120).

Whether this estimate of Kennedy by one of his admirers is justified or not, it is hard to imagine one of President Bush or Australian Prime Minister Howard's officials writing anything similar.

(6) *Military overconfidence*. White here points to the paradox that exaggerated fear can be combined with an exaggerated military confidence. "Military over-confidence is a self-deluding manifestation of the virile self-image" (White, 1970, p. 242). It typically involves a belief in imminent victory – that (as in World War I) the war will be over by Christmas; or prominent neo-Con and Republican insider Kenneth Adelman's forecast that the Iraq war would be a "cakewalk" (Isikoff and Corn, 2006, p. 212). A further aspect of military overconfidence is to overestimate the extent to which key groups will support one's own side.

White's central concern was with government decision makers and their perceptions in conflict situations. Nevertheless, his writings are also suggestive of the cognitive structure needed for public support for war, while in turn, to have mass support for war in a democracy, it is necessary to have news coverage supportive of its main themes, and White's classifications are suggestive for how we might approach analyzing news coverage. While examining these major cognitive themes in support for war in public opinion, news coverage, and official propaganda, there is no presumption in any particular case as to whether claims are true or false. Finally, the logic of his six categories is less than

watertight, and for the purposes of analyzing themes in public support for war, I will regroup them into three:

(1) The diabolical enemy image.
(2) The moral self-image.
(3) The virile, efficacious self-image.

Together these yield the major themes for supporting war: we are right; our cause is just; our motives pure. The enemy is an inhuman, irrational aggressor. There is no choice, we must fight. We can win, and victory is worth the cost. Retreat is intolerable.

News coverage and selective perception

My focus in this chapter is to build upon White's work on social perceptions, but also to address the issue of levels of analysis by looking at the channels of information that shape public perceptions of war, namely the news media. Unlike White, my main concern is not with policy makers' perceptions, but rather with news coverage of wars in democracies. The norm – for reasons explored below – is that the news media will tend to support governments in war-time, especially in the early stages of a war, and especially when it is perceived as moving towards a successful conclusion.

It is important to note that these patterns of news coverage do not derive from some floating ideological or psychological tendencies, nor in any simple sense from "bias" by journalists, but rather they come from the institutional workings and socio-political context of news institutions. They flow from the nature of news production, the news media's access to information and their news values, the publicity efforts by major sources, their perception of their audience's attitudes, and the socio-political context in which they operate. Understanding these institutional workings also illuminates the contingencies affecting when news coverage is going to adhere most closely to supportive themes and when not.

Especially in the early stages of a war that has public and bipartisan political support, news coverage is influenced by two basic factors – that nearly all the most important news sources fall on one side of the conflict, and the news audience falls entirely on the same side of the conflict. In domestic conflicts – especially party conflicts where the audience is broadly evenly split and there are important sources on both sides – there are commercial and institutional incentives toward balance (Tiffen, 2000). In international conflicts with strong public support and all major domestic sources on one side there are fewer constraints.

Reporting a war is full of logistical difficulties and obstacles to journalistic access. In some wars such as the long-running conflicts in the Congo, terrible massacres have gone unreported partly because no reporters were close enough to know about them (although this reflects not only immediate obstacles but a lack of organizational commitment reflecting a perception of lack of audience interest). The long range of contemporary weaponry also limits access. The position of British reporters on warships during the Falklands War gave them no access to anything else, inducing professional claustrophobia among some (Morrison and Tumber, 1988).

In ground wars, a reporter's capacity to move with the troops depends on official arrangements regarding access. The arrangements regarding embedding in the Iraq war are an accentuation of these arrangements, but despite the controversy surrounding it, it extends the logic that always existed. As one veteran reporter, Keyes Beech, told me regarding his work in the Vietnam War, you're with the troops. They're the ones you're with and your sympathies are naturally with them (Tiffen, 1978). Moreover, the reporters know that their audiences (and editors) have the same sympathies and emotions.

This skewed access of course also offers dominant sources great opportunities to have the initiative in their relations with the news media. They can use their briefings and statements to direct attention to some aspects rather than others, to release compelling news film, to frame issues the way they want, to make claims that reporters often can only belatedly, if ever, test.

This institutional logic of the balance of sources and audiences is accurate, but does not alone capture the high passions that accompany any military commitment. News organizations are very aware of the official and public sanctions that may follow coverage that runs against the patriotic mood, in particular any coverage that does not seem to appreciate the sacrifice made by the troops going to war. Moreover, the news executives more than likely share these views. They are not just conforming because of fear of the consequences if they don't, but because they positively embrace the same views as the government, and some also see commercial opportunity in it. "Gotcha!" – the London *Sun* headline when the British sank the Argentine warship *Belgrano* – was one infamous peak of a jingoism that the media both feeds off and feeds when war fever is at a pitch (Morrison and Tumber, 1988).

In the past, especially during periods of total war, censorship of the news media was the norm. However, during limited wars – fought at a distance from the metropolitan power, where societies are not totally mobilized for war and their survival is not seen as being at

stake – censorship is more difficult, and has become steadily less possible anyway in this age of instant and globalized media (Tiffen, 1992). The decline of censorship is one reason for the increasing efforts at news management by militaries and governments. Nevertheless, even if official censorship is now less feasible, governments in war-time have an impressive political arsenal for ensuring conformity. Although news media at times celebrate their adversarial relationship to officialdom, in times of high patriotic fervor and if the most important forces in the polity are arrayed behind the war effort, the news media are reluctant to isolate themselves and incur the wrath of the government. Similarly, they are sometimes reluctant to make an intervention that may seem partisan.

During the Iraqi saga, among American news organizations, which generally pride themselves on reporting without fear or favor, there were at least two such instances of editorial reluctance. In March, 2003, just as the Americans were about to invade, senior writers for the *Washington Post*, including Bob Woodward, had "information that the basis for this war was shakier than many believed." Pentagon correspondent Thomas Ricks said "There was an attitude among editors: look, we're going to war, why do we even worry about all this contrary stuff?" (Bennett *et al.*, 2007, p. 34; Tumber and Webster, 2006, p. 58). *New York Times* reporter James Risen, after extensive investigative research, had documented the extent to which legal safeguards regarding surveillance had been abandoned after 9/11 at the direction of the White House. He was ready to publish in the lead-up to the 2004 election, but the paper only ran the story in December after the election (Powers, 2006).

Taking such institutional and socio-political contexts into account also throws perspective on the controversies over the Arabic-language satellite news service al-Jazeera. The Gulf War of 1991 was sometimes labeled CNN's war. They transmitted from Baghdad when all others had evacuated or been expelled. Their continuous coverage attracted huge audiences globally as well as in America. President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, for example, said he watched CNN for hours each day (Allen *et al.*, 1991). In contrast, the Iraq war beginning in 2003 could be dubbed the Fox News–al-Jazeera war. Fox News, with its vociferous pro-Republican bias, flourished in the post-9/11 ethos of support for Bush and an eagerness for decisive action. Unlike its main competitor CNN, Fox News spent much less on news gathering and instead highlighted the views of its presenters. While this played well to one part of the political spectrum in the United States – and seemed to pressure the more mainstream news media to veer towards the right – it never held any attraction for non-American audiences.

While a major American news channel had become more jingoistic and less appealing to any non-US audience, a new international satellite news service had also grown up in the meantime, one that was appealing greatly to audiences in the Middle East. Begun in 1996, from late 2001 onwards al-Jazeera attracted many American criticisms from Donald Rumsfeld (Noujaim, 2004) and others. Without examining the exact merits of the various controversies, much of the difference in al-Jazeera's news coverage is explained by its different audiences and different sources. Arab audiences are more interested in Arab casualties, just as American audiences think American casualties are most important. Al-Jazeera's commitment of journalistic resources to the conflict is at least as great as that of any Western organization, while their journalists' linguistic skills and ability to move through Arab societies give al-Jazeera access to many sites that Western reporters often lack (Miles, 2005). Similarly, Arab politicians are keen to appear on al-Jazeera to reach their constituents.

Such considerations also illuminate controversies over the Western media's role, and especially when critical reporting is likely to emerge. News coverage is at its most conforming when there is a bipartisan commitment to the war; unity between political leaders, senior officials, and lower ranks; when it is early in the war; and when there is a prospect of quick victory. The longer wars last, especially if there does not seem to be any end in sight, the more critical reporting develops. Partly this may be a response to the domestic political and public moods, but in addition the news media increasingly gain expertise, and have more independent sources on which to draw.

The main stimuli to critical coverage are when (1) there are divisions within the allied side; and (2) official expectations are not fulfilled, manifested in military disasters or problems, and especially casualties on one's own side. It is not the balance between ally and enemy that in any sense fuels criticism, but divisions within the allied polity. Many myths have grown up about the performance of the news media during the Vietnam War, often for example conflating different periods of this extremely prolonged conflict. Before the long era of Vietnamization beginning in 1969 under President Nixon, news coverage reached a crisis during two periods. The first was in 1963 in what turned out to be the final months of the Diem regime, and the second was following the shock of the Tet offensive in early 1968. In both cases, it was how developments punctured the official optimism, plus divisions within the American forces and officialdom, that were the main stimuli to critical reporting (Tiffen, 1983).

While the issues over images in media coverage of war are constant in some aspects, in other ways as the nature of war and the nature

of media both change the relationship is also dynamic. Technological changes have most obviously changed both media and warfare, and the media are a far more massive presence in contemporary wars than they were in the past. More subtle but also important are changes in public thinking. For example, in previous centuries and generations, there was much more overt racism in the population, which made demonizing the whole enemy population much easier. No one would now talk of Iraqis as Kipling did of Germans in World War I – "there are only two divisions in the world today, human beings and Germans" (Knightley, 1978, p. 84). Although of course racism is not absent today, it is qualitatively much less than in earlier generations, and so at the least there is not the indifference to Iraqi casualties that there was to German and Japanese casualties in World War II.

Going back even further, the first time that the media played an independent critical role in war reporting was the London *Times* during the Crimean War. This occasion has been properly celebrated for several reasons. It signaled the assertiveness of a democratic press, with the editor of the *Times* famously proclaiming that the role of the press differed from that of diplomacy, that the press lived by disclosure. It was also one of the first occasions when a newspaper had sent its own correspondent to report on a war. William Howard Russell, the "father of a miserable tribe" (Knightley, 1978), as he described himself, was greeted by the military in an early depiction of their limited grasp of public relations, by having his tent cut down by an officer who resented his very presence.

Russell's reporting caused great political controversy in England. The focus of his critical coverage was not the rightness of the cause, or questioning the need for war; it involved the competence of its conduct. Russell reported on the poor conditions and lack of support given to the soldiers. Most press criticism of wars since has involved similar types of criticism, especially reflecting the grievances and problems of our own troops and officers. It must be stressed, however, that because lives are at stake, even seemingly "technical" criticisms of the prosecution of the war are emotionally and politically explosive.

While Russell was a lone professional journalist in the 1850s Crimean War, now there are contingents from all over the globe able to transmit across the world instantly. We know more about contemporary wars more quickly than ever before, including often access to the enemy side. Nevertheless, issues about the quality of media coverage are if anything more intense than ever, and the themes of White's propositions about misperception are still crucial to understanding these issues. White wrote that "Empathy normally has the disturbing effect of requiring

us to see double – to hold in suspension two interpretations of the same facts, the other fellow's and one's own. Complexity and uncertainty are introduced. The human mind, seeking simplicity and certainty, rebels. And empathy is choked off" (White, 1970, p. 284). Whether the human mind seeks simplicity and certainty, the news media certainly do, and political debates shun away from complexity and uncertainty. The news media are geared toward moral simplicity and the presentation of certainty. The great bulk of the time this reinforces the main themes supporting the war. In the case of the current war in Iraq, in the four-plus years the war has lasted at time of writing, the nature of the media coverage has changed greatly. However, in crucial ways issues deriving from White's schema are still apparent.

The war in Iraq

Saddam's endless evil and Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMDs)

Iraq is the most morally problematic war since Vietnam. It is no small thing for a democracy to go to war on the basis of a fiction. So the prewar period – the politics of the stampede regarding the urgent threat of Saddam's weapons of mass destruction – is one where news coverage needs to be closely examined. How did the US administration and its allies in Britain and Australia get away with their hit-and-run claim-making about Iraq's WMDs?

White's observations on the diabolical enemy image are very pertinent to the politics and media coverage of this period in two respects. One is the way in which it was possible to extrapolate from Saddam's moral monstrosity to a related but distinct set of propositions about his aggression, how the certainty about his evil motives covered weaknesses in the evidence about his alleged actions, and how a lower threshold of evidence was necessary for claims about his aggressive designs. The second is the loaded political debate in the lead up to the war about WMDs.

Among strong global competition, Saddam was, without doubt, in the top league of brutal dictators, abusing human rights and terrorizing his own population. He used chemical weapons against the Iranians and against his own Kurdish population. In the decade leading up to the Gulf War, he built up a huge arsenal of weapons, including chemical and biological weapons, and was working toward a nuclear bomb.

The aim here is not to question this dominant imagery and these firmly established facts, or to suggest there was a more virtuous side to Saddam. Rather, it is to see how his undoubted evil was extended

into an image of reckless, determined, and insatiable aggression. In his twenty-four years in power, Saddam committed two acts of external aggression. He invaded Iran in 1980 and Kuwait in 1990. In neither case was the military action morally justified. But both related to longstanding Iraqi grievances fueled by some immediate provocations. In the attack on Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran, Saddam was acting with a green light from the United States and the major Arab states, including Saudi Arabia (Lando, 2007). The campaign against Kuwait followed from his desperation and resentments after the prolonged war against Iran, and the impoverished state in which it left Iraq, as his Arab neighbors worsened his economic plight by lowering the price of oil.

While there is no doubt Saddam had had militaristic ambitions, and his military aggression had damaged his people enormously, and while he always maintained great braggadocio and public defiance following his devastating defeat in the Gulf War, it is far from clear that he wanted to commit suicide by engaging with American power again. To question whether Saddam had actively aggressive designs in 2002 is not to suggest any virtue on his part but simply a bully's capacity to recognize superior power.

The series of false accusations against Saddam in the lead up to the March, 2003 invasion – from his involvement with the 9/11 bombers, to the importing of uranium from Niger, importing aluminium tubes for use in a nuclear centrifuge, his mobile biological weapons laboratories, the training of al-Qaeda in chemical weapons, and others – constitutes one of the most remarkable episodes of false claims in recent democratic history. Eventually the Iraq Survey Group (2004) found that none of these charges was true (Barton, 2006, p. 256).

In retrospect what is remarkable is the way that a sense of urgency was generated even though no new actions by Saddam fueled it. It illustrates first the initiative that officialdom had in its relations with the media, and the much lower standards of evidence needed to print anti-Saddam stories than to refute them: how ambiguities were resolved to confirm rather than challenge the dominant image.

Second, the loaded nature of the debate is stark. Given Saddam's record of past abuses, given his tyranny, given the doubts about the real situation and the possibility that he might have WMDs, it would have been political suicide to appear as a dupe of Saddam. There was no political mileage in saying the charges against Saddam were false.

Moreover, especially as time went on, there was a shift in the onus of proof – Saddam was guilty unless he could prove he was innocent. Because, as Donald Rumsfeld said, the absence of evidence was not

evidence of absence, the refutation of any particular detail was never sufficient to damage the general scenario. In the end, it was being demanded of Saddam that he provide positive evidence of disarmament.

The hidden casualties of allied bombing

There has been continuing controversy over the number of war-related deaths in Iraq. By far the highest estimate (Burnham *et al.*, 2006) is that published in the British medical journal, the *Lancet*, which for the period up to July, 2006 gave a figure of 654 000 extra fatalities due to war, with 600 000 directly due to violence (Thieren, 2006). That figure is based on cluster sampling and survey data (courageously) gathered from nearly 2000 households and 12 000 people and then extrapolated to the population. For the same period the Iraq Body Count, a conscientious group who have documented incidents reported in the media since the start of the war, at the same time had a figure of 48 783. This group does not claim to have an exhaustive tally – although they do dispute the *Lancet*'s figure as much too high (Dagadan *et al.*, 2006). Iraq Body Count acknowledge that their own methodology depends centrally on the media's capacity and willingness to report casualties, and of course this is far from constant. They scour the world's media to look for reports, and while they perform a very valuable service that highlights the nature of many fatalities in Iraq it rests upon a very fallible source.

Some other groups have given tallies for more limited periods. The Iraqi Ministry of Health and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq offer annual estimates for recent periods, the latter giving a higher figure than the former – 34 000 Iraqi civilians killed in 2006, for example (UN News Service, 2007). Accepting this UN figure and very roughly extrapolating a similar rate to the whole period of the war would give a fatality count of around 130 000. The total must remain contentious and in doubt until it is possible post-war to undertake a proper census. Even the death rate before the war began (when the state institutions were functioning as normally as they could under Saddam) is a matter of dispute. Nevertheless, our current concern is less with the total, than with different types of fatalities.

Which of these fatalities were visible in the news? The problem with the Iraqi Body Count methodology is of course that fatalities do not have an equal chance of appearing in the news, and there is furthermore a patterning in which deaths are covered. American and allied casualties are more likely to be covered. Prominent people are more likely to be covered. Casualties in Baghdad – close to journalists and

officials – are more likely to be covered. Casualties who occur in a more newsworthy way – either because of the size of the incident, or its novelty, or at a particularly sensitive time – are more likely to be covered. Casualties who are publicized by the pronouncements of the American and allied governments are more likely to be covered. Casualty events that occur in front of a TV camera are probably the most likely to be covered.

In turn, the obverse of all these conditions identifies the casualties least likely to be covered. For example, an isolated killing outside Baghdad where no Westerners are involved is extremely unlikely to be reported in the Western media. First, it is not likely to come to the attention of any Western journalist. Second, it is likely to fall below the threshold of newsworthiness. Third, it does not fit within any resonant news narrative salient to Western publics.

During the Iraq war, very few Iraqi victims of aerial bombing have been covered in the news. The *Lancet* study in 2006 identified air strikes as contributing around 13% of violent deaths where a specific cause was known – the same proportion as car bombs (Burnham *et al*., 2006, p. 1425). Air-strike victims constituted around 40% of children's deaths from violent causes. But car bombs figure in the news much more frequently and prominently than deaths from air strikes.

This absence of the casualties of air wars has been a recurring feature in the news coverage of contemporary wars. This is firstly for logistical reasons, because journalists are almost never present to see the effects of the bombing at first hand. It is also that the public relations arms of governments rarely focus on the civilian casualties and damage wrought by such bombing – unless they have no choice. Indeed, they go to considerable lengths – especially in the first Gulf War – to do the opposite. Many years later it was gradually disclosed that the smart bombs that received so much attention in press briefings at the time constituted a small proportion of the total tonnage of bombs dropped (Bowcott, 2003) and the precision of those used had also been considerably exaggerated (Norton-Taylor, 2002). In the Vietnam War, also, the bombing was the worst covered aspect of the fighting.

In the political aftermath of September 11, and the American determination to attack al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, the lack of interest in the casualties of allied bombing – an indifference to civilian casualties that plagued the war effort for years to come – brought recurring conflicts between the American government and al-Jazeera. CNN told its reporters that if they found themselves covering civilian deaths they should make it clear it was the country's leaders who were responsible for the situation Afghanistan is now in, and that every

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such report should begin by referring to the casualties of 9/11 (Miles, 2005, pp. 141–142). For much of this period, al-Jazeera was the only TV news organization covering the areas being bombed. When they reported, for example, deaths from American bombing of a hospital, it was denied, Donald Rumsfeld describing it as ridiculous, but the report proved to be true (Miles, 2005, p. 144). This period climaxed with American bombing of the al-Jazeera bureau in Kabul, but "the war in Afghanistan cemented Al Jazeera's reputation as a world-class news network" (Miles, 2005, p. 171).

The hidden casualties of allied behavior

News coverage and public opinion are normally particularly sympathetic to our troops in the field. The dangers they run and the possibility of their losing their lives, leaving their loved ones behind to face the dangers, plus the closeness of reporters to them, naturally all tend to produce sympathetic coverage of our troops. These sympathies generally support a pro-war politics (Bacevich, 2007).[1] One of the least covered aspects of wars is the misdeeds of those troops. This was particularly so in the early period of triumphalism, especially before the horrors of Abu Ghraib drew unavoidable attention to allied misdeeds.

Dahr Jamahl, a young freelance journalist, started to hear stories of torture by Americans soon after his arrival in Iraq. In May, 2004, he heard an account of a man from Kirkuk who was arrested after seeking to intercede between soldiers and some locals. He was held for a month, and then dumped at Baghdad General Hospital in a coma. The US medical report didn't mention the bruises from beatings and electric shocks. The 57-year-old man entered custody healthy, but emerged in a vegetative state. His family only found him because the Red Crescent of Tikrit posted photos of him on buses trying to identify him, and a friend saw them. Jamahl related the story ending with the family caring for their unresponsive father, and the lack of any satisfactory explanation by the American military. He sent the report to 180 American papers but none was interested, until a few months later Seymour Hersh of the *New Yorker* took it up (Jamahl, 2004; personal communication, March, 2007).

The obstacles facing reporting of such incidents were encapsulated in an experience of *Los Angeles Times* reporter Ann Louise Bardach. In the second half of 2004, she met a 40-year-old former marine sergeant recently returned from Afghanistan. He was deeply distressed by what he had seen in his tours of duty, especially offering vivid tales of torture and intimidation by the CIA of people who had only vague

associations with the Taliban. Bardach said that when the ex-marine told her his story, she "didn't quite know what to do with it." Partly this was because of the mental state of her informant, who was seeing a psychiatrist for post-traumatic stress disorder, and who was in a distressed state that would have made it difficult for him to cope with public pressure. Indeed, he later committed suicide. But in addition, "such allegations were not yet being reported – and many Americans would probably have found his accusations unimaginable. For multiple reasons I put his story on the backburner" (Bardach, 2006, p. M1).

Later, as more critical themes became more prevalent, there was more willingness to accept the possibility of such behavior. As retrospects on what went wrong increased, there was more attention to the actions of US troops. For example, Thomas Ricks in the *Washington Post* – two-and-a-quarter years after the war began – reported that from "its first days in Iraq in April 2003, the Army's Fourth Infantry Division made an impression on soldiers from other units – the wrong one" (Ricks, 2006). He said they had a reputation for conducting indiscriminate sweeps of the local population. One officer commented on their capricious detention practices. According to one colonel "every male from 16 to 60 was detained, and when they got out they would be supporters of the insurgency" (Ricks, 2006).

This last comment focuses on a crucial issue – that such behavior is not only immoral but counter-productive. Apart from the moral issues involved, deaths from air strikes and mistreatment by allied troops are crucial factors in affecting attitudes of the population and so prospects for some sort of successful resolution. President Hamid Karzai got considerable news attention in the West recently when he warned that civilian casualties were damaging support for foreign forces in Afghanistan (Anon., 2007). Civilian casualties no doubt contribute to the rather startling poll result that in early 2006, 47% of Iraqis approved of attacks on US-led forces in Iraq. While only 16% of Kurds had this opinion, 41% of Shias did and fully 88% of Sunnis did (Brookings Institution, 2007, p. 57).

An inexplicable parade of abstracted deaths

In many ways news coverage of the Iraq war is far more critical and skeptical in 2007 than it was in 2003. It reflects the political conflicts among the allies, the puncturing of official optimism as the war has defied confident predictions of imminent victory. There has been a reaction in the media – especially the quality media – against the manipulation of them in the lead-up to the war. When evaluating

current coverage, the starting point must always be the considerable obstacles facing the media. Many journalists have risked their lives to cover news in Iraq, and so have their crews and fixers. We should never take for granted their efforts or underestimate the difficulties they encounter.

Iraq figures in the news frequently, most usually because of a report either of domestic politics surrounding the war in one of the Coalition partners or because of reporting violent incidents from Iraq. However, because the latter have become so common, they often no longer reach the threshold for commercial television news coverage, for example (one consequence is that the gap between quality print media – especially the more "liberal" newspapers – and popular media – especially television – has become greater). It has to be a slow news night, or a particularly big, or spectacular, or politically significant explosion to gain TV coverage, and of course Western casualties are more newsworthy than Iraqi ones. But with media habituating to violence in Iraq, a bigger hit is needed to make headlines or receive in-depth coverage.

It is not only the increasing threshold of newsworthiness, but the news' formulaic coverage. Dead Iraqis rarely have names or families or lives. They are presented anonymously, as statistics. Moreover, there is typically the reporting that an incident occurred without attention to either its perpetrators or their aims, or how this action fits within any larger scheme.

This formless violence with little pattern is conducive to war-weariness, but not to understanding what is occurring. There is a faceless enemy with no names or purposes beyond committing violence. To some extent this vacuum of meaning can be filled by politicians who increasingly define the enemy in moral terms rather than with substantive descriptions, for example as terrorists. It makes it more difficult for any realistic debate about strategic options to occur.

Conclusion

The media form a massive presence in major international wars involving the West: an intense and volatile political force, whose unfavorable stories can quickly escalate into major political and diplomatic problems for war managers. On the other hand, governments waging war retain considerable advantages in pressing themes favorable to the war's prosecution. White's insights about decision makers' misperceptions are also pertinent to news coverage. In terms of predominant patterns of coverage, the media's access to different types of information, the levels of evidence they require to publish particular stories, and the causal

narratives and news frames surrounding information, news is typically supportive of the official themes in prosecuting a war. Combining the situation and workings of the news media with White's patterns of recurrent misperceptions leads to three general propositions:

(1) Coverage of stories and information supporting the dominant themes of virtuous and virile self-image and diabolical enemy image are more prevalent, and much easier to have published and accepted than those that challenge those themes.
(2) The effectiveness of the war effort, its execution and prospects, are questioned more readily than the moral basis of the conflict.
(3) The prevalent pattern of the portrayal of violence and suffering conforms to the perceptual and moral frames that support the war.

Nevertheless, on those rare occasions when the dominant moral imagery is reversed in news coverage, when the moral negatives are attributed to our side, such as in the torture at Abu Ghraib, the result can be politically explosive. As Lewandowsky, Stritzke and colleagues have shown elsewhere in this volume, audiences, especially those supportive of the war, often process such dissonant information in ways that minimize its implications. Moreover, Graber's content analysis in this volume has shown that news coverage of torture still relies heavily on government sources, and the distribution of blame in accounts of torture often conforms to the officially promoted moral schema. Similarly, Tulloch in this volume also highlights the prevalence of "bad apple" explanations for such atrocities. All these chapters accurately capture the dominant trend. However, news coverage that challenges the dominant moral schema can set in train unpredictable political reactions, and this helps to explain why allied governments devote such energy to minimizing their occurrence.

NOTE

1 The son of Bacevich, a lecturer at Boston University and an opponent of the war, was killed in Iraq. Among the hundreds of messages he received were two directly holding him personally culpable for his son's death because of his public opposition to the war (Bacevich, 2007).

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