

US Bombing & Afghan Civilian Deaths - Official Neglect of 'Unworthy' Bodies *†

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Abstract

The British bombed the 'restless natives' of Afghanistan intermittently between 1915 and 1919. Bombing the Pathans' irrigation ditches, which cut water supplies and emptied terraces of their topsoil, was deemed more effective than destroying their villages (Lindqvist, 2000, p.42). The Pathans were temporarily subdued, because food and water were difficult to secure in the bleak, dry region which still remains wretchedly poor. Sir John Maffrey, chief of colonial Britain's Northwest Frontier Province - now Pakistan's troubled tribal zone along the Afghan border - was told by regional airforce headquarters that international law did not apply 'against savage tribes who do not conform to codes of civilized warfare' (Ehrlich, 2001).

The first air attacks in 1919 to support British and colonial ground columns took place in early May upon Afghan forces in Daka, just over the Khyber Pass. The New York Times¹ and the Times² reported the attacks 'with good results'. The 'good result' here was primarily demoralizing the Afghans, evidence for which was claimed to be the exaggerated casualties (around 600) reported by the Afghans. This was followed by a bombing attack carried out by Bristol F2B aircraft upon Jalalabad, after which 'large portions of the town are reported to be burnt out'.³ On 24 May, the Handley Page strategic bomber hit Kabul and the Afghan amir's palace. Soon thereafter, the Afghan amir sued for peace.

The hidden details of the US bombing campaign

Eighty-two years later, at 9 p.m. on 7 October, the United States and Britain began a new air assault upon Afghanistan, setting in motion a range of processes which would devastate the people, the land

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¹13 May 1919 New York Times

²24 May 1919 The Times, London

³29 May 1919 *ibid*. Also see Strausz-Hupe, *Account of the Anglo-Afghan War 1943*

and the environment of Afghanistan. Far from suing for peace, Mullah Omar in Kandahar declared a holy war.

Examining the first 20 weeks of US bombing of Afghanistan in detail reveals the following human costs of this attack:

- Between 3,100 and 3,500 civilians killed directly by bombs and missiles;
- Another 4,000-6,500 civilians injured, many requiring prostheses;
- 4,000-6,000 dead Taliban and allies; an additional estimated minimum 19,800 Afghan refugees dying of hunger, disease and cold in camps (Steele, 2002);
- An additional estimated 5,000 war widows and thousands of orphans;
- Destroyed animals and livestock;
- The scattering of 49,000 BLU-97 cluster bomblets around the major bombing zones;
- Long-term health effects from using munitions containing depleted uranium;
- The further destruction of infrastructure - bridges, power plants, water supplies, roads, communication systems, hundreds of incinerated trucks, burned fuel storage facilities etc.;
- Environmental costs in addition to the aforementioned unexploded ordnance, which causes loss of agricultural land and human injuries, including massive forest fires in Tora Bora, destroyed wildlife, altered migratory patterns, a resurgence of locusts etc.; and
- Widespread psychological costs of being bombed - post-traumatic stress disorders, anxiety, irritability and loss of appetite. There 'is a real feeling of loss - loss of body, loss of money, loss of friends and family', according to Dr. Ghulam Rasool, a psychiatrist treating Afghan refugees in Quetta (Parry, 2001).

My research suggests that civilian deaths have been so high in Afghanistan not because of targeting errors, faulty intelligence or equipment malfunction (as argued by Conetta (2002)).⁴ Rather, high levels of civilian deaths are the direct result of the decision by US military planners to employ highly destructive bombs upon what were perceived to be 'targets' located in areas populated by civilians, whether residential neighborhoods or villages.⁵

⁴Herold, A dossier on civilian victims of United States aerial bombing of Afghanistan: A comprehensive accounting (as in n. †)

⁵The only other report to-date counting civilian casualties emphasizes the former elements (Conetta, 2002). The report, while useful, is in my opinion questionable insofar as it employs only so-called western sources for information on bombing incidents and the author has not published his disaggregated day-by-day count of casualties.

Effects of the deliberate destruction of infrastructure

The bombing campaign also took a very heavy toll upon urban infrastructure, destroying buildings,⁶ airports, clinics, communication systems, water and electricity supplies, fuel storage depots, and cratering innumerable roads. In the third phase of the air war, Afghan fuel trucks became a favored target.

Even before the US bombing campaign began, Afghanistan's urban infrastructure was heavily damaged from two decades of civil war. Nonetheless, US planes, in *deja vu* performances of the Iraq and Yugoslav campaigns, proceeded to bomb electrical power facilities.⁷ The most severe consequence was cutting off power to hospitals and clinics, which were compelled to use diesel generators. Numerous reports exist of the deplorable conditions in hospitals - lack of supplies, staff who fled, operating without anesthetic on the injured, cramped facilities etc. Hospitals resorted to diesel-powered generators, but diesel fuel became very scarce once US planes targeted privately-owned fuel trucks. The first such attack took place 8kms outside Kandahar on 22nd October, destroying three trucks and incinerating at least five drivers. The Kandahar-based reporter for Al Jazeera broadcast footage shortly after the US strike. The destruction of electrical power supplies also hampered the operation of Afghanistan's meager clean water treatment and sewage treatment plants.

The widespread bombing has also stopped truck traffic (carrying supplies) and has contributed to the utter collapse of Afghanistan's hospital system in the heavily bombed areas like Kandahar (as staff fear going to work).⁸ The Afghan hospital system had collapsed by late October under the bombing onslaught as hospital staff fled for safety.⁹ Those wounded able to, head off to clinics in Pakistan, while 'those too wounded or poor to make the journey have been left to die in their homes in Kandahar'.¹⁰ Carroll (2001) reported about Kandahar, 'parents with mutilated children have been turned away and told to hire smugglers to take them across the border to Quetta, Pakistan'.

In early November, the doctors at Kandahar's Chinese-built Mir Wais said the hospital was receiving 10 to 20 new victims of US bombing each day, but on average three died daily. Medicine supplies were inadequate, most trained doctors and nurses had fled in fear, there is no electricity except for a generator since US planes hit the city's main power supply unit (Carroll, 2001). Another report on Mir Wais suggested that 300 people a day were being treated at Mir Wais hospital during the height of the US bombing campaign around Kandahar, many of them victims of US bombs or other wounds, with 10-15% of them dying. In Kabul's 300-bed children's hospital supplies ran out and most of the staff fled.¹¹ By early November, doctors in the only government hospital in Jalalabad were operating without anesthetics, and yet the hospital was receiving 30 injured people daily of whom at least five were in a serious condition.¹²

⁶Today, officials estimate that as many as 60% of Kabul's buildings are damaged or destroyed, largely a legacy of the 1990s civil war, though US bombing damaged over 1,000 buildings (see D Filkins, Brick by brick, Afghans recycle and rebuild city, New York Times April 16 2002).

⁷US-led air forces totally destroyed 11 of Iraq's 20 operating power stations and damaged six others (see L Everest, Iraq & Afghanistan: *Deja vu* all over again, Zmag.org 2001, (URL: <http://www.zmag.org/everest.htm>)).

⁸28 October 2001 Pakistan News Service

⁹29 October 2001 The Frontier Post, Peshawar

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹30 October 2001 *ibid*.

¹²7 November 2001 Out There News. A description of conditions in the women's ward of a hospital in Jalalabad may be found in 16 October 2001 Associated Press

During the last two weeks of October, US warplanes made a concerted effort to hit Afghanistan's meager electricity generating capacity. The Afghan power system consisted largely of isolated regional networks supplied by small power and diesel facilities. The two exceptions were Kabul (supplied by the Soviet-built 100 megawatt Naghlu dam near Darunta) and Kandahar (fed by the large American-built Kajakai 33 megawatt hydroelectric facility in Helmand province). My database lists five attacks upon Afghanistan's power systems:

- 10 October: US planes hit a small hydro plant outside Jalalabad;¹³
- 14 October: US planes hit high-power tension lines near Kandahar;
- 15 October: US planes hit the Naghlu power station northeast of Kabul;
- 18 October: planes bomb the Jalalabad power system;
- 31 October: a major bombing attack upon the Kajakai power station supplying both Lashkargah and Kandahar.

A report from US energy research group, Frost & Sullivan, noted 'this has led to major health and sanitation concerns as cities require electricity to pump water' (Thayer, 2001). On 3rd December, US planes bombed two bridges leading out of Kandahar.

US warplanes also bombed vehicles on roads and highways, creating thousands more craters and rendering the roads virtually impassable. The highways are now so badly damaged that it takes 2-3 times as long to travel between cities as it once did, crippling commerce in a land of traders (Baker and Glasser, 2002). Transportation costs soared and the bombing campaign aggravated an already dire refugee crisis by idling trucks laden with relief supplies.¹⁴

US bombs destroyed fuel depots, the downtown Kabul telephone exchange and radio stations. In both Serbia and then Afghanistan, US warplanes attacked national media outlets. NATO forces bombed Belgrade's leading TV station, Radio Television Serbia, in the early hours of 23rd April 1999, killing 16 civilian employees.¹⁵ On the night of 8 October 2001, US warplanes bombed the Taliban radio station, Voice of Shariat, with a tower located on a hill in eastern Kabul and offices in downtown Kabul, killing 10 civilians (Reuters, 2001). Some days later, the US bombed a small one-kilowatt mobile radio transmitter station which the Taliban had set up (Salahudin, 2001). US bombing of Afghanistan, as we document, consistently and egregiously violated the tenets of international humanitarian law.

US planes targeted and sought to silence Afghan media as of the first night of bombing. The group, Reporteurs Sans Frontieres (RSF), described this action:

according to information obtained by RSF, the US forces struck the radio and television in Kabul, Kandahar [south of the country], Jalalabad [east], and Puli Khomri [north of Kabul]

¹³14 October 2001 The Washington Post

¹⁴This topic is explored in my essay Marc W Herold, Rubble rousers: US bombing and the Afghan refugee crisis 2002b, (URL: <http://www.cursor.org/stories/rubble.htm>). The ruined roads are described in D Birch, Afghanistan's lost highways, Baltimore Sun 29 April 2002.

¹⁵See C Holland, *Destruction of the Yugoslav media* June 2000, (URL: http://www.iacenter.org/warcrime/10_media.htm), chap. 10

during the first days of the military operation ‘Enduring Freedom’ against the Taliban regime. On the first night of the strikes, the building and antennae of the official station Radio Shariat in Kabul were targeted and the programmes were cut off... the television installations, banned from broadcasting since 1996 by the Taliban, were also targeted. Following the strikes, programmes were suspended for more than three weeks. On 24 October the radio station that broadcasts mostly the Taliban authorities’ press releases and religious prayers, started to broadcast again for no more than two hours per day. The Taliban used a mobile transmitter but on the night of 25 October the air strikes destroyed this installation.¹⁶

But US bombs also hit the infrastructure of the Afghan mind. Between 10 October and 20 December, US bombs and missiles fell upon 12 different mosques in Afghanistan, killing at least 120 innocent civilians (Herold, 2002c).¹⁷ Mosques were hit in the provinces of Nangarhar, Kunduz, Herat, Kandahar and Paktia.

Proximity to Taliban was fatal!

On 13 February, Peshawar’s daily newspaper, The Frontier Post, got it more right than all the US media war pundits, headlining a brief article, ‘Proximity to Taliban was fatal!’. The article described how: ‘The bomb craters are like enormous footsteps a few hundred yards apart, marching in the direction of a Taliban radio transmitter. Along the way, four men died . . . a fatal proximity to a site considered militarily useful to Afghanistan’s Taliban or Osama’.

Hundreds of individual stories exist, as yet mostly untold, of how the proximity of civilian populations to what US war planners deemed a military ‘target’ led to high numbers of innocent Afghan civilians being killed. Ghulam and Rabia Hazrat, for example, lived on the outskirts of Kabul near a Taliban military base. One day, a US missile landed in the family’s courtyard and the neighborhood was showered with cluster bombs. Mrs. Hazrat remembers:

there was no warning. I was in the kitchen making dough when I heard a big explosion. I came out and saw a big cloud of dust and saw my children lying on the ground. Two of them were dead and two died later in the hospital (Gall, 2002).

Along with the decision of US military planners to bomb perceived military targets in urban areas, the use of weapons with great destructive blast and fragmentation power (see Figure-1) necessarily resulted in heavy civilian casualties. The weapon of choice during the first three weeks of the air campaign was the 500lb bomb, which has a lethal blast range of 20 meters; later, the 2,000lb pound became the weapon of choice and it has a lethal blast range of 34 meters. The JDAM (Joint Defence Attack Munition) technology consists of a \$21,000 attachment produced by Boeing which transforms 1,000lb and 2,000lb conventional ‘dumb’ bombs into ‘smart’ bombs which rely upon the global positioning

¹⁶RSF asks the US army not to take Afghan media as military targets in War Coverage in Afghanistan, RSF 9 November 2001

¹⁷Two years ago, NATO war planes also destroyed mosques in Kosovo - the fifteenth-century Bajratki mosque in Pec, the sixteenth-century Hadum mosque in Djakovica, the seventeenth-century Sinan Pasha mosque in Prizren. For more details on NATO’s bombing of historical treasures in Yugoslavia, see A Herscher and A. Kiedlmayer, The destruction and reconstruction of architectural heritage in Kosovo, Technical report Bosnia Report 19/20, October-December 2000.

Characteristics	Mark 82 500lb Paveway II bomb	Mark 83 1000lb JDAM bomb	CBU-87 1000lb Cluster bomb	Mark 84 2000lb JDAM bomb
Officially reported accuracy range	9 meters	13-30 meters, 39 feet in tests	NA	13-30 meters, 39 feet in tests
Fragmentation range		3,000 feet	NA	3,000 feet
Blast shrapnel range		600-foot radius	500 feet	1,200-foot radius
Effective casualty radius ^a	about 60 metres radius		Disperses 202 bomblets, each with 300 steel fragments	Safety at least 400 meters from impact site
Lethal blast range ^b	about 20 metres radius		250 feet [76 meters]	100 feet or 34 meters
Crater upon impact	12 feet or 4 meters	35-feet wide	Foot print is 200x400 meters	50-feet wide and 36-feet deep
Price per unit	\$19,000	\$25,000	\$12,400	\$25,000
Manufacturers	Texas Instruments and Raytheon	Boein Corp. and Lockheed Martin	Aerojet/Honeywell	Boeing Corp. and Lockheed Martin

^a Meaning 50% of exposed persons will die

^b Meaning 100% mortality within this range

Table 1: Data on weapons systems used in Afghan aerial war theater

Time Period	Low Estimate	High Estimate
October 2001	1061	1238
November 2001	1012	1106
December 2001	864	1045
No Date Available	171	171
Total	3108	3560

Table 2: Civilian casualties (showing impact death only) of the US air war in Afghanistan

system. When global positioning updates are available the JDAM-outfitted bomb can strike within 13 meters [43 feet] of its target. When updates are not available due to jamming or other problems, it can ‘still hit within 30 meters (or 98 feet)’ (Thompson, 1999). The B1-B bombers flying out of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean can carry 24-30 Mark 84 2,000lb JDAM bombs. Each bomb is 14-feet long and will destroy military targets within a 40-foot radius from the point of impact. Using only an inertial guidance system (INS), the Mark 84 bomb has a circular error radius of 30 meters, but with a GPS guidance unit this gets reduced to 13 meters.

Documenting civilian casualties

Afghan civilians in proximity to alleged military installations inevitably died in large numbers, as the ‘collateral damage’ of US air attacks, as US military planners sought to make future military operations in the sky or on the ground safer from the point of view of the US military. The military facilities of the Taliban were mostly inherited from the Soviet-supported government of the 1980s, which had concentrated its military infrastructure in cities which could be better defended against the rural insurgency of the mujahadeen. This reality was compounded insofar as the Taliban maintained dispersed facilities: smaller units, spread out. US military strategists and their bombers thus engaged in a very widespread high intensity of bombing. Such intense urban bombing caused high levels of civilian casualties. From the point of view of US policymakers and their mainstream media boosters, the ‘cost’ of a dead Afghan civilian is zero as long as these civilian deaths can be hidden from the general US public’s view. The ‘benefits’ of saving future lives of US military personnel are enormous, given the US public’s post-Vietnam aversion to returning body bags.

The documented Afghan civilians killed were not participating in war-making activities (e.g. working in munitions factories etc.) and therefore had not forfeited their right to immunity from attack (Wheeler, 2001, p. 5-6). In effect, as an astute scholar has noted, I am turning Walzer (1977, p. 156) notion of ‘due care’ upside down: that is, far from acknowledging a positive responsibility to protect innocent Afghans from the misery of war, US military strategists chose to impose levels of harm upon innocent Afghan civilians to reduce present and possible future dangers faced by US forces.

The 14,000 tons of bombs dropped upon Afghanistan between October 2001 and February 2002 killed, at a conservative estimate, between 3,100 and 3,500 civilians upon direct impact (what I call ‘impact deaths’). These do not include persons dying later from injuries, from the later explosion of cluster bombs, or from hunger or cold. Table-2 ‘counts the dead’ during the US bombing campaign. From the data available, about 70% of these casualties were women and children.

Analysis of civilian casualty data reveals two other important characteristics of the US air war. First, most civilian deaths were registered in regions of high population density.¹⁸ Second, the elevated number of civilian deaths is the result of a very large number of small death tolls in many bombing attacks. This fits well with the fact that most fighter planes were carrying out 3-4 bombing attacks per sortie.

Phases of the bombing campaign

The US air war upon Afghanistan was played out in five phases, though without any overall grand plan. The air war was adjusted to the shifting realities on the ground. The five sequential phases were:

- 7-20 Oct. 2001** Bombing of perceived military facilities in urban areas, airports and outlying camps
- 21 Oct.-25 Nov. 2001** The battle for the central plains area, the Shomali Plain campaign and the carpet bombing around Kunduz, Khanabad and Mazar
- 26 Nov.-10 Dec. 2001** The bombing campaign around Kandahar and the southern provinces
- 27 Nov.-10 Dec. 2001** Tora Bora campaign
- 20 Dec.-Present** The bombing of selected sites believed to harbor Al Qaeda or Taliban leadership

Beginning in the Balkan wars of the 1990s, military and media propagandists began arguing that casualties among civilian populations do not, strictly speaking, count (pious public relations statements aside) if they are not premeditated. Since the US and its allies are (by definition) the ‘good’ guys, if they killed some innocent people, they did not do it on purpose. The ‘bad’ guys, on the other hand, are always portrayed as intentionally murderous. In Chechnya, while the war has taken the lives of thousands of innocent civilians, it is against Khattab and Basayev. In Iraq, while the trade embargo has probably taken hundreds of thousands of lives, the war is against Saddam. In these two instances, argument over the amount of ‘collateral damage’ rages, whereas the Taliban’s bombing of Afghan civilians was (by definition) a fact of murder.

In Afghanistan, the war (‘against terrorism’) has been touted as a war not against Afghans, but against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. However, drawing on Herman’s (1999) analysis of the bombing of Kosovo, a very different interpretation might read:

But where the likelihood of ‘errors’ in a bombing raid has a probability of over 90 percent, the damage is intentional even if the particular victims were not targeted. If somebody throws a bomb at an individual in a crowded theater, and 100 bystanders are also killed, would we say that the bomb thrower was not clearly guilty of killing the 100 because their deaths were ‘unintended’ and the damage was ‘collateral’? The propaganda agencies reserve such purr word excuses for ‘humanitarian’ bombing (Herman, 1999).¹⁹

¹⁸Appendix 5 Herold, A dossier on civilian victims of United States aerial bombing of Afghanistan: A comprehensive accounting (as in n. †)

¹⁹See also N Solomon, Orwellian logic 101 - a few simple lessons 27 September 1988, <URL: <http://www.fair.org/media-beat/980827.html>>, E Ferguson, Language of conflict, The Observer September 2001, <URL: <http://www.observer.co.uk/comments/story/0,6903,556571,00.html>> and more locally, O Tesdell, Collateral damage equals murder, Iowa State Daily 14 December 2001.

‘Worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ bodies and the asymmetry of reporting

A bigger factor is at work here. There is a stark asymmetry in the ways in which ‘bodies count’ in this new global War on Terrorism. After September 11th the personal lives of virtually every victim merited massive media attention. Enormous efforts were (rightly) made to uncover and identify every last body part from ‘Ground Zero’. In Afghanistan, by contrast, the bodies of bombing victims have been nameless, invisible to the world and totally neglected. Sometimes, civilian victims are ‘worthy’ and other times ‘unworthy’. Edward Herman (Herman, 2002) argues that what gets counted is fundamentally a political question:

where there is an official and imperial demand for a high body count and great indignation, as in the case of Kosovo in 1998 and 1999 . . . the [ideological and propaganda] collective will be deeply concerned with civilian casualties, will pursue refugees relentlessly to get details of their suffering, and will search eagerly for dead bodies . . . on the other hand, where the imperial power and/or its proxies are doing the killing, as in Afghanistan from October 7, 2001 onward, or in Panama in 1989, or in Iraq in January 1991 to the present; or where client states like Israel, Turkey and Indonesia in East Timor are doing the killing, the establishment collective has little interest in civilian casualties . . . fails to pursue refugees to get their stories of suffering, and does not engage in any search for dead bodies. In fact, its members tend to be skeptical of stories of suffering and estimates of dead bodies made by others, in a direct reversal of their position on such stories and estimates for ‘worthy’ victims of ‘another Hitler’ (Herman, 2002).

The zeal in uncovering bodies killed by Serbs, the recounting of the most horrific witness accounts, and the ensuing indignation, is precisely matched by the utter neglect, great skepticism, and ridicule towards any who might count the Afghan civilians who died under US bombs. Similar neglect was evident for the 1,000-3,500 civilians who died in the El Chorillos slum of Panama City in the 1989 US invasion. They happened to be overwhelmingly poor blacks living next to the Panamanian military headquarters. The US propaganda system simply made Panamanian and Afghan civilian victims ‘unworthy’ of note, unworthy bodies. Contrast this with Human Rights Watch’s (1999-2000) report on Chechan victims of Russian atrocities, which depicted the Russian war on Chechnya as seen through the drawings of children in Chechnya.

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