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The Nation

## War Crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan

by Robert Dreyfuss

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War crimes, massacres, and, as Al Jazeera properly calls it, "collateral murder," are all part of the US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001.

The [release last week of the Wikileaks video](#), thirty-eight grisly minutes long, of US airmen casually slaughtering a dozen Iraqis in 2007 -- including two Reuters newsmen -- puts it into focus not because it shows us something we didn't know, but because we can watch it unfold in real time. Real people, flesh and blood, gunned down from above in a hellish rain of fire.

The events in Iraq, nearly three years old, were repeated this week in Afghanistan, when trigger-happy US soldiers slaughtered five Afghans cruising along on a huge, comfortable civilian bus near Kandahar.

As the *New York Times* [reports](#):

"American troops raked a large passenger bus with gunfire near Kandahar on Monday morning, killing and wounding civilians, and igniting angry anti-American demonstrations in a city where winning over Afghan support is pivotal to the war effort."

The Kandahar incident is only one of many, of course. Over the past year, dozens of Afghans have similarly died in checkpoint and roadside killings. Not one, not a single one, of these

murders involved hostile forces. In other words, when the smoke and dust cleared, in all of the cases over the past year the bodies recovered were those of innocents.

As General McChrystal himself recently said:

"We really ask a lot of our young service people out on checkpoints because there's danger, they're asked to make very rapid decisions in often very unclear situations. However, to my knowledge, in the nine-plus months I've been here, not a single case where we have engaged in an escalation of force incident and hurt someone has it turned out that the vehicle had a suicide bomb or weapons in it and, in many cases, had families in it."

My question is: if so, then why aren't the rules of engagement altered? Why is it that US forces can fire wildly at an approaching vehicle, if in none of the cases that have happened thus far were there hostile forces involved?

In the Iraq case, as revealed in the stunning Wikileaks video, a group of eight men on a Baghdad street, in plain sunlight, is shot to pieces under withering fire from above. Then, when a van carrying four or five other men arrives to pick up a wounded man who is crawling painfully along the gutter, the van too is blasted to smithereens when the airmen request permission to "engage."

An [analysis by Politifact](#) takes apart Secretary of Defense Gates' callous assertion that the murders were "unfortunate" and "should not have any lasting consequences." We've already investigated this, he said, so what's the big deal?

The military's rationale for the slaughter is that US forces a few hundred yards away had taken small arms fire, and so the airmen in the copters circling above concluded that the men they'd seen carrying what they thought were weapons and RPGs -- although the "RPG" turned out to be a cameraman's telephoto lens -- were bad guys who could be shot to pieces at will. There was, of course, no evidence at all that the dozen or so Iraqis butchered were involved in what may or may not have been a shooting incident nearby. But, you know -- war is hell.

Politifact, to its discredit, defends Gates on these grounds, quoting David Finkel, a *Washington Post* reporter and author of *The Good Soldiers*, who writes in blase defense of the slaughter:

"What's helpful to understand is that, contrary to some interpretations that this was an attack on some people walking down the street on a nice day, the day was anything but that. It happened in the midst of a large operation to clear an area where U.S. soldiers had been getting shot at, injured, and killed with increasing frequency. What the Reuters guys walked into was the very worst part, where the morning had been a series of RPG attacks and running gun battles.

"More context. You're seeing an edited version of the video. The full video runs much longer. And it doesn't have the benefit of hindsight, in this case zooming in on the van and seeing those two children. The helicopters were perhaps a mile away. And as all of this unfolded, it was unclear to the soldiers involved whether the van was a van of good Samaritans or of insurgents

showing up to rescue a wounded comrade. I bring these things up not to excuse the soldiers but to emphasize some of the real-time blurriness of those moments.

"If you were to see the full video, you would see a person carrying an RPG launcher as he walked down the street as part of the group. Another was armed as well, as I recall. Also, if you had the unfortunate luck to be on site afterwards, you would have seen that one of the dead in the group was lying on top of a launcher. Because of that and some other things, EOD -- the Hurt Locker guys, I guess -- had to come in and secure the site. And again, I'm not trying to excuse what happened. But there was more to it for you to consider than what was in the released video."

Finkel, who apparently is not going to write a sequel to his book called *The Bad Soldiers*, cavalierly dismisses the deaths of a dozen Iraqis as something that happens in the "real-time blurriness of those moments."

In Afghanistan, the repeated killings of innocent civilians has angered an embittered President Karzai, who has strongly and repeatedly condemned the killings of Afghan citizens by American troops. In a *Washington Post* story today, "Shooting by U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan fuels Karzai's anger," the paper [reports](#):

"Twelve days before President Hamid Karzai denounced the behavior of Western countries in Afghanistan, he met a 4-year-old boy at the Tarin Kowt civilian hospital in the south.

"The boy had lost his legs in a February airstrike by U.S. Special Operations forces helicopters that killed more than 20 civilians. Karzai scooped him up from his mattress and walked out to the hospital courtyard, according to three witnesses. 'Who injured you?' the president asked as helicopters passed overhead. The boy, crying alongside his relatives, pointed at the sky.

"The tears and rage Karzai encountered in that hospital in Uruzgan province lingered with him, according to several aides. It was one provocation amid a string of recent political disappointments that they said has helped fuel the president's emotional outpouring against the West and prompted a brief crisis in his relations with the United States. It was also a reminder that civilian casualties in Afghanistan have political reverberations far beyond the sites of the killings."

But I suppose Finkel can justify that one, too.