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Censorship of war casualties in the US

Ted Rall
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Why is it so easy for political leaders in the US to convince ordinary citizens to support war? How is it that, after that initial enthusiasm has given away to fatigue and disgust, the reaction is mere disinterest rather than righteous rage? Even when the reasons given for taking the US to war were proven to have been not only wrong, but brazenly fraudulent - as in Iraq, which hadn't possessed chemical weapons since 1991 - no one is called to account.

The United States claims to be a shining beacon of democracy to the world. And many of the citizens of the world believe it. But democracy is about responsiveness and accountability - the responsiveness of political leaders to an engaged and informed electorate, which holds that leadership class accountable for its mistakes and misdeeds. How to explain Americans' acquiescence in the face of political leaders who repeatedly lead it into illegal, geopolitically disastrous and economically devastating wars of choice?

The dynamics of US public opinion have changed dramatically since the 1960s, when popular opposition to the Vietnam War coalesced into an antiestablishmentarian political and cultural movement that nearly toppled the government - and led to a series of sweeping social reforms whose contemporary ripples include the recent move to legalise marriage between members of the same sex.

Why the difference?

Numerous explanations have been offered for the vanishing of protesters from the streets of American cities. First and foremost, fewer people know someone who has been killed. The death rate for US troops has fallen dramatically, from 58,000 in Vietnam to a total of 6,000 for Iraq and Afghanistan. Many point to the replacement of conscripts by volunteer soldiers, many of whom originate from the working class, which is by definition less influential. Congressman Charles Rangel, who represents the predominantly African-American neighbourhood of Harlem in New York, is the chief political proponent of this theory. He has proposed legislation to restore the military draft, which ended in the 1970s, four times since 9/11. "The test for Congress, particularly for those members who support the war, is to require all who enjoy the benefits of our democracy to contribute to the defence of the country. All of America's children should share the risk of being placed in harm's way. The reason is that so few families have a stake in the war which is being fought by other people's children," Rangel said in March 2011.

War is extraordinarily costly in cash as well as in lives. By 2009, the cost of invading and occupying Iraq had exceeded \$1 trillion. During the 1960s and early 1970s conservatives unmoved by the human toll in Vietnam were appalled by the cost to taxpayers. "The myth that capitalism thrives on war has never been more fallacious," argued *Time* magazine on July 13, 1970. Bear in mind, *Time* leaned to the far right editorially. "While the Nixon administration battles war-induced inflation, corporate profits are tumbling and unemployment runs high. Urgent civilian needs are being shunted aside to satisfy the demands of military budgets. Businessmen are virtually unanimous in their conviction that peace would be bullish, and they were generally cheered by last week's withdrawal from Cambodia."

Aware of this concern among the business class that finances the Republican Party, President George W Bush kept the lion's share of spending on the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq "off the books," relying on a new accounting gimmick - funding the "war on terror" from supplemental and emergency appropriations. As of 9/11 the Pentagon budget no longer included the price of its primary activity, waging war. Yes, the wars of the 21st century add to the national debt. But they don't add to the number reported by the business press - the annual budget deficit. Inattentiveness is a politician's best friend.

Out of sight, out of mind

What about the bodies? During the 1960s and early 1970s television viewers and newspaper readers in the US were regularly treated to images from the front that prompted even the most fervent proponents of the war to question themselves. "A stream of media reports and images describing spectacular carnage suggested that the United States was embroiled in a brutal, dehumanising struggle. For example, newspapers and television programs across the country carried gruesome images of the South Vietnamese national police chief executing an NLF prisoner with a shot to the head," writes Mark Atwood Lawrence in his book *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*.

The global war on terror, which under Obama has expanded from Afghanistan and Iraq to include Libya, an expanded secret drone war in Pakistan, as well semi-covert wars in Yemen and Somalia, obviously includes countless similar images "on the ground", in the parlance of US television analysts. ("On the ground" = "in real life.")

US military actions in Libya, Yemen and Somalia barely register. Most in the US aren't even aware that they exist or, for that matter, where they are. According to a March 2011 poll, only 58 per cent of Americans knew that Libya is in North Africa.

Jonathan Schell, writing in *The Nation*, recently marvelled at the Obama administration's argument that it did not need congressional approval for war against Libya because US forces were not substantially at risk in a campaign fought from high in the air and with drones. "War is only war, it seems, when Americans are dying, when we die," he wrote. "When only they, the Libyans, die, it is something else for which there is as yet apparently no name. When they attack, it is war. When we attack, it is not."

Iraq and Afghanistan remain "real" wars in the traditional sense. Thousands of American soldiers have been killed. Tens of thousands have been severely wounded. But images from these "real" wars have been studiously sanitised to the point that a well-informed news consumer could be excused for thinking that their country's latest wars are virtually bloodless.

"Pictures [of dead or dying American troops] have rarely been seen in recent years from Iraq and Afghanistan," acknowledged *The New York Times* in September 2009. "This was not the case during the Vietnam War."

The *Times* published only a handful of photos of dead and dying soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq. Compare that with other countries, where pictures of the war dead routinely appear in print and on the air. The current atmosphere of censorship is unprecedented, even by the comparably squeamish standards of the US media. According to Professor Gail Buckland, who studies and teaches photo history at Cooper Union in New York, far more photos of dead US soldiers appeared in newspapers during the 1861-65 Civil War than have since 2001.

The Bush administration censored the images of flag-draped coffins arriving at Dover Air Force Base, a dignified rite that was a familiar sight on the evening news during Vietnam. Obama lifted Bush's coffin ban in 2009, but it made little difference. After the media showed a few such photos - to illustrate the story about the lifting of the ban - they disappeared. Self-censorship, it seems, is as powerful as the government variety.

Media consumers saw thousands of images of dead and dying combatants, both American and Vietnamese, 40 years ago. Most were supplied by war photographers embedded with US troop units. But today's "embeds" are required to submit their work to military censors for approval and transmission. One reporter returned from the 1991 Gulf War to find that none of his photos had been sent to his employer.

War correspondents in Vietnam were given "carte blanche", Don McCullin, who covered Indochina for the *Sunday Times* of London told *The New York Times*. "Vietnam was a total free-for-all," confirms Dirck Halstead, who ran the UPI wire service's photo bureau in Saigon in 1965-66. "Our job was to be there to take photographs of whatever happened in front of us. Our core mission was to record history."

History changed public opinion. "As picture editor of *The New York Times* during the Vietnam War, I argued for prominent usage of the pictures by the AP's Eddie Adams of the execution of a Vietcong suspect, for the publication of the photo by the AP's Nick Ut of a naked Cambodian girl running from napalm, of the picture by John Filo of the shooting of a student at Kent State by National Guardsmen," says John G Morris.

"If those pictures helped turned the world against continuation of the Vietnam War, I am glad."

Where are the pictures?

What pictures will turn Americans against their nation's wars against Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen or Somalia?

Atrocities committed - and often photographed - by US military forces have also been thoroughly sanitised from the public narrative.

Thousands of digital photos of the 2004 torture of inmates at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq were taken as souvenirs by the torturers, US occupation troops. This is a US government description of one trove: "A review of all the computer media submitted to this office revealed a total of 1,325 images of suspected detainee abuse, 93 video files of suspected detainee abuse, 660 images of adult pornography, 546 images of suspected dead Iraqi detainees, 29 images of soldiers in simulated sexual acts, 20 images of a soldier with a swastika drawn between his eyes, 37 images of military working dogs being used in abuse of detainees and 125 images of questionable acts." But only a small fraction of these have been disseminated in the United States. The porn - which supposedly depicts US soldiers engaged in sexual acts with Iraqi prisoners - never appeared in any American media outlet.

When President Obama refused to release the entire Abu Ghraib dossier to the media, no less a luminary than *New Yorker* staff writer Philip Gourevitch defended censorship: "Who are we trying to fool, if not ourselves, if we pretend that we need more photos to know what has been going on?"

Americans need something. That's certain. Because they definitely do not know what is going on.

In 2009 a US "kill team" operating near Kandahar was accused of "killing innocent civilians for sport and mutilating their bodies by cutting off fingers and ripping out teeth to keep as trophies," in the words of a reporter for the UK *Guardian*. Investigators discovered some 4,000 photographs documenting these horrific acts. The German weekly *Der Spiegel*, citing US and NATO concerns that publication of the trophy photos could spark riots in Afghanistan as the result of "a new Abu Ghraib", ran three of the suppressed images. The feared riots never materialised.

None of the pictures appeared in the United States. The story lasted one day.

When it comes to the carnage of war, even a simple count of civilian casualties is hard to come by for Americans trying to find out what's going on in wars being fought in their name, by their fellow citizens, using weapons financed by their tax funds.

In yet another marked departure from Vietnam, when the Department of Defense obsessively attempted to count the number of military and civilian dead on both sides of the conflict, the US claims to no longer track the number of civilians killed in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Pentagon complained about the famous *Lancet* study which found that more than a million Iraqis had perished since 2003, but had no numbers with which to counter it.

Then there's the muddling of the few numbers that are available. US media outlets reported that civilian casualties were up 15 per cent in Afghanistan this year - but parsed the blame. Civilian deaths caused by anti-government forces, they said, were up 28 per cent. Pro-government forces, on the other hand, were responsible for nine per cent fewer dead civilians. Left unsaid: if not for the US and NATO, the war might have been over years ago.

Americans in denial

Now the US is increasingly reliant on remotely controlled aerial vehicles, or armed "drone" planes, to fight its wars. How many civilians get killed by US drone attacks in places like Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province? "The overall numbers are important because they would allow the public to assess whether drones are a new, more precise method of exerting air power," Salon quotes Jonathan Manes of the American Civil Liberties Union, which filed a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit against the US government to compel it to reveal its casualty count. The Pentagon denies keeping track. "While each drone strike appears to be subject to an individual assessment after the fact, there is no total number of casualties compiled," says the ACLU. "Moreover, information contained in the individual assessments is classified - making it impossible for the public to learn how many civilians have been killed overall."

Dead and wounded Afghans, Iraqis, Pakistanis, Somalis, Yemenis and Libyans have been expunged from American popular culture as well.

Popular films like "Restrepo" and "The Hurt Locker" depict the experience of US troops fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively, and do with unreserved sympathy for the American side. The US occupation of Afghanistan has been going on for ten years, yet there is still no sign of a Hollywood movie that gives time to the "enemy" side, as "The Longest Day" did with World War II. The closest attempt at pure criticism in the vein of the post-Vietnam film "Apocalypse Now" was "Extraordinary Rendition," a flat-footed look at the Bush-era torture outsourcing program. It's hard to imagine that American audiences will someday see a film that depicts, say, the Taliban resistance with a level of sympathy approaching "Letters from Iwo Jima," a Clint Eastwood-directed look at the "enemy" military during the closing months of the Battle of Japan.

Americans don't see the brutality of their wars in the newspaper, on the nightly news, in their weekly newsmagazines, or at the movies. They don't even see them in books, where educated people turn for nuance and breadth. Coverage of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, such as it is considering that most such books are written by American reporters embedded with US forces, is

decidedly Americentric, such as Dexter Filkins' bestseller "The Forever War". Literary works that depict the point of view of civilians tend to view them as passive victims, such as Khaled Hosseini's novel "The Kite Runner" and Greg Mortenson's "Three Cups of Tea" (though under attack in the media as fictionalized, the latter title continues to sell briskly).

American citizens are morally responsible for the wars and the war crimes committed in their name. The sad truth is, however, that they don't know what's going on - and they don't lift a finger to find out.