

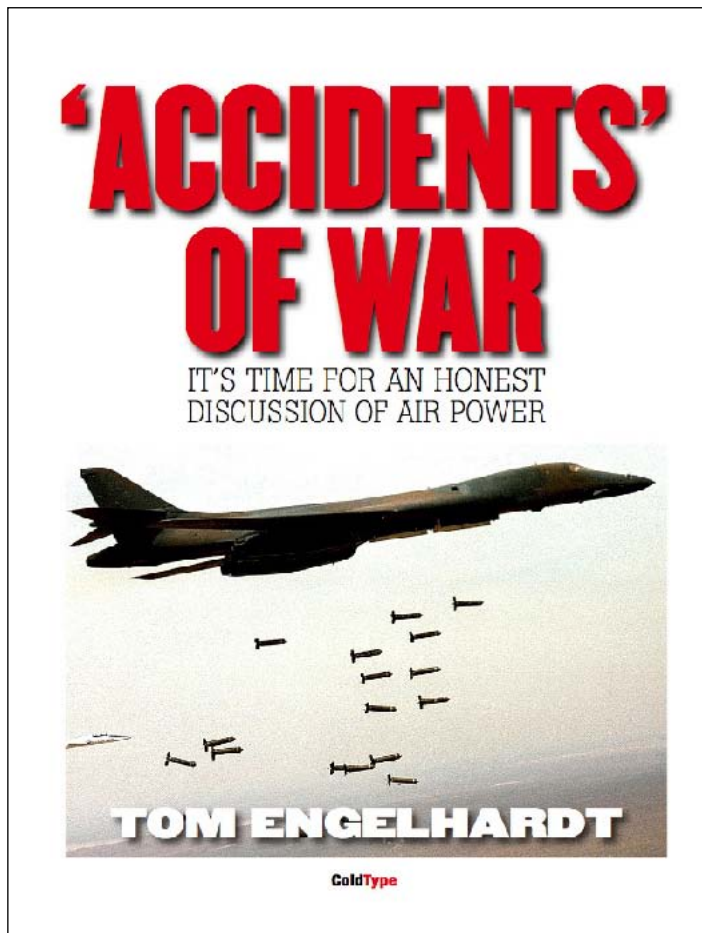
# 'ACCIDENTS' OF WAR

IT'S TIME FOR AN HONEST  
DISCUSSION OF AIR POWER



**TOM ENGELHARDT**

**ColdType**



**TOM ENGELHARDT**, who runs the Nation Institute's Tomdispatch.com ("a regular antidote to the mainstream media"), is the co-founder of the American Empire Project and, most recently, the author of *Mission Unaccomplished: Tomdispatch Interviews with American Iconoclasts and Dissenters* (Nation Books), the first collection of Tomdispatch interviews.

© Tom Engelhardt 2007

This essay originally appeared on the TomDispatch.com web site

**ColdType**

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD  
[www.coldtype.net](http://www.coldtype.net)

## TOM ENGELHARDT | 'ACCIDENTS' OF WAR

# THE

first news stories about the most notorious massacre of the Vietnam War were picked up the morning after from an Army publicity release. These proved fairly typical for the war. On its front page, the New York Times labeled the operation in and around a village called My Lai 4 (or "Pinkville," as it was known to U.S. forces in the area) 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 termed what happened there 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 'Red, White and Blue Village.'"

All these dispatches from the "front" were, of course, military fairy tales. (There were no reporters in the vicinity.) It took over a year for a former GI named Ronald Ridenhour, who had heard about the bloody massacre from participants, and a young former AP reporter named Seymour Hersh working in Washington for a news service no one had ever heard of, to break the story, revealing that "red, white, and blue village" had just been red village — the red of Vietnamese peasant blood. Over 400 elderly men, women, children, and babies had been slaughtered there by Charlie Company of Task Force Barker in a nearly day-long rampage.

Things move somewhat faster these days — after all, Vietnamese villagers and local officials didn't have access to cell phones to tell their side of the slaughter — but from the military point of view, the stories these last years have all still seemed to start the same way. Whether in Afghanistan or Iraq, they have been presented by U.S. military spokesmen, or in military press releases, as straightforward successes. The newspaper stories that followed would regularly announce that 17, or 30, or 65 "Taliban insurgents" or "suspected insur-

## **TOM ENGELHARDT | 'ACCIDENTS' OF WAR**

gents," or "al-Qaeda gunmen" had been killed in battle after "air strikes" were called in. These stories recorded daily military victories over a determined, battle-hardened enemy.

Most of the time, that was the beginning and end of the matter: Air strike; dead enemies; move on to the next day's bloody events. When it came to Iraq, such air-strike successes generally did not make it into the American press as stories at all, but as scattered, ho-hum paragraphs (based on military announcements) in round-ups of a given day's action focused on far more important matters — IEDs, suicide car bombs, mortar attacks, sectarian killings. In many cases, air strikes in that country simply went unreported.

From time to time, however, another version of what happened when air strikes were called in on the rural areas of Afghanistan, or on heavily populated neighborhoods in Iraq's cities and towns, filtered out. In this story, noncombatants died, often in sizeable numbers. In the last few weeks "incidents" like this have been reported with enough regularity in Afghanistan to become a modest story in their own right.

In such news stories, a local caregiver or official or village elder is reached by phone in some distant, reporter-unfriendly spot and recounts a battle in which, by the time the planes arrive, the enemy has fled the scene, or had never been there, or was present but, as is generally the case in guerrilla wars, in close proximity to noncombatants going about their daily lives in their own homes and fields. Such accounts record a grim harvest of dead civilians — and they almost invariably have a repeated tagline when it comes to those dead: "including women and children." In an increasing number of cases recently, reports on the carnage have taken not over a year, or weeks, or even days to exfiltrate the scene, but have actually beaten the military success story onto the news page.

In the past, when such civilian slaughters were reported, often days or even weeks after the initial military account of the battle, what followed also had a pattern to it. The first responses from the U.S. military would be outright denials (undoubtedly on the assumption that, without reporters present, the accounts of Afghan peasants or Iraqi slum dwellers would carry little weight). Normally, given the competing he says/she says frame for the reports and the inability of journalists to make it to the scene of the reputed slaughter, sooner or later the story would simply fade away.

If, against all odds, evidence of civilian deaths piled up, the military would, in strategic fashion, fall back from one heavily defended position to the next. The numbers of noncombatant dead or wounded would be questioned and lowered. Regrets would be offered. Explanations would be proffered. It was perhaps an "accident" (a missile missed its target or faulty local intelligence was responsible); or it wasn't an accident, because "the bad guys" meant it to happen as it did. (In their cowardly way, they had turned the civilian population into "human shields," thus causing the deaths in question when U.S. forces reacted in "self-defense.")

## **TOM ENGELHARDT | 'ACCIDENTS' OF WAR**

If the story nonetheless persisted, an "investigation" (by the military, of course) would be announced — again, meant to fade away. In rare cases, "consolation payments" and limited apologies would be offered. In extreme instances, when the killings of civilians were especially grotesque and the result of boots-on-the-ground — as at Haditha — lower-ranking soldiers might finally be brought up on charges. With the exception of a friendly fire incident in which two U.S. National Guard pilots killed four Canadian soldiers and injured six others on the ground in Afghanistan, air strikes were exempt from such charges, no matter what had happened. (In the Canadian case, the U.S. pilot, originally threatened with a court-martial on manslaughter charges, was found guilty of "dereliction of duty," reprimanded, and fined \$5,600.)

American (and NATO) officials regularly make the point that the enemy's barbarism — and from car-bombs to a six year-old boy sent to attack Afghan soldiers wearing a suicide vest, their acts have indeed been barbarous — is always intentional; the killing of noncombatants by American planes is always an "inadvertent" incident, an "accident," and so, of course, the regrettable "collateral damage" of modern warfare.

Recently, however, in Afghanistan, such isolated incidents from U.S. or NATO (often still U.S.) air attacks have been occurring in startling numbers. They have, in fact, become so commonplace that, in the news, they begin to blur into what looks, more and more, like a single, ongoing airborne slaughter of civilians. Protest over the killings of noncombatants from the air, itself a modest story, is on the rise. Afghan President Hamid Karzai, dubbed "the mayor of Kabul," has bitterly and repeatedly complained about NATO and U.S. bombing policies. ACBAR, an umbrella organization for Afghan and international relief and human rights organizations, has received attention for claiming that marginally more civilians have died this year at the hands of the Western powers than the Taliban; and, most recently, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has made a "'strong' appeal to military commanders in Afghanistan to avoid civilian casualties."

In all of this, the weakening of the American and NATO position in Afghanistan, and of the American one in Iraq, continue to play crucial roles — while these repeated air-power "incidents" lead into conceptual territory that is simply never touched upon in our mainstream media.

### **A BLUR OF CIVILIAN DEATHS**

But first things first. Let's start with a partial list of recently reported air power "incidents" (dates approximate), all of which resulted in significant civilian casualties:

June 18: An "airstrike against a suspected al-Qaeda hideout" in the southeastern Afghan province of Paktika is ordered after "nefarious activities" have been observed at the site,

## **TOM ENGELHARDT | 'ACCIDENTS' OF WAR**

which includes a mosque and a madrassa (religious school). Almost immediately, news arrives that seven children have been killed in the attack. The initial response: "Maj. Chris Belcher, spokesman for the coalition, said there had been no sign of children at the facility in the hours before the strike, and blamed al-Qaeda for trying to use a civilian facility as a shield." (According to another spokesman, Sgt. 1st Class Dean Welch, "If we knew that there were children inside the building, there was no way that that air strike would have occurred.")

Later, up to 100 civilians are reported to have been killed in related fighting, though the figures vary with the news story. Subsequently, U.S. military officials admit that the air strike "likely missed its primary target," an al-Qaeda commander, and that "contrary to previous statements, the U.S. military knew there were children at the compound." Thinking they had a key al-Qaeda figure in their sights, they launched the attack anyway.

\June 21: A U.S. air strike aimed at a "booby-trapped house" in the Iraqi city of Baquba misses its target and "accidentally" hits another house, wounding 11 civilians, according to the U.S. military. The incident is declared "under investigation."

In the larger Baquba incursion, Operation Arrowhead Ripper, part of the President's "surge plan" for the country, civilian casualties from the air (and ground) are evidently significantly more widespread than generally reported in the American media. A BBC report notes at least 12 civilian casualties, including three women, on the operation's first day and quotes the head of the city's emergency service as saying that there were "certainly more... but ambulances were being prevented by U.S. troops from going in to evacuate them." (A Sunni political party in Prime Minister Maliki's government claims 350 dead civilians in Baquba, mainly due to helicopter attacks.)

Joshua Partlow of the Washington Post, reporting on the Baquba operation, quotes Iraqi refugee Amer Hussein Jasm, a refugee from a nearby town, saying: "The airplanes have been shooting all the houses and people are getting scared, so they ran away." Partlow also quotes an American lieutenant threatening Iraqis his unit has picked up: "Our planes can blow up this whole city. They have that capability. If we didn't care about you guys, we wouldn't place ourselves in danger walking around trying to separate the bad guys from the good guys. When you guys tell us where the bad guys are, you keep innocent people from being hurt."

**June 21:** "At least 25 civilians, including nine women, three infants and an elderly village mullah," are killed in "crossfire" in Helmand province in southern Afghanistan when U.S. air strikes are called in. ("In choosing to conduct such attacks in this location at this time, the risk to civilians was probably deliberate," [NATO spokesman Lt. Col. Mike] Smith said [of the Taliban]. "It is this irresponsible action that may have led to casualties.")

## **TOM ENGELHARDT | 'ACCIDENTS' OF WAR**

**June 22:** The U.S. military announces that it has killed "17 al-Qaeda gunmen" infiltrating an Iraqi village north of Baquba. ("Iraqi police were conducting security operations in and around the village when Coalition attack helicopters from the 25th Combat Aviation Brigade and ground forces from 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, observed more than 15 armed men attempting to circumvent the IPs and infiltrate the village.... The attack helicopters, armed with missiles, engaged and killed 17 al-Qaeda gunmen and destroyed the vehicle they were using.")

A BBC report later reveals that the dead are 11 village guards ("some of their bodies cut into small pieces by the munitions used against them"). They were assisting the Iraqi police in trying to protect their village from possible al-Qaeda attacks when rocketed and strafed by American helicopters.

**June 22:** "NATO and U.S.-led coalition forces killed 60 insurgents [in Afghanistan] near the border with Pakistan, in what was described as the largest insurgent formation crossing the region in six months, the military said Saturday." That was how the story was first presented, before news of civilian casualties started to trickle out. Later, more defensively, U.S. Commander Col. Martin P. Schweitzer would insist that his forces had only targeted "bad guys": "These individuals clearly had weapons and used them against our aircraft as well as shooting rockets against our positions," he said. "This required their removal from the battle-space."

The first accounting of noncombatant dead, reportedly from a U.S. rocket, includes at least five men, three women, and one child, according to a Pakistani Army spokesman. These deaths occurred on the Pakistani side of the border. (According to the Pakistanis, civilians also died on the Afghan side of the border.) This figure is later raised to 12; the place hit identified as a "small hotel"; and the airpower identified as possibly B-52s and Apache helicopters. A report in the Egyptian paper al-Ahram adds: "Sources in Pakistan's tribal areas.... say 31 of the supposed slain 'insurgents' were in fact Pakistan tribesmen and their families, including women and children."

**June 30:** In air strikes, again in Helmand province, munitions "slammed into civilian homes." At least 30 insurgents and civilians are initially reported to have been killed, "including women and children." These figures later rise precipitously. ("More than 100 people have been killed. But they weren't Taliban. The Taliban were far away from there," said Wali Khan, a member of parliament who represents the area.") Other reports have 45 civilians and 62 insurgents dying. NATO spokesman later claim civilian deaths were "an order of magnitude less" and that Taliban fighters were firing from well-dug trenches and "continuing their tactic of using women and children as human shields in close combat."

Given the ongoing uproar over civilian casualties in Afghanistan, an investigation is

## **TOM ENGELHARDT | 'ACCIDENTS' OF WAR**

launched. According to Haji Zahir, "a tribal elder who said he had been in touch with residents of bombed villages": "People tried to escape from the area with their cars, trucks and tractors, and the coalition airplanes bombed them because they thought they were the enemy fleeing. They told me that they had buried 170 bodies so far." Thirty-five villagers "fleeing in a tractor-trailer" were reportedly hit from the air — with only two survivors, an old man and his severely wounded son. NATO (American) spokesmen beg to disagree: "The allies returned fire and called in air support, aimed at 'clearly identified firing positions.'"

**July 2:** An intense mortar barrage aimed at a U.S. base near the largely Shiite city of Diwaniya leads to air strikes by two F-16s that reportedly kill 10 civilians along with Shia militiamen. Among them, it is said, are six children under the age of 12. ("Coalition forces are reviewing the incident to ensure that appropriate and proportionate force was used in responding to the intense attack," a U.S. statement said, without referring to any Iraqi casualties.")

New reports of deaths from air strikes in Afghanistan continue to arrive — 108 noncombatants "including women and children" killed in Farah Province on July 6th and 33 killed in Kunar Province, "11 of them on Thursday [July 5th] during a bombardment, and 25 more on Friday as they attended a funeral for the deceased." American denials are issued and Taliban propaganda blamed. ("[A] US official said Taliban fighters are forcing villagers to say civilians died in fighting — whether or not it is true.")

### **AIR WAR: AFGHANISTAN**

Even from such a partial list — undoubtedly lacking information from Iraq, where the air war has been notoriously overlooked by American reporters — a pattern can be seen. But beyond the loss of innocent lives (always, when finally admitted, officially "regretted" by the U.S. military), why should any of this matter?

Let's start this way: Barring an unexpected change of policy, some version of this list of "errant" incidents, multiplied many times over, is likely to represent the future for both Afghanistan and Iraq. The obvious math of the military manpower situation in both countries tells us this is so — as does history.

In Afghanistan this year, Taliban suicide attacks alone have increased by 230%, while Iraq-style roadside IEDs are also a growing threat. In eastern Afghanistan, where the U.S. leads NATO operations, "militant attacks" rose 250% compared to May 2006, according to the U.S. military. NATO and American troop levels, now somewhere in the range of 46,000-50,000 — approximately 20,000 of whom are from European countries and Canada — remain woefully inadequate for securing the country (if such a thing were even possible) and NATO casualties are on the rise.



## **TOM ENGELHARDT | 'ACCIDENTS' OF WAR**

Afghanistan, after all, is far larger than Iraq and is being garrisoned by a combined force less than a third the size of the occupying force in that country, which itself is universally considered inadequate to the task. It's a fair bet that the various European powers (and the Canadians) are wondering how they ended up in this distant war in a land that has historically been a graveyard for conquerors and occupiers. In Canada and various European countries, as casualties rise and success of any sort seems beyond reach, the Afghan deployments are becoming increasingly unpopular.

Don't expect reinforcements from NATO countries any time soon; while the U.S. Army and Marines, already stretched beyond capacity by the recent "surge" in Iraq, are probably incapable of reinforcing their Afghan contingent in any significant way. By elimination, this leaves one weapon in the American/NATO arsenal, air power, which is, in fact, ever more in use in response to a surge in Taliban ambushes and limited takeovers of villages (and even entire districts) in the Afghan south.

As the Europeans are well aware, air power — given the civilian casualties that invariably follow in its wake — is intensely counterproductive in a guerrilla war. "Every civilian dead means five new Taliban," was the way a British officer just returned from Helmand Province put it recently.

However, an air-power strategy fits American predilections to a tee. As a Reuters piece aptly headlined the matter, the Americans in Afghanistan are "hooked on air power." Americans have long been so. After all, with the singular exception of various Central American proxy wars during the Reagan years, air war has essentially been the American way of war since World War II. The Bush administration fought its Afghan War of 2001 largely from the air in support of the well-paid-off ground forces of the Northern Alliance, aided by Special Forces troops and lots of CIA money in suitcases. (In Iraq, of course, the invasion of March 2003 started with a massive air attack meant to "decapitate" Saddam Hussein's regime — it did no such thing — while having the side benefit of shocking-and-awing hostile states in the region.)

Even after American ground forces moved in, Afghanistan has never ceased to be an Air Force war. B-1 bombers have been called in relatively regularly there (unlike in Iraq) and air strikes in the Afghan countryside have become a commonplace. By November 2006, David Cloud of the New York Times — who flew on a B-1 mission over the country (and noted that a similar flight the week he went up had "dropped its entire payload of eight 2,000-pound bombs and six 500-pound bombs after ground units called for help") — reported that the use of air power had risen sharply there. More than 2,000 air strikes had been called in during the previous six months, with a concomitant rise in civilian casualties. In addition, the Air Force's full contingent of B-1s had been "shifted over the summer from the British air base at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean to a Middle Eastern airfield closer to Afghanistan," cut-

## **TOM ENGELHARDT | 'ACCIDENTS' OF WAR**

ting mission flight time by a critical two hours.

Though no post-November 2006 figures are available, the recent spate of reported "incidents" confirms that missions have risen again this year, along with noncombatant deaths. According to Laura King of the Los Angeles Times, in a piece typically headlined, "Errant Afghan Civilian Deaths Surge": "More than 500 Afghan civilians have been reported killed this year, and the rate has dramatically increased in the last month." Local dissatisfaction and bitterness are also noticeably on the rise.

The Karzai government remains weak, ineffective, and corrupt, while Taliban strength grows in southern Afghanistan and across the border in the Pakistani tribal areas. There, for instance, Jane Perlez and Ismail Khan of the New York Times reported that, according to a secret document from the Pakistani Interior Ministry, "the Taliban have recently begun bombing oil tank trucks that pass through the Khyber area near the border on their way to Afghanistan for United States and NATO forces. A convoy of 12 of the trucks was hit with grenades and gutted on Thursday night in the third such incident in a month."

To all of this, air power is the "NATO" answer for the present and the future, the only answer in sight, however counterproductive it may prove to be.

According to a report in the British press, American General Dan McNeill, commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, has already been dubbed "Bomber McNeill" (and it's not meant to be a compliment). Despite periodic "reviews of procedures," nor is his strategy — call in the planes — likely to change any time soon. The U.S. military (and NATO officials) have essentially confirmed this. Despite a growing chorus of criticism in Afghanistan (and among NATO allies), Army Brig. Gen. Joseph Votel has praised the "extensive procedures" in place "to avoid civilian casualties." "We think the procedures that we have in place are good — they work," he told reporters. U.S. spokespeople have recently indicated that NATO is not about to "change its use of air power against the Taliban."

So, in Afghanistan, the future is already clear enough. More Taliban attacks mean more air strikes mean more dead noncombatants ("including women and children") mean more alienated, angry Afghans in a spiral of devolution to which no end can yet be foreseen.

### **AIR WAR: IRAQ**

Striking as this rise in civilian deaths may be for Afghanistan, it gains extra importance for what it signals about the future of Iraq. Afghanistan is, in a sense, the maimed, defeathered canary in the mine of American air-power.

In Iraq, as all now know, the U.S. military has reached its on-the-ground limits. With approximately 156,000 troops surged into place (and many tens of thousands of armed pri-

## **TOM ENGELHARDT | 'ACCIDENTS' OF WAR**

vate security contractors, or mercenaries, surging into that country as well), the occupation forces have, it seems, reached their maximum numbers. By next spring at the latest, unless tours of duty in Iraq are lengthened from an already extended 15 months to 18 months — a notoriously unpopular move for a notorious unpopular administration — the President's "surge," like some tide, will have to recede.

Downsizing, if not withdrawal, will arrive whether anyone wants it to or not. In fact, as Julian Barnes of the Los Angeles Times has reported, U.S. commanders in Iraq already assume that such a downsizing is on the way; that, by fall, Congress will impose some kind of timetable for a partial withdrawal. They are adjusting their "surge" tactics accordingly.

With the President's approval ratings sinking into the mid-20% range, senior Republican senators, including Richard Lugar, George Voinovich, Pete Domenici, and possibly even John Warner are jumping the administration's Iraqi ship (or, at least, edging toward the rail). Pressure is building in Congress and within the Republican Party for a change of course. Bush himself has stopped promising Americans "victory," and is instead pathetically begging for "patience" on the home front until "the job is done."

The next stage of the war in Iraq is, in a sense, already in sight. While that might seem like mildly encouraging news to the ever-increasing numbers of Americans who want to see it all over, it should give pause to Iraqis, who are sure to be on the receiving end of what such a partial withdrawal will mean.

The Wall Street Journal's Jochi Dreazen and Greg Jaffe, for instance, recently reported on planning for an ongoing occupation of Iraq by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and "allies in the Bush administration" ("In Strategy Shift, Gates Envisions Iraq Troop Cuts"). The Secretary of Defense, they revealed, is "seeking to build bipartisan support for a long-term U.S. presence in Iraq by moving toward withdrawing significant numbers of troops.... by the end of President Bush's term." He is in search of a new Washington Consensus — "a modern-day version of President Harry Truman's 'Cold War consensus,'" as he puts it — in which a far smaller U.S. force (possibly 30,000-40,000 troops) would "operate out of large bases far from Iraq's major cities" for years, even decades, to come.

There's nothing new in this, of course. Such a "Plan B" was, in fact, "Plan A" when the Bush administration first rumbled into Baghdad in April 2003. The administration's top officials always expected to draw-down U.S. forces quickly into the 30,000 range and garrison them in four or more enormous bases outside of Iraq's urban areas. This was the occupation they planned for, not the one they got. It now goes under the rubric of the "Korea model."

If such a plan were indeed put into operation in 2008-2009, it would surely mean one thing that is almost never mentioned in Washington, or even by critics of the war: a significant increase in the use of U.S. air power.

## **TOM ENGELHARDT | 'ACCIDENTS' OF WAR**

Actually, bombs are already being dropped in Iraq in 2007 at almost twice the rate of the previous year. In this sense, the Afghan model is available as an example of things to come, as is the historical model of the Vietnam War in the period in which President Richard Nixon was employing what might now be called the "Gates Plan." It was then called "Vietnamization." Nixon was intent on withdrawing all American ground combat troops, while leaving behind tens of thousands of American advisors, who were to continue training the South Vietnamese military, as well as sizeable numbers of troops to guard our enormous bases in that country. Not surprisingly, that period saw an unprecedented escalation of the air war over South Vietnam. It was a time of unparalleled (but under-reported) brutality, destruction, and carnage in the Vietnamese countryside.

Any similar "Iraqification" plan would surely have an equivalent effect, the gap in manpower being plugged by air power. And the Washington "consensus" Gates hopes for is already forming. The two leading Democratic candidates for President, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, adhere to it. Both call for "withdrawal" from Iraq, but define withdrawal (as Gates would) as the "redeployment" of U.S. "combat brigades" (possibly less than half the American forces in that country at present).

In other words, we are almost guaranteed that, either this winter or in the spring of 2008 (as the presidential election looms), some kind of drawdown, surely to be headlined as a "withdrawal" plan, will begin and that significantly lower levels of troops will be supported by a rise in air strikes — and in Iraq, unlike Afghanistan, this means the bombing not of peasant villages but of urban neighborhoods.

This, in turn, means that we should prepare ourselves for a rise in "incidents," in "mistakes," in the "inadvertent" or "errant" death of civilians in escalating numbers. Whether in Vietnam, Afghanistan, or Iraq, the formula, with a guerrilla war, is simple and unavoidable: Air Power = Civilian Deaths. Or put another way, "Incidents" 'R Us.

### **A HISTORY OF MISTAKES**

Let's start with the nature of modern war. The very phrase "collateral damage" should be tossed onto the junk heap of history. For the last century, war has increasingly targeted civilians. Between World War I and the 1990s, according to Richard M. Garfield and Alfred I. Neugut in *War and Public Health*, civilian deaths as a percentage of all deaths rose from 14% to 90%. These figures are obviously approximate at best, but the trend line is clear. In a sense, in modern warfare, it's the military deaths that often are the "collateral damage"; civilian deaths — "including women and children" — turn out to be central to the project. The Lancet study's figures for Iraq indicate as much.

If modern war has largely been war against noncombatant populations, then the airplane

## **TOM ENGELHARDT | 'ACCIDENTS' OF WAR**

— which, even more than artillery, represented war from a distance — was its ultimate terror weapon. The invention of the atomic bomb, the culmination of the dreams of air power as an "ultimate weapon," signaled this in an unforgettable way. In the post-World War II years, the wars of the superpowers migrated to the "peripheries" where they could be fought with less fear of a nuclear holocaust, of, as American first-strike plans had it, the deaths of hundreds of millions of noncombatants across what was known as the "Communist bloc." Those wars began to be fought largely against low-tech forces, propelled by powerful allegiances often to national entities that did not yet exist. In those guerilla wars of "national liberation," the enemy combatants were invariably mixed in with civilian populations, which both provided support and a kind of protection. Air war against such forces, then, had to be a war against noncombatant populations. "Mistakes" would be constant.

Of course, even in World War II, the deaths of civilians in London in the Blitz were no mistake; nor were the later deaths of the citizens of Hamburg or Dresden; or the inhabitants of Tokyo and 59 other fire-bombed Japanese cities as well as Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which were atomized. The deaths of city dwellers in Pyongyang in the early 1950s were not a mistake; nor were the mass killings of peasants in South Vietnam; nor Laotian villagers on the Plain of Jars; nor the citizens of Hanoi over Christmas, 1972.

When, in 1970, after a conversation with President Nixon, Henry Kissinger passed on to White House Chief of Staff Alexander Haig by phone the president's orders for "a massive bombing campaign in Cambodia," using "anything that flies on anything that moves," it was not a mistake (nor, undoubtedly, was the "unintelligible comment" on the transcript that "sounded like Haig laughing.")

Here's the simplest truth of air power, then or now. No matter how technologically "smart" our bombs or missiles, they will always be ordered into action by us dumb humans; and if, in addition, they are released into villages filled with civilians going about their lives, or heavily populated urban neighborhoods where insurgents mix with city dwellers (who may or may not support them), these weapons will, by the nature of things, by policy decision, kill noncombatants. If an AC-130 or an Apache helicopter strafes an urban block or a village street where people below are running, some carrying weapons and believed to be "suspected insurgents," it will kill civilians. The disadvantage of "distant war" is that you normally have no way of knowing why someone is running, or why they are carrying a weapon, or usually who they really are.

Once Americans find themselves engaged in a guerrilla war, the urge is naturally to bring to bear military strengths and limit casualties — and the fear is always of sending American troops into an "urban jungle," or simply a jungle, where the surroundings will serve to equalize a disproportionate American advantage in the weaponry of high-tech destruction. In distant war, particularly wars where Americans alone control the skies and can fly in them with

## **TOM ENGELHARDT | 'ACCIDENTS' OF WAR**

relative impunity, the trade-off is clear indeed: our soldiers for their civilian dead "including women and children."

This is not an aberrant side effect of air war but its heart and soul. The airplane is a weapon of war, but it is also a weapon of terror — and it is meant to be. From the beginning, it was used not to "win over" enemy populations — after all, how could that be done from the distant skies? — but to crush or terrorize them into submission. (It has seldom worked that way.)

Then, there's another factor that has to be added in. What if you don't really care — not all that much anyway — who is running in the street below you?

Since 1945, American air power has regularly been used to police the imperial borders of the planet. It has, that is, been released against people of color, against what used to be called the Third World. (Serbia in 1999 was the sole exception to this rule.) As Afghan President Karzai put the matter in response to recent reports of civilian casualties in his country: "We want to cooperate with the international community. We are thankful for their help to Afghanistan, but that does not mean that Afghan lives have no value. Afghan life is not cheap and it should not be treated as such." (His bitter comment eerily reflects another from the Vietnam era, more than thirty years gone. "The Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does a Westerner. Life is plentiful. Life is cheap in the Orient" — so said former commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam General William Westmoreland in 1974.)

It may be that American administrations would have been no less willing to release their bombs and missiles on white noncombatant populations (as was the case with Germany in World War II); but it can at least be said that, for the last half-century-plus, air power has functionally acted as an armed form of racism, that the sense of "their lives" as cheaper, even if seldom spoken aloud, has made it easier to use the helicopter, the bomber, the Hellfire-missile-armed Predator drone. The fact is that air war always cheapens human life. After all, from the heights, if seen at all, people must have something of the appearance of scurrying insects. It is the nature of such war, and an ingrained racism, seldom mentioned any more, only adds to it.

Not so long from now, by the way, we may not even be able to use the term "air power" without qualification. We may instead be talking about "distant war" via the air, for the nature of air power itself is beginning to blur. Artillery always represented a form of distant war, but the latest version of artillery, a new weapons system evidently in operation in Afghanistan, the High Mobility Artillery Rockets, or HIMARS, brings into play an artillery man's version of air war. This truck-mounted rocket system fires its weapons into the atmosphere, where they are "guided to the target by either GPS or lasers." According to the Washington Post's William Arkin, HIMARS "can be configured to shoot a wide array of rockets and missiles, from cluster bombs to a single missile system with a range up to 300 kilo-

## **TOM ENGELHARDT | 'ACCIDENTS' OF WAR**

meters." One or more of these rockets may have been used in the Paktika attack that killed seven children and seems to have been used in the killing of Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah in mid-May.

Beyond all else, there is the American attitude towards air power itself — and, beyond that, toward modern war when fought on the planetary "peripheries" (even if those peripheries turn out to be the oil heartlands of our world). From World War II, through Korea and Vietnam to Afghanistan and Iraq, our air wars have always visited death and destruction on civilians. In a future in which it is highly unlikely that American troops will ever fight Russians or Chinese or the soldiers of any other major power in set-piece battles, imperial war is likely to continue to take place in heavily populated civilian areas against guerrillas and insurgents of various sorts. Don't take my word for it. The Pentagon thinks so too and is engaged in extensive planning for such future wars -- involving weapons that leave its soldiers "at a distance" in the burgeoning urban slums of our planet.

So perhaps a modicum of honesty is in order. Iraq and Afghanistan are already charnel houses, zones of butchery for the innocent. In both lands, it's possible to make a simple prediction: As bad as things already are, if present trends continue, if the "Korea model" becomes the model, it's going to get worse. We have yet to see anything like the full release of American air power in Afghanistan, no less in Iraq, but don't count it out.

We in the U.S. recognize butchery when we see it — the atrocity of the car bomb, the chlorine-gas truck bomb, the beheading. These acts are obviously barbaric in nature. But our favored way of war — war from a distance — has, for us, been pre-cleansed of barbarism. Or rather its essential barbarism has been turned into a set of "errant incidents," of "accidents," of "mistakes" repeatedly made over more than six decades. Air power is, in the military itself, little short of a religion of force, impermeable to reason, to history, to examples of what it does (and what it is incapable of doing). It is in our interest not to see air war as a — possibly the — modern form of barbarism.

Ours is, of course, a callous and dishonest way of thinking about war from the air (undoubtedly because it is the form of barbarism, unlike the car bomb or the beheading, that benefits us). It is time to be more honest. It is time for reporters to take the words "incident," "mistake," "accident," "inadvertent," "errant," and "collateral damage" out of their reportorial vocabularies when it comes to air power. At the level of policy, civilian deaths from the air should be seen as "advertent." They are not mistakes or they wouldn't happen so repeatedly. They are the very givens of this kind of warfare.

This is, or should be, obvious. If we want to "withdraw" from Iraq (or Afghanistan) via the Gates Plan, we should at least be clear about what that is likely to mean — the slaughter of large numbers of civilians "including women and children." And it will not be due to a series of mistakes or incidents; it will not be errant or inadvertent. It will be policy itself. It will be

## **TOM ENGELHARDT I 'ACCIDENTS' OF WAR**

the Washington — and in the end the American — consensus.

**[Note to readers:** *Air power has been perhaps the worst reported aspect of the Bush administration's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Tomdispatch.com has, however, covered it as regularly, even doggedly, as possible. I've written about it since at least 2004. Independent reporter Dahr Jamail, sociologist Michael Schwartz, and Tomdispatch Associate Editor Nick Turse have all offered contributions on the subject. In addition, Seymour Hersh wrote a piece in the New Yorker, "Up in the Air," in 2005 that remains predictive on air power in Iraq and a must-read. Just recently, Glenn Greenwald at Salon.com dealt incisively with a single incident of civilian deaths from the air in Iraq and how our press covered it; while Ira Chernus at the Commondreams.org website, took up civilian deaths in Afghanistan with his usual acumen. I recommend both pieces. Someday, it will occur to mainstream reporters to do the same and then we'll know we've entered a different moment, a different world.]*





# READ MORE POLITICAL ESSAYS AT COLDTYPE.NET

Download political essays by many of the best and brightest commentators from around the world, plus books, booklets, essays, newspapers and magazines – all in pdf format – all free of charge, at [www.coldtype.net](http://www.coldtype.net)

(Click on this link to enter web site)



**ColdType**

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD