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MISFORTUNES OF WAR

Press and Public Reactions to Civilian Deaths in Wartime

Eric V. Larson • Bogdan Savych

Prepared for the United States Air Force

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Summary

Although the number of armed conflicts worldwide has declined since the spasm of violence that followed the breakup of the Soviet Union and the Balkans, war has continued to wreak havoc, albeit in a diminishing number of locations. Western nations, such as the United States, have, through the development of international law, military strategy, doctrine, tactics, technologies, and procedures, sought to alleviate some of the burdens that war imposes on innocents.

Nevertheless, U.S. adversaries have just as creatively found ways to place innocents at risk and thereby increase the human and moral costs of the nation's wars, evidently in the hope of deterring the United States from taking military action in the first place or of imposing political costs and constraints on the conduct of military operations if their deterrent efforts fail.

Judging both by their statements and the evident energy they expend on the matter, national political and military leaders appear to attach a great deal of importance to avoiding collateral damage and civilian casualties during U.S. military operations.¹ In part, this simply reflects a desire to reduce the inhumanity of warfare for innocent civilians. But it also seems to be attributable to beliefs they have about how the media and public react to incidents of civilian casualties. Indeed,

¹ *Collateral damage* is defined in Joint Publication 1-02 (JP 1-02) as

[u]nintentional or incidental injury or damage to persons or objects that would not be lawful military targets in the circumstances ruling at the time. Such damage is not unlawful so long as it is not excessive in light of the overall military advantage anticipated from the attack. (DoD, 2005, p. 93)

there is some reason to believe that concern about casualties shapes the constraints that are imposed on military operations.² To date, however, there has been no systematic analysis of media and public reactions to civilian casualty incidents, whether these incidents affect media reporting or public support for military operations, and if so, how.

This monograph, part of a larger study of collateral damage undertaken for the United States Air Force, aims to fill this gap. It accomplishes this through an analysis of case studies of incidents of civilian deaths in recent U.S. wars and military operations that describe and explain how the U.S. and foreign media and publics have responded to these incidents:

- the February 1991 bombing of the Al Firdos bunker, which was also being used as a shelter by noncombatants, in the Gulf War
- the April and May 1999 attacks on the Djakovica convoy and Chinese embassy during the war in Kosovo
- the late June 2002 attack involving an Afghan wedding party during operations in Afghanistan
- the late March 2003 incident involving a large explosion in a crowded Baghdad marketplace.

For each case study, the study team examined press, public, and leadership responses to these incidents:

- To understand press reactions, we first performed quantitative content analyses of media reporting. Specifically, we counted the frequency that a common set of phrases (e.g., “Iraq” and “civilian casualties” or “collateral damage” or “civilian deaths”) occurred in a fixed set of elite U.S. and foreign newspapers or television news sources.³ We also qualitatively reviewed selected reports from

² For a discussion of the interaction between public opinion and the media and constraints imposed on military operations, see “Domestic Constraints on Coercion,” in Byman, Waxman, and Larson (1999, pp. 59–85).

³ “Elite papers” are those that generally regarded as having national (as opposed to local) influence. For the elite U.S. newspapers, we performed keyword searches on the full text of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, and

these sources to get a better sense of how the collateral damage incidents were being reported.

- To understand public reactions to civilian casualty incidents, we examined the top-line (marginal) results of public opinion polling conducted over the course of the operation and before and after the incidents of interest. We also analyzed respondent-level public opinion data to understand the relationship between various attitudes about civilian casualties and individuals' decisions to support or oppose U.S. military operations. To assess the association between public support for each military operation and various civilian casualty-related attitudes, we conducted analyses both at a bivariate level (using the Chi-square test of association), and using multivariate statistical regression techniques (using ordered probit regression techniques). We also examined media reporting on antiwar demonstration activities to try to understand the extent to which civilian casualty incidents might have increased the frequency or scale of social protest activity against the war.
- To understand leadership responses to civilian casualty incidents, we reviewed the transcripts of public statements, press conferences, testimony, and other official sources.

Findings

Our analysis of these cases leads to seven main findings:

- **First, while avoiding civilian casualties is important to the American public, they have much more realistic expectations about the actual possibilities for avoiding casualties than most understand.** Large majorities of the American public consistently say that efforts to avoid civilian casualties should be given a high

The Christian Science Monitor, as represented in the ProQuest Newspapers database. For U.S. television, we searched the full text of the Lexis-Nexis service's television abstracts for ABC News, CBS News, CNN, and NBC News. For foreign press reporting, we searched the full text of the Lexis-Nexis service's files for Agence France Presse (AFP) (France), *The Guardian* (London), Xinhua (People's Republic of China [PRC]), and TASS (Russia).

priority and have indicated that their prospective support for U.S. military operations is at least in part contingent on minimizing civilian deaths. Very large majorities, however, consistently stated their belief that civilian casualties in these wars were unavoidable accidents of war. *This finding suggests that most Americans have few illusions about the U.S. military's ability to prevent all civilian deaths in wartime. The argument that the American public has unreasonably high expectations for zero-casualty warfare is not supported; in fact, most Americans appear to have a fairly realistic view of the possibilities for eliminating civilian casualties entirely from modern warfare.* (See pp. 50, 82–84, 103–104, 121–122, and 136.)

- **Second, the press report heavily on civilian casualty incidents.** Civilian casualty incidents are highly “mediagenic” events that tend to receive high levels of reporting by the press, and making the issue of civilian casualties more salient can lead the public to weigh the morality of wars against the importance of their aims. (See pp. 27, 76–78, 129–131, and 163–167.)
- **Third, adversaries understand the public’s sensitivities to civilian deaths and have sought to exploit civilian casualty incidents to erode the support of domestic publics; drive wedges in coalitions; and affect campaign strategy, targeting, and rules of engagement.** The cases of Iraq (1991) and Kosovo (1999) in particular suggested how adversaries have sought to use human shields, provide press access to sites of alleged civilian deaths, and otherwise trumpet these incidents in the press to affect warfighting strategy, not without some success. (See pp. 43–46, 71–76, 125–128, and 161–162.)
- **Fourth, while the prospect of civilian casualties can affect support prior to the onset of a military operation, during armed conflict it is not so much beliefs about the *numbers* of civilian casualties that affect support for U.S. military operations as the belief that the United States and its allies are making enough effort to avoid casualties. Substantial majorities of Americans typically subscribe to this view.** Our multivariate statistical models, which have a good record of predicting individual-level support and opposition in past military opera-

tions, showed that beliefs about the *number* of civilian casualties typically did not attain statistical significance. Importantly, however, when variables for beliefs about the adequacy of the U.S. military's efforts to avoid civilian deaths were included in our models, the variables for civilian casualties frequently attained statistical significance. An analysis of aggregate data on foreign attitudes and a cross-tabulation of Iraqi attitudes suggested a similar relationship in foreign publics as well. (See pp. 29–33, 81–84, 131–139, and 167–185.)

- **Fifth, while strong majorities of Americans typically give U.S. military and political leaders the benefit of the doubt when civilian casualty incidents occur, this does not necessarily extend to foreign audiences.** In the U.S. case, this derives in large measure from the credibility of military leaders and the high levels of trust in the military as an institution in U.S. society. It generally does not appear to extend to foreign audiences, however, which are far less inclined to believe that the United States makes enough of an effort to avoid civilian casualties and are far more likely to view incidents involving civilian deaths as resulting from careless or callous disregard for human life, or even something far more malign. (See pp. 36–41, 85–99, 140–150, and 188–202.)
- **Sixth, when civilian casualty incidents occur, it is at least as important to get the story right as to get the story out.** Notwithstanding the view that is sometimes heard that it is critical to get one's story out first, to operate within the media's news cycle, and to dominate an adversary's own efforts to influence U.S. and foreign audiences, it is at least as important—and possibly more important—that the information that is put out is in fact correct. While it would be best to provide *timely, complete, and accurate* information about the specific circumstances of civilian casualty incidents—providing *inaccurate* information that later needs to be amended can erode the credibility of the United States and its coalition. As observed in Kosovo after the Djakovica convoy incident, a constant stream of partial and errant information and subsequent corrections issued by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) about the incident—many of

which also soon proved to be in error themselves—seem to have hurt NATO’s credibility with the press and also may have eroded its credibility in some NATO publics. (See pp. 92–106.)

- **Seventh and finally, attention to and concern about civilian casualties both at home and abroad have increased in recent years and may continue to do so, suggesting that they are likely to be a recurring—and perhaps even more salient—concern in the conduct of future military operations.** Our content analyses suggest that the issue of civilian casualties has become increasingly prominent in media reporting, as have humanitarian organizations’ commentary on wars and military operations. It thus seems likely not only that U.S. military action will continue to be judged by domestic and foreign audiences on the basis of its conduct but that the focus on civilian casualties may increase in the future. If, as we suspect, the belief that the U.S. military is doing everything it can to minimize civilian casualties is the key to public support for U.S. military operations, this suggests that a serious public commitment to further reducing civilian casualties by the U.S. military will be necessary to preserve Americans’ faith that their military is seeking to reduce harm to innocents during its wars and military operations. (See pp. 2–4 and 205–208.)

Implications and Recommendations

Incidents of civilian deaths are, by definition, tragedies, and there are no “silver bullets” that can diminish the media attention and emotion—ranging from hopelessness and sorrow to anger—they can generate. There are, however, some things that the USAF and the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) profitably can do in this area:

- As in the 1991 Gulf War and the 1999 war in Kosovo, there is a good chance that future U.S. adversaries also will seek to use human shields. Enhancing capabilities to screen mobile targets such as the Djakovica convoy for a civilian presence prior to strike

could help to avoid such incidents in the future. This may be a good role for unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). (See pp. 43–46, 71–74, 125–128, and 161–162.)

- Until timely and accurate combat assessment capabilities are available, the ability to counter an adversary's claims of civilian damage incidents promptly will be quite limited. More timely and accurate combat assessment capabilities could improve commanders' ability to reconstruct more quickly and reliably the facts surrounding civilian casualty incidents and to communicate more timely and accurate explanations of these incidents to the media and public. Such improvements also would have the benefit of reducing the likelihood of issuing constantly changing (or contradictory) explanations that can erode credibility. It also could open the possibility of putting these incidents to rest much more quickly, rather than drawing out speculation over days—or even weeks—while the necessary facts are being collected and assessed. (See pp. 92–99.)
- Public affairs personnel can and should prepare for possible incidents even before they actually happen. For example, public affairs officers can brief the press and public on measures that are being taken to minimize casualties to better sensitize these audiences to the importance the military attaches to avoiding civilian casualties, and the sophisticated—if by no means foolproof—processes and procedures that have been developed to minimize their likelihood. They also can develop in advance overall guidance and procedures for dealing with civilian casualty incidents. In a similar vein, even before missions are flown, Judge Advocate General (JAG) personnel can document their judgments about the legal justifications for the highest-risk missions, thereby better positioning commanders to respond in an informed and timely manner should an incident occur. Some of these efforts already are under way within the combatant commands and DoD. (See pp. 92–99.)
- Public affairs guidance used to explain specific incidents should touch upon all the issues likely to be of concern to key audiences. The provisions of Article 57 (2) of Protocol I to the Geneva

Conventions offer a very useful framework for discussing incidents in such terms as military value, military necessity, discrimination, and other constructs that are likely to be of greatest concern to, and resonate with, various audiences (“Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949,” 1977). (See pp. 92–99.)

- Finally, over the longer term, by emphasizing the efforts that are being made to reduce civilian casualties (e.g., improved target verification, increased precision, focused weapon effects, and so on), the USAF and DoD can help ensure that the U.S. Congress and public have continued reason to trust that the U.S. military is seeking new ways to reduce the prospects for civilian deaths in future military operations. A demonstrated commitment to a philosophy of continuous improvement may be what is needed to ensure this trust in the future and, in the case of foreign audiences, to build trust in the first place. (See pp. 2–4 and 205–208.)

While efforts to further reduce the likelihood of these incidents and their impacts are laudable, policymakers and military leaders should, however, be very careful to avoid giving the impression that civilian deaths ultimately can be eliminated from warfare; such a belief is unwarranted. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that future U.S. adversaries may increasingly rely on human shields and other techniques to increase the possibility of innocent deaths at U.S. hands.