

# The Bombing of Afghanistan: The Convergence of Media and Political Power to Reduce Outrage

*Los bombardeos sobre Afganistán: la unión de los medios de comunicación y el poder político para mitigar la indignación de la opinión pública*

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## Abstract

The United States (US)-led war in Afghanistan has resulted in high levels of civilian casualties and human suffering for over nine years. One of the primary causes of this suffering during the first three months of the war came from high altitude bombing led by the US Air Force. Tens of thousands of bombs equal to approximately 14,000 tons were used over Afghanistan in the first three months of the war from October 2001.\* However the damaging effects of this bombing campaign were largely hidden from Western audiences. This article examines techniques used by the US government and two mainstream media organisations to alter perceptions of the early stages of the air war in order to dampen indignation over the injustice being perpetrated against Afghanistan's civilian population. These techniques can be organised under five headings: cover-up, devaluation, reinterpretation, the use of official channels and intimidation.

**Keywords:** injustice, backfire, Afghanistan.

## Resumen

La guerra liderada por los EE.UU. en Afganistán ha producido unas elevadas cantidades de muertes civiles y sufrimiento humano durante más de nueve años. Entre las causas principales de este sufrimiento durante los tres primeros meses de la guerra estuvieron los bombardeos realizados desde gran altura por la Fuerza Aérea de los EE.UU. Decenas de miles de bombas, con un peso aproximado de 14000 toneladas, se lanzaron sobre Afganistán durante esos tres meses, a partir de octubre de 2001. Sin embargo, los efectos destructivos de esa campaña de bombardeos se ocultaron, casi por completo, a la opinión pública occidental. Este artículo estudia las técnicas utilizadas por el gobierno norteamericano y dos populares grupos mediáticos para adulterar las percepciones sobre las primeras fases de la guerra aérea, con el objetivo de diluir la indignación que podría haber producido la injusticia sufrida por la población civil afgana. Estas técnicas pueden ser agrupadas en cinco categorías: ocultación, minimización, reinterpretación, uso de los canales oficiales e intimidación.

**Palabras clave:** injusticia, Afganistán, teoría de la acción contraproducente.

\*. M.W.Herold, 'Urban Dimensions of the Punishment of Afghanistan by U.S. Bombs', in S.Graham (Ed.), *Cities, War and Terrorism: Towards an Urban Geopolitics*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, M.A., 2004: p.316.

## 1. Introduction

Since 2001, Afghanistan has been occupied by US government-led forces as part of its ill-defined “war on terror”. Almost immediately following the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, the US government accused the Afghanistan’s Taliban leaders of harbouring the Al-Qaeda terrorists allegedly responsible for the attacks although little proof of this fact was offered at the time. What followed was an intensive bombing campaign in the lead-up to a full-scale invasion that had a destructive effect on Afghanistan’s civilian population. In the West, public outrage over the suffering of Afghani civilians was minimal.

Public outrage is a phenomenon that often occurs when an injustice is observed by a third party. History contains many documented examples of injustice but an aspect worth examining is how that injustice is communicated to a social or political group which at the time might be capable of mobilising against the perpetrator of the injustice. The repression of the communication of an injustice can have two outcomes. Firstly it prevents awareness of the unfair act and is therefore likely to reduce the chances of mobilisation against it. Secondly, it increases the possibility that the act can continue, or that similar cases can occur in the future without repercussions for the perpetrator.

In war, there is a strong likelihood of unjust crimes occurring. Rape, torture, the killing of civilians and genocide are examples of atrocities that are often committed in military conflict. Therefore when a country is at war the minimisation of public outrage becomes a primary concern, especially where there is the likelihood of crimes being committed against the innocent. The killing of civilians is especially important in modern times. In the First World War from 1914-1918 only 5% of deaths were civilian casualties<sup>1</sup>. In just over twenty years and with the advent of much larger and more technically advanced air forces, civilian casualties increased dramatically and during the Second World War over 66% of casualties were civilians<sup>2</sup>. The allies were complicit in the deliberate targeting of civilians where over one quarter of American bombs during the war from 1941-1945 were directed at commercial and residential areas of German cities<sup>3</sup>. This formed part of a two-pronged strategy to disable the urban industrial centres of military production, and lower the German people’s “determination to fight”<sup>4</sup>. Now in the twenty first century, the proportion of civilian casualties in war has reached an astounding level of around 90%<sup>5</sup>. It is important then to examine the way in which a war’s effect on civilian populations is communicated to larger audiences. If Western media audiences and constituencies were aware of the effects of war on civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan since the declaration of the “war on terror”, it is likely that opposition to these two theatres of war would be much greater.

The backfire model is one tool that can be used to analyse the way in which outrage has been minimised in war. The war in Indo China in the 1960s and 1970s produced case studies in civilian killing that have previously been analysed using this model. Tactics to reduce outrage over the mass bombing campaigns in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the My Lai massacre and the Phoenix program have been documented previously by Brian Martin and Truda Gray<sup>6</sup>. A broader study of the initial invasion of Iraq was also undertaken by Martin to identify ways in which the US government attempted to prevent public outcry over the intervention when all pretexts for war were regarded as inadequate<sup>7</sup>. This paper adds to these existing backfire analyses by looking at the way

1. J.Bourke, ‘Why does politics turn to violence?’, in J.Edkins and M.Zehfuss (Eds.), *Global Politics*, Routledge, New York, 2009: p. 372.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid. p.373.

4. J. Friedrich, *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany 1940-1945*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2006: pp.53-54.

5. J.Bourke, p.373.

6. See T.Gray and B.Martin, ‘The American War in Indochina: Injustice and Outrage’, *Revista de Paz y Conflictos*, No. 1, 2008: pp.6-28, and T.Gray and B. Martin, ‘My Lai: the struggle over outrage’, *Peace & Change*, Vol. 33, No. 1, January 2008, pp. 90-113.

7. B.Martin, ‘Iraq Attack Backfire’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 39, No. 16, 17-23 April 2004, pp. 1577-1583.

in which the media worked in conjunction with the US government to limit public outrage over Afghan civilian casualties at the beginning of the “war on terror”. The significance of identifying these tactics that occurred in 2001 is that similar tactics are being used today as the war moves into its tenth year. An understanding of these methods of reducing outrage gives observers and peace activists a system for understanding the apparent indifference in the West to the suffering of Afghan civilians and the war generally.

This article examines the way in which the US government and two mainstream media outlets employed tactics to limit or minimise outrage over the death and injury caused to the Afghan civilian population during the period of high altitude bombing from October 2001 to early 2002. The first section gives an overview of tactics used in backfire theory and the way in which these tactics function to inhibit outrage. This is followed by an account of the first three months of the air-war in Afghanistan by Professor Marc Herold in terms of civilian casualties. Herold’s data collection and analysis of the effects of the early stages of the bombing campaign is regarded as the most detailed study available for this period in Afghanistan. Following Herold’s account, an examination of selected articles from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* from early 2002 demonstrates the extent to which these media outlets assisted in the minimisation of outrage over Afghan civilian casualties resulting from the US bombing campaign. These two news publications were selected because of their high circulation rates in the two major cities. Finally, the US government’s and US military’s direct role in the minimisation of outrage is described in terms of two of the five tactics outlined in backfire theory.

## 2. Tactics in backfire theory

The backfire model is a useful instrument that can be used to analyse the tactics of the perpetrators of a perceived injustice. Its framework outlines five tactics that may be used to reduce outrage over the injustice and in doing so, minimise the possibility that the injustice will backfire on the perpetrator. The five tactics in the model can be summarised as cover-up, devaluation of the victims, reinterpretation of the event, the use of official channels and finally, bribery and/or intimidation.

Cover-up concerns the way in which a perpetrator, or an organisation aligned with the perpetrator, will attempt to hide or conceal an injustice<sup>8</sup>. This is often the first tactic that will be used, although it should be emphasised that the tactics are not necessarily used in any sequential order. However if a cover-up is successful, then it is unlikely that any other tactics need to be employed. If a cover-up is unsuccessful or only moderately successful, then it is likely that another tactic will be employed to dampen outrage.

The devaluation of the victims of an unjust event is another tactic which may be used by a perpetrator to reduce outrage. In this instance the perpetrator or a supportive organisation will ostensibly justify the event by denouncing the victim. For example, if police were to shoot into an unarmed group of protestors, they might refer to the protestors as a violent rabble, regardless of their actions or levels of affluence. If the shooting were to be communicated to a receptive audience inclined to be outraged over the injustice, devaluing the victims is designed to have the effect of implying to the audience that the protestors somehow deserved to be shot, or perhaps their protest even represented a threat to the wider community. In Martin’s case study on the Rodney King beating

8. B.Martin, *Justice Ignited*, Rowman and Littlefield, New York, 2007: pp. 5-6.

in Los Angeles in 1991, the devaluation tactic was employed in a way that highlighted King's past criminal (although non-violent) behaviour to imply that he in some way deserved the beating<sup>9</sup>.

Reinterpretation of the event is another way in which a perpetrator can reduce outrage. Reinterpretation comes in many forms and has become a political art in modern times with the use of "spin doctors" and public relations organisations to frame narratives in order to suit a particular agenda. The violent military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan by the US, United Kingdom (UK), Australia and other nations have been re-interpreted as an exercise in homeland defence and formalised in the doctrine of pre-emption<sup>10</sup>. Again, this tactic is an attempt to draw attention away from the real injustice or organise perceptions of it in such a way that make it acceptable.

The use of official channels is a technique that can be used by the perpetrator(s) to give an impression that justice is being served. Government inquiries, international courts and other quasi judicial procedures can give the appearance of justice without having the power to apply retribution to the persons or organisations committing the injustice. The United Nations (UN) is one avenue that has been pursued in the "war on terror" as a means to justify the aggressive military intervention in Iraq. Although UN sanctioning was not forthcoming, there was an initial perception that the US was attempting to navigate a just pathway to war<sup>11</sup>.

Prosecuting a perpetrator of an injustice through official channels can be a slow process and the effects of the injustice can often have been maximised by the time a judicial hearing has taken place. The results of such trials and investigations can also be questionable. In the case of the initial investigation into the My Lai massacre during the US war in Indo-China, twelve US soldiers were prosecuted for the murder of Vietnamese civilians but only one was convicted. The single conviction resulted in a life sentence for the soldier, but he served only a short time in prison<sup>12</sup>.

The final tactic in the backfire model used to diminish outrage is intimidation and bribery. These could be described in some ways as a last resort, or alternatively as a first resort as a way of covering up an injustice. These tactics can be used against witnesses and any individual or organisation that may hold information about an injustice which could prove damaging to the perpetrator. Intimidation could mean violence or even death for those presenting a threat to the perpetrator, whereas bribery involves the use of financial incentives to achieve a similar result. If exposed these tactics would also be very damaging to the perpetrator in tandem with the unjust event itself and as a result such tactics are also covered-up giving the backfire model a circular dynamic although as previously stated, the five tactics do not necessarily occur in a sequential order.

This article examines the first three months of the air attacks by US-led forces in Afghanistan as a case study in backfire tactics. Two mainstream media organisations, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, acted as de-facto agents for the US government in performing the first three tactics: cover-up, devaluation and reinterpretation. The use of official channels and intimidation was conducted by the US government and US military.

9. Ibid. pp. 48-50.

10. A. Dawson and M. J. Schueller, 'Coda: Information Mastery and the Culture of Annihilation', in A. Dawson and M. J. Schueller (eds.), *Exceptional State: Contemporary US Culture and the New Imperialism*, 2007, Duke University Press, London: p. 278.

11. Martin, 2004.

12. Gray and Martin, 2008a: p.18.



### 3. The air assault on Afghanistan: October – December 2001

In less than one month after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington in September 2001, the US government initiated an air war in Afghanistan. The large scale military effort was justified as an attempt to capture or punish the alleged perpetrators of the September 11 attacks, Al-Qaeda, as well as removing Afghanistan's Taliban leadership which was charged with supporting and assisting the actions of Al-Qaeda. This very swift response by the US government was activated without any international judicial procedures and the bombing of Afghanistan from October 2001 constituted an advanced military intervention against a weaker target that was comparable only with the bombing campaigns in Indochina in the 1960s and 1970s.

In December 2001, Professor Marc Herold of the University of New Hampshire published the only detailed account of the effect of high altitude bombing on civilian infrastructure and civilian life in Afghanistan between October 2001 and December 2001<sup>13</sup>. His focus on Afghan civilian casualties is important because this cost was, and still is, largely ignored by the Western mainstream media. Herold's methodology is consistent with an approach that is not prone to inflating figures, or deflating them. He gathered data from a range of independent news sources and some mainstream European and Asian news agencies, and provided first hand accounts from Afghani survivors that also appeared in these sources. Because of the difficulty in counting casualties in a war zone that is under heavy attack from the air, it is most likely that his figures are an under estimate. Herold's work has been used by human rights and peace organisations, cited by numerous academics and gained wider exposure in publications such as *The Guardian* and India's bi-weekly national magazine, *Frontline*<sup>14</sup>.

An air bombardment of the scale that was launched by the US-led attack on Afghanistan causes civilian casualties in several ways. The first is that legitimate military targets may be hit, but those targets may be in close proximity to civilian infrastructure. Secondly, flawed military intelligence can lead to the incorrect targeting of civilian areas that are mistaken for military facilities. Thirdly, poor execution from those responsible for firing the weapons can lead to legitimate military targets being missed altogether. Another possibility is that the use of cluster bombs results in small unexploded bomblets being spread over a wide area. These bombs create problems for civilians during and after conflict in much the same way as land mines<sup>15</sup>. A significant problem in Afghanistan during the early stages of the bombing in 2001 was that one type of cluster bomb used by the US was the same colour as food parcels being dropped from the air<sup>16</sup>. Afghani civilians who were encouraged to collect the yellow food parcels were at risk of coming into contact with an unexploded bomblet.

The number of Afghani civilian casualties accounted for by Herold between October and December 2001 is in the thousands – up to 3,767 - a figure which has been described by Professor Achin Vanaik as “carefully conservative”<sup>17</sup>. Herold's claim that a “heavy bombing onslaught must necessarily result in substantial numbers of civilian casualties simply by virtue of proximity to ‘military targets’” is reflected in the data presented in his article<sup>18</sup>. Herold counters the “dangerous notion” that the United States can wage an air war and only kill enemy combatants and despite claims that new technology enables US weapons to primarily hit military targets, the bombing campaign was aimed extensively at civilian facilities<sup>19</sup>. The extensive use of cluster bombs early in

13. M.W. Herold, 2001, 'A dossier on Civilian Victims of United States' Aerial Bombing of Afghanistan: A Comprehensive Accounting [revised].

14. See M.W. Herold, 'Counting the Dead', *The Guardian*, 8 August, 2002, M.W. Herold, 'The Massacre at Kakarak', *Frontline*, Vol.19, Iss.16, August 3-16, 2002, S. Shalom, 'Far from Infinite Justice: Just War Theory and Operation Enduring Freedom', *Arizona Journal of International and Comparative Law*, Vol.26 No.3, 2009; pp.623-697, and Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan – [http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/category/marc\\_herold](http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/category/marc_herold).

15. M.W. Herold, 'Steel Rain: An Analysis of Cluster Bomb Use by the U.S. in Four Recent Campaigns', 16 June, 2003.

16. Human Rights Watch, 'Cluster Bombs in Afghanistan', October 2001.

17. A. Vanaik, 'The Ethics and Efficacy of Political Terrorism', Social Science Research Council, September 2002.

18. Herold, 2001.

19. Herold, 2001.



the campaign resulted in the deployment of over 248,000 bomblets in Afghanistan by US warplanes between October 2001 and March 2002<sup>20</sup>. Cluster bombs are by their very nature indiscriminate anti-personnel weapons and no doubt contributed to the civilian death toll during this bombing campaign.

As well as direct casualties from the US bombing, it is likely that many indirect casualties occurred for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the widespread “carpet bombing” employed by the US air force destroyed roads and utility supplies such as power and water<sup>21</sup>. When these services are cut off, public institutions such as hospitals are unable to operate creating a twofold impact on the people affected by the bombing. For those who have survived the actual bombing but are in need of urgent medical attention as a result of their injuries, a significant problem arises when the medical system has been rendered inoperable by damage caused to the power supply, water supply, and road services supplying medical equipment. These indirect casualties do not form part of Herold’s figure of 3,767 casualties which supports the notion that his data represents an underestimation of civilian casualties arising from the bombing campaign. The roll-on effect of having a society’s infrastructure extensively damaged means that even for survivors, the chances of living in any degree of acceptable comfort is severely diminished. Considering that the civilian population of Afghanistan had no connection with the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington, the US military intervention in Afghanistan could readily be viewed as unjust.

#### 4. Afghan civilian casualties and mainstream news reporting: cover up, reinterpretation and devaluation

Following the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, the news reporting on the event could be accurately described as saturation coverage. In the first four weeks after the September 11 attacks, for the three main US news broadcasters, ABC, CBS and NBC, their top three stories were related to the attacks themselves, the new ‘war on terror’, and the proposed strike against the Taliban<sup>22</sup>. The top ten stories in the weeks from September 11 to the launching of the air war against Afghanistan related to the attacks in some way<sup>23</sup>. Using the Proquest Newsstand database, a keyword search using the criteria “victim” and “terrorist” in the date range from 11 September 2001 to 11 October 2001 results in 142 articles in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times Late Edition* alone. The mass media was justifiably concerned with the human impact of the September 11 attacks which resulted in the deaths of nearly 3,000 civilians.

In response to the September 11 attacks, the sustained air attack on Afghanistan led by the US military also resulted in a significant number of civilian casualties. As documented by Herold, by December 2001 the number of civilian casualties in Afghanistan had exceeded those caused by the attacks on Washington and New York. However outrage was minimal over Afghan civilian casualties compared to the outrage over the deaths of US civilians on September 11. One explanation for this involves the use of specific tactics designed to minimise outrage. In general terms, reducing outrage over perceived injustices is an important consideration for governments so that support for policies associated with the injustice is not diminished on a national and international level.

Most news reports of the bombing didn’t mention civilian casualties that came about as a result of it, preferring to focus on the high-tech weaponry per se, rather than the

20. Human Rights Watch, Vol.14, No.7, December 2002, ‘Fatally Flawed: Cluster Bombs and their use by the United States in Afghanistan’, p.1.

21. Herold, 2001.

22. A. Eisman, ‘The media of manipulation: patriotism and propaganda – mainstream news in the United States in the weeks following September 11’, *Critical Quarterly*, Vol.45, Issue 1-2, Spring 2003: p.56.

23. Ibid.

damage caused by the weapons. In a war such as this where tens of thousands of bombs have been used in a short period of time, the effects of the bombing arguably should be a significant part of the story of the war. Where the mass media omits this side of the story it can be considered a de facto cover-up. According to Neil Hickey, the editor of *Columbia Journalism Review*, the bloodless coverage conformed to the Pentagon's determination to eliminate images and descriptions of civilian bombing casualties which would no doubt have eroded public support for the war in the US and other parts of the world<sup>24</sup>.

A few articles in two of North America's most prestigious newspapers did mention civilian casualties however, these stories used other techniques to minimise outrage. I have chosen a total of five articles from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* to illustrate these techniques. The articles were selected on the basis that they specifically address the problem of civilian casualties during the first six months of the air war which corresponds with a three month period studied in greater detail by Herold. The consistent pattern in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* articles show that the mainstream media outlets are willing to acknowledge civilian casualties, although greatly underestimating the extent of the harm inflicted upon the civilian population when compared with Herold's more thorough and detailed account.

According to *The New York Times*, the first detailed assessments of the US air war in Afghanistan became available in early April where reports claimed that of the 22,000 bombs and missiles which were dropped on Afghanistan, 75% hit their targets<sup>25</sup>. This means that approximately 5,500 bombs missed their targets, legitimate or otherwise, and potentially impacted on non-military targets. It is reasonable to suggest that this is an extraordinarily high number over a six month period in terms of the risk it poses to the civilian population of Afghanistan. Despite this, the US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld is quoted in a *New York Times* article on 9 April describing "this war the most accurate ever"<sup>26</sup>.

Although the stated aim of the air campaign was to "topple the Taliban government and destroy Al-Qaeda operations in Afghanistan", *New York Times* journalist Eric Schmitt concedes that there is no definitive measure to assess the effectiveness of an air campaign, describing attempts to do so "as much an art, as it is science"<sup>27</sup>. Although Schmitt quotes Rumsfeld's statement about accuracy without critical comment, the "art versus science" argument contradicts Rumsfeld's position. If a war is claimed to be highly accurate, then this accuracy should be measured using scientific methods, rather than "artistic" techniques. The claim that the air war in Afghanistan is "accurate" implies a minimisation of suffering for the civilian population, a claim that is inadvertently negated by using the "art versus science" accounting method.

Although Schmitt is prepared to acknowledge a 25% failure rate of US bombs to hit their intended targets, he fails to raise any possibility that the "errant" bombs had the potential to negatively impact upon Afghanistan's civilian population, deferring instead to Rumsfeld's claims of military accuracy. Interpreting this article through a backfire lens, Schmitt's article contains elements of cover-up and reinterpretation. The failure to even speculate that civilian casualties might arise from the sheer number of bombs used and the 25% failure rate to hit intended targets indicates a cover-up, where the omission of obvious facts serves to hide a considerable aspect of the bombing campaign.

24. N.Hickey, 'Access denied: Pentagon's war reporting rules are toughest ever', *Columbia Journalism Review*, Jan/Feb, 2002: p.27.

25. E. Schmitt, 'Improved US Accuracy Claimed in Afghan Air War', *The New York Times*, 9 April, 2002.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.



Schmitt's uncritical restatement of Rumsfeld's claim to accuracy demonstrates a reinterpretation of events that not only defies common sense, but also the data on civilian casualties collected by Herold.

In July 2002, Dexter Filkins wrote in *The New York Times* that the American air campaign "had produced a pattern of mistakes that killed hundreds of Afghan civilians"<sup>28</sup>. Filkins' analysis though is based only on eleven bombing incidents in Afghanistan and is not a universal estimate. Herold's analysis of the same eleven incidents estimates a slightly higher figure than Filkins<sup>29</sup>. However if we return to Schmitt's article that documents thousands of bomb deployments, Filkins' analysis and figures are a misrepresentation of Afghan civilian casualties overall. When one considers that the location of military targets in Afghanistan were in urban areas as a result of the Soviet era legacy,<sup>30</sup> it could be expected that even those bombs that successfully hit military targets would likely have caused considerable civilian damage. Filkins' news article is consistent with Herold's claim that one of the main tasks for the corporate media is to downplay claims of "civilian casualties caused by US bombs"<sup>31</sup>. Filkins repeats questionable claims from U.S. commanders that they "painstakingly assess the potential for injuring civilians or damaging civilian facilities" and that this is "the most accurate war ever fought in this nation's history"<sup>32</sup>. The reader is then left wondering how this "accuracy" might be assessed because US commanders concede "that they have not kept track of civilian deaths in Afghanistan"<sup>33</sup>. Taking into account that over 20,000 bombs were dropped on Afghanistan in six months, it is understandable that the US military would be unable to collect adequate data which accurately represented the extent of the damage that had been inflicted on Afghan civilians. Whilst this article is an improvement on Schmitt's in that it does acknowledge some level of civilian casualties, in terms of reducing outrage, it also is an example of reinterpretation where the extent of civilian casualties has been minimised by publishing a low estimate from a small number of case studies.

The theme of "low civilian casualties" was continued in *The New York Times* in an article by Thom Shanker where Rumsfeld was quoted as saying that he took some comfort in the knowledge that civilian losses in this war had been fewer than any in modern history<sup>34</sup>. The abstract use of a timeframe such as "modern history" makes it difficult to determine exactly which other wars Rumsfeld was comparing with the intervention in Afghanistan. Perhaps his statement should have read that the number of 'reported' civilian deaths in the mainstream media was fewer than any in modern history. Further in Shanker's article Rumsfeld goes on to say that the numbers of casualties that the US had been able to find, "or anyone else had been able to find", were fewer than first reported<sup>35</sup>. This claim is partially explained in Schmitt's article which described the way in which US Air Planners had designed bomb detonators with adjusted timing devices in relation to the construction of Afghan buildings<sup>36</sup>. The aim of these devices was to achieve "maximum damage" on existing Afghan buildings, which would justify Rumsfeld's claim that casualties had been difficult to find. For example if a bomb destroys a building where say, one hundred people work, killing all, it is quite likely that less than one hundred bodies would be recovered due to the "maximum damage" design of the weapon. In this example although reported casualties might be high, it is likely that the number of bodies found are far fewer. The statement from Rumsfeld that reported casualties were higher than bodies accounted for implies that the initial reports were

28. D. Filkins, 'Flaws in US Air War Left Hundreds of Civilians Dead', *The New York Times*, 21 July, 2002.

29. Herold, 2002b.

30. Herold, 2001.

31. M.W. Herold 'Truth about Afghan Civilian Casualties Comes Only through American Lenses for the U.S. Corporate Media [our modern-day Didymus]', in Peter Phillips and Project Censored (eds.), *Censored 2003: the Year's Top 25 Stories*, Seven Seas Publishing, New York, 2002: p.282.

32. Filkins, 2002.

33. Filkins, 2002.

34. T. Shanker, 'Rumsfeld Calls Civilian Deaths Relatively Low', *The New York Times*, 23 July, 2002.

35. Ibid.

36. Schmitt, 2002.



inflated. This is an example of the tactic of reinterpretation, where creative accounting methods for civilian casualties create an impression that the numbers are low.

During this time in 2002, *The Washington Post* also reinterpreted civilian casualties in Afghanistan, referring to reports of “hundreds” of civilians killed in air attacks around major battle zones<sup>37</sup>. Rumsfeld is quoted uncritically in this article claiming that he cannot “imagine there’s been a conflict in history where there has been less collateral damage, less untended consequences”<sup>38</sup>. The author, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Karen De Young, has since stated in a 2004 *Washington Post* article that as journalists, “we are inevitably the mouthpiece for whatever administration is in power”<sup>39</sup>. Further examples of this type of media behaviour are demonstrated in the article where De Young states unequivocally that Taliban reports of civilian casualties were “exaggerations with little basis in fact”<sup>40</sup>. Interestingly De Young does refer to Herold’s count of civilian casualties, but allocates only one sentence to his study. The main emphasis in this 1200 word article is on the “dozens” and “hundreds” of civilians that have been killed as a result of US air strikes. With respect to civilian casualties, the pattern of reinterpretation present in *The New York Times* is also evident in this article.

De Young’s article also contains elements of devaluation where casualties are systematically referred to as being connected with either Al-Qaeda or the Taliban. The first example in this article concerns an attack described by De Young that occurred near the mountain caves of Tora Bora where the Pentagon claimed that “innocent victims were Al-Qaeda relatives or civilians knowingly sheltering terrorists”<sup>41</sup>. Proof of this relationship between the victims and the terrorist organisation is not offered and could be dismissed as speculative if attention is paid to De Young’s general commentary on civilian casualties where she asserts that “there is little opportunity to check claims of civilian deaths on the ground” and that “assurances that no mistake has been made generally rely on technical observation from the air”<sup>42</sup>. It could be concluded checking the victims’ association with Al-Qaeda would also be difficult from the air. The effect of this unproven association is to devalue the victims who, because of an unsubstantiated link with Al-Qaeda, could be viewed by De Young’s readers as being less worthy of concern.

In February 2002 a *Washington Post* article by Molly Moore conceded that precision guided missiles in Afghanistan “almost always hit their targets, but sometimes have killed the wrong people”<sup>43</sup>. In this article the tactic of devaluation operates in a way that reduces civilian casualties to “Taliban claims” of civilian casualties. Moore states that the Taliban placed the numbers of civilian casualties in the thousands but “anecdotal evidence” suggests the figures are much lower<sup>44</sup>. There is no suggestion from Moore as to what value this anecdotal evidence might be but the effect once again is to limit the audience’s perception of the scale of civilian suffering as a result of the US bombing campaign. By quoting civilian casualties in terms of a Taliban claim, the implication is that the claim is unreliable. The anecdotal evidence supplied in *The New York Times* by Schmitt, that 5,000 US bombs missed their target, indicates that the Taliban estimates, supported by Herold’s data, are reasonable.

37. K. De Young, ‘More Bombing Casualties Alleged; UN Aide ‘Concerned’; Rumsfeld Defends Airstrike Targeting’, *The Washington Post*, 4 January, 2002.

38. Ibid.

39. J. Winter, *Lies the Media Tell Us*, Black Rose Books, Montreal, 2007: p. 219.

40. K. De Young, 2002..

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. M. Moore, ‘Fleeing US Bombs, Villagers Found No Place to Hide; Missiles killed 21 in Two Families, Survivors Say’, *The Washington Post*, 13 February, 2002.

44. Ibid.



## 5. Official channels: The UN, ISAF and NATO

There are no strong examples or evidence of the US government using official channels as a way of minimising outrage through giving the appearance of justice during the early months of the air campaign in Afghanistan. The United Nations did not sanction the intervention which began in October 2001, and there appeared to be little effort made by the US government to use official channels in any way to legitimise the intervention before the bombing began. However, some connection with official channels has occurred since. In December 2001, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was created as a UN mandated force to assist the newly created Afghan Transitional Authority<sup>45</sup>. Whilst it is not known what influence the US government had in creating this force, its international composition and link with the UN has the effect of giving legitimacy to the US attacks. Since 2003, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) assumed control of the ISAF and the fighting force in Afghanistan is referred to as a NATO force. Conducting the war in Afghanistan under the NATO flag gives the impression that the intervention is legitimised by the support of a large multi-national force despite the fact that the initial action was a unilateral one taken by the US government. The current troop contributions from 44 of the 47 contributing nations are minimal with over 75% of soldiers being supplied by three countries: the US, UK and Australia<sup>46</sup>, indicating that the multinational force is significantly influenced by the interests of a few.

## 6. Intimidation: Silencing Al-Jazeera

One way in which the US government and military attempted to minimise outrage over the war in Afghanistan was by attacking the Arab news agency Al-Jazeera. Free of the controls of US government propaganda and broadcasting mainly to an Arab audience but with content freely available on the internet, Al-Jazeera showed “intensely terrifying scenes of war”, broadcasting uncensored images of the human suffering in Afghanistan and Iraq<sup>47</sup>. When the war in Afghanistan began, US Secretary of State Colin Powell used his influence to exert pressure on Qatar to “rein in” Al-Jazeera’s reporting of the war<sup>48</sup>. When this approach was not as successful as hoped, Al-Jazeera’s Kabul office was targeted and hit by US missiles<sup>49</sup>. Al-Jazeera posed a genuine threat to the US government’s desire to shield the American public, as well as Al-Jazeera’s primary audience in the Middle East, from witnessing the human suffering in Afghanistan. The attack on Al-Jazeera’s office is an attempt to prevent the communication of this suffering and shows the way in which methods of intimidation are linked to cover-up.

It should also be noted that it is not just foreign journalists or those associated with Al-Jazeera that have been the targets of intimidation by the US military in Afghanistan. US journalist Doug Struck was detained at gun point by US soldiers when he attempted to investigate the scene of a missile attack that was said to have killed a number of civilians<sup>50</sup>. The soldiers held Struck for over twenty minutes and when he asked them what would happen if he proceeded to the bomb site without their permission they replied that he “would be shot”<sup>51</sup>. Again this is an example of intimidation by the US military to restrict the outflow of information about the effects of the war.

45. International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), ‘History’, 2010.

46. International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), ‘Troop numbers and contributions’, 2010.

47. D. Hanley, 2003, ‘Two Wars in Iraq: one for US audiences, the other for the Arab speaking world’, *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, Vol. 22, Iss.4: p6.

48. Z.Sardar and M.W. Davies, *Why Do People Hate America?*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2003: pp.202-203.

49. Sardar and Davies, 2003: pp.202-203, and see also Hanley, 2003: p6.

50. Committee to Protect Journalists, ‘Attacks on the Press 2002: Afghanistan’, 31 March, 2003.

51. Ibid.



## 7. Conclusion

The bombing of Afghanistan immediately after the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington resulted in the deaths of a significant number of innocent civilians not accounted for in the sample articles taken from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Each newspaper acted as a de-facto agent for cover-up, reinterpretation and devaluation. The formation of the ISAF under NATO control following the initial US bombing campaign shows the way in which official channels have been used since the initial attacks to legitimise an aggressive military action by a very powerful nation against a far weaker state. The silencing of Al-Jazeera and the threatening of Doug Struck illustrates the way in which intimidation can also be used to prevent the communication of unjust events reaching a receptive audience.

The backfire model predicts that following an injustice, the perpetrator will use some or all of these tactics to minimise outrage, a term that is interchangeable with indignation, anger or any other emotion that may cause a person or organisation to react against the injustice. The model contains another element not discussed in this article and that is where these five tactics are unsuccessful in inhibiting outrage, the injustice will backfire on the perpetrator. How this might occur in the case of Afghanistan is difficult to say but one option for peace activists is the use of counter-tactics.

If we were to consider counter-tactics in the backfire model using this case study, an area for continued study concerns the way in which other means of communicating the effects of the Afghan war on civilians can promote outrage. The inverse of cover-up, reinterpretation and devaluation is to expose the action, interpret the events accurately, and place value on the lives of the victims and the victims' families. The emergence of the whistle blowing website Wikileaks in recent times offers this possibility. In July 2010, Wikileaks released 92,000 classified Pentagon documents on the war in Afghanistan between 2004 and 2009. Wikileaks' spokesperson Julian Assange claims that the documents do not reveal a "single mass killing" or crimes that could be attributed to a single individual, but an ongoing story of the "continuing deaths of civilians, children and soldiers"<sup>52</sup>.

One of the interesting points about the release of these documents and Assange's desire to reveal what he describes as the "true nature of the war", is that the mainstream media has paid little attention to the documents' content and more to the story associated with Assange and his organisation. The tactics used by Assange to promote outrage have been countered again by a range of actors using tactics that also fit within the backfire model. Following the release of the Afghanistan documents there were numerous calls from the mainstream media to have the Wikileaks site shut down.<sup>53</sup> Closing the Wikileaks site could be viewed as another cover-up. Assange found himself at the centre of rape allegations in Sweden where charges were laid, then dropped, then re-opened.<sup>54</sup> The effect of this international publicity is to devalue Assange using a "trial by media" technique. Finally, the claim that the documents will endanger the lives of Afghan civilians working with the US military as informants is an ironic twist in reinterpretation when the purpose of the document release was to show the scale of damage already done to the civilian population following the US occupation.<sup>55</sup> This last claim may be true but what is genuinely lacking in the media discourse surrounding Wikileaks is an analysis of the documents in terms of the civilian deaths that have occurred since 2001. The

52. J.Adetunji, 'Wikileaks founder Julian Assange: more revelations to come', *The Guardian.co.uk*, 26 July, 2010.

53. D.McCullagh, 'Growing calls for Wikileaks to be shut down', *Zdnet*, 3 August, 2010.

54. No Author, 'Sweden reopens investigation into rape claim against Julian Assange', *The Guardian*, 2 September 2010, p.23.

55. J.Birmingham, 'The Man Who Fell to Earth', *The Monthly*, October 2010, pp.20-27.

release of the documents by Wikileaks has not led to a questioning of the war, but an attack on the organisation which is trying to raise awareness of the broader injustices of the war. What this indicates is that in the battle over outrage, Western governments supported by a compliant mainstream media make a formidable opponent.

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