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## Why do we ignore the civilians killed in American wars?

By John Tirman,

As the United States officially ended the war in Iraq last month, [President Obama spoke eloquently at Fort Bragg, N.C.](#), lauding troops for “your patriotism, your commitment to fulfill your mission, your abiding commitment to one another,” and offering words of grief for the nearly 4,500 members of the U.S. armed forces who died in Iraq. He did not, however, mention the sacrifices of the Iraqi people.



This inattention to civilian deaths in America’s wars isn’t unique to Iraq. There’s little evidence that the American public gives much thought to the people who live in the nations where our military interventions take place. Think about the memorials on the Mall honoring American sacrifices in Korea and Vietnam. These are powerful, sacred spots, but neither mentions the people of those countries who perished in the conflicts.

The major wars the United States has fought since the surrender of Japan in 1945 — in Korea, Indochina, Iraq and Afghanistan — have produced colossal carnage. For most of them, we do not have an accurate sense of how many people died, but a conservative estimate is at least 6 million civilians and soldiers.

Our lack of acknowledgment is less oversight than habit, a self-reflective reaction to the horrors of war and an American tradition that goes back decades. We consider ourselves a generous and compassionate nation, and often we are. From [the Asian tsunami in 2004](#) to [Hurricane Katrina in 2005](#) and the [Haiti earthquake in 2010](#), Americans have been quick to open their pocketbooks and their hearts.

However, when it comes to our wars overseas, concern for the victims is limited to U.S. troops. When concern for the native populations is expressed, it tends to be more strategic than empathetic, as with Gen. David H. Petraeus’s acknowledgment in late 2006 that harsh

U.S. tactics were alienating Iraqi civilians and undermining Operation Iraqi Freedom. The switch to [counterinsurgency](#), which involves more restraint by the military, was billed as a change that would save the U.S. mission, not primarily as a strategy to reduce civilian deaths.

The wars in Korea and Indochina were extremely deadly. While estimates of Korean War deaths are mainly guesswork, the three-year conflict is widely believed to have taken 3 million lives, about half of them civilians. The sizable civilian toll was partly due to the fact that the country's population is among the world's densest and the war's front lines were often moving.

The war in Vietnam and the spillover conflicts in Laos and Cambodia were even more lethal. These numbers are also hard to pin down, although by several scholarly estimates, Vietnamese military and civilian deaths ranged from 1.5 million to 3.8 million, with the U.S.-led campaign in Cambodia resulting in 600,000 to 800,000 deaths, and Laotian war mortality estimated at about 1 million.

Despite the fact that contemporary weapons are vastly more precise, Iraq war casualties, which are also hard to quantify, have reached several hundred thousand. In mid-2006, two household surveys — the most scientific means of calculating — found 400,000 to 650,000 deaths, and there has been a lot of killing since then. (The oft-cited [Iraq Body Count](#) Web site mainly uses news accounts, which miss much of the violence.)

The war in Afghanistan has been far less violent than the others, with civilian and military deaths estimated at about 100,000.

The numbers can be confusing because some estimates include only those people killed by direct violence; others include deaths from “structural” violence — such as those resulting from a destroyed health-care system. That we do not have an official way of accounting for the dead is one sign of the uncaring attitudes that have accompanied our wars.

It is difficult to obtain accurate mortality figures during wartime, but the best way might be to commission a consortium of public health schools — the most qualified institutions that study violence — to conduct household surveys every year.

The lack of concern about those who die in U.S. wars is also shown by these civilians' absence, in large part, from our films, novels and documentaries. The entertainment industry portrays these wars rarely and almost always with a focus on Americans.

A few nonprofit organizations have sprung up to deal with the wars' victims — notably the [Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict](#), a Washington-based group founded by Marla Ruzicka, an aid worker who was killed in Iraq in 2005. Such efforts rarely register with the American public, however.

Pollsters, meanwhile, have asked virtually no questions of the public about foreign

casualties. But on the rare occasions when they do, the results have been striking. A 1968 Harris poll found 4 percent favored an end to the Vietnam war because of harm to civilians. A University of Michigan pollster concluded: “More and more Americans now think our intervention was a military mistake, and want to forget the whole thing.”

On Iraq, when an Associated Press survey asked Americans in early 2007 [how many Iraqis had died in the war](#), the average of all answers was 9,890, when the actual number was probably well into the hundreds of thousands. In several polls in 2007 and 2008, Americans were asked whether we should withdraw troops even if it put Iraqis at risk of more civil unrest; a clear majority said yes.

Today there is virtually no support for helping rebuild Iraq or Afghanistan — no campaigns by large charities, no open doors for Iraqi refugees. Even Iraqis who worked with the American military are [having trouble getting political asylum](#) in the United States and face a risk of retribution at home. The U.S. response to so many dead, 5 million displaced and a devastated country is woefully dismissive.

Even civilian atrocities tend to fade quickly from view, or else become rallying points for the accused troops. My Lai, where about 400 Vietnamese were murdered by a U.S. Army unit in 1968, at first shocked the nation, but Americans quickly came to support Lt. William L. Calley Jr. — who was later found guilty of killing 22 villagers — and the others involved. More recently, eight Marines were charged in [the 2005 Haditha massacre](#) in Iraq, and none has been convicted. (The last defendant’s trial [started this past week](#).) Indeed, each atrocity that fails to alter public opinion piles on to further prove American indifference.

Why the American silence on our wars’ main victims? Our self-image, based on what cultural historian Richard Slotkin calls “the frontier myth” — in which righteous violence is used to subdue or annihilate the savages of whatever land we’re trying to conquer — plays a large role. For hundreds of years, the frontier myth has been one of America’s sturdiest national narratives.

When the challenges from communism in Korea and Vietnam appeared, we called on these cultural tropes to understand the U.S. mission overseas. The same was true for Iraq and Afghanistan, with the news media and politicians frequently portraying Islamic terrorists as frontier savages. By framing each of these wars as a battle to civilize a lawless culture, we essentially typecast the local populations as the Indians of our North American conquest. As the foreign policy maven Robert D. Kaplan [wrote on the Wall Street Journal op-ed page](#) in 2004, “The red Indian metaphor is one with which a liberal policy nomenclatura may be uncomfortable, but Army and Marine field officers have embraced it because it captures perfectly the combat challenge of the early 21st century.”

Politicians tend to speak in broader terms, such as defending Western values, or simply refer to resistance fighters as terrorists, the 21st-century word for savages. Remember the

military's code name for the raid of Osama bin Laden's compound? [It was Geronimo](#).

The frontier myth is also steeped in racism, which is deeply embedded in American culture's derogatory depictions of the enemy. Such belittling makes it all the easier to put these foreigners at risk of violence. President George W. Bush, to his credit, disavowed these wars as being against Islam, as has President Obama.

Perhaps the most compelling explanation for indifference, though, taps into our beliefs about right and wrong. More than 30 years ago, social psychologists developed the "just world" theory, which argues that humans naturally assume that the world should be orderly and rational. When that "just world" is disrupted, we tend to explain away the event as an aberration. For example, when encountering a beggar on the street, a common reaction is indifference or even anger, in the belief that no one should go hungry in America.

This explains much of our response to the violence in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. When the wars went badly and violence escalated, Americans tended to ignore or even blame the victims. The public dismissed the civilians because their high mortality rates, displacement and demolished cities were discordant with our understandings of the missions and the U.S. role in the world.

These attitudes have consequences. Perhaps the most important one — apart from the [tensions created with the host governments](#), which have been quite vocal in [protesting civilian casualties](#) — is that indifference provides permission to our military and political leaders to pursue more interventions.

There are costs to our global reputation as well: The United States, which should be regarded as a principal advocate of human rights, undermines its credibility when it is so dismissive of civilian casualties in its wars. Appealing for international action on Sudan, Syria and other countries may sound hypocritical when our own attitudes about civilians are so cold. Korean War historian Bruce Cumings calls this neglect the "hegemony of forgetting, in which almost everything to do with the war is buried history."

Will we ever stop burying memories of war's destruction? More attention to the human costs may jolt the American public into a more compassionate understanding. When we build the memorial for Operation Iraqi Freedom, let's mention that Iraqi civilians were part of the carnage. Count them, and maybe we can start to recognize and remember the larger tolls of the wars we wage.

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