



Media Reality ✓ Check

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ABC, CBS and NBC Broadcast Hours of Charges Against U.S. Marines But Ignored 14 Top U.S. Heroes

Touting Military Misdeeds, Hiding Heroes

It may be weeks or longer before officials announce what, if any, charges will be filed stemming from allegations that U.S. Marines killed Iraqi civilians in the town of Haditha last November. But the allegations themselves have triggered a frenzy of network news coverage over the past three weeks, much as did allegations of abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison back in 2004.

While ABC, CBS and NBC have chosen to highlight this potential scandal, a new Media Research Center study finds those same networks have given far less attention to the heroic deeds of the 20 members of the U.S. military who have received the highest recognition for bravery since the war on terror began. In fact, 14 of the country's top 20 medal recipients have gone unmentioned by ABC, CBS and NBC.

MRC analysts tallied all stories regarding charges of U.S. military misconduct that aired on ABC, CBS and NBC's morning, evening, primetime and late night news shows from May 17 through June 7, before the networks' pessimism was interrupted by the successful termination of terrorist menace Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The analysts then searched those same shows for coverage of top medal recipients, starting in September 2001. They found that none of America's heroes received anywhere near as much attention from the broadcast networks as TV gave the latest allegations of military wrongdoing — and many received no coverage at all.

PUSHING HARD ON HADITHA

In the past three weeks, the networks have emphasized charges that, after Marine Lance Corporal Miguel Terrazas was killed in Haditha last year, members of his unit murdered 24 innocent Iraqi civilians and filed a false report to hide their crime. In March of this year, all three networks aired stories documenting the charges and the fact that the Pentagon was investigating.

The investigation isn't over, but on May 17 *NBC Nightly News* opted to put the story back in the headlines after comments from anti-war Congressman John Murtha. From

that date through June 7, the networks have aired 99 stories or segments suggesting U.S. military misconduct — three and a half hours of coverage in three weeks. ABC has hit the story the hardest, with 85½ minutes of coverage on *Good Morning America*, *World News Tonight*, *This Week* and *Nightline*. NBC aired 67 minutes on *Today*, *Nightly News* and *Meet the Press*, while CBS broadcast 58 minutes on *The Early Show*, *CBS Evening News* and *Face the Nation*.

Much of the coverage has been repetitive, reviewing the allegations and the still unfinished investigation. At the same time, the networks have presumed a guilty verdict and a blow to the overall American military's reputation. "Will Haditha

be the My Lai of the Middle East?" asked *Nightline* co-host Terry Moran on May 25, referring to the killing of hundreds of Vietnamese civilians back in 1968. Filling in as anchor of the May 31 *CBS Evening News*, Russ Mitchell pronounced that "if the allegations prove true, they'd be a huge new blow to the American military's standing with Iraq's government and it's people."

On the June 7 *Today*, NBC's Andrea Mitchell similarly labeled Haditha a "black eye for American policy," while her colleague Richard Engel seemed upset that Iraq's television network wasn't making more of the scandal. "It's barely on the news," Engel fretted on the June 5 *Nightly News*. "Today, at the state-sponsored al-Iraqiya TV, we asked the news director why." The news director told him: "If we played it up or sensationalized it, more Iraqis would want to attack U.S. troops and more Iraqis would die."

If the Haditha allegations are true, it is certainly a major story deserving widespread attention. But so much coverage — so far in advance of any authoritative account of what happened — makes journalists seem eager to spread a story that portrays the U.S. military as bad guys. The networks' heavy coverage of Haditha stands in contrast to their pattern of overlooking the stories of most of America's top military heroes in the war on terror.

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TV'S BAD NEWS BIAS

Misconduct Allegations: 3 hrs, 30 mins
(Three weeks from May 17 - June 7, 2006)

Top 20 Military Heroes: 52 mins
(Nearly five years from Sept. 2001- June 2006)

MRC review of morning, evening, primetime and late night news shows on ABC, CBS and NBC, weekends included.

Touting Misdeeds, Hiding Heroes (cont.)

WHERE HAVE ALL THE HEROES GONE?

Since the war on terror began, the military has awarded top medals to 20 individuals, four of whom died on the battlefield in either Afghanistan or Iraq. The highest award, the Medal of Honor, was given to the family of Army Sergeant First Class Paul Ray Smith, who lost his life while protecting more than 100 fellow soldiers during the battle for Baghdad's airport in April 2003. Nineteen servicemen received the second highest honors, all for "extraordinary heroism" in combat. The list includes two fallen members of the Air Force who were awarded the Air Force Cross; three soldiers who merited the Distinguished Service Cross; and three sailors and 11 Marines who received the Navy Cross, one posthumously.

Most of these men have never been recognized by ABC, CBS or NBC. None have been given more than a fraction of the attention that the latest allegations against the military have received. And while the networks have told of acts of heroism by others in the military — with Sergeant Leigh Ann Hester of the Kentucky National Guard getting the most coverage among those honored with a Silver Star — none of those other positive stories have interested the networks as much as news of possible military misconduct.

CBS presented more than twice as much coverage (28½ minutes) of these 20 heroes as either ABC or NBC (each at about 11 minutes, 45 seconds). The *CBS Evening News* has since 2004 regularly spotlighted short biographical features of "Fallen Heroes" and, later, "American Heroes." And only the *CBS Evening News* noted when Vice President Cheney gave the Distinguished Service Cross to Army Special Forces Master Sergeant Donald Hollenbaugh on June 10, 2005, although they did not recount the story of how Hollenbaugh saved the group of Marines he was with when they were overrun in Fallujah in April 2004.

The most heavily-covered hero was Medal of Honor

winner Paul Smith, who received 41 minutes of coverage during a 24-month period, 79 percent of the heroes' total. CBS's Jim Axelrod had Smith's story on April 9, 2003, just five days after he was killed in action. ABC's Bill Blakemore featured Smith on *World News Tonight* two weeks later. Blakemore ran a soundbite from First Sergeant Tim Campbell: "He's the epitome of what I look for in a soldier. He was, a good man. When you think in terms of how many soldiers he saved, and he died doing it, it's just phenomenal to me." All three networks offered full reports on their morning and evening news shows when President Bush presented the Medal of Honor to Smith's widow and two children on April 4, 2005, the second anniversary of his death.

ABC, CBS and NBC have yet to mention the heroism of Marine Captain Brian Chontosh, who led his men out of an ambush during the drive to Baghdad in March 2003. "I never wanted a medal. I just wanted to save my Marines," Chontosh told the *Rochester (N.Y.) Democrat and Chronicle* in 2004. Nor have they reported on Marine Sergeant Scott Montoya, who ran into a hail of gunfire to save five wounded Marines. Later, Montoya told the *Orange County Register* that all he could think of was the Bible verse: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

These stories aren't military secrets. Nearly every surviving medal recipient has told their story publicly, and many are recounted in *Home of the Brave*, the last book by former Defense Secretary Casper Weinberger, just published. There's

no question the media must not hide bad news from the public. But can't they balance the portrait with true stories of America's newest heroes? — *Rich Noyes, with research assistance from MRC analysts Geoff Dickens, Brian Boyd, Michael Rule and Scott Whitlock.*

Network Coverage of U.S. War Heroes

	(minutes: seconds)
Paul Smith (Medal of Honor)	41:26
Jason Cunningham (Air Force Cross)	6:55
James Chapman (Air Force Cross)	1:25
James Coffman (Distinguished Service Cross)	1:16
Brent Morel (Navy Cross)	0:58
Donald Hollenbaugh (Distinguished Service Cross)	0:31
Mark Mitchell (Distinguished Service Cross)	—
Stephen Bass (Navy Cross)	—
Louis Fonseca (Navy Cross)	—
Britt Slabinski (Navy Cross)	—
Brian Chontosh (Navy Cross)	—
Willie Copeland (Navy Cross)	—
Bradley Kasal (Navy Cross)	—
Jarrett Kraft (Navy Cross)	—
Justin Lehew (Navy Cross)	—
Marco Martinez (Navy Cross)	—
Scott Montoya (Navy Cross)	—
Joseph Perez (Navy Cross)	—
Anthony Viggiani (Navy Cross)	—
Jeremiah Workman (Navy Cross)	—

ABC, CBS and NBC morning, evening, primetime and late night news programs, September 2001 to June 2006.

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