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MRC Study: World News Tonight Showed Afghan Civilian Deaths More Than CBS and NBC Combined

## ABC's War: US Military vs. Afghan Civilians

Last Wednesday, Diane Sawyer asked her ABC colleague Dan Harris why the Taliban had invited him to tour the Afghan city of Kandahar. "They've woken up to the PR value of having Western journalists here in this country," Harris acknowledged on *Good Morning America*. "They have one single, unerring goal, which is to show that civilian casualties are mounting that the U.S. is responsible for."

That's exactly the enemy's goal, but a review of the three broadcast networks' evening news coverage of the war in Afghanistan from October 8, the day the first damage assessments were available, through October 31 found that ABC's *World News Tonight* has spent far more time than its competitors showcasing the grisly pictures that the Taliban purport are civilians killed by U.S. bombs. Since the air strikes began, ABC's *World News Tonight* has devoted nearly four times as much of its newscast to allegations of civilian casualties as the *CBS Evening News*, and almost twice as much as *NBC Nightly News*. (See box.)

Coverage of Civilian Casualties in Afghanistan		
<i>World News Tonight</i>	15 min, 44 sec	(56%)
<i>NBC Nightly News</i>	8 min, 9 sec	(29%)
<i>CBS Evening News</i>	4 min, 17 sec	(15%)
<b>Total Coverage</b>	<b>28 min, 10 sec</b>	<b>(100%)</b>
<i>Airtime figures based on MRC analysis of all evening newscasts shown in the Washington, D.C. area, Oct. 8-31.</i>		

While all three newscasts have shown pictures of structures identified as damaged civilian buildings, ABC has repeatedly showed images of injured people, including children with facial wounds, and wrapped bodies. At the same time, ABC downplayed the American military's dedication to keeping such casualties at an absolute minimum and the obvious benefits to the Taliban of exaggerating the number of deaths caused by U.S. bombs. In contrast, the *CBS Evening News* spent twice as much airtime covering these points as did *World News Tonight*.

All three networks were faced with the same war, but viewers heard different war stories depending on which channel they selected. "The Navy talks about delivering a short, sharp shock to the Taliban," CBS's Mark Phillips reported on October 10, "but its desire to limit civilian casualties has always been a restriction on what the pilots and the bombs can do." That same evening, NBC's Charles Sabine similarly reported from an aircraft carrier that U.S. "planes returned with their bombs undelivered after airmen

were instructed to abort missions where there was a risk of civilian casualties."

But on ABC that night, reporter David Wright gave no hint U.S. pilots were trying to be careful. "The skies above Kabul have thundered for four nights now, four very long days and nights for those on the ground. 'We haven't slept for days,' says this shoe shiner in Kabul. Eight miles east of Kabul, a family's home was hit. The target may have been an abandoned fort nearby," Wright guessed as ABC displayed images of damaged buildings. Reporting on refugees, he added that "many who are leaving say it would be one thing if the Americans were only bombing the terrorist camps in Afghanistan, but they say the killing of innocents is not okay."

The contrast between ABC and its rivals has been evident since the bombing began. On October 11, ABC's Bob Woodruff aired unverified claims that we were killing scores of civilians. He showed refugees from Kandahar: "They say after a few days of bombs falling outside the city, they are now hitting the city center." Woodruff narrated: "'Today a bomb exploded on a house,' this man says. 'Eight women and their children died on the spot.' Two other men told us that same story. There are other stories, too: 'I saw civilians die,' he says. 'Yes, this morning I saw 20 or 25 killed myself.' The Taliban believes more than 100 civilians have died in the bombings, but there's no way to verify any of it."

As Woodruff put it, the Taliban didn't just "claim" high casualty counts, but "believed" it, phrasing that bolstered their credibility. Completely missing from his ABC report was the point of view CBS uncovered the next night. Reporter Jim Axelrod found refugees rebutting the charges of high civilian losses in Kabul. "They say only military targets have been hit. 'No civilians are killed,' says this man, 'only Taliban are killed. They say that civilians are killed to stop America's attacks. They announce that. It's wrong.'" No refugees making such anti-Taliban claims were ever shown on *World News Tonight*.

(Continued on Page 2)

## **ABC, STRESSING U.S.-CAUSED DEATHS** (cont.)

On October 15, CBS anchor Dan Rather described the military campaign: "U.S. warplanes press the bombing campaign against terrorist camps and other Taliban targets in Afghanistan while trying to avoid civilian targets." CBS's Pentagon correspondent, David Martin, gave little credence to the Taliban's story that American bombs had killed 200 Afghan civilians: "Pentagon officials believe this small village was leveled not by an American bomb, as the Taliban claims, but by an explosion triggered by an attack on a nearby cave." After a supporting quote from General Richard Myers ("Everybody was surprised by the length of the fire afterwards. It went on for three and a half to four hours"), Martin moved to another topic.

On ABC, however, the same charge was treated far differently. ABC's Wright and other foreign reporters were permitted to visit the bombed-out area soon after the event and, even though his ABC colleague Jim Wooten would contend much later that the journalists' tour showed how baseless the Taliban claims really were (see box), Wright refused to undermine the Taliban's case in his report for the October 14 *World News Tonight*: "The Taliban claims some 200 civilians in a village near Jalalabad were killed by a stray U.S. missile. If that's true, it would be the deadliest strike so far in the war. The Islamic militia escorted the press to a residential area littered with shrapnel. Inside one house, a blood-stained pillowcase. Outside another, dozens of dead sheep and goats, as well as what appeared to be body parts." Perhaps trying to explain the evident lack of corpses, he noted "villagers were still digging through the rubble looking for bodies. The air has a rancid stench."

The next day, October 15, Pentagon reporter John McWethy transmitted the military's explanation that a large secondary explosion had caused the damage to the village, but ABC again had Wright pass along the enemy's spin: "They said Taliban troops are still alive and well-armed and that the bombing isn't fazing them. 'We just laugh at these bombs,' one of the Taliban escorts said." Three days later, on October 18, Wright again reported as established fact that "for the ninth time, American bombs hit residential areas in Kabul. At least 14 people were killed, including five members of one family."

On October 23, NBC's Jim Miklaszewski placed reports of U.S. bombing errors alongside information that the Taliban were using civilians as human shields: "Two

errant bombs were dropped in a residential neighborhood outside Kabul and a 1,000-pound bomb landed next to a senior citizen home in Herat. But the Pentagon disputes Taliban claims that hundreds were killed...[and] the Pentagon also claims the Taliban is using civilians as human shields, positioning some of its weapons in civilian neighborhoods and next to religious mosques."

But on ABC that same evening, anchor Peter Jennings emphasized the Pentagon's initial confusion, or perhaps deliberate misinformation: "Yesterday, the Pentagon said it knew nothing about an alleged stray bomb hitting a hospital in Herat in western Afghanistan. Today, a spokeswoman said a bomb had gone astray and landed near a senior citizens home." The subsequent report by ABC's Harris cast no doubt on Taliban charges and gave no hint that U.S. officials suspected a human shield policy.

"Videophone footage from Al-Jazeera television today shows body bags lined up in a hospital hallway in Kandahar," Harris related. "There have been reports of civilian casualties before, but never these kinds of pictures." The video showed wrapped bodies, but there was no indication whether they were civilians or soldiers. In a Pakistani hospital, Harris

showed an injured child: "This boy is one of the injured. His uncle says he heard American radio broadcasts promising civilians wouldn't be targeted, but he says his village was nowhere near any Taliban positions."

"In this war of propaganda, the battle for public opinion, U.S. military firepower and the damage it can inflict may be twisted by the terrorists," CBS's Rather correctly warned on October 26. That doesn't imply that the media should either ignore American military mistakes or act as if the lives of Afghan civilians aren't valuable. But the free American media should be extremely dubious of the self-serving claims of an enemy dictatorship. ABC knows that the despotic Taliban are using both real and phony instances of U.S. errors to undermine our war against terror but, at least so far, its correspondents have reserved most of their skepticism for America.

— Rich Noyes

### **One ABC Reporter Exposed Taliban Lies**

"The Taliban says 200 are dead. Days later, when reporters visit the site, they find nowhere near that number of casualties, but by then the story is already out: the Taliban version. It happens nearly every day. In the Afghan embassy in Islamabad, the Taliban ambassador presents some murky account of American atrocities or Taliban success. 'This time,' he says, 'the U.S. is using chemical weapons and targeting civilians, and a thousand have already been killed.' Often no pictures, no proof." — *ABC's Jim Wooten on the October 25 World News Tonight.*

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