

# Before Starting Another War

By John LaForge

The Oct. 2001 blitzkrieg of U.S. bombs and missiles into, and the subsequent military occupation of, Afghanistan was the first time the government has engaged in such a massive, unilateral, undeclared war against another country and its government without having first been attacked by that country. Indeed, the FBI and the CIA have admitted that they found no evidence in Afghanistan linking the Taliban to the Sept. 11 attacks.

The U.S. war on Afghanistan must not be forgotten or ignored in the rush to attack Iraq, Columbia, North Korea or the Philippines. As recently as Feb. 12, 2003, U.S. warplanes bombing southern Afghanistan were reported to have killed 17 civilians in Helmand Province when Green Berets, in a fire fight with "rebels," called in jets to bomb the area.

Investigations into alleged U.S. atrocities must be conducted, and reparations for war damages along with compensation for as many as 3,000 civilian deaths must be demanded. As though it were possible to put a price tag on each innocent victim, the *New York Times* editorialized that, "Afghan relief workers suggest \$10,000 per death."

The killing of civilians is a direct and inevitable result of any bombing raid, especially those conducted from the safety of 30,000 feet in the air. The papers reported Dec. 24, 2001, "American bombs damaged residential areas, especially early in the war, killing and wounding an unknown number of civilians." In the Feb. 12 attack, Pentagon Spokesman Col. Roger King reported no U.S. or coalition casualties.

The Pentagon's Donald Rumsfeld said in July 2002, that the country could "take comfort in the knowledge that this war has seen fewer tragic losses of civilian life than perhaps any war in modern history." He then refused to provide even a rough figure of civilian deaths caused by the bombing, saying "it is exceedingly difficult to get ... an estimate." The *Times* said July 8, 2002, that such estimates "range from a few hundred to a few thousand."

Secretary Rumsfeld appeared to condone attacks on civilians when he spoke March 13, 2002, about the 14 women and children killed March 6, near a village in eastern Afghanistan. He said that they were in the war zone, "of their own free will, know-

## The Human Cost of War

**"Does Tony Have Any Idea What the Flies are Like That Feed Off the Dead?"**

By Robert Fisk, *The Independent*, January 26, 2003

On the road to Basra, Independent TeleVision was filming wild dogs as they tore at the corpses of the Iraqi dead. Every few seconds a ravenous beast would rip off a decaying arm and make off with it over the desert in front of us, dead fingers trailing through the sand, the remains of the burned military sleeve flapping in the wind.

"Just for the record," the cameraman said to me. Of course. Because ITV would never show such footage. The things we see -- the filth and obscenity of corpses -- cannot be shown. First because it is not "appropriate" to depict such reality on breakfast-time TV. Second because, if what we saw was shown on television, no one would ever again agree to support a war.

That was 1991. The "highway of death," they called it-- there was a parallel and much worse "highway of death" 10 miles to the east, courtesy of the U.S. Air Force and the Royal Air Force, but no one turned up to film it -- and the only true picture of the horrors we saw was the photograph of the shriveled, carbonized Iraqi soldier in his truck. This was an iconic illustration of a kind because it did represent what we had seen, when it was eventually published.

For Iraqi casualties to appear on television during that Gulf War -- there was another one between 1980 and 1988, and a third is in the offing -- it was necessary for them to have died with care, to have fallen romantically on their backs, one hand over a ruined face. Like those First World War paintings of the British dead on the Somme, Iraqis had to die benignly and without obvious wounds, without any kind of squalor, without a trace of shit or mucus or congealed blood, if they wanted to make it on to the morning news programs.

I rage at this contrivance. At Qaa in 1996, when the Israelis had shelled Lebanese refugees at the UN compound for 17 minutes, killing 106 civilians, more than half of them children, I came across a young woman holding in her arms a middle-aged man. He was dead. "My father, my father," she kept crying, cradling his face. One of his arms and one of his legs was missing -- the Israelis used proximity shells which cause amputation wounds -- but when that scene reached television screens in Europe and America, the camera was close up on the girl and the dead man's face. The amputations were not to be seen. The cause of death had been erased in the interests of good taste. It was as if the old man had died of tiredness, just turned his head upon his daughter's shoulder to die in peace.

Today, when I listen to the threats of George Bush against Iraq and the shrill moralistic warnings of Tony Blair, I wonder what they know of this terrible reality. Does George, who declined to serve his county in Vietnam, have any idea what these corpses smell like? Does Tony have the slightest conception of what the flies are like, the big bluebottles that feed on the dead of

ing who they're with and who they're supporting and who they're encouraging and who they're assisting."

Military history tells a sanitized story. "There's not that image of uncaring, rampant destruction," Richard Hallion, a U.S. air force historian told the *Times* Dec. 24, 2001. "We didn't just drop bombs," said Capt. Dave Mercer, commander of the aircraft carrier *Enterprise*-based Carrier Air Wing 8. "We always had a precise aim point."

Contrary to these glowing assessments, the bombing has been indiscriminate. The *Times* reported July 21, 2002, "The Pentagon's use of overwhelming force meant that even when truly military targets were located, civilians were sometimes killed." And of U.S. military commanders, the *Times* said, "Often -- despite evidence on the ground -- they denied that civilians were killed."

Soundings enamored of the Pentagon's new weapons, a *Times* reporter crooned, "The ability to bomb targets with precision could be a potent weapon against terrorist safe houses and command centers hidden among schools, hospitals and homes in crowded urban areas, Pentagon planners said."

In Afghanistan, according to the Pentagon, nearly 60% of the 14,000 missiles, bombs and other ordnance were steered to their targets by lasers or satellites. Nevertheless, mechanical and human errors caused these hugely expensive "smart" machines to kill and maim hundreds and perhaps thousands of civilians. "Innocent civilians are killed," Mr. Rumsfeld said July 22, 2002. "This has been true ... and it remains true even in this age of advanced technology and precision-guided munitions."

**"Not possible to distinguish men from women or adults from children"**

The *Pathfinder* condemned the U.S. attack on Afghanistan as "illegal, immoral, known in advance to be counter-productive and even self-destructive." Here we compile a short list of reported bombing raids that could be considered crimes of war, because, 1) the laws of war apply even absent a formal declaration, and 2) the U.S. air force's own law manual forbids attacks that may harm civilians.

The air force's pamphlet, "International Law: The Conduct of Armed Conflict and Air Operations," binding on all U.S. pilots, says, "Those who plan or decide upon an attack must: ... Refrain from deciding to launch any attack which may be expected to cause inci-

the Middle East, and then come to settle on our faces and our notepads?

Soldiers know. I remember one British officer asking to use the BBC's satellite phone just after the liberation of Kuwait in 1991. He was talking to his family in England and I watched him carefully. "I have seen some terrible things," he said. And then he broke down, weeping and shaking and holding the phone dangling in his hand over the transmission set. Did his family have the slightest idea what he was talking about? They would not have understood by watching television.

Thus can we face the prospect of war. Our glorious, patriotic population -- albeit only about 20% in support of this particular Iraqi folly -- has been protected from the realities of violent death. But I am much struck by the number of letters in my postbag from veterans of the Second World War, men and women, all against this new Iraqi war, with an inalienable memory of torn limbs and suffering.

I remember once a wounded man in Iran, a piece of steel in his forehead, howling like an animal -- which is, of course, what we all are -- before he died; and the Palestinian boy who simply collapsed in front of me when an Israeli soldier shot him dead, quite deliberately, coldly, murderously, for throwing a stone; and the Israeli with a chair leg sticking out of her stomach outside the Sbarro pizzeria in Jerusalem after a Palestinian bomber had decided to execute the families inside; and the heaps of Iraqi dead at the Battle of Dezful in the Iran-Iraq war -- the stench of their bodies wafted through our helicopter until the mullahs aboard were sickened; and the young man showing me the thick black trail of his daughter's blood outside Algiers where armed "Islamists" had cut her throat.

But George Bush and Tony Blair and Dick Cheney and Jack Straw and all the other little warriors who are bamboozling us into war will not have to think of these vile images. For them it's about surgical strikes, collateral damage and all the other examples of war's linguistic mendacity. We are going to have a just war; we are going to liberate the people of Iraq -- some of whom we will obviously kill -- and we are going to give them democracy and protect their oil wealth and stage war crimes trials and we are going to be ever so moral, and we are going to watch our defense "experts" on TV with their bloodless sandpits and their awesome knowledge of weapons which rip off heads.

Come to think of it, I recall the head of an Albanian refugee, chopped neatly off when the Americans, ever so accidentally, bombed a refugee convoy in Kosovo in 1999 which they thought was a Serb military unit. His head lay in the long grass, bearded, eyes open, severed as if by a Tudor executioner. Months later, I learned his name and talked to the girl who was hit by the severed head during the U.S. air strike and who laid the head reverently in the grass where I found it. NATO, of course, did not apologize to the family. Nor to the girl. No one says sorry after war. No one acknowledges the truth of it. No one shows you what we see. Which is how our leaders and our betters persuade us -- still -- to go to war.



Art by Sue Coe

dental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated."

Was the 2001 bombing of Afghanistan "excessive" in relation to military advantage? An answer was given by the skipper of a U.S. aircraft carrier. Only two days after the bombing started, *The New York Times* ran this headline, "Aboard the Enterprise, Pilots Are Running Out of Targets to Drop Bombs On." The ship's commander said, "I don't quite know how to put this, but we're almost running out of targets." These are a few of the excesses that followed:

*St. Paul Pioneer Press & New York Times*, Oct. 15, 2001

✂ The Taliban allowed international journalists into the village of Karam in eastern Afghanistan and claimed that a U.S. attack there Oct. 11 killed almost 200 people.

*New York Times*, Oct. 28, 2001

✂ U.S. bombs smashed a UN center for land mine removal Oct. 25, killing four people.

*New York Times*, Oct. 28, 2001

✂ U.S. warplanes dropped eight 2,000 pound laser-guided bombs on a Red Cross complex in Kabul for a second time. It was bombed the first time Oct. 16.

*New York Times*, Dec. 21, 2001; *Washington Post*, July 3, 2002

✂ U.S. warplanes attacked a convoy carrying tribal elders to inaugural ceremonies in Kabul killing at least 65 people. "The survivors scrambled up a hill, toward the villages of Asmani and Pokharai, and the planes, circling back, struck both villages, destroying about 20 homes."

*London Weekly Telegraph*, & *New York Times*, Jan. 2, 2002

✂ More than 100 people including many women and children were killed by a devastating predawn bombardment Dec. 29, 2001, of the village of Qalaye Niazi, north of the city of Gardez in Paktia Province. A U.S. jet fighter, a B-52 and two helicopters staged the attack that villager Janat Gul told *Reuters* killed 24 members of his family.

*New York Times*, Feb. 12, 2002

✂ Three peasants scrounging for scrap metal were killed by a CIA "drone" attack near Zhawar Kili in eastern Afghanistan. Pentagon officials denied the drone killed peasants and called the strike "appropriate."

*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 3, & *New York Times*, Feb. 23 & 27, 2002

✂ U.S. troops killed 16 people and captured 27 on Jan. 24, 2002, none of whom turned out to be Al Qaeda or Taliban. Some of the dead Afghans were found bound in plastic handcuffs, raising questions about the fighters' having been executed while in custody. Afghan survivors said the U.S. troops punched, kicked and beat them, tied their hands and feet, and blindfolded and hooded them before leading them away to helicopters.

*New York Times*, July 8, & Sept. 7, 2002

✂ After U.S. AC-130 gunships bombed four villages and an engagement party July 1 in Kakrak, the *Times* reported, "Around her in the orchard, there was unspeakable gore. A woman's torso had landed in one of the small almond trees. Human flesh was still hanging on the tree five days after the attack, and more putrefying remains were tangled in the branches of a pomegranate tree." Of one whole family of 25 people, not a single person was left alive. The Pentagon claimed that the AC-130 gunship attacked "after taking fire from anti-aircraft batteries." However, Pentagon investigators admitted that when ground troops arrived on the scene two hours after the attack, they found "no signs of anti-aircraft weapons or even spent cartridges or shell casings." Their report says curtly about the assault, "Unfortunately, it is also not possible to distinguish men from women or adults from children."

*New York Times*, Oct. 9, 2002

✂ Cluster bombs dropped by U.S. warplanes last fall killed at least 73 civilians in the village of Dah Wairan, in Kuduz Province in northern Afghanistan, according to Maldud Malimi, supervisor of mine removal for the Halo Trust, a British nonprofit aid organization. Two of the dead were Malimi's colleagues in mine sweeping.

*Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Nov. 8, *New York Times*, Nov. 6, 2002

✂ A Hellfire missile fired Nov. 4 from a remote-controlled CIA Predator aircraft, covertly operated from hundreds of miles away, assassinated six suspected Al Qaeda members in Yemen, including Ahmed Hijazi, a U.S. citizen. Assassination is banned by a Presidential Executive Order, which the White House says does not apply to known Al Qaeda agents or in this case to suspects.