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The Meaning of Haditha

Posted By [Justin Raimondo](#) On June 2, 2006 @ 12:00 am In [Uncategorized](#) | [No Comments](#)

The [Haditha massacre](#), as it will doubtless be known, tells us something about this war we are fighting, and something about ourselves as Americans – or, rather, as creatures who have become a little less American in the post-9/11 era. What that something amounts to, according to your view of the war and of U.S. foreign policy, varies, but not that much. Both [ostensible critics](#) of the war and those neoconservatives who still see it as a noble cause derailed by defeatists and [lack of will](#) assume the essential goodness of American troops, both as individuals and as a unit. It's only a few "[bad apples](#)" who are the problem. This view was given voice in a *National Review* editorial decrying the designation of [war critic](#) John Murtha as a [recipient](#) of the "Profiles in Courage" award handed out by the JFK Library. In a display of breathtaking nerviness, the weenies over at *NR* – who have never gotten closer to a U.S. military facility than driving past one – [attacked](#) war hero Murtha for supposedly dissing the troops:

"Even if the allegations against the Marines are true, Murtha's rhetoric is imbalanced: He declines to emphasize that the vast majority of soldiers perform their duties honorably and that those who break the rules are severely punished, choosing instead to cite the actions of a few sadists as though they were representative of the military."

Surely this could be said about most armies in the history of human warfare: the overwhelming majority do not commit war crimes. They're too busy just trying to stay alive. But what this has to do with the cold hard fact that these U.S. Marines did commit a number of especially horrible atrocities is not at all clear. Aside from that, they have Murtha all wrong. He is [full of excuses](#) for American soldiers who murder children as young as 1 year old:

"They were so stressed out, they went into houses and killed children, women and children. 24 people they killed. Now this is the kind of stress they are under. Listen, I don't excuse it, but I understand what's happening and the responsibility goes right to the top. This is something that should not have happened, that should have been investigated, they've already relieved three commanding officers ... but this is the kind of stuff ... stress is going to cause these kind of things. That's why I'm so upset about it."

"Stress," my a**. We are not talking about National Guard units, here: [these](#) are U.S. Marines, highly-trained killing machines who know [the rules of war](#), know the difference between a woman with a [baby](#) in her arms and a group of insurgents, and know, furthermore, that the war they are fighting is supposed to be *against* terrorism. Would they succumb to "stress" like some housewife who's run out of vacuum-cleaner bags, go ballistic, and slaughter 24 innocents, including women and very young children, if they didn't think they could get away with it? In short, would they have done it if it wasn't *policy* – directed, encouraged, and condoned by their commanders?

Hell, no.

Yes, Murtha is right: those Marines aren't going to take the fall all by themselves, the responsibility *does* go right to the top – but they, as individuals, are not absolved. They pulled the trigger, they slaughtered children, fer chrissake, [executed them in cold blood](#). So they're responsible – right? If they were Iraqis, there wouldn't be any question about that: we wouldn't be talking about "stress," now would we? Does the fact that they're Americans somehow ameliorate their crimes? I don't think so.

Last year, I [wrote about](#) the "[El Salvador option](#)" – the emerging strategy of this administration in fighting a losing war, which amounts to [throwing off all constraints](#) and simply [terrorizing](#) the Iraqi people into [cowed submission](#). We are now seeing the results of this policy of [desperation](#) in practice. Haditha is not just an "isolated incident," but evidence of a new strategic orientation by the U.S. military – a scorched-earth policy designed to stave off the humiliating prospect of impending defeat.

Further evidence of this new orientation is the revelation of [yet another massacre](#), this time in the village of Abu Sifa, about 60 miles north of Baghdad. Of course, it isn't a revelation to readers of Antiwar.com and this column, where [we covered it in detail](#) back in March. The *Times* of London [reported it](#), most of the American media ignored it, and the news dropped like a stone, clear out of sight and out of mind – except that, as in the case of Haditha, a videotape has come out that vividly documents American atrocities.

A pattern emerges: Haditha, Abu Sifa, [Abu Ghraib](#), and all the others now bound to come out in horrifying detail. These place names will become the new [slogans](#) of the Iraqi insurgency, which will be fueled as never before – and perhaps immeasurably strengthened by [rising](#) Shi'ite anger. As we said in the [beginning](#) – nay, [before](#) the beginning – the occupation of Iraq will soon take on all the [familiar earmarks](#) of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Both Iraqis and Americans will be locked in a deadly embrace of indignities that will soon escalate into everyday atrocities. The Iraqis, like the Palestinians, will become [captives](#) in their own land, and their jailers will get progressively more abusive and cruel as a matter of sheer necessity. Iraq is the occupied territories writ large, and we are well on our way to becoming as [hardened](#), as [self-exculpatory](#), and as [ruthless](#) as our Israeli [allies](#).

"[A few sadists](#)" – or a nation of sadists? That's what this whole question boils down to: have we become so corrupted by ambition and blinded by [self-righteousness](#) that we have spawned an army of baby-killers? And are we going to make weak excuses for them – by crying over the amount of "stress" the poor dears have to endure – or will we face the truth, about ourselves as well as them?

The ugly truth is that we have been corrupted by dreams of empire: our [foreign](#) and [military](#) policy of "preemption" is the doctrine of a swaggering bully. To claim preeminence on every continent, to [strut and preen](#) on the world stage and demand applause at gunpoint, this is evidence of a collective mania, a severe psychological affliction, and, I might add, a mortal sin – the sin of hubris.

We imagine that we are, like Nietzsche's "[overman](#)," beyond good and evil: acts that would be judged harshly if done by others become, in ourselves, evidence of unsurpassed virtue. Yes, our soldiers commit [atrocities](#) – but they are being investigated and prosecuted, aren't they? Well, that remains to be seen, but, in any event, what this argument misses is that our policy of untrammelled aggression *requires* terroristic tactics. If we don't have the

stomach to kill women and children, then we had better turn back now. Because there is no nice way to be a [global hegemon](#). We either give up the role, or else resign ourselves to many more Hadithas.

Back in October 2002, in a [speech](#) at Missouri's Washington University, as the likelihood of an American invasion of Iraq grew into a certainty, I warned about the "corruption of empire" that would inevitably infect every aspect of our culture. I spoke of "what is new – or so old that it seems new – about Gulf War II," and said:

"The mask has been dropped, and now we see the face of the monster revealed in all its shameless, leering ugliness. It's as if [Dorian Gray](#) has hauled [his portrait](#) out of the locked attic and hung it over his mantelpiece."

If we can look into the monster's face unflinchingly and recognize it as our own, then we have the wherewithal to implement our imperial foreign policy. If not – if we retain enough of our humanity to recoil in horror – then perhaps we ought to find ourselves another line of work, and get out of the empire-building business for good.

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