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Be mindful of the real casualties of war

The ropes are heaved, down come the statues. . . . They're dragging Sejanus along by a hook in public. Everyone cheers, 'Just look at that ugly face.' 'Believe me I never cared for that fellow.' 'But . . . [w]ho brought the charges, who gave the evidence? How did they prove him guilty?' 'Nothing like that: a letter arrived from [the emperor Tiberius] at Capri.' 'Fair enough: you need say no more.'"
(Juvenal)



The famous remark that "[t]he first casualty of war is always the truth" distracts us from the fact that there are many other casualties of war that we Americans at home may not recognize. We are not fighting; we see what strictly controlled press coverage gives us. And the loss of human lives makes any discussion of the effects on ourselves feel disrespectful.

Coalition forces now report at least 123 dead. Iraqi military and civilian losses go unreckoned. We glimpse the awful carnage on the ground only when something in our conduct of the war goes so awry that it affects our own troops and makes domestic coverage necessary. For example, The Washington Post covered the checkpoint incident near Karbala. U.S. soldiers were ordered to fire a warning shot at a Toyota racing through a controlled intersection. The soldiers could not know that it was jammed with an Iraqi family desperate to reach the safety of American lines. Cannon fire obliterated the car, killing 10, decapitating two children. "The most horrible thing I've

ever seen and I hope I never see it again," said the army medic who was trying to get the mother to let go of her daughters' mangled corpses.

We can only imagine such scenes or the more routine ways human beings are dying in Iraq. The reality is censored or transformed in words like my own here into subjects for our civilian sorrow. Our pity is sincere. But it will never bring that Iraqi mother, that medic and those poor, good brave men who fired the cannon rounds any comfort.

We see the statues of Saddam being pulled down. We all feel joy as the symbols of Saddam's cruel power are toppled and mangled by exuberant Iraqis. No Romans pitied malevolent praetorian prefect Sejanus when the emperor Tiberius had him summarily dispatched and all his images subjected to damnatio memoriae.

But the Roman satirist Juvenal, known for his savage hatred of anyone wielding power in evil or stupid ways, reminds us of one potential casualty in destroying brutal regimes: justice. While his men in the street revile Sejanus' beheaded statue, one asks what charges, evidence or proof of guilt before a formal tribunal led to Sejanus' fall.

Is Juvenal being trivial? No. He is reminding us that violence is dangerous even when it is practiced in the name of good and justice. We should think of this as we drop massive targeted bombs obliterating areas where we think Saddam and his family are. Buildings are destroyed. Nameless human beings luckless enough to be in and around those buildings are gone, too. They are unnoticed casualties of war.

The American ideal of civilized justice suffers, too.

A Cypriot correspondent wrote after American tanks accidentally fired on a hotel occupied by journalists, "Why do you Americans kill in this way? Why do you now kill journalists?" Do we reply simply that these are the hazards of war? And if we do, what have we done to ourselves?

We should pay attention even to seemingly inconsequential casualties, like the University of Texas Club canceling a planned "Paris soiree" because of anti-French sentiments. The French are ridiculed as cowards. French food is boycotted. We should be ashamed. Our mothers taught us better.

Think first about the 1917 American poster reminding us: "1778-1783: America Owes France the Most Unalterable Gratitude. French Comrades, Your Children Shall Be As Our Children." Think about the number of men mobilized in World War I: France, 8.4 million; United States, 4.3 million. Number killed: France, 1.3 million; United States, 126,000. World War II military fatalities: France, 340,000; United States, 293,000.

Read Bernard Fall's "Hell in a Very Small Place" about the Viet Minh siege and massacre of the French forces during 170 days at Dien Bien Phu. There, 709 cowardly French who were not jump-qualified parachuted straight into hell to fight and die alongside their comrades.

The first casualty of war may be truth, but one of its first products is ignorance.

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