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# The human toll behind the Iraq statistics

**W**hat do war statistics mean to us?

Imagine how Americans would feel if they were exposed to the same rate of insurgent attacks that are now occurring in Iraq. Six of the Iraqi provinces that have been declared safe have had four or more attacks per 100,000 people in the last month.



Let's say that here in Austin during the month of September, 25 explosions and killings and maimings took place in our

neighborhoods. Imagine you knew that in larger cities such as Houston and Dallas the number of attacks had reached upward of 300 all the way to a 1,000, and that authorities showed no signs of being able to stop them.

How safe would you feel about going out to work or to vote—or sending your children off to school?

Statistics about what is going on in human societies can mislead us, but only if we let them. We will not see the truth, if we lack the imagination and human sympathy to think through in concrete terms what the statistics are telling us. Yet our capacity for putting ourselves in the place of others varies according to what we ourselves have experienced or have taken real pains to learn.

This is made tragically clear in Lt. Col. Dave Grossman's classic study "On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society." The trauma associated with killing in combat and our understanding of what killing means varies according to our proximity to those who are killed and how they are killed. It is one thing to kill enemy soldiers with high-altitude bombs or long-rang artillery, quite another to shoot an enemy across a rice paddy with an M-16 in a firefight, and still another to kill an enemy face-to-face at close quarters.

It is yet another thing to plot bomber payloads in the air campaign, as Robert McNamara did in the bombing of Japan in 1945. The enemy dead and even our



An Iraqi father carries his injured daughter to the hospital after three bombs exploded near a U.S. convoy in western Baghdad Thursday. Thirty five children were killed.

Samir Mizban  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

own dead are numbers on a page, and one can draw statistical conclusions from them about how the war is going. McNamara summed it up later when working on Vietnam: "Things you can count, you ought to count. Loss of life is one."

Most of us who are even further distanced from the killing should think carefully about statistics from the zone of war. We need to figure out what they mean.

The New York Times has given us statistics about insurgency attacks in Iraq, gathered by the Special Operations Consulting-Security Management Group Inc. They show 2,429 attacks, took place throughout Iraq in September, 1997 in Baghdad. Still, President Bush supports Iraqi Interim Prime Minister Allawi's opinion that 14 or 15 of Iraq's 18 provinces "are completely safe." Allawi believes that elections could be held in 15 of the 18 provinces. And the president maintains we are on track to free elections in January.

A conservative Web site was immediately suspicious of any statistics brought forward by the New York Times and analyzed them with great care, even computing attacks per 100,000 people province by province.

The Web site's conclusions mirror Allawi's: the level of violence is of no concern in 12 of the 18 provinces. In the

last month, 2,400 attacks have occurred within an Iraqi population of 24 million. Iraqis, then, should feel safe because they and their families have only one chance in 10,000 of being victims of an insurgent attack.

People who reason like this have never imagined what a random car bomb exploding on a city street—or unexpected mortar fire, or a hidden road mine, or a sudden American air strike—can do to the individual and collective human psyche. And they do not understand insurgent strategy. As with the Tet offensive in Vietnam, insurgents concentrate on key and highly visible points and urban centers and attack in outer provinces just enough to create unease. This maximizes the fear felt everywhere.

Using the same reasoning as Bush and Allawi, we would stress that only three terrorist attacks have occurred in America in the last 37 months: in lower Manhattan, at the Pentagon and in rural Pennsylvania. Therefore, Americans living everywhere else should feel absolutely safe.

Why don't we? And why are we being told Iraqis do?

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