

NOVEMBER 11

A distant mirror of holy war

The conflict in Iraq has become a holy war. In both directions. On the surface, the most prominent headline on the New York Times front page Nov. 10 was simply matter-of-fact: “In Taking Fallujah Mosque, Victory by the Inch.” Yet it’s not mere happenstance that American forces have bombed many of Fallujah’s mosques.

For public consumption, U.S. military officers — like their civilian bosses and American journalists — usually discuss this war in secular, even antiseptic terms. When the Times quoted Marine battalion commander Gary Brandl in another front-page story, on Nov. 6, the lieutenant colonel sounded straightforward: “We are going to rid the city of insurgents. If they do fight, we will kill them.”

However, on the same day, the Associated Press reported that the same Lt. Col. Brandl said: “The enemy has got a face. He’s called Satan. He’s in Fallujah, and we’re going to destroy him.”

That statement by Brandl — an officer with 800 soldiers under his command — caused a bit of stir in some Internet circles. But mainstream U.S. media outlets scarcely noted his holy-warrior declaration. Most news outlets ignored it entirely.

Providing a fuller, more revealing quote from Lt. Col. Brandl, the Sunday Times of London included a lead-in sentence: “The Marines that I have had wounded over the past five months have been attacked by a faceless enemy. But the enemy has got a face. He’s called Satan....” In other words, Satan started this conflict. And we — the anti-Satan forces — fully intend to finish it by destroying him.

Sounds very fundamentalist.

Sounds a lot like Osama bin Laden.

In public-relations terms, the colonel was a tad off-message. Except for occasional lapses, the rhetoric from Washington stops short of proclaiming a crusade against Islamic devils. And the U.S. news coverage rarely fails to detour around the American side of the jihad equation.

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During a real holy war, of course, the fire and brimstone is not just figurative. Dominating the top half of the New York Times front page on Nov. 10 was a full-color picture with stunning hues and brilliant composition, over this caption: “Marines tried to take cover after a phosphorous round, set off to help provide cover for tanks, rained down on the unit. No one was seriously hurt.” An article inside mentioned that the phosphorous broke “into a hundred flaming pieces ... burning backpacks and gear but seriously hurting no one.” Reassuring.

Meanwhile, a Washington Post article provided more graphic — though sketchy — information about phosphorous. “Some artillery guns fired white phosphorous rounds that create a screen of fire that cannot be extinguished with water,” the Post explained more than 20 paragraphs into the story. “Insurgents reported being attacked with a substance that melted their skin, a reaction consistent with white phosphorous burns.”

The Post quoted hospital physician Kamal Hadeethi: “The corpses of the mujaheddin which we received were burned, and some corpses were melted.”

But such melting of human flesh is an abstraction in U.S. media, as it is apt to be for holy warriors. On NBC’s “Today” show Nov. 9, a network correspondent in Baghdad mentioned phosphorous shells just long enough to say that they are “meant to burn through metal bunkers.” Presumably a description of effects on human beings would not have gone well with viewers’ breakfasts.

A live report from a CNN correspondent in Fallujah, on Nov. 8, was similarly circumspect: “Tanks have been blasting away inside the city, and shells filled with phosphorous — shells to hide the movement of the Marines inside the city — have been exploding overhead.”

The CNN reporter added that, along with gunfire from the city, “We have also heard, even from our distance about two kilometers away, chants of ‘Allah Akbar’ going up from the insurgents, the chants of ‘God is great’ going up from the insurgents.”

Lt. Col. Brandl, like his commander in chief, would doubtless scorn such prayerful chants as satanic. The holy warriors from America are blessed with superior military strength, which includes the capacity to melt human flesh ... and to drop large quantities of cluster bombs — one of the most inhuman weapons on the planet — from sleek A-10 jets flying over Fallujah. Children often pick up not-yet-exploded cluster bombs because they look like toys.

At the outset of the new assault, U.S. forces captured Fallujah’s general hospital. “In terms of the information war, the hospital was indeed the most