

# Iraq's invisible war becomes visible

**By Bill Berkowitz**

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**O**n Tuesday, September 7, sixteen months after President Bush declared an end to major combat operations in Iraq, the 1,000th US service member was killed in Iraq. Within hours, the 1000th death was followed by death number 1,001, making twenty-three US dead since the beginning of the month. (In August, 66 US service members died in Iraq.)

The Bush Administration's response? On the campaign trail, the president keeps insisting that America was right to go into Iraq. And on the battlefield, according to CNN's Wolf Blitzer, the US is planning an increase in military operations. Blitzer reported that US military officials, in a departure from previous policy, had trumpeted the large number of Iraqi casualties the US has inflicted. (Since March 2003, the Pentagon had insisted that it had no mechanism for, or interest in, counting Iraqi deaths, particularly civilians. Now, it appears that counting the bodies of Iraqi insurgents – a staple of US policy in Vietnam – is back on the Pentagon's agenda.)

The death of the 1000th US service member forced even Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to make an appearance, during which he praised the successes of the war against terrorism.

Spinning the 1000th death isn't surprising, but the appearance marked a departure from the past several months when benign neglect of the news media was the main course taken.

For all intents and purposes, since the so-called handover of power, the Bush Administration has rendered the war in Iraq invisible: There have been fewer front-page stories in our daily newspapers, fewer journalists reporting from the scene, and cable television's 24/7 news networks appeared to view Iraq-related news as an afterthought.

If the 1000th US death does anything, it makes the war in Iraq visible once again – if only for a New York minute – and makes it an appropriate time for all Americans to remember and reflect on the dead, the wounded, and the overall situation in Iraq.

This benchmark (an admittedly arbitrary but nevertheless significant one) will pass in the blink of an eye. The heavy coverage given to it by the media will fade into tomorrow's new

## **Iraq's invisible war becomes visible / 2**

stories. Set aside some time regardless of whether you support or oppose the war. Set aside some time regardless of who you support in the upcoming presidential election.

What you don't know will lead to more dead

Did you know that over the Labor Day weekend, a car bomb exploded on the outskirts of Fallujah, killing seven U.S. Marines, three Iraqis and wounding a number of others, bringing the U.S. death toll to the cusp of 1,000?

That is why we need time to remember and reflect.

Did you know that more than 1,000 U.S. soldiers and Marines were wounded in Iraq in August?

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Did you know that Britain's Royal Institute of International Affairs recently issued a report asserting that Iraq will be lucky if it avoids civil war and a breakup of the country?

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Did you know that many Iraqi cities, including Najaf, Ramadi, Samarra, Falujah and the Sadr City slum section of Baghdad are virtually under the control of insurgents?

That is why we need time to remember and reflect.

Most Americans don't have the time, energy or wherewithal to thoroughly keep up with events. Even if the public was paying attention to the news over the Labor Day weekend, they likely heard little else but reports about Hurricane Frances.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not against the cable news networks or ABC, CBS or NBC devoting substantial time to hurricane coverage. The heartbreak of the devastation caused by Hurricane Charlie and Hurricane Frances – coming back-to-back as they did – was palpable.

The 24/7 cable news networks should keep the public informed about hurricanes, tornadoes, and other severe weather conditions. However, while Hurricane Frances seized hold of Florida, it also managed to drag the cable news networks along in its wake: Reporters were embedded in a number of cities along the coast and millions of dollars were spent covering the damaging winds, steady rains, downed power lines, and warily watching for looters.

Wouldn't it have been possible for the cable news networks and the Big Three – NBC, CBS and ABC – to devote a little attention to the more than 1,000 US soldiers and Marines wounded in Iraq during August? Wasn't there anything left in their news budgets? Wasn't there an extra stringer or two to assign to the hurricane of violence and chaos that continues to plague Iraq?

Can't dissimilar news stories, albeit those dealing with tragic outcomes, be reported at the same time?

## **Iraq's invisible war becomes visible / 3**

In an era of multi-tasking in a multi-media society, it is more than possible to take in information about one, two, three many different situations at the same time. In fact, it's essential we focus on more than just the immediacy of a hurricane: It is imperative that we acknowledge the suffering of families whose loved ones have died in Iraq. It is imperative to understand that so many of the wounded will be suffering for the rest of their lives.

Pause and remember the sacrifice of the 1,000 dead. Pause and reflect on why and how this war came to be. Don't argue about it with anyone. Just think about it.

Be assured that you won't be alone: The next of kin of those who have died and the families of the wounded reflect on this tragedy every day.