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Their barbarism, and ours

The Baghdad bureau chief of the New York Times could not have been any clearer. "The story really takes us back into the 8th century, a truly barbaric world," John Burns said. He was speaking June 20 on the PBS "NewsHour With Jim Lehrer," describing what happened to two U.S. soldiers whose bodies had just been found. Evidently they were victims of atrocities, and no one should doubt in the slightest that the words of horror used by Burns to describe the "barbaric murders" were totally appropriate.

The problem is that Burns and his mass-media colleagues don't talk that way when the cruelties are inflicted by the U.S. military – as if dropping bombs on civilians from thousands of feet in the air is a civilized way to terrorize and kill.

When journalists maintain a flagrant double standard in their language -- allowing themselves appropriate moral outrage when Americans suffer but tiptoeing around what is suffered by victims of the U.S. military – the media window on the world is tinted a dark red-white-and-blue, and the overall result is more flackery than journalism.

Based on the available evidence from Abu Ghraib to Afghanistan to Guantanamo, anyone who claims that U.S. foreign policy does not include torture is disingenuous or deluded.

Reporters for the New York Times and other big U.S. media outlets would not dream of publicly describing what American firepower does to Iraqi civilians as "barbaric."

An eyewitness account from American author Rahul Mahajan, during the U.S. attack on Fallujah in April 2004, said: "During the course of roughly four hours at a small clinic in Fallujah, I saw perhaps a dozen wounded brought in. Among them was a young woman, 18 years old, shot in the head. She was having a seizure and foaming at the mouth when they brought her in; doctors did not expect her to survive the night. Another likely terminal case was a young boy with massive internal bleeding."

Hundreds of civilians died in that attack on Fallujah, and many more lost their lives when U.S. troops attacked the city again seven months later. Since then, the U.S. air war has escalated in Iraq, often putting urban neighborhoods in the cross hairs.

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Days ago, in mid-June, independent U.S. journalist Dahr Jamail tells us, "a hospital source in Fallujah reported that eight Iraqis, some of whom were women and children from the same family, were killed and six wounded when U.S. warplanes bombed a home in the northeastern Ibrahim Bin Ali district of the city."

We hear that of course the U.S. tries to avoid killing civilians – as if that makes killing them okay. But the slaughter from the air and from other U.S. military actions is a certain result of the occupiers' war. (What would we say if, in our own community, the police force killed shoppers every day by spraying blocks of stores with machine-gun fire – while explaining that the action was justifiable because no innocents were targeted and their deaths were an unfortunate necessity in the war on crime?)

Meanwhile, routinely absent from the U.S. media's war coverage is the context: an invasion and occupation fundamentally based on deception.

"The Bush strategy for victory is about to begin," author Beau Grosscup said on June 20. "U.S. and Iraqi forces have surrounded the city of Ramadi. Food and water have been cut off. Next is the 'Shock and Awe' strategic bombing of the city, to be followed by 'mop-up' operations: ground troops, snipers and aerial 'support.'"

Grosscup, a professor of international relations at California State University in Chico, added: "It is the hallowed 'Fallujah' model, intended to bring 'stability' by flattening the city with civilian death and destruction. It is a 'clean' way to victory, one supported by Rep. Jack Murtha, who would withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq but continue to engage the 'enemy' from far away and from 15,000 to 30,000 feet above with air power.

By October 2004, this 'clean war' had killed close to 100,000 Iraqi civilians and thousands more since. But, as any enthusiast of strategic bombing would say, it is the price of victory and somebody has to make the ultimate sacrifice. Terror from the skies, anyone?"

Without maintaining a single and consistent moral standard in their work, journalists no matter how brave, skilled or hardworking end up prostituting their talents in the service of a war machine.

The paperback edition of Norman Solomon's latest book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," was published in June. For information, go to: www.warmadeeasy.com