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The pundit path for death in Iraq

No one knows exactly how many Iraqi civilians have died from the war's violence since the invasion of their country. The new study from public health researchers at Johns Hopkins University estimates that the number of those deaths is around 601,000, while saying the actual total could be somewhere between 426,369 and 793,663. Such wartime figures can't be precise, but the meaning is clear: The invasion of Iraq has led to ongoing carnage on a massive scale.

While we stare at numbers that do nothing to convey the suffering and anguish of the war in Iraq, we might want to ask: How could we correlate the horrific realities with the evasive discussions that proliferated in U.S. news media during the lead-up to the invasion?

In mid-November 2002 – four months before the invasion began – a report surfaced from health professionals with the Medact organization and International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. "The avowed U.S. aim of regime change means any new conflict will be much more intense and destructive than the [1991] Gulf War," they warned, "and will involve more deadly weapons developed in the interim."

At the time, journalists routinely gave short shrift to that report – treating it as alarmist and unworthy of much attention. The report found that "credible estimates of the total possible deaths on all sides during the conflict and the following three months range from 48,000 to over 260,000. Civil war within Iraq could add another 20,000 deaths. Additional later deaths from postwar adverse health effects would reach 200,000. ... In all scenarios the majority of casualties will be civilians."

During a live TV debate on Dec. 3, 2002, I cited the report's estimates of the bloodshed ahead and then asked: "What kind of message is that from the Bush administration against terrorism and against violence for political ends?"

CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer turned to the other guest: "Jonah Goldberg, do you accept that assumption in that report on these huge casualties, including a lot of children, if there were an effort to go forward with so-called regime change in Baghdad?"

Goldberg, a pundit with National Review Online, replied: "Frankly, I don't. I mean, I

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haven't looked at the exact report, and I think that there are a lot of groups out there that inflate a lot of these numbers precisely because they're against the war no matter what. We certainly heard a lot of that around on the table last time. Before the Gulf War, we were told there were going to be tens of thousands of casualties."

He was playing off a common U.S. media pretense that the bombardment of Iraq in early 1991 had minimal negative effects. Yet a fleeting Associated Press story reported on March 22, 1991, that the six-week war had killed an estimated 100,000 Iraqi people – a figure that came from official U.S. military sources.

American news outlets tend to be rather cavalier about the suffering at the other end of the Pentagon's missiles, bombs and bullets. And there's a strong tendency to brand documented concerns as unfounded speculation – a media reflex that suits war-crazed presidents just fine.

In his major speech on March 17, 2003, just before the invasion, President Bush used boilerplate rhetoric: "Many Iraqis can hear me tonight in a translated radio broadcast, and I have a message for them: If we must begin a military campaign, it will be directed against the lawless men who rule your country and not against you."

The day after that speech, Christopher Hitchens came out with an essay providing similar niceties. He wrote that "the Defense Department has evolved highly selective and accurate munitions that can sharply reduce the need to take or receive casualties. The predictions of widespread mayhem turned out to be false last time – when the weapons [in the Gulf War] were nothing like so accurate."

In fact, Hitchens asserted, "it can now be proposed as a practical matter that one is able to fight against a regime and not a people or a nation."

As a practical matter, journalism like that ends up putting cosmetics on death.

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