

For War or Peace

Issues of war and peace in the twenty first century

WikiLeaks: U.S. Soldiers Left Wondering "What's the Moral Code This Week?"

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By Bonnie Bricker and Adil E. Shamoo, October 25, 2010

The newly released documents from WikiLeaks reveal massive falsehoods, cover-up and abuse in Iraq. The President, Vice-President, and Commanding Generals -- including the iconic General Petraeus -- have knowingly conveyed false and deceptive information to the American people and the Congress of the United States regarding the invasion and the aftermath of Iraq.

The American people know about the falsehoods that were established as reasons for the invasion of Iraq. We now know that falsehoods have continued throughout the war, especially regarding the treatment of prisoners and overall conditions in Iraq. For example, the Bush administration consistently informed us that the military does not keep track of the number of Iraqi deaths, both civilian and military. The WikiLeaks release proved this to be false. Moreover, the number of deaths was intentionally underestimated. President Bush repeatedly denied knowing the number of deaths -- yet the numbers were there. Now the Pentagon does not dispute that the total number of deaths between 2004-2009 (from the WikiLeaks revelation) is 109,000 with 65,000 of those being civilians.

The arbitrary killing of nearly a thousand Iraqi civilians at checkpoints, our handing over of Iraqi prisoners to Iraqi security forces and silence while knowing prisoners are tortured and raped is now a part of the historical record. American administrations' acquiescence to our contractors' free rein in killing Iraqis is disturbing. The cover-up of civilian deaths, the shooting of children and the claims of ignorance about the abuse at Abu Ghraib simply debase what we tout as our American values.

What is the consequence of four-star generals telling the American people falsehoods with a straight face? How does that reverberate throughout the ranks of the military, and throughout

American society as a whole? Imagine a 20-year-old soldier forced to lie about his military actions, contrary to his upbringing. The values our soldiers grew up with in their homes, houses of worship and schools -- honesty, integrity, honor, duty -- all have been debased. The policies of our politics have forced our military personnel, down to the soldiers' level, to

practice and perpetuate falsehoods, or at the very least, come close to that in order to remain in the military. The very definition of war crimes has been altered.

When American soldiers are faced daily with such stark moral dilemmas, it is no surprise that over a half million returnee soldiers from the current wars demonstrate mental health issues. We have over 300,000 returnee soldiers with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Moreover, a very large number of our veterans have a very difficult time adjusting to regular civilian life. War has always been hell. But our soldiers suffering the additional burden of a rewritten moral code that demeans the values they thought they were protecting face an even greater burden. Yet no one at the Pentagon wants to talk about the contribution of this moral stress on our soldiers. Military leaders will not address these moral values issues for their soldiers, since in so doing, the entire system that has been built on these tall tales is dismantled.

It is inevitable that we will now find ourselves lost in the details of the vast sea of documents that have been exposed through WikiLeaks. But we should step back from the details and ask ourselves some bigger questions presented by the documentation. For example, what does the rest of the world see as emblematic of American actions abroad? Does this reputation serve us well as we engage other nations in the quest for basic human rights and democracy? Does it show us to be a trustworthy partner in economic negotiations?

This is a defining moment for our identification as Americans. Do we fully understand the implications of our acceptance of the status quo, never questioning the veracity of reports that now have been proven false? Or are we going to investigate our crimes to embark on a path that restores American honor and leadership in the world?