

As Enemies Put Innocents at Risk, U.S. Military Must Continue Efforts to Minimize Civilian Deaths and Be Positioned to Better Inform the Public When Casualties Do Occur

Western nations, such as the United States, have sought to reduce the likelihood of civilian casualties in war. Yet, U.S. adversaries have actively sought ways to place innocents at risk and thereby increase the human and moral costs of war—evidently in the hope of deterring or constraining the United States' ability to conduct military operations. Thus, at the same time that U.S. military leaders and policymakers seek ways to further minimize civilian casualties, there is growing concern about the effects that such incidents may have on public support for military campaigns.

RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) analyzed U.S. and foreign media and public opinion reactions to a number of high-profile incidents of collateral damage involving civilian deaths that were attributed to airpower in recent U.S. wars and military operations. The study concluded the following:

- U.S. efforts to minimize civilian casualties are frequently met by adversary efforts to place innocents at risk and to exploit for propaganda purposes those incidents that do occur.
- Although the U.S. public has fairly realistic expectations regarding the possibility of eliminating civilian deaths in overseas military operations, the news media tend to focus heavily on such incidents. This heightened emphasis may foster exaggerated perceptions of civilian harm and reinforce enemy claims about the magnitude of civilian casualties and the circumstances in which they occur.
- Foreign audiences are less willing than U.S. audiences to extend the benefit of the doubt to U.S. military and political leaders when civilian casualty incidents occur.

Abstract

This research, part of a larger study undertaken for the U.S. Air Force of ways to reduce collateral damage, analyzes press, public, and leadership reactions to civilian casualty incidents and how these incidents affect media reporting or public support for military operations. It analyzes U.S. and foreign media and public responses to the 1991 Al Firdos bunker bombing, the 1999 Djakovica convoy and Chinese embassy attacks, the 2002 Afghan wedding party attack, and the 2003 Baghdad marketplace explosion.

- Timely, accurate information about efforts to avoid civilian deaths and the circumstances in which incidents do occur is critical to maintaining public support for military campaigns. Inaccurate information that later has to be amended can erode the credibility of the United States and its coalition partners and can diminish public support.

Although there are no simple solutions that can diminish the attention and emotion generated by incidents of civilian deaths, the U.S. Air Force and Department of Defense should bear certain factors in mind:

- Enhanced capabilities to screen mobile targets for civilians prior to strike could help avoid incidents in the future, especially as enemies continue to use human shields.
- Faster and more accurate combat assessments could improve commanders' ability to reconstruct the facts surrounding civilian deaths, diagnose whether these incidents might have resulted from U.S. errors, and thereby prevent their recurrence. This capability would also enable military commanders and U.S. officials to give more timely and precise accounts to the media and public.
- Public affairs officers can brief the press and public on measures that are being taken to minimize casualties to

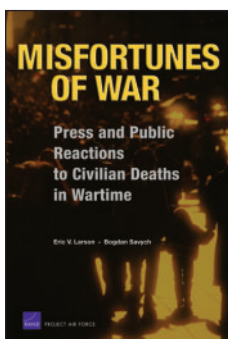
better acquaint these audiences with the importance that the military attaches to avoiding civilian casualties.

- A demonstrated and public commitment to a philosophy of continuous improvement in capabilities to further

reduce the prospects for civilian deaths may be what is needed to ensure Americans' continued confidence in the future and, in the case of foreign audiences, to build trust in the first place. ■

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