



"[W]hen the search for truth is confused with political advocacy, the pursuit of knowledge is reduced to the quest for power."

—Alston Chase

22-Jun-07

The Haditha Non-Story

A year and a half ago, the bloodbath at Haditha, a city in the western Iraqi province of Al Anbar, was big news. The major media outlets in the United States and worldwide reported that on November 19, 2005, Marines from the Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment slaughtered 24 Iraqi civilians in retaliation for the killing of a comrade, Lance Corporal Miguel Terrazas, by an improvised explosive device (IED). When the military's account of the fighting did not match media reports, which accused the Marines of wantonly massacring unarmed civilians—and even killing some execution-style—the Marine Corps opened an investigation, ultimately charging eight Marines with crimes, four of them with unpremeditated murder.

From media reporting, it sounded an awful lot like a My Lai-style atrocity. A company of soldiers, angered by the death of a respected brother-in-arms, goes rogue, taking its revenge on innocent villagers, killing until its bullets are spent and no one remains to be killed.

But not so fast.

Now that sober investigations have been done and pre-trial hearings have taken place, it seems that the media was once again horribly wrong. In fact, in the media's rush to judgment on these Marines, the reporters got the story backwards. The Marines were doing their jobs in accordance with the rules of war, while Iraqi insurgents used civilians as human shields, letting them suffer for the insurgents' terrorism. The situation is reminiscent of a wise proverb of Solomon: "The first one to plead his cause seems right, until his neighbor comes and examines him" ([Proverbs 18:17](#)).

A more accurate account runs as follows: Intelligence gathered before the day in question pointed to an insurgent ambush of the Marines in Haditha. Two facts were certain: About twenty insurgents would participate in the ambush, and a white car was to play a major part in the attack. As the company rolled into the area, an IED exploded near a Humvee, killing Terrazas and seriously wounding at least one other Marine, Lance Corporal James Crossan. Due to the intelligence, the Marines were ready for such an occurrence and quickly went on the offensive.

A white Opal taxi skidded to a stop on the Marines' left, which was exposed to attack, and five men jumped out, and seeing that the Marines already deployed, turned to flee. The ambush had failed to surprise its targets. Sergeant Frank Wuterich and Sergeant Sanick P. Dela Cruz ordered the fleeing men to stop, and when they did not, the Marines opened fire, killing them. It was later discovered that four of these five men were known insurgents.

Shortly afterward, Lieutenant William T. Kallop arrived on the scene, and the Marines began receiving small arms fire from a nearby house, into which a known insurgent was seen to run. Kallop ordered the company to take the house. The remaining nineteen victims were killed when soldiers used grenades and automatic rifles on the house and the two houses adjacent to it. To a civilian, this may seem excessive, but Marines are trained to "clear a house" in this manner. Four of the dead in the houses were later identified to be known insurgents. Other insurgents fled from the rear of the houses.

It is true that the initial military report on the incident was misleading, as it said that fifteen Iraqis had been killed by the IED. As details began to be amassed, this report was soon proved to be wrong. For instance, a gruesome

video soon turned up, supposedly showing the atrocity in all its gore. It was shot, wrote Tim McGirk of *Time* magazine in March 2006, by a "budding journalism student," later learned to be 43-year-old Taher Thabet al-Hadithi, the head of the Hammurabi Organization for Human Rights and Democracy Monitoring. This group had only two members, al-Hadithi and Ali Omar Abrahem al-Mashhadani, both of whom had been held for five months in the infamous Abu Ghraib Prison as insurgents or insurgent-sympathizers. Al-Hadithi was shooting film that day and in that place because Iraqi insurgents routinely film their ambushes and terrorist acts for propaganda purposes. It was later learned that the initial intelligence on the ambush had been intercepted from cell phone calls between al-Hadithi and al-Mashhadani.

Reporters also took the word of local Iraqis at face value. A nine-year-old boy told a story of the cold-blooded murder of his grandfather and grandmother, but his claims of Marines entering the house and killing his grandparents at close range do not accord with what is now known. In addition, a local doctor said that the 24 bodies brought to his hospital that evening did not contain shrapnel wounds, as the Marines claimed, but many of them had been shot in the head and chest at close range. However, the walls and ceilings of the houses were filled with shrapnel from the Marines' grenades, so his testimony is untrustworthy. No official reports on the state of the victims' bodies has yet been made public.

We must also recall the political environment surrounding the Haditha "Massacre." By November 2005, it was clear that the U.S. military would be in Iraq for an extended period, and support for the war at home was eroding. The President's political opponents were gearing up for an all-out assault on his Iraq policy in order to win the 2006 congressional elections. They had many willing accomplices in the media—in fact, it has just been reported that journalists support Democrat and liberal causes over Republican or conservative causes by a 9-to-1 margin. Thus, a "massacre" by Bush's Marines was just what the doctor ordered.

What can we learn from this? Simply, and unfortunately, we cannot trust what we are being told by the media. Or, at best, as Ronald Reagan said so famously regarding the Cold War's weapon's treaties with the Soviet Union, we should "trust but verify" what they report. This is especially true in "breaking news" stories. Not all the facts are known as an event occurs, and

sometimes, as in this case, not for months or years later. In *The Merchant of Venice*, one of William Shakespeare's characters says, ". . . at the length truth will out." In other words, we should not be too hasty in judgment, which often causes a person subsequently to make serious errors, but we need to let the truth speak for itself as it becomes known over time.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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