

By Nicolas J.S. Davies

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In [my recent report](#) on the death toll in America's post-9/11 wars, I estimated that about 2.4 million Iraqis have been killed as a result of the U.S. invasion and hostile military occupation of their country. But opinion polls in [the United States](#) and the [United Kingdom](#) have found that a majority of the public in both countries believe that no more than 10,000 Iraqis have been killed.

An important factor in the public's failure to grasp the scale of the death toll in America's post-9/11 wars is that the U.S. military has worked hard to convince the public that its weapons are now so "precise" that they can kill terrorists and other enemies without harming innocent civilians. A U.S. military spokesperson recently described the bombing of Raqqa in Syria as "one of the most precise air campaigns in military history," even as journalists and human rights groups documented the [total destruction](#) of the city.

The dreadful paradox of "precision weapons" is that the more the media and the public are wrongly persuaded of the near-magical qualities of these weapons, the easier it is for U.S. military and civilian leaders to justify using them to destroy entire villages, towns and cities in country after country: Fallujah, Ramadi, and Mosul in Iraq; Sangin and Musa Qala in Afghanistan; Sirte in Libya; Kobane, and Raqqa in Syria.

An Imprecise History

The skillful use of disinformation about "precision" bombing has been essential to the development of aerial bombardment as a strategic weapon. In a World War II propaganda pamphlet titled the "[Ultimate Weapon of Victory](#)", the US government hailed the B-17 bomber as "... the mightiest bomber ever built... equipped with the incredibly accurate Norden bomb sight, which hits a 25-foot circle from 20,000 feet."

In reality, the U.K.'s [1941 Butt Report](#) found that only five percent of British bombers were dropping their bombs within five miles of their targets, and that 49 percent of their bombs were falling in "open country."

In the "[Dehousing Paper](#)," the UK government's chief scientific adviser argued that mass aerial bombardment of German cities to "dehouse" and break the morale of the civilian population would be more effective than "precision" bombing aimed at military targets. British leaders agreed, and adopted this new approach: "area" or "carpet" bombing, with the explicit strategic purpose of "dehousing" Germany's civilian population.

The US soon adopted the same strategy against both Germany and Japan, and a US airman quoted in the postwar US Strategic Bombing Survey lampooned efforts at "precision" bombing as a "major assault on German agriculture."

The destruction of North Korea by U.S.-led bombing and shelling in the Korean War was so total that US military leaders estimated that they'd [killed 20 percent of its population](#).

In the American bombing of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the US dropped more bombs than all sides combined in the Second World War, with full scale use of horrific napalm and cluster bombs. The whole world recoiled from this mass slaughter, and even the US was chastened into scaling back its military ambitions for at least a decade.

The American War in Vietnam saw the introduction of the "laser-guided smart bomb," but the Vietnamese soon learned that the smoke from a small fire or a burning tire was enough to confuse its guidance system. "They'd go up, down, sideways, all over the place," [a GI told Douglas Valentine](#), the author of *The Phoenix Program*. "And people would smile and say, 'There goes another smart bomb!' So smart a gook with a match and an old tire can fuck it up."

Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome

President Bush Senior hailed the First Gulf War as the moment that America “kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.” Deceptive information about “precision” bombing played a critical role in revitalizing US militarism after defeat in Vietnam.

The US and its allies ruthlessly carpet-bombed Iraq, reducing it from what [a UN report](#) later called “a rather highly urbanized and mechanized society” to “a pre-industrial age nation.” But the Western media enthusiastically swallowed Pentagon briefings and broadcast round-the-clock bombsight footage of a handful of successful “precision” strikes as if they were representative of the entire campaign. Later reports revealed that only [seven percent](#) of the [88,500 tons](#) of bombs and missiles devastating Iraq were “precision” weapons.

The US turned the bombing of Iraq into a marketing exercise for the US war industry, dispatching pilots and planes straight from Kuwait to the [Paris Air Show](#). The next three years saw record US weapons exports, offsetting small reductions in US arms procurement after the end of the Cold War.

The myth of “precision” bombing that helped Bush and the Pentagon “kick the Vietnam syndrome” was so successful that it has become a template for the Pentagon’s management of news in subsequent US bombing campaigns. It also gave us the disturbing euphemism “collateral damage” to indicate civilians killed by errant bombs.

The grotesque idea that dropping tens of thousands of bombs and missiles on another country can fulfill the “responsibility to protect” its people, or serve as a “[humanitarian intervention](#)” to save people from a dictator, has become an unquestioned premise of America’s illegal and interventionist foreign policy. In reality, the intractable violence and chaos unleashed by U.S.-backed wars nearly always dwarfs the smaller-scale violence used to justify them.

‘Shock and Awe’

As the US and UK launched their “Shock and Awe” attack on Iraq in 2003, Rob Hewson, the editor of *Jane’s Air-Launched Weapons*, [estimated](#) about 20-25 percent of the US and UK’s “precision” weapons were missing their targets in Iraq, noting that this was a significant improvement over the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia, when 30-40 percent were off-target. “There’s a significant gap between 100 percent and reality,” Hewson said. “And the more you drop, the greater your chances of a catastrophic failure.”

Since World War II, the US Air Force has loosened its definition of “accuracy” from 25 feet to 10 meters (39 feet), but that is still less than the blast radius of even its smallest 500 lb. bombs. So the impression that these weapons can be used to surgically “zap” a single house or small building in an urban area without inflicting casualties and deaths throughout the surrounding area is certainly contrived.

“Precision” weapons comprised about two thirds of the [29,200 weapons](#) aimed at the armed forces, people and infrastructure of Iraq in 2003. But the combination of 10,000 “dumb” bombs and 4,000 to 5,000 “smart” bombs and missiles missing their targets meant that about half of “Shock and Awe’s” weapons were as indiscriminate as the carpet bombing of previous wars. Saudi Arabia and Turkey asked the US to [stop firing cruise missiles](#) through their territory after some went so far off-target that they struck their territory. Three also hit Iran.

“In a war that’s being fought for the benefit of the Iraqi people, you can’t afford to kill any of them,” a puzzled Hewson said. “But you can’t drop bombs and not kill people. There’s a real dichotomy in all of this.”

‘Precision’ Bombing Today

Since Barack Obama started the bombing of Iraq and Syria in 2014 more than [107,000 bombs and missiles](#) have been launched. US officials claim only [a few hundred](#) civilians have been killed. The [British government](#) persists in the utterly fantastic claim that none of its 3,700 bombs have killed any civilians at all.

Former Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari, a Kurd from Mosul, told Patrick Cockburn of Britain's *Independent* newspaper that he'd seen Kurdish military intelligence reports that US airstrikes and [US, French and Iraqi artillery](#) had killed at least [40,000 civilians](#) in his hometown, with many more bodies still buried in the rubble. Almost a year later, this remains the only remotely realistic official estimate of the civilian death toll in Mosul. But no other mainstream Western media have followed up on it.

The reality of our wars is hidden in plain sight, in endless [photos and videos](#) of what the weapons our tax dollars pay for really do to people and their homes in America's war zones. The Pentagon and the corporate media may suppress the evidence, but the mass death and destruction of aerial bombardment are real, as the millions of people living through it or reliving it in their nightmares know only too well.

Nicolas J. S. Davies is the author of [Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq](#). He also wrote the chapter on "Obama at War" in [Grading the 44th President: a Report Card on Barack Obama's First Term as a Progressive Leader](#). An edited version of this originally appeared on [Consortium News](#).