

By Glenn Greenwald

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(updated below - Update II)

On February 12 of this year, U.S. forces entered a village in the Paktia Province in Afghanistan and, after surrounding a home where a celebration of a new birth was taking place, shot dead two male civilians (government officials) who exited the house in order to inquire why they had been surrounded, and then shot and killed three female relatives (a pregnant mother of ten, a pregnant mother of six, and a teenager). The Pentagon then issued a statement claiming that (a) the dead males were "insurgents" or terrorists, (b) the bodies of the three women had been found by U.S. forces bound and gagged inside the home, and (c) suggested that the women had already been killed by the time the U.S. had arrived, likely the victim of "honor killings" by the Taliban militants killed in the attack.

Although numerous witnesses on the scene as well as local investigators vehemently disputed the Pentagon's version, and insisted that all of the dead (including the women) were civilians and were killed by U.S. forces, the American media largely adopted the Pentagon's version, often without any questions. But enough evidence has now emerged disproving those claims such that the Pentagon was forced yesterday to admit that their original version was totally false and that it was U.S. troops who killed the women:

After initially denying involvement or any cover-up in the deaths of three Afghan women during a badly bungled American Special Operations assault in February, the American-led military command in Kabul admitted late on Sunday that its forces had, in fact, killed the women during the nighttime raid.

One NATO official said that there had likely been an effort to cover-up what happened by U.S. troops via evidence tampering on the scene (though other NATO officials deny this claim).¹ The Times of London actually reported yesterday that, at least according to Afghan investigators, "US special forces soldiers dug bullets out of their victims' bodies in the bloody aftermath of a botched night raid, then washed the wounds with alcohol before lying to their superiors about what happened."

What is clear -- yet again -- is how completely misinformed and propagandized Americans continue to be by the American media, which constantly "reports" on crucial events in Afghanistan by doing nothing more than mindlessly and unquestioningly passing along U.S. government claims as though they are fact.² Here, for instance, is how the Paktia incident was "reported" by CNN on February 12:

Bodies found gagged, bound after Afghan 'honor killing'

February 12, 2010 1:34 p.m. EST



Kabul, Afghanistan (CNN) — Four people found dead in a southwestern Afghan compound appear to be victims of an honor killing, a senior U.S. military official said on Friday.

The bodies were discovered during an operation by Afghan and NATO-led forces in Paktia province, a volatile region along the border of Pakistan.

Note how the headline states as fact that the women were dead as the result of an "honor killing."³ The entire CNN⁴ article does nothing but repeat what an "unnamed senior military official said" about the incident, and it even helpfully explained:

An honor killing is a murder carried out by a family or community member against

someone thought to have brought dishonor onto them.

The U.S. official said it isn't clear whether the dishonor in this case stemmed from accusations of acts such as adultery or even cooperating with NATO forces.

"It has the earmarks of a traditional honor killing," said the official, who added the Taliban could be responsible. . .

The operation unfolded when Afghan and international forces went to the compound, which was thought to be a site of militant activity. A firefight ensued and several insurgents died, several people left the compound, and eight others were detained.

Similarly, *The New York Times*, while noting that there were "varying accounts of what happened" among U.S. forces and their allies in the Afghan police, also passed along the Pentagon's false version of events with no questioning. Here's the

[NYT](#)

['s February 12 article in its entirety](#)

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Several civilians were killed in Paktia Province on Friday when a joint Afghan-NATO force went to investigate a report of militant activity, but NATO and the Afghan police gave varying accounts of what happened. A NATO statement said the joint force went to a compound in the village of Khatabeh, in the Gardez district, where insurgents opened fire on them from a residential compound. Several insurgents were killed and a large number of men, women and children fled and were detained by the NATO force. Inside the compound, soldiers "found the bodies of three women who had been tied up, gagged and killed," the NATO statement said. The Paktia Province police chief, Aziz Ahmad

Wardak, confirmed the episode but said the dead in the house were two men and three women, who he said were killed by Taliban militants. He said the killings took place while the residents were celebrating the birth of a baby.

CNN conveyed its version of events without the slightest contradiction or doubt, and the *NYT* simply ignored entirely the claims of the residents of the village -- notwithstanding the fact that serious conflicts about what actually took place were known from the very beginning. Consider, for instance, [this February 12 article by Amir Shah of the Associated Press](#), who actually bothered to pick up a phone to determine if the Pentagon's claims were true before "reporting" them as fact; this is what Shah found:

However, relatives of the dead accused American forces of being responsible for the deaths of all five people when contacted by The Associated Press by phone.

A man who identified himself as Hamidullah said he had been in the home as some 20 people gathered to celebrate the birth of a son when a group of men he described as "U.S. special forces" surrounded the compound.

When one man came out into the courtyard to ask why, Hamidullah said he watched U.S. forces gun him down.

"Daoud was coming out of the house to ask what was going on. And then they shot him," he said.

Then they killed a second man, Hamidullah said. The rest of the group were forced out into the yard, made to kneel and had their hands bound behind their back, he said, breaking off crying without giving any further details.

A deputy provincial council member in Gardez, Shahyesta Jan Ahadi, said news of the operation has inflamed the local community that believes the Americans were responsible for the deaths.

"Last night, the Americans conducted an operation in a house and killed five innocent people, including three women. The people are so angry," he said.

The Pentagon's version of events was vehemently disputed from the start. But there was not a hint of any of that in the CNN or *NYT* "reporting," which simply adopted the press release claims of NATO forces.

[at Press Release](#)

, false from start to finish, claimed that "a combined force of Afghan and international troops last night found the bound and gagged bodies of two women and the bodies of two men during an operation in the province's Gardez district," and "members of the combined force found the bodies inside." Ironically, the Pentagon Press Release ended this way: "'ISAF continually works with our Afghan partners to fight criminals and terrorists who do not care about the life of civilians,' ISAF spokesman Canadian army Brig. Gen. Eric Tremblay said." On March 16 -- more than a month later, and only after

[a major investigative report](#)

about this incident was published by Jerome Starkey of *The Times of London*

-- the

[NYT](#)

[ran a story detailing the gruesome claims](#)

of residents about what really happened; click that link for the horrific details and to get a sense for how false were the Pentagon and U.S. media's original claims about what took place.

Contrast the pure propaganda dissemination of the American media with the immediate

reporting of the [Pajhwok Afghan News](#), an independent news agency created in Afghanistan to enable war reporting by Afghans. Here is how they reported the Pakita incident from the beginning, on Febraury 12 (via NEXIS):

US Special Forces have shot dead a district intelligence chief along with four family members in the volatile southeastern province of Paktia, a senior police officer claimed on Friday. Brig. Gen. Ghulam Dastagir Rustamyar explained that Daud and his family were celebrating the birth of his son. But acting on a misleading tip-off, foreign troops raided the intelligence official's residence. . . . He said the dead included Daud, his brother Zahir, an employee of the attorney's office, and three women. . . .

But the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) claimed Afghan and international forces found the bound and gagged bodies of three women during the operation in Gardez late Thursday night. "The joint force went to a compound near the village of Khatabeh, after intelligence confirmed militant activity. Several insurgents engaged the joint force in a firefight and were killed," the ISAF press office in Kabul said. . . .

When the troops entered the compound, according to the press release, they conducted a thorough search and found the bodies of three women who had been tied up, gagged and killed. "The bodies had been hidden in an adjacent room."

Note the crucial difference: the Afghan news service shaped its report based on the statements of actual witnesses on the ground and local investigators, while also including the Pentagon's version of events. Put another way, anyone reading about what happened from American news outlets would be completely misled and propagandized, while anyone reading the *Pajhowk Afghan News* would have been informed, because they treated official U.S. claims with skepticism rather than uncritical reverence.

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All of this is a chronic problem, not an isolated one, with war reporting generally and events in Afghanistan specifically. Just consider what happened when the [U.S. military was forced in 2008 to retract its claims about a brutal air raid in Azizabad](#)

. The Pentagon had vehemently denied the villagers' claim that close to 100 civilians had been killed and that no Taliban were in the vicinity: until a video emerged proving the villagers' claims were true and the Pentagon's false. Last week,

[TPM highlighted](#)

a recent, largely overlooked statement from Gen. McChrystal, where he admitted, regarding U.S. killings of Afghans at check points: "to my knowledge, in the nine-plus months I've been here, not a single case where we have engaged in an escalation of force incident and hurt someone has it turned out that the vehicle had a suicide bomb or weapons in it and, in many cases, had families in it. . . . We've shot an amazing number of people and killed a number and, to my knowledge, none has proven to have been a real threat to the force." And

[as I documented before](#)

, the U.S. media constantly repeats false Pentagon claims about American air attacks around the world in order to create the false impression that Key Terrorists were killed while no civilians were.

At the Nieman Watchdog Foundation, Jerome Starkey, the Afghanistan war reporter for *The Times of London*

who published the March 13 investigative report, has

[a crucial, must-read piece on all of this](#)

. Amazingly, his Nieman piece was written three weeks ago, and recounted in detail: (a) how clearly the U.S.-led forces had lied about what happened in Paktia; and (b) the reasons why the U.S. media continuously spews false government propaganda about the war. Starkey wrote under this headline:



In this mid-March piece, Starkey explained how he had discovered that NATO's claims about the Paktia incident were false (he [recounted that evidence in gruesome detail in the Times on March 13](#), three days before the *NYT* finally returned to the story to correct its original reporting), and more importantly, highlighted why the U.S. media so frequently disseminates false NATO claims with no questioning:

The only way I found out NATO had lied -- deliberately or otherwise -- was because I went to the scene of the raid, in Paktia province, and spent three days interviewing the survivors. In Afghanistan that is quite unusual.

NATO is rarely called to account. Their version of events, usually originating from the soldiers involved, is rarely seriously challenged. . . .

It's not the first time I've found NATO lying, but this is perhaps the most harrowing instance, and every time I go through the same gamut of emotions. I am shocked and appalled that brave men in uniform misrepresent events. Then I feel naïve.

There are a handful of truly fearless reporters in Afghanistan constantly trying to break the military's monopoly on access to the front. But far too many of our colleagues accept the spin-laden press releases churned out of the Kabul headquarters. Suicide bombers are "cowards," NATO attacks on civilians are "tragic accidents," intelligence is foolproof and only militants get arrested.

Starkey describes some of the understandable reasons so many reporters do nothing more than regurgitate officials claims: resource constraints, organizations limits, dangers of traveling around, and the "embed culture." But he also recounts how NATO

tries to intimidate, censor and punish any reporters like him who report adversely on official claims. Illustratively, in response to Starkey's March 13 article detailing what really happened at Paktia and the cover-up that ensued, [NATO issued a formal statement](#) singling him out and accusing him of publishing an article that was "categorically false." As recently as that mid-March statement, NATO was still claiming -- falsely -- that the women in Paktia were killed prior to the arrival of American troops, and they were impugning the integrity of the reporter (Starkey) who was proving otherwise (see the Update below for my interview with Starkey today).

There are some very courageous and intrepid reporters in Afghanistan, including some who work for American media outlets. It was, for instance, [a superb and brave investigative report](#) by the *NYT*'s Carlotta Gall in Afghanistan that uncovered what really happened in that air attack on Azizabad and who documented the Pentagon's false claims. But far more often, Americans are completely misled about events in Afghanistan by the combination of false official claims and mindless stenographic American "journalism." And no matter how many times this process is exposed -- [from Jessica Lynch's heroic firefight to Pat Tillman's death by Al Qaeda](#) -- this relentless propaganda machine never seems to diminish.