

By Ralph Lopez

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*Posted on behalf of my friend Ethan McCord (and damned proud to say it) a vitally important response to New York Magazine article on Bradley Manning. □ The blatantly illegal killing of wounded, and in which two children in the van are also shot, takes place at [minute 6:16 this video](#).*

*The New York Magazine profile, which disclosed a previous unreported set of IM logs between Bradley and the blogger Zinnia Jones, focused on Bradley's intimate personal details as a way to explain his alleged act of whistle-blowing, and has been met with fiery response by many who have been closely following his case.*

[PFC Bradley Manning: Conscience & Agency](#)

By Ethan McCord, former specialist, U.S. Army

July 10th, 2011

Serving with my unit 2nd battalion 16th infantry in New Baghdad Iraq, I vividly remember the moment in 2007, when our Battalion Commander walked into the room and announced our new rules of engagement:

“Listen up, new battalion SOP (standing operating procedure) from now on: Anytime your convoy gets hit by an IED, I want 360 degree rotational fire. You kill every [expletive] in the street!”

We weren’t trained extensively to recognize an unlawful order, or how to report one. But many of us could not believe what we had just been told to do. Those of us who knew it was morally wrong struggled to figure out a way to avoid shooting innocent civilians, while also dodging repercussions from the non-commissioned officers who enforced the policy. In such situations, we determined to fire our weapons, but into rooftops or abandoned vehicles, giving the impression that we were following procedure.

On April 5, 2010 American citizens and people around the world got a taste of the fruits of this standing operating procedure when WikiLeaks released the now-famous Collateral Murder video. This video showed the horrific and wholly unnecessary killing of unarmed Iraqi civilians and Reuters journalists.

I was part of the unit that was responsible for this atrocity. In the video, I can be seen attempting to carry wounded children to safety in the aftermath.

The video released by WikiLeaks belongs in the public record. Covering up this incident is a matter deserving of criminal inquiry. Whoever revealed it is an American hero in my book.

Private First Class Bradley Manning has been confined for over a year on the government’s accusation that he released this video and volumes of other classified documents to WikiLeaks — an organization that has been selectively publishing portions of this information in collaboration with other news outlets.

If PFC Bradley Manning did what he is accused of doing, then it is clear—from chat logs that have been attributed to him—that his decision was motivated by conscience and political agency. These chat logs allegedly describe how PFC Manning hopes these revelations will result in “worldwide discussion, debates, and reforms.”

Unfortunately, Steve Fishman's article Bradley Manning's Army of One in New York Magazine (July 3, 2011) erases Manning's political agency. By focusing so heavily on Manning's personal life, Fishman removes politics from a story that has everything to do with politics. The important public issues wrapped up with PFC Manning's case include: transparency in government; the Obama Administration's unprecedented pursuit of whistle-blowers; accountability of government and military in shaping and carrying out foreign policy; war crimes revealed in the WikiLeaks documents; the catalyzing role these revelations played in democratic movements across the Middle East; and more.

The contents of the WikiLeaks revelations have pulled back the curtain on the degradation of our democratic system. It has become completely normal for decision-makers to promulgate foreign policies, diplomatic strategies, and military operating procedures that are hostile to the democratic ideals our country was founded upon. The incident I was part of—shown in the Collateral Murder video—becomes even more horrific when we grasp that it was not exceptional. PFC Manning himself is alleged to describe (in the chat logs) an incident where he was ordered to turn over innocent Iraqi academics to notorious police interrogators, for the offense of publishing a political critique of government corruption titled, "Where did the money go?" These issues deserve "discussion, debates, and reforms" — and attention from journalists.

Fishman's article was also ignorant of the realities of military service. Those of us who serve in the military are often lauded as heroes. Civilians need to understand that we may be heroes, but we are not saints. We are young people under a tremendous amount of stress. We face moral dilemmas that many civilians have never even contemplated hypothetically.

Civil society honors military service partly because of the sacrifice it entails. Lengthy and repeated deployments stress our closest relationships with family and friends. The realities, traumas, and stresses of military life take an emotional toll. This emotional battle is part of the sacrifice that we honor. That any young soldier might wrestle with his or her experiences in the military, or with his or her identity beyond military life, should never be wielded as a weapon against them.

If PFC Bradley Manning did what he is accused of, he is a hero of mine; not because he's perfect or because he never struggled with personal or family relationships—most of us do—but because in the midst of it all he had the courage to act on his conscience.

