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The barbarians of Fallujah

MATT CARR

Abstract: The ‘global war on terror’ is often represented as a struggle between incompatible opposites, of good versus evil, terror versus democracy and civilisation versus barbarism. The deployment of such dichotomies was part of the background to the onslaught on Fallujah in 2004, serving to provide the US military with the appearance of moral legitimacy, as it turned the city to rubble in order to ‘save’ it. In the US media, the arrogant assumption that the US is civilisationally superior both to the ‘barbarians’ its armies were fighting in the city and to the broader mass of the Iraqi population, was a recurring theme among neo-conservative and pro-war liberal ideologues. Yet, with the city’s destruction presented as a moral imperative on behalf of civilised values, there has been scant examination of the allegations that US forces were guilty of war crimes. Moreover, the attack on Fallujah shows that civilisation and barbarism are not diametrically opposed concepts in a ‘global war on terror’ which continues to cause more death and destruction than the violence it is supposedly intended to eliminate.

Keywords: clash of civilisations, Iraq occupation, US military, ‘war on terror’, al-Zarqawi

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Our deepest national conviction is that every life is precious, because every life is the gift of a creator who intended us to live in liberty and equality. More than anything else, this separates us from the enemy we fight. We value every life; our enemies value none – not even the innocent; not even their own.

George Bush, 9/11 anniversary address, September 2002¹

The Iraqis are sick people and we are the chemotherapy.

US Marine, April 2003²

On 31 March 2004, four US mercenaries working for the Blackwater private security firm were ambushed and killed by Iraqi resistance fighters in the city of Fallujah in central Iraq, while escorting a convoy of empty trucks that was on its way to pick up kitchen equipment. The four Americans were dragged from their burning vehicles by a furious local mob and hacked with shovels before two of their charred bodies were hung from a bridge before a jubilant crowd of a thousand fighters and civilians. The entire sequence was filmed and broadcast across the world, transforming what would otherwise have been merely a routine act of brutality in the ongoing carnage in Iraq into a global media spectacle.

To the insurgents who filmed those images, the brutal *sahel* – public lynching – inflicted on the four contractors was a humiliation of the US and an attempt to sap the will of the American public to support the occupation by ‘sickening’ public opinion in the US. To the US media and political establishment, however, the Blackwater mercenaries were transformed through the manner of their deaths into symbolic incarnations of the virtuous intentions and noble endeavour of the occupation itself, whose selfless dedication to ‘reconstruction’ was contrasted with the collective depravity on display at the Fallujah bridge.

The dominant consensus was summed up by Rupert Murdoch’s *New York Post*, which branded the celebrating crowd ‘thugs’, ‘savages’ and ‘cold-blooded ruthless barbarians’, while the *Washington Times* described how ‘cheering crowds revelled in a barbaric orgy’. In Iraq itself, the US military commander, Brigadier-General Mark Kermitt, described the celebrating crowds as ‘bestial’ and the head of the Iraqi transitional authority, L. Paul Bremer, depicted the attacks as ‘a dramatic example of the ongoing struggle between human dignity and barbarism’ and vowed that the ‘ghouls and cowards’ responsible would be caught and punished.³

Elsewhere, there were calls for a more comprehensive retribution. On Fox News, the bullying anchorman and propagandist Bill O’Reilly exhorted the US military to destroy Fallujah itself, declaring: ‘You’re not going to win their hearts and minds. They’re going to kill you to the very end. They’ve proven that. So let’s knock this place down.’⁴ On the internet, the language was even more unrestrained, as right-wing websites overflowed with outraged condemnations of the ‘savages’ and ‘subhumans’ of Fallujah and urged

the US military to 'shell the joint' and 'level the city – no quarter'. Robert Spencer's anti-Islamic website Jihad Watch provided a natural platform for such sentiments: one post recommended that Fallujah should be obliterated with a 'tactical nuke', while another demanded the annihilation of the city whose inhabitants were 'not humans with minds but evil spirits trapped in bodies'. In the neoconservative online journal Front Page, the one-time feminist and radio talk show host Tammy Bruce solemnly declared:

I contend it is now time to raze Fallujah. I'll remind you of what it took to quell the beasts of Germany and Japan in 1945: complete and total destruction. There was a reason why we bombed Dresden into oblivion. There was a reason why Berlin was not saved. There was a reason why two atomic bombs had to be dropped on Japan after Hiroshima: they still refused to surrender unconditionally. Beasts of violence and destruction understand one thing: destruction.⁵

On the internet news site *Newsmax.com*, Jack Wheeler, a former advisor to Ronald Reagan, invoked more distant historical parallels to advocate the same response in an article entitled 'Fallujah delenda est', which coolly recommended that:

Fallujah must be destroyed. I don't mean metaphorically, I mean for the entire population of the city, every man, woman and child, given 24 hours to leave and be dispersed in resettlement camps, moved in with relatives in another village, wherever, and the town turned into a ghost-town. Then the entire city carpet-bombed by B-52s into rubble, the rubble ground into powdered rubble by Abrams tanks, and the powdered rubble sown with salt as the Romans did with Carthage. Fallujah must be physically obliterated from the face of the earth.⁶

The intellectual architect of the 'Reagan doctrine', which called for the violent destabilisation of leftist regimes during the cold war, Wheeler was also a doctor in philosophy with a special interest in Aristotelian ethics. This classical education was now brought to bear in his depiction of the Iraq war as a continuation of an ongoing struggle between civilisation and barbarism that had first begun '25 centuries ago, when a few thousand Athenians, representing the founding culture of Western civilization, faced a Persian horde many times their size on the field of Marathon'. In Wheeler's *Readers Digest* version of history, the Blackwater 'contractors' were no longer guns for hire but valiant defenders of western civilisation in an unbroken confrontation that included the failed attempts by Roman legionaries to repel 'vast human wolf packs', the 'barbaric insanities of Marx and Hitler' and, of course, Islam, which had 'waged jihad against the West for 13 centuries'.

Wheeler was not the first pundit to seek classical precedents for America's catastrophic adventure in Iraq. Since the 9/11 attacks, the idea that America should act 'like Rome' and impose a 'benevolent hegemony'

on a disordered world has been a recurring theme amongst neoconservative intellectuals. This evocation of the classics tends to confer a similarly noble glow across the past and the present, and Wheeler's proposal for a 'Carthaginian' response to the killings at Fallujah was no exception. In his previous incarnation as a Reaganite cold warrior, Wheeler had been a fervent supporter of the maniacally violent RENAMO insurgency in Mozambique but this association with one of the most murderous organisations of modern times was not reflected in his moral outrage at the 'barbaric horror' on view at Fallujah. Though he conceded that 'the people of Iraq as a whole were not barbarians', there was nevertheless 'a barbarism in their culture which is capable of subhuman atrocities'. Having demonstrated this capacity through the killing of the four contractors, Wheeler presented his Carthaginian response as a form of quarantine, since: 'Turning Fallujah into rubble, smashing its atrocity with a hammer, is the only way to get this genie back in the bottle.'

These fantasies of punitive annihilation cannot be attributed to visceral disgust at the horrific deaths of the hapless Blackwater operatives, some of whom had barely arrived in the country when they were inexplicably sent without an adequate escort into a known centre of violent resistance to the US-British occupation. There is no doubt that the public mutilation of American corpses was seen as a particularly outrageous transgression, in a way that the deaths of Iraqi civilians, soldiers and even ordinary American servicemen in the course of the Iraq invasion and its subsequent occupation were not. At a time when the role of privatised paramilitary companies in the Iraq occupation was still barely known, the presentation of the four Blackwater operatives as civilians aiding in 'reconstruction' added to the aura of monstrous depravity that surrounded their killers. The killings were also recognised as a test of American will comparable to the 'Black Hawk Down' battle in Mogadishu in 1993, when images of dead US airmen being dragged through the streets had similarly horrified and revolted the American public.

All these factors contributed to the outrage that followed the killings of the Blackwater contractors. But the reiterated depictions of those responsible as 'barbarians' – and the suggestion that the entire population of Fallujah was complicit in such barbarism – stemmed from the same arrogant assumption of civilisational superiority that had helped make the Iraq invasion possible in the first place.

Barbarians

Western politicians and ideologues of the 'global war on terror' (GWOT) have often depicted this 'war' as a global struggle between incompatible opposites, of good versus evil, terror versus democracy, freedom versus tyranny, civilisation versus barbarism. In September 2001, only a few weeks after the attacks in New York and Washington, the Italian president

Silvio Berlusconi gave more concrete shape to these abstractions when he told a press conference that: 'We should be conscious of the superiority of our civilization, which consists of a value system that has given people widespread prosperity in those countries that embrace it, and guarantees respect for human rights and religion. This respect certainly does not exist in the Islamic countries.'⁷

Berlusconi's brash, cultural chauvinism caused some embarrassment at a time when the Bush administration was attempting to mobilise the support of the Muslim world for the coming offensive in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the idea that the 'war on terror' is a confrontation between civilisation – meaning the West – and an array of barbarian enemies intent on tumbling that civilisation into the void is a recurring theme of the GWOT. In a speech at Johns Hopkins University in April 2002, the then US national security advisor, Condoleeza Rice, described the 'fundamental divide between the forces of chaos and those of order' and declared that: 'Nations must decide which side they are on in the fault line that divides civilization from terror.'⁸ Stripped of the contemporary resonance of 'terror', Rice's comments evoked the same binary opposition between the 'civilised' and the 'barbarian' as Wheeler, whose origins can be traced back to classical times. Both the Greeks and Romans saw themselves as the apex of the civilised world, surrounded by an array of barbarian peoples whose cultural inferiority made them worthy only of conquest and enslavement. This classical distinction has been replayed in many different ways during the centuries of European military expansion into the wider world. It is not a distinction that is unique to the West but western states have nevertheless shown a remarkable consistency in using it as a rationale for imperial domination and conquest.

In the ancient world, the inferiority of the barbarian was defined through a wide range of cultural characteristics which the Greeks and Romans projected onto their enemies. As European colonial powers pushed out into the Americas, Africa and Asia, such inferiority was variously determined by culture, race or a 'heathen' absence of Christianity. Barbarian societies were often defined through a supposed propensity for violence and cruelty, which distinguished them from civilised states. Where 'barbarian' violence was visceral, 'savage' and dictated by primitive bloodlust, civilised violence was controlled, rational and dispassionate, subject to ethical and legal restraint and dedicated towards a higher purpose.

However the barbarian was defined, the term was invariably used to justify a common objective of imperial conquest and domination. If the savagery of the barbarian made it possible for civilised states to present such conquests as a form of liberation, there were also episodes in which barbarian peoples could not be raised up from their primitive state but only destroyed – particularly when such peoples resisted the encroachments of civilisation. The history of European colonialism is littered with episodes

in which the inferiority of the barbarian has acted as a justification for gratuitous acts of slaughter carried out by armies and states that claim to act in the name of civilisation. By representing 'the barbarian' as an alien 'other' with whom no rational discourse or common ethical framework is possible, even gross acts of barbarism may appear to be not only morally acceptable but morally essential. Such representations were crucial to the self-righteous consensus that demanded the obliteration of Fallujah in April 2004 and served to transform a city of some 300,000 inhabitants on the Euphrates river into a symbol of the wider confrontation between the civilised West and the new barbarians of the twenty-first century. The result was a savage assault by the most powerful military force in history, the devastating consequences of which have barely been acknowledged by either those responsible or a compliant media that has too often acted as their mouthpiece.

The 'terror city'

Before the killing of the four contractors, few of those calling for Fallujah's destruction had even heard of its existence. But if 'the city of minarets' was little known in the West, it occupied a unique place in the history of modern Iraq, with its overlapping of nationalist, tribal and religious currents in Iraqi society. It was in Fallujah, in 1920, that the shooting of a British colonial official in the city prompted a nationwide revolt against British occupation. The city was also the scene of bloody fighting by British and Indian forces during the invasion of Iraq in the second world war. Under Saddam, Fallujah was generally favoured by the Iraqi dictator and was considered a strong base of support for his regime, though the city's militant religious conservatism occasionally brought it into conflict with the Ba'athist regime. Fallujah was also the scene of a horrific tragedy during the first Gulf War, when British tornado fighters inadvertently killed more than two hundred civilians during an attack on one of the city's bridges.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2003 invasion, Fallujah's mayor initially welcomed US troops. The city's metamorphosis into a centre of violent resistance to the occupation stemmed directly from an incident in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, on 28 April, when US soldiers fired on an unarmed crowd protesting the conversion of a local primary school into a military base, killing at least eighteen demonstrators. Though the army claimed that its soldiers had been fired upon, local eyewitnesses denied that the demonstrators had carried any weapons. Various international journalists supported this account of events, as did a report by Human Rights Watch, which concluded that 'physical evidence does not support claims of an effective attack on the building as described by US troops'.⁹

In the wake of these killings, relations between the local population and the US military rapidly deteriorated and Fallujah became a major base for local and foreign groups fighting the occupation. The US military attributed these activities primarily to foreign groups, particularly the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, which subsequently adopted the al-Qaida franchise. Some of the bloodiest sectarian atrocities of the insurgency were attributed to al-Zarqawi's group, as well as some of the more notorious kidnappings and gruesome murders of foreign hostages, such as Nick Berg, Ken Bigley and the British aid worker Margaret Hassan. Al-Zarqawi's media notoriety was partly boosted by US counterinsurgency propaganda, which generally preferred to present a 'foreign jihadist' linked to al-Qaida as a more suitable 'face' for the insurgency. But a subsequent US military intelligence assessment of Fallujah concluded that al-Zarqawi's group only contained about a hundred members and attributed the majority of the attacks on US and Iraqi forces to fighters drawn from local tribes.

This was not how the situation in Fallujah was presented in the western media in the spring of 2004. The more al-Zarqawi's reputation grew, the more the US military carried out air raids on the city in search of his hideouts and safehouses, which frequently killed more civilians than fighters. One of these raids took place only days before the ambush of the four contractors and resulted in the deaths of eighteen Fallujan residents, who died in their bombed homes. The *Guardian* correspondent Jonathan Steele witnessed its bloody aftermath and commented on the anger created by such raids. Steele rejected the conventional media image of a city dominated by 'foreign jihadists' and attributed the insurgency to 'ordinary families, driven by nationalist pride, and increasingly by a desire to retaliate when their homes and neighbourhoods are violated and their relatives and friends killed'.¹⁰

Such reports received scant attention in the outrage that followed the deaths of the four contractors. On both sides of the Atlantic, British and American politicians and media pundits agreed that an overwhelming military response was required to restore control over the 'lawless' and 'restive' city. At the beginning of April, US helicopters and warplanes unleashed a fearsome aerial assault on residential areas in Fallujah believed to be harbouring insurgents, using an array of high-tech weaponry, from cluster bombs loaded with razor-sharp metal pieces known as 'flechettes' to 500lb explosives. This aerial assault was followed by a ground offensive by US marines to the strains of 'Welcome to the Jungle' by Guns 'n Roses. Numerous eyewitnesses reported that US soldiers were firing on unarmed civilians and that ambulances and hospitals were prevented from giving medical treatment to wounded patients. One US sniper described how: 'Sometimes a guy will go down and I'll let him scream a bit to destroy the morale of his buddies ... then I'll use a second shot.'¹¹

Few western reporters were inside the city to confirm the impact of the assault on the civilian population but harrowing footage of civilian casualties was broadcast through the al-Jazeera television network, which the US military accused of acting as a vehicle for insurgent 'propaganda'. Other observers supported al-Jazeera's coverage. Jo Wilding, a British human rights worker who remained in the city throughout the assault, described on 13 April how: 'US snipers in Fallujah shoot unarmed man in the back, old woman with white flag, children fleeing their homes and the ambulance that we were going in to fetch a woman in premature labour'.¹² Even the liberal Israeli daily *Haaretz* accused the US army of having 'committed war crimes in Fallujah on a scale unprecedented for this war'.¹³

Such protests, coupled with unexpectedly stiff resistance and the emerging scandal of the Abu Ghraib photos that month, obliged US forces to withdraw from Fallujah without taking the city, after negotiating a truce with insurgent leaders – leaving an estimated 650 dead civilians in their wake. This was not considered a satisfactory outcome, either by the military or the Bush administration. That same month, General Richard Myers, the chair of the joint chiefs of staff, told a US congressional committee that Fallujah was 'a huge rat's nest that ... needs to be dealt with'.

That summer, the US journalist Nir Rosen, one of the most courageous and clear-sighted of American journalists in Iraq, visited the 'rat's nest' and reported on a poetry festival attended by an enthusiastic audience of 'religious clerics wearing turbans, tribal leaders wearing head scarves, businessmen, military and police officers'. The Arabic-speaking Rosen described how a succession of Sunni and Shia poets celebrated Fallujah's heroic defiance in hyperbolic verse, amidst banners that variously proclaimed 'The stand of Fallujah is the truest expression of Iraqi identity', 'Fallujah, castle of steadfastness and pride' and 'All of Fallujah's neighbourhoods bear witness to its heroism, steadfastness and virtue'.¹⁴

This picture of a passionate local resistance to occupation rarely figured in the western media, which generally took for granted the US military's version of Fallujah as a zone of barbarism in thrall to psychotic 'foreign jihadists'. If Fallujah had become a symbol of nationalist pride in Iraq and to some extent in the Arab world, it had assumed a very different symbolic significance in the US. In June 2004, Herbert London, president of the conservative US thinktank the Hudson Institute, warned of the 'growing fatalism' that he observed amongst the American population as a result of the Abu Ghraib revelations and the failure to curb the 'insurrection of Fallujah'. London attempted to reverse such 'national despair' by reminding the US population that: 'Americans fight not only for self-defence against sanguinic and shadowy foes, they fight for the foundations of western civilization in Scripture, literature, traditions and morality.'¹⁵

Throughout the summer, the forces of civilisation continued to clash sporadically with the ‘sanguinic and shadowy foes’ at Fallujah. In October, as the US presidential campaign moved towards its conclusion, the confrontation entered a new phase and US and Iraqi forces, backed by British troops, prepared for an all-out assault on a city whose continued defiance was now depicted as an insuperable obstacle to the staging of Iraq’s first elections the following January. With the Bush administration now installed for a second term, the ‘barbarians’ at Fallujah were depicted not merely as savage enemies of ‘western civilisation’ but as diehard enemies of freedom, democracy and progress, whose defeat would mark a turning point in Iraq’s ‘liberation’.

The laboratory

The coming assault was dictated by military as well as political considerations. To US army commanders, Fallujah was a decisive confrontation in the Sunni-based insurgency, the successful subjugation of which would have ‘demonstrative effects’ on insurgents elsewhere. The primitive logic behind this aspiration was summed up by the British Iraq analyst Toby Dodge: ‘You flatten Fallujah, hold up the head of Fallujah, and say “Do our bidding or you’re next”.’¹⁶

If Fallujah was a test of US military resolve in Iraq itself, the city was also seen as a laboratory for the new type of war that American military strategists saw its armies fighting in the twenty-first century. Whereas US counterinsurgency theory during the cold war had been directed primarily towards fighting irregular guerrilla forces in jungles and rural areas, the dominant strategic trend of the ‘war on terror’ consisted of ‘military operations on urbanised terrain’ (MOUT) – or ‘fighting in someone’s house’ (FISH) as it was unofficially known. From this perspective, the main battlegrounds of the twenty-first century would be the cities and slums of the Third World, which US soldiers would be obliged to enter in order to ‘flush out’ their terrorist enemies in what the military called ‘complex environments’ and ‘difficult terrain’. The Israeli army was already familiar with such operations in the Occupied Territories, where US army observers had witnessed the brutal Israeli assault on Jenin in 2002. But the US army itself had little experience of such warfare apart from its disastrous retreat from Mogadishu in 1993. This was an experience that the military was determined not to repeat in Iraq or anywhere in the Islamic world, which was identified by US military strategists as the main site of these new urban battlefields.

According to the geographer Stephen Graham, the US military has established a chain of eighty mock ‘Arab cities’ around the world to train for such wars. Graham has described such training grounds as ‘imaginative constructions of Islamic cities as little more than “terrorist nests” to

soak up US military firepower'.¹⁷ In these fantasy versions of the Middle East, US soldiers rehearse the future battles of the 'war on terror':

Replete with minarets, pyrotechnic systems, loop-tapes with calls to prayer, donkeys, hired 'civilians' in Islamic dress wandering through narrow streets, and olfactory machines to create the smell of rotting corpses, this shadow urban system simulates not the complex cultural, social or physical realities of real Middle Eastern urbanism, but the imaginative geographies of the military and theme park designers that are brought in to design and construct it.¹⁸

By the autumn of 2004, Fallujah had become a 'real' version of these fantasy targets, which provided an opportunity for the US army to put its new concept of counterinsurgency into practice. As one US marine later described it in a 'kick ass' action video celebrating the performance of the marines in Fallujah, the city offered 'a once in a lifetime opportunity to take down a full-fledged city full of insurgents'.

From where had the US military acquired the moral and legal right to carry out an assault on a residential city? Legally, US army commanders always maintained the fiction that they were carrying out the assault on the orders of the Iraqi prime minister, Iyad Allawi, a US appointee whose power, such as it was, derived entirely from the US military presence itself. On a broader level, the moral legitimacy for the assault stemmed from the assumption that the 'coalition' in Iraq represented a higher 'value system' that was directly contradicted by the 'terrorist barbarians' inside Fallujah. This narrative was supported and disseminated by a consensus of conservative and 'hard liberal' commentators in the American and British media. Some argued that Fallujah had become an outpost of the most virulent 'Islamofascism'; others predicted that the 'liberation' of the city would pave the way for the establishment of democratic secular government, not only in Iraq but throughout the Middle East.

In the US, the savage neoconservative pundit and former military officer Ralph Peters portrayed Fallujah as a diseased city in need of violent purification, writing in the *New York Post*: 'The most humane thing we can do in that tormented city is just to win, to burn out the plague of fanaticism and prove to Iraq's people that the forces of terror will not be allowed to enslave them ... If that means widespread destruction, we must accept the price ... Even if Fallujah has to go the way of Carthage, reduced to shards, the price will be worth it.'¹⁹

George Bush similarly described Fallujah as a city that had slipped the moorings of the civilised world, whose inhabitants were 'without law' and menaced by 'the enemies of democracy'. Elsewhere the potentially devastating consequences of an all-out military assault were cushioned by the familiar dehumanising language of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, as a chorus of British and American politicians and army officers described Fallujah as a 'rat's nest' and a 'cancer' that would have

to be 'cleansed' and 'flushed out' so that the city could be 'liberated' and remade as a 'model city'. A number of liberal commentators, such as the *Independent's* then pro-war columnist Johann Hari, depicted Fallujah as a zone of misogynistic religious fanatics in thrall to al-Zarqawi. Hari described the forthcoming 'incursion' as a 'massive bloody risk' but nevertheless concluded: 'I cannot see any way to hold an election unless Fallujah is reclaimed; Zarqawi is not going to agree to set up polling booths any time soon.'²⁰

The picture of Fallujah as a city in thrall to 'Zarqawi' ignored the desperate attempts by the city's governing council to prevent the forthcoming assault, including a public letter that same month from the Fallujah governing shura council to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. The letter rejected US claims that the city was harbouring al-Zarqawi's organisation, claiming that:

The people of Fallujah assure you that this person, if he exists, is not in Fallujah and is probably not anywhere in Iraq. The people of Fallujah have announced many times that any person who sees al-Zarqawi should kill him ... At the same time the representative of Fallujah, our tribal leader, has denounced on many occasions the kidnapping and killing of civilians, and we have no links to any groups committing such inhuman behaviour.²¹

The letter was barely acknowledged in the US or British media, where an all-out assault by the most powerful army in history on a civilian city, defended by a few hundred insurgents armed mostly with kalashnikovs, was already being accepted as a *fait accompli*. By the first week of November, the majority of Fallujah's 300,000 population had fled in expectation of the assault, leaving an estimated 30,000–50,000 people still inside the city, of whom only a tiny proportion were armed fighters.

While liberal hawks such as Hari rationalised the coming assault as a tragic but necessary step towards secularism and democracy, others depicted Fallujah as a battleground in a cosmic confrontation between good and evil. Evangelical Christian narratives often featured in the representation of the 'war on terror' in the US and such representations were given explicit shape by Lieutenant-Colonel Gareth Brandl, the commander of the US marines surrounding Fallujah, who told reporters: 'The enemy has got a face. He's called Satan. He lives in Fallujah and we're going to destroy him.'²² On 7 November, *Agence France Presse* described an open-air religious service outside the city in which thirty-five marines 'swayed to Christian rock music and asked Jesus Christ to protect them' in the forthcoming battle. One marine compared Fallujah to the biblical battle between David and the Philistines, to the approval of his colleagues who, according to the reporter, 'perceive themselves as warriors fighting barbaric men opposed to all that is good in the world'.²³

The assault

Stripped of its Christian warrior overtones, this depiction summed up the broad consensus of politicians and the media in the US and Britain. On 8 November, with British and Iraqi forces in support, the US military unleashed Operation Phantom Fury, also known as Operation al Fajr (the dawn), against what Ralph Peters called ‘the terrorist city-state of Fallujah’, with a massive aerial bombardment using cluster bombs and 500lb conventional explosives, followed by a ground offensive by US and Iraqi forces equipped with tanks and new shoulder-mounted assault weapons (SMAWs), which fired smaller versions of the devastating ‘thermobaric’ explosives used by the Russian army at Grozny in Chechnya. The *Marine Corps Gazette* later enthused how ‘SMAW gunners became expert at determining which wall to shoot to cause the roof to collapse and crush the insurgents fortified inside interior rooms’.²⁴

As in April, there were reports that US forces were using napalm, that civilians had been shot by US snipers waving white flags, that families had been killed in their homes, that hospitals, health centres and trauma clinics had been targeted by US forces. The intrepid and resolutely unembedded US journalist Dahr Jamail interviewed refugees from Fallujah in Baghdad, who described how they were using carjacks in bombed neighbourhoods to prise dead children from under blocks of concrete and that American soldiers were dropping bodies into the Euphrates. According to one of Jamail’s interviewees: ‘The first thing they did was bomb the hospitals because that is where the wounded have to go. Now we see that wounded people are in the street and the soldiers are rolling their tanks over them. This happened so many times. What you see on the TV is nothing. That is just one camera. What you cannot see is much more.’²⁵

Little of this emerged in the playstation game imagery broadcast by the dozens of correspondents accompanying US marines into the city. In December 2007, a leaked US army intelligence report on the April assault attributed the US withdrawal to the ‘effects of media coverage, enemy information operations and the fragility of the political environment’. In November, according to the report’s authors, the assault was covered by ninety-one embedded reporters, mostly from western news outlets, whose purpose was to offer a ‘rebuttal’ to ‘false allegations of non-combatant casualties ... made by Arab media in both campaigns’.²⁶

For the most part, the embedded reporters fulfilled their allotted role but there were exceptions when the reality of what was taking place in Fallujah showed through. One American TV cameraman captured footage of a marine casually shooting a wounded man lying on the floor of a mosque. On 14 November, a *Reuters* correspondent described a ‘sea of rubble and death’ in Fallujah. The *Daily Telegraph* described one incident in which:

A Phantom Abrams tank moved up the road running along the high ground. Its barrel, stencilled with the words 'Ali Baba under 3 Thieves' swivelled towards the city and then fired a 120mm round at a house where two men with AK-47s had been pinpointed. 'Ain't nobody moving now,' shouted a soldier as the dust cleared. 'He rocked that guy's world.'²⁷

One US marine sniper told the same reporter: 'I got my kills ... I just love my job.' After three weeks of such fighting, US forces announced that Fallujah had been pacified. In the ensuing weeks and months, a wider picture of the destructive impact of the assault began to emerge in piecemeal fashion. Though the US military claimed that its forces had killed 1,200 insurgents, statistics by Iraqi NGOs and other organisations estimated 6,000 deaths. In January 2005, the director of the main hospital at Fallujah told the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs that a hospital emergency team had recovered 'more than 700 bodies from rubble where houses and shops once stood', of whom 'more than 550 were women and children'. In February, Dr Salem Ismael, an Iraqi doctor from Bagdad, accompanied an aid convoy into the city, where he described a scene of apocalyptic devastation in which: 'Hundreds of bodies were decomposing in the houses, gardens and streets of Falluja. Bodies were rotting where they had fallen – bodies of men, women and children, many half-eaten by wild dogs.'²⁸

In March that year, a deputation sent to Fallujah by the Iraqi health ministry confirmed that some 75 to 80 per cent of the housing in the city had been destroyed or heavily damaged. At a press conference, the head of the deputation, Dr ash-Shaykhli, accused US forces of using 'mustard gas, nerve gas and other burning chemicals' during the assault. The independent journalist Dahr Jamail, one of the few foreign reporters to visit the city in the aftermath of the assault, recorded numerous incidents in which US soldiers had shot unarmed civilians in their homes, in the streets or trying to swim to safety across the Euphrates.

Such allegations produced no expressions of outrage or denunciation in western media coverage or official statements. On the contrary, in the US, Operation Phantom Fury was hailed as an exemplary victory and the heroism of the US marines was epitomised by the photograph of the 'smoking soldier' at Fallujah, whose oil-stained face became an iconic image of American military valour. The *New York Daily News* commented favourably on the 'shooting-fish-in-a-barrel quality' of the fighting with its unprecedented 'thirty-to-1' kill ratio, while a headline in the *New York Post* proclaimed 'Marlboro Men kick butt in Fallujah'.

In the following months, Fallujah faded from media headlines, reappearing only in January 2005 when an Italian television station revealed that civilians in the city had been killed by white phosphorus dropped by US forces in 'shake and bake' operations against insurgents. The suggestion that US forces had committed war crimes caused a brief media flurry before Fallujah slipped once more from the media radar. The

assault received more attention from a video game company called Kuma Reality Games, which specialises in 'playable recreations of real events in the war on terror' and now sells a game called 'Fallujah: Operation al-Fajr'. Using real satellite imagery of Fallujah's Jolan district, it provides a fantasy environment where players can 'dodge sniper fire and protect civilians'.

Journalistic access to Fallujah itself remained difficult. Occasional reports described a model 'antiterrorist' city, cleansed and purged of its evil elements, where vehicle traffic was prohibited to prevent car bombs, a city divided by roadblocks, sentry posts and mountains of earth known as 'sand berns', where the population was subjected to DNA tests, biometric retina scans and obliged to wear visible ID badges with their photos, names and addresses at all times. In December 2005, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld spoke to marines at Camp Fallujah, where he congratulated them on Fallujah's transformation from a 'symbol of rejection of the new democratic Iraq' into a city which has 'some of the highest voter registration and turnout rates in the country, has increasingly capable and competent Iraq security forces in the streets helping to maintain order and hunting down terrorists'.²⁹

Other visitors have told a different story. In November 2007, the Iraqi journalist Ali ad-Fadhily reported that some 70 per cent of the city's buildings had been damaged or destroyed and many neighbourhoods remained without water and electricity. Fadhily reported a hollow shell of a city, where businesses and cafes remained mostly closed and whose residents were reluctant to talk to the media for fear of being detained by the Iraqi police.³⁰ In January 2008, the brilliant *Independent* journalist Patrick Cockburn found a still devastated and locked-down Fallujah that was 'more difficult to enter than any city in the world' and which was still receiving only an hour's electricity a day.³¹

Cockburn's visit took place more than two years after US forces carried out their devastating assault on the city. In that time, there have been no independent investigations into the allegations of war crimes that took place there. Within the US military itself, a minor dispute emerged last year over whether the assault was consistent with the 'judicious application of the minimum destruction concept in view of the ongoing requirements to minimize alienating the population' outlined in the US army's *Counterinsurgency Operations Field Manual*.³² But the western media has generally remained silent on the morality or legality of a military operation that converted some 216,000 Iraqis into refugees and turned large sections of their city into an uninhabitable wasteland.

Why did this happen? As far as its stated counterinsurgency objectives are concerned, the 'demonstrative effects' had no impact on the Iraqi insurgency and transformed Fallujah into a rallying cry that will continue to resonate throughout the Islamic world for years to come. Presented as a moral imperative on behalf of civilised values, the assault

merely revealed the absence of such values amongst those who ordered and approved it. In doing so, Fallujah provided further evidence that barbarism and civilisation are not diametrically opposed concepts in a 'global war on terror' which continues to cause more death and destruction than the violence it is supposedly intended to eliminate. If this 'war' is steeped in the civilising imperial narratives of the nineteenth century, it also replicates an imaginative worldview that harks back to classical times.

Greek and Roman geographers once imagined the world as a series of concentric circles, with a civilised centre emanating outwards to an ever more barbarian periphery. At the furthest edges there were no longer people but 'monstrous races', consisting of mutants with cloven feet and 'wild men' who were closer to beasts than humans. In the imagined atlas of the GWOT, the core nations of 'the West' stand at the centre of the world, surrounded by a dark periphery of 'rogue states' and 'lawless wild places' inhabited only by terrorists and homicidal death cults, by 'jihadists', 'ragheads', 'Taliban' and 'al-Qaida'. These zones of barbarism and disorder range from the badlands of Helmand province and the 'failed state' of Somalia to the 'terrorist nests' of Lebanon. They include the 'feral, failed cities' of the Third World that Mike Davis has identified as the emerging battlefronts in the Pentagon's future wars.³³ Most of these places are located in the Muslim world, particularly in the Middle East, which the neoconservative pundits Richard Perle and David Frum have depicted as a 'cesspit' of violence, hatred and religious fanaticism that can only be cured by limitless western military 'interventions'.

In 2004, Fallujah was identified as one of these 'cesspits' and selected for exemplary punishment. The Roman historian Tacitus once famously described how his compatriots 'make a desolation and call it peace' – a phrase that he placed in the mouth of a barbarian chieftain. In this sense, at least, the US really did behave 'like Rome' at Fallujah and the more it continues to do so in the course of its bloody and incoherent campaigns against the 'barbarians' of the twenty-first century, the more likely it is that Fallujah will not be the last city that has to be destroyed before it can be saved.

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