

JOHN SLOBODA'S SPEECH AT CAAB'S "INDEPENDENCE FROM AMERICA" RALLY – JULY 4th 2011, Menwith Hill.

PRESS PRE-QUOTE.

“Through detailed analysis of the Wikileaks “Iraq War Logs” Iraq Body Count has shown that the USA has withheld details of many thousands of civilians killed in Iraq. This falls far below the standards of accountability required of any state, far less a democracy such as the USA. “

TEXT

I am proud to speak at a CAAB event. This organisation and its valiant leadership have been one of the most consistent champions of a simple principle. The principle is accountability. States must be accountable to the people for their actions. That simple principle has huge consequences across a whole range of issues and activities.

The issue that concerns us here at the Menwith Hill Base is accountability for information – the information gathered secretly by the US government – much of which passes through here. Wikileaks may have lifted the lid on this information in an unprecedented way, yet the information in the logs and cables they have released can only be a small fraction of the information that passes through places like this.

Other small gobbets of information has been dragged out of the US government through laborious Freedom of Information Requests, made by such fine campaigning organisations as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

But the point is, in a properly accountable state, the activities of Wikileaks and ACLU would hardly be necessary, because the state would voluntarily release all the information that was safe to do. And it is clearly safe to release a far greater amount of information than the USA is inclined to do. We haven't studied all the Wikileaks materials in detail, but despite early protestations that this information would put lives at risk in a new and acute way, it is hard to find any convincing evidence of serious risk.

The released information has undoubtedly been embarrassing to some individuals, but surely it is the implementation of publicly pronounced US policies in Afghanistan, Iraq, and round the world, that had been vastly more damaging to people than anything done by Wikileaks?

The Iraq Body Count project, of which I am proud to be a member, has concentrated on documenting one unacceptable consequence of the policies of the USA and its main military ally the UK. This is the continuing violent death of civilians in Iraq, whose number since March 2003 exceeded 100,000 several

years ago. We have been carefully accumulating detailed information about these deaths from media and other public-domain sources, and publishing them in standard format on our website. This includes name, and other identifying details of victims, where reported. Sadly we have so far only been able to record a name for 6% of the reported victims.

None of these deaths would have occurred without the US-led invasion.

For several years, requests to the US and UK governments for information on civilian deaths always came back with a version of the same answer:

“we don’t collect this information; there is no official record”

Indeed, in February 2009, the US Special Investigator for Iraq Reconstruction published a report for Congress entitled “Hard Lessons: The Iraq Reconstruction Experience”. In that report, he cited Iraq Body Count data on civilian casualties, presumably because no comprehensive account was available from his own government.

But in October 2010 we discovered, courtesy of Wikileaks, that the US military had been collecting information about civilian casualties since as early as 2004. This information was then been meticulously recorded and circulated within the military in nearly half a million hugely detailed logs, which we now know as the Iraq War Logs.

Iraq Body Count research has estimated that the logs contain information on around 15,000 hitherto unrecorded civilian deaths.

But just as importantly, the logs contain a wealth of detailed information regarding deaths which were already known about, at least to some degree. Where an earlier public report might just indicate a number, the logs often put names to those numbers, so that, for the first time, the identity of the civilian victims is revealed.

Everything we have so far found out about the Iraq War Logs is contained in a series of detailed articles published on our web site back in October, and I do invite you to go and have a look at these if you have not already done so (www.iraqbodycount.org).

Why is this particular issue so important?

As we argued at the time of release of this data “All information about the deaths caused in any disaster, be it a man-made war or a natural catastrophe, is public information which no state has a right to withhold indefinitely.”

Yes the USA held onto this information of vital public importance for up to six years, and may well have kept it secret indefinitely were it not for Wikileaks.

Human death is a public fact. In all civilised societies, the basic facts of death are

made available to all. Name, age, time of death, and cause of death. This is the minimum acceptable, and could be considered a basic human right.

The dead have rights as well as the living, and recent analysis of international law commissioned by the Oxford Research Group has clarified that war does not exempt combatants from upholding these rights. This includes seeing to it that the dead are identified, their remains and effects collected, and each given a proper burial in an individual marked grave. These responsibilities are shared between those who fire the weapons and those who control the territory in which the death occurs.

In post-invasion Iraq, the responsible parties have always included the USA, and many would claim them to be the primary responsible party, not only for the deaths cause by their own weapons, but for all violent deaths caused in the breakdown of law and order which followed their disastrous invasion.

And the first, and most fundamental responsibility on all parties who have any knowledge of the circumstances in which a human being died is this:

Release what information you have about the victim and the circumstances of death.

The USA is not alone in falling far below this standard, but it has far greater resources to be able to comply, and actually, it is in its interest to do so.

Calling for greater accountability by the USA and its major ally the UK is what CAAB is about. Iraq Body Count proudly joins hands with CAAB and all those individuals who are denied their rightful access to information by states around the world.

John Sloboda is co-founder, with Hamit Dardagan, of Iraq Body Count (www.iraqbodycount.org), and also with Hamit Dardagan, co-directs Oxford Research Group's "EveryCasualty" initiative, whose aim is to seek the proper and detailed recording of all casualties of war, both combatant and non-combatant (see www.everycasualty.org and www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk).