

# Human Rights & Human Welfare

---

Volume 7

Issue 8 *September Roundtable: An Annotation  
of "The Other War: Iraq Vets Bear Witness" by  
Chris Hedges and Laila Al-Arian*

Article 4

---

9-2007

## Facing Up to the Truth

Susan E. Waltz  
*University of Michigan*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>



Part of the American Politics Commons, International Humanitarian Law Commons, International Relations Commons, Military and Veterans Studies Commons, Military, War, and Peace Commons, Near and Middle Eastern Studies Commons, and the Peace and Conflict Studies Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Waltz, Susan E. (2007) "Facing Up to the Truth," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 7: Iss. 8, Article 4.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol7/iss8/4>



All Rights Reserved.

This Roundtable is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact [jennifer.cox@du.edu](mailto:jennifer.cox@du.edu), [digitalcommons@du.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@du.edu).

---

## Facing Up to the Truth

### Abstract

American GIs who liberated Dachau from the Nazis in April 1945 exist in our collective memory as iconic representations of the American soldier-hero: competent and capable, disciplined, principled and fundamentally good. From their collective example, we expect American soldiers to reveal, report, and excoriate war crimes. This makes it difficult to acknowledge that Americans may also commit war crimes—and on a regular basis.

### Keywords

Human rights, Iraq, United States, War, Soldiers, Civilians, War crimes

### Copyright Statement / License for Reuse



All Rights Reserved.

### Publication Statement

Copyright is held by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

## Facing Up to the Truth

by Susan E. Waltz

American GIs who liberated [Dachau](#) from the Nazis in April 1945 exist in our collective memory as iconic representations of the American soldier-hero: competent and capable, disciplined, principled and fundamentally good. From their collective example, we expect American soldiers to reveal, report, and excoriate war crimes. This makes it difficult to acknowledge that Americans may also commit war crimes—and on a regular basis.

Truth, [they say](#), is the first casualty of war, and we Americans need to face up to the conduct of our soldiers in Iraq. The 50 combat veterans interviewed by *The Nation* direct our attention to acts of brutality and depravity we would rather not confront. When we say “support the troops,” are we ready to embrace the American soldier who poses for his buddies with a spoon poised to scoop up the spilled brains of a dead Iraqi? We have our heroes, to be sure, and the wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq have been immensely complicated by the presence and participation of civilians. But neither of these truths exempt us from a hard look at another unsavory reality.

[As we now know](#), the war billed as liberation *for* the Iraqi people quickly morphed into a war *against* the Iraqi people. Roughly 10 percent of the 1,757 soldiers and Marines interviewed by Army health professionals as part of the 2006 Medical Health Advisory Team study ([MHAT IV](#)) acknowledged hitting or kicking non-combatants “when it was not necessary,” or gratuitously damaging or destroying Iraqi property. Less than half of those polled agreed that Iraqi civilians should be treated with dignity and respect, and about a third acknowledged insulting or cursing non-combatants in their presence. Moreover, 60 percent of the Marines indicated they would not report abuse by their comrades, even if it involved injuring or killing an innocent civilian.

The prevalence of such attitudes cannot be attributed simply to the nature and exigencies of war. At one level they reflect training, messaging, and discipline. It is not immaterial that by 2002, American officials were already seeking ways to cut corners on the Geneva Conventions. And a Navy recruitment ad that ran in [Field and Stream](#) in 2004 spoke volumes with its blustery message: “KICKING BUTT IS MANDATORY. TAKING NAMES IS OPTIONAL.”

Civilian and military leaders bear responsibility for the culture created and cultivated by the military, but we must also be concerned about the attitudes and actions of individual soldiers. In international law, *criminal* acts are by definition individual acts. The Iraq war has lifted thousands of young Americans from the routines of civilian life and confronted them with moral choices that most of us cannot imagine. Twenty-percent of the MHAT IV subjects report that their military training left them unprepared for ethical dilemmas they have faced in Iraq, and 30 percent reported that officers in their units did not reinforce a prohibition against mistreatment of civilians. The study also revealed that the propensity for abuse of civilians was exacerbated by mental health problems (including anger management, anxiety and depression), the loss of a comrade, or handling human remains.

In response to the MHAT IV study, the Pentagon has pledged to develop new soldier training modules, and General David Petraeus sent a [letter](#) to all military personnel in Iraq admonishing them to respect “human dignity, maintain integrity, and do what is right.” These are appropriate

and welcome steps, but will they suffice? Thirty years ago, an [investigation into the My Lai massacre](#) concluded that, among other things, American soldiers had not received sufficient training in provisions of the Geneva Conventions for the treatment and safeguarding of civilians, and a new program of officer training was inaugurated. And to what effect? The current commander of day-to-day operations in Iraq is none other than General Raymond Odierno, who as commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in the early years of the war stands [accused](#) of fueling the insurgency by alienating Iraqis with his blatant and indiscriminant use of strong-arm tactics.

The treaties and customary law that constitute [international humanitarian law of war](#) are admittedly weak and incomplete, but they represent our best chance for "[alleviating the calamities of war.](#)" War may be marked by acts of courage and heroism, but warfare also elicits the basest of human responses and actions. It is humanitarian law that sets the limits, draws the lines, for behavior that cannot be sanctioned. Ultimately, we have to rely on prosecutions to enforce humanitarian law, and individual soldiers must accept responsibility for their own actions. But, we as a society also have to accept responsibility for ensuring that our institutions uphold humanitarian law. The investigation undertaken by *The Nation* and the MHAT IV study underscore the need to scrutinize our military recruitment standards, training for soldiers, decisions about fitness for battle, and the ways in which civilian leaders and military officers alike model their attachment to the standards of humanitarian law. Our own values hang in the balance.

---

*Susan Waltz is a Professor at the University of Michigan's Ford School of Public Policy. She has published extensively on the politics of human rights in North Africa and has recently completed a series of essays on small state participation in the negotiations of human rights standards. From 1996-1998 Dr. Waltz served as International Chairperson of Amnesty International, and since 2001 she has convened a working group on arms transfers for Amnesty International-USA. Her article on U.S. policy on small arms transfers is forthcoming in World Policy Journal.*