

ON KILLING CHILDREN: An Open Letter to US Military Spokesman

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JEFF GUNTZEL
Common Dreams (10 Dec 03)

Dear Bryan,

We have never met. Still, I hope you do not mind that I have dispensed with your formal title.

Yesterday the United States Military announced to the world that, last week, it had killed six more children in the eastern Afghan province of Paktia.

Surely you know the details, but the story bears repeating:

It happened last Friday, December 5th. It was a nighttime raid on a compound near the city of Gardez, where nine children were killed one day later in an air attack on a Taliban suspect. It turns out that the suspect was just an ordinary laborer.

But that is another story. Back to Friday. The renegade Afghan commander, Mullah Jalani, it was believed, was storing weapons in the compound. Jalani himself may even have been sleeping there. So the compound was shot up. There were explosions. And the next day when troops showed up to assess the damage, six children were found crushed under a collapsed wall. And there were two dead adults. Neither of them were Mullah Jalani.

When things like this happen, I do not envy your job. As a spokesman, your job is to comment on events you did not experience. And so, with the detachment with which distance sometimes cloaks tragedy, you briefed the press on the details.

“I can't guarantee that we will not injure more civilians,” you said, “I wish I could.”

I think your job should be eliminated. Better to hear from the young man who first discovered the small bodies—or maybe a panel of soldiers who worked to remove the collapsed wall in order to count the dead. What a gruesome sight it must have been.

“We do make mistakes,” you said, “War is an inexact art.”

The soldiers familiar with the sight and smell of each of those six lives lost may have said the same thing. But what a weight those words would have carried. Perhaps there would have been long pauses or deep breaths. And maybe even tears.

Your words are without gravity.

Still you said more. “In this incident, if non-combatants surround themselves with thousands of weapons and hundreds of rounds of ammunition and howitzers and mortars, in a compound known to be used by a terrorist, we are not completely responsible for the consequences.”

Did you mean to call those dead children—whose names and ages and dreams I wish I could recite to you now—“non-combatants?” Was it reflex or script? When you were briefed on this tragedy, did you feel like you had swallowed a stone? Did you think, just for a short second, I will not explain this one for them?

The next time you are asked to speak about the inevitable but inexcusable tragedies of war, remember the people you love. And remember that your love for family and friends is not unique.

And to the people who loved each of those six lost children, war is not an “inexact art,” it is a murderous folly.

There is a quote from a book by the well-known American author Barbara Kingsolver that I recite to myself when I feel like I can't find the ground:

“The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof. What I want is so simple I almost can't say it: elementary kindness. Enough to eat, enough to go around. The possibility that kids might one day grow up to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed. That's about it...”

I would be grateful to receive your response.

Sincerely,

Jeff Guntzel

(Jeff Guntzel is a contributing editor to Punk Planet Magazine (<http://www.punkplanet.com/>) and a freelance writer. From 1998-2003 he was co-coordinator of Voices in the Wilderness (<http://www.vitw.org>). He lives in Indianapolis, IN and he can be reached at jeff@vitw.org.)