

Web Memo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1111
June 5, 2006

Haditha's Aftermath: What's Next?

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Allegations that U.S. Marines murdered Iraqi civilians in Haditha are deeply troubling. The American government bears a grave responsibility to fully meet its obligations to investigate and dispense justice without reservation. At the same time, the United States must continue to pursue the vital national interest of building an independent and stable Iraq.

Standing Up for What is Right

War crimes are not just crimes, they are challenges to the credibility of how just nations fight just wars. The United States cannot afford to sacrifice its credibility in the war on terrorism or the war in Iraq. Sustaining the credibility of the U.S. effort in Iraq requires the right response to allegations of misconduct. The American response must:

- **Be Transparent** – The United States fights its wars in accordance with the laws of war. It has obligation to prove that in the face of credible allegations of violations. The government must fully investigate charges of war crimes and punish the guilty to the full extent of the law. This process should be as transparent as possible to Iraqis, the American people, and the world. Government and military officials should announce what findings they can as soon as possible.

- **Be Reflective** – Atrocities in combat zones usually occur when ill-disciplined troops are unsupervised or poorly led. There may be a leadership failure within the immediate chain-of-command, creating a climate for abuse. Usually, the problem can be resolved by getting the facts and punishing the culprits. Sometimes, however, the tactics, policies, or procedures used in operations also contribute to the problem. Operating procedures and training have to be scrutinized, and if shortfalls are found that materially contributed, they must be acknowledged. The military needs to be honest about its mistakes—and fix them.
- **Be Steadfast** – Investigating, prosecuting, and punishing war crimes is part of the difficult and regrettable tasks that nations must bear in war. Bad things happen even in just wars, but there is still a war to won. The United States government must continue to demonstrate resolve that, despite this incident, it will finish the mission in Iraq.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://www.heritage.org/research/nationalsecurity/wm1111.cfm>

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
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In the face of unexpected challenges, unpreparedness for the demands of post-conflict operations, ruthless enemies, and tragic events, the U.S. military has achieved much in Iraq—overthrowing a murderous dictator, supporting unprecedented free elections, helping establish an independent, sovereign, and legitimate government, and training domestic security forces to take on the challenge of defending the Iraqi people. Sustaining that image will require the right response to the Haditha incident—an investigation that is transparent, thorough, and respects rather than undermines the efforts of the hundreds of thousands of American soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and coastguardsmen who have served and will serve honorably in Iraq.

The job, however, is not done. To finish its work, the military must retain credibility as a force for good.

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