

## By Raoul Sherrard

Recently an American military video has been leaked on the website Wiki leaks. The event may be deeply damaging to public opinion and can even have ramifications for national security and the armed forces, even if it does not lead to further investigation by American authorities. It highlights important issues in public opinion, freedom of information in conflict and the complexities of the internet in attempts to control information.

The video shows a US apache gunship engaging an indiscriminate group of potential combatants through the lens of its targeting system almost a kilometre away. As they circle they call in their command and are given permission to engage. The "hostiles" are quickly dispatched with several bursts from its cannon. As one man survives and crawls away the crew urge him to pick up a weapon to allow them to open fire. A van stops and several other unidentified individuals try to carry him away. The gun operator clamours to stop them before they get away as they wait for permission. He is given the all clear they and they duly dispatch them.

Videos like this are not uncommon on the in the modern press, though the macabre language used describing them as "f\*\*king pricks" and celebrating as they hit their mark would more likely be censored. Often within its own media briefings the US army will show this same style of warfare where the act of killing is reduced to a monochrome vision. They are displays of the "efficiency" with which modern warfare can be undertaken. The relative ease by which it is taken has already been compared to a video game.

What makes this event different to other videos readily available on the internet is that in this case the weapons supposedly seen by the crew were in fact the cameras of a Reuter's news crew Namir Noor-Eldeen and his driver Saeed Chmagh. The cameras had been misidentified as RPG's and led to the death of a number of civilians and the injury of two children in a van that stopped to help one of those who survived the first engagement. When the children are found by a patrol that appears some minutes after the response is of disregard from the pilots, responding "Well it's their fault for bringing kids to a battle".

The debate retraces familiar discussions on the brutality of war and the actions of those involved in the military. Many have called for justice and punishment of those involved, likening it to a war crime. When a video such as this appears every frame is poured over, every detail remarked upon with precious hindsight. The Rules of Engagement and the Geneva Convention are recited and applied, showing how this event is an act of murder by those who have little regard for the sanctity of life. How can they engage a target without real confirmation? How can they fire upon those who are looking to help the wounded even if they were combatants, as it breaks the rules of war? The attacks upon the pilots spread to condemnation of the US military as a whole, the American system. It is not long before their actions are an embodiment of a ruthless imperial power who is able to take the lives of anyone they please without

repercussion.

Opinions from sympathetic views and military sources highlight the difficulty of working in such a hostile environment. Context is key and the commentator points out that this is Baghdad in 2007, during one of the bloodiest months for US troops in the summer surge where small arms fire had been reported in the area. It was a scene where a mistake could cost just as many lives, as the boundary of the soldier and the civilian have been blurred beyond recognition. This was a costly error, but one that happens in a warzone where fallible humans are asked to behave as infallible mechanical soldiers. People have been killed in events such as this and are the collateral of a very real conflict, alluded to by the name of the video as 'Collateral Murder'. General Stanley McChrystal describes how an untold number have been killed in similar situations. Highlighting the problems in the escalation of force and of civilians or soldiers not acting rationally given the stresses they are under.

However the morality of the action in itself is not the major issue to be dealt with here. The opinion garnered from is easily marred by personal position and opinion. One thing for certain is that the arguments about how you can justify or vilify the actions of these US soldiers will be debated ad nauseum.

There is a far more sinister aspect to this story. The issue is how this video has been dealt with by the American government and how it will be received in the American media as a whole. Wiki leaks have claimed the US actively looked to censor the video by taking down the website. They dismissed the actions of these whistleblowers and in effect looked to cover up the video from the public. They undertook harassment of the website owners and put them under aggressive surveillance. Suggestions have been made the decrypted video has been discussed by the higher echelons of the pentagon and the best way to silence those who would publish damaging sensitive information.

Whether these allegations are true or not are difficult to gauge, but given the sensitivity of the video at hand and the reaction garnered so far it would be hard to believe the US military was not aware of developments. They have not responded to Reuter's on the subject of their slain journalist and have made little comment on the act beyond admitting that they were killed in the area. But accusations of conspiracy by the US to limit free speech and hide the killings of civilians would be hugely detrimental to public opinion in a number of countries, where they are already saturated with stories such as Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay.

Those with access to wide array of sources available to them on the internet have been able to release sensitive and damaging evidence to an audience that would have been unthinkable even during the first Gulf War. The ramifications of this media presence is very hard to quantifiably measure but even the most old fashioned of defence analysts must understand that stories like this play a part in the war on terror. They colour impressions and fuel hatred to forces deployed overseas and sympathy toward extremist opinion.

Two bloody wars and a stream of stories on human rights abuse being carried out in the name of the security of the state has torn away the political goodwill from the 2001 Afghanistan invasion. The ability to transfer and influence ideas through loose networks on the internet has

produced a facet of security that if not fully appreciated could prove disastrous. Yet censorship is obviously not the way to approach events have shifted to the digital realm. Whatever the outcome of the release of this video, it is a stark reminder that national security does not end in the actions of soldiers on the ground.