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Wounded in Iraq, Deserted at Home

By **Bill Berkowitz**, [WorkingForChange.com](#)

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More than thirty satellite trucks and nearly a hundred reporters hunkered down outside the Eagle County (Colorado) courthouse on Wednesday Aug. 6th waiting to get a glimpse of Los Angeles Laker basketball star Kobe Bryant entering the courtroom for a scheduled ten-minute appearance. Most of the major television networks and cable news and sports networks had reporters and camera crews at the scene.

Across the country, where plane loads of wounded soldiers are airlifted back to the states, unloaded at Andrews Air Force Base, and sent off to area hospitals, there are no hordes of television cameras recording these tragic trips off the tarmac.

In a summer marked by the media's focus on the Bryant sex case, the entrance of Conan (Arnold Schwarzenegger) into California's recall election, the killing of Saddam Hussein's sons and the hunt for their father, little attention has been paid to U.S. soldiers wounded in Iraq and stuffed into wards at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, the nation's biggest military hospital, and other facilities.

There are no pictures of wounded soldiers undergoing painful and protracted physical rehabilitation. There are no visuals of worried families waiting for news of their sons or daughters.

What is it about the wounded that makes us uncomfortable? Why have they been left out of the coverage of the war by the broadcast media?

"There have been no feature news stories on television focusing on the wounded," Liz Swasey, director of communications at the Media Research Center (MRC), a conservative media watchdog group, told me in a telephone interview. "While there have been numerous reports of soldiers getting wounded, there have been no interviews from hospital bed sides," she pointed out. The Alexandria, Va.-based MRC, founded in 1987 by L. Brent Bezel III, monitors all major nationally televised and print news broadcasts and maintains "the nation's largest video news archive," Swasey said.

"The war was televised and sold as a sanitized war with minimal US

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casualties," said John Stauber, co-author of the recently released book, "The Weapons of Mass Deception," in an email exchange. "Showing wounded soldiers and interviewing their families could be disastrous PR for Bush's war. I suspect the administration is doing all it can to prevent such stories unless they are stage-managed feel-good events like Saving Private [Jessica] Lynch."

The glow from the jubilant celebrations over the speedy march to Baghdad has morphed into months of guerilla resistance. In the three months since President Bush declared an end to major combat operations in Iraq, U.S. casualties continue to mount: Since May 1, sixty-nine U.S. soldiers have been killed in combat, and deaths from other causes are more than double that figure.

As of Sept. 4, "[Casualties in Iraq: The Human Cost of Occupation](#)" – a website affiliated with Antiwar.com – listed the number of US combat deaths since the beginning of the U.S. invasion at 284, 184 of which are considered combat deaths. In addition to those killed in combat, dozens of other soldiers have died in accidents; a few have committed suicide; two are dead from a still-to-be-explained cluster of pneumonia cases; and several have died mysteriously in their sleep.

Another website, CNN.com's "[Forces: U.S. & Coalition/Casualties](#)", provides the names of coalition casualties – whose families have been notified – and includes pictures of the victims (when available), the soldier's ages, units, hometowns and an explanation of how each was killed.

While the dead are honored, the men and women injured in Iraq and/or Afghanistan have become the new disappeared. Once they've been swept off the battlefield and returned home, the broadcast media has essentially paid no attention to them. "Wounded troops are kept out of the media picture because they are perceived as a downer," said Norman Solomon, media critic, columnist and co-author of "Target Iraq: What the News Media Didn't Tell You."

"Dead people don't linger like wounded people do. Dead people's names can be posted on a television honor role, but the networks and cable news channels won't clog up their air time with the names and pictures of hundreds and hundreds of wounded soldiers."

"The wounded are much too real; telling their stories would be too much of a bummer for television's news programmers," Solomon added. "It is important, however, to ask about the wounded. If they exist then we will want to hear from them, even if the networks do not really want to hear what they've got to say."

The numbers of wounded in action are hard to come by: Since the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, according to the Guardian's Julian Borger, the Pentagon has put the number of wounded at 827 but he writes, "unofficial figures are in the thousands."

Central Command in Qatar talked of 926 wounded, but "that too is understated," Borger maintained. Lieutenant-Colonel Allen DeLane, the

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man in charge of the airlift of the wounded into Andrews Air Force Base, recently told National Public Radio that "Since the war has started, I can't give you an exact number because that's classified information, but I can say to you over 4,000 have stayed here at Andrews, and that number doubles when you count the people that come here to Andrews and then we send them to other places like Walter Reed and Bethesda, which are in this area also." An early September report in the Washington Post put the number of U.S. wounded at more than 1,120.

Military hospitals are being overwhelmed and "staff are working 70 or 80-hour weeks," Borger reports. "[T]he Walter Reed army hospital in Washington is so full that it has taken over beds normally reserved for cancer patients to handle the influx, according to a report on CBS television." The Washington Times recently reported that because of the overflow, some of the outpatient wounded are being placed at nearby hotels.

Howard Rosenberg, the former television critic of the Los Angeles Times, suggested that the networks might hesitate to report on the wounded because they could be perceived as negative or downbeat. "Since 9/11, there is a general feeling among many media outlets that they need to stay away from anything that could be interpreted as disloyal to the country," Rosenberg told me.

Inside the hospitals, there's no shortage of compelling stories.

The Associated Press' Stephen Manning reported in early June on the plight of Sgt. Robert Garrison of Ithaca, N.Y. During an accident while in western Iraq, Sgt. Garrison was thrown from his Humvee. He landed on his head, fractured his skull and slipped into unconsciousness. Garrison "can't speak at more than a faint whisper and breathes with the help of a tube jutting from his neck. A scar runs across the back of the head, and the left side of his face droops where he has lost some control over his muscles."

Sgt. Kenneth Dixon, of Cheraw, S.C., was in a Bradley fighting vehicle when it plunged into a ravine. He "broke his back, leaving him unable to use his legs." These days he's at a veteran's hospital in Richmond, Va., "focusing on his four hours of daily physical therapy."

Marine Sgt. Phillip Rugg, 26, recently had his left leg amputated below the knee, caused by a grenade "that penetrated his tank-recovery vehicle March 22 outside Umm Qasr, nearly shearing his foot off."

Media coverage of the first few months of the invasion of Iraq highlighted the boom, bang and glitz. On May 1st, President Bush landed on the USS Lincoln and declared an end to major combat operations in Iraq, but since that over-hyped media event, U.S. troops continue to be killed and wounded.

"The wounded represent something that we'd really not rather have to deal with," Todd Ensign, director of Citizen Soldier, a GI rights advocacy organization, told me in a phone interview. "They leave a bad taste in our mouths. The fact that there's so many wounded clearly represents a failed policy and the media isn't all that interested in covering these stories."

"The American media is by and large controlled and dominated by corporations that line up politically with the Bush Administration," Ensign added. "They appear to be increasingly incapable of grappling with such a highly charged issue as the wounded."

On Aug. 8, MSNBC was "live" at Fort Stewart in Georgia to report on the homecoming from Iraq of several hundred troops from the 3rd Infantry Division: The 3rd I.D. has suffered more than 30 dead and over 100 wounded. As summer turns toward fall, most Americans are going about their business, but as the AP's Manning pointed out, most of the wounded "will forever be affected physically and emotionally by their wounds."

The president has repeatedly visited with troops that have returned intact and he has issued statements honoring the dead, but he has not shown up at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. He has shown little inclination to pay much attention to the wounded whose problems will stretch on long after he's left the White House.

Bill Berkowitz is a columnist at WorkingForChange.com.

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