



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on April 15, 2010

Is It American Policy to Shoot the Wounded and Commit War Crimes?

Defense Secretary Robert Gates defended the actions of U.S. soldiers who are shown in a video shooting civilians — a video released by Internet whistleblower website Wikileaks.org April 13.

Gates [criticized](#) the video as “looking at the war through a soda straw.” The video, [Collateral Murder](#), contains the video and the flight chatter from a U.S. Apache helicopter gunship in Iraq when it mistook Reuters Wire Service reporters and their cameras for terrorists brandishing AK-47s back in 2007. The two helicopter gunships shot down the reporters, and then shot down good Samaritans who stopped to pick up the wounded after the initial engagement. According to [Wikileaks](#), “U.S. military authorities concluded that the actions of soldiers and pilots were in accordance with the law of armed conflict and their Rules of Engagement.”



[On ABC's This Week](#), Gates criticized Wikileaks for releasing the video, saying it was “unfortunate” and “clearly not helpful.” And in an April 13 [press conference](#) he claimed that “these people can put anything out they want and are never held accountable for it.” Gates [added](#):

Well, first of all, in the civilian casualty incidents, I have not — I don't recall a single — in Afghanistan, I don't recall a single one where anybody has alleged the United States went in and did this on purpose. These are — where there have been civilian casualties, they have been tragic incidents or places where they have been placed in harm's way by the Taliban or where there was some kind of a misunderstanding. So I think it's a completely different situation.

Gates' statement was clearly and patently untrue, however, in this instance. [Wikileaks](#) explains: “The video, shot from an Apache helicopter gunsight, clearly shows the unprovoked slaying of a wounded Reuters employee and his rescuers. Two young children involved in the rescue were also seriously wounded.” While it is possible the trigger-happy U.S. helicopter crews mistook the reporters' cameras for AK-47s and RPGs (though they'd have to have [the eyesight of Mr. Magoo](#) to do so), the gunship crews without question deliberately shot down the wounded and the men who had come to care for them.

Shooting the wounded is a clear violation of the [Geneva Conventions](#), and one of the more vicious of war crimes (and violations of the natural law).



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Chatter among the flight crews in the video makes it clear that the crews knew with certainty that they were shooting unarmed wounded men. After the initial attack on the reporters, one gunner can be seen circling around the smoking courtyard with the wounded Reuters reporter Saaed Chmagh — crawling on the sidewalk — in his gun sights. “All you gotta do is pick up a weapon,” he [says](#) under his breath, apparently eager to shoot Saaed again and finish the job. He then tells the other helicopter. “We’re also looking for weapons. If we see a weapon, we’re going to engage.” The gunner is apparently aware of the fact that wounded soldiers are not to be killed, and it’s especially unnecessary because U.S. ground troops are already on their way to the scene.

As soon as a black van that is driving by stops in the courtyard and two men get out and pick up Saaed, the gunners eagerly pursue permission to shoot down the wounded man along with the good Samaritans who are — apparently — about to take the reporter to a hospital. Although they first suspect the men in the van are going to pick up “weapons,” they later realize the men are just picking up the wounded. One gunner [asks](#), “Picking up the wounded?” and the other replies: “Yeah, we’re trying to get permission to engage.” In that instant, concern for the rules of war was abandoned entirely.

Within a few seconds, one gunner [complains](#), “Come on, let us shoot!” and “They’re taking him.” Another pilot requests formal permission to shoot the wounded reporter and the clearly unarmed civilians picking him up and placing him in their van: “We have a black S-U - uh - Bongo truck trying to pick up the bodies. Request permission to engage.” The base commander immediately gives permission to shoot the wounded, and as a result the reporter is killed with the two good Samaritans, and two girls in the truck are wounded. “Well, it’s their fault for bringing their kids into a battle,” one of the helicopter gunners callously quips after hearing about the two little girls, and the gunner in the other ship quickly agrees: “That’s right.”

Gates excused the helicopter gunners on ABC’s *This Week* by [saying](#):

They’re — they’re in a combat situation. The video doesn’t show the broader picture of the — of the firing that was going on at American troops. It’s obviously a hard thing to see. It’s painful to see, especially when you learn after the fact what was going on. But you — you talked about the fog of war. These people were operating in split-second situations. And, you know, we — we’ve investigated it very thoroughly. And it’s — it’s unfortunate. It’s clearly not helpful. But by the same token, I think — think it should not have any lasting consequences.

Chatter among Americans over the Internet has varied from justifiable outrage at the war crimes that are being excused in their name to yahoos who show the same callousness as the helicopter gunners to helpless wounded persons.

Wikileaks is apparently working on another blockbuster Internet video release, [according to the Times of London](#), on “the so-called ‘Granai massacre,’ when American aircraft dropped 500lb and 1,000lb bombs on a suspected militant compound in Farah province on May 4 last year. Several children were among those killed.” More videos exposing the horrors of war can be expected, but the real question is: Will U.S. authorities continue to excuse these attacks against basic human rights? And, will the American public continue to allow it?



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