

WHOSE MORALE COUNTS?

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, JUL 25 2009

US Secretary of defense Robert Gates said recently that coalition forces have about a year to turn around the war in Afghanistan, where the Taliban is resurgent, or risk losing support in America. Just a few days later the US military command in Afghanistan announced that action reports will no longer mention enemy casualties in an effort to bolster local support in Afghanistan by stressing security for the Afghans rather the Taliban/al Qaeda body count.

Commentary was quick to remind Americans of the futile effort by then Secretary Robert McNamara to measure progress in the Vietnam War by body counts. Unmentioned was the fact that the addition of enemy killed in action reports came late in both Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The military had indeed learned the lesson of Vietnam and hidden the price the enemy was paying through 2006 or 2007. But it could not avoid reporting our own casualties. Day after day Americans back home heard reports that an American soldier died in an IED attack in Mosul or two Marines had been killed in Anbar province. It was all about our losses and little about the impact of their effort on the enemy. Support for the wars wavered. Somewhere along the line a decision was made to begin reporting as well the number of insurgents killed or detained. The losses then had some reference point. It wasn't all one way.

The war in Afghanistan has intensified. The number of American and allied dead is increasing. The attempt to sanitize the war for the Afghans ignores the morale effects of one way reporting back in the US. The steady toll of dead soldiers and marines needs a context. Body counts may be a poor measure of progress, but they do help provide a balance to the continuing sacrifice of young men and women in their nation's service in a very distant land. Both the Afghans and Americans will continue to hear about coalition losses. They ought also to hear about the Taliban dead.

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.