

(7) Air Force Pilots: *Heroes or Automatons?*

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In a CNN interview, a British bombing crew just back from some action in Iraq were asked about reports that they had bombed a lot of civilian targets and caused civilian casualties. One answered: "We go about and drop our bombs and if they hit civilian targets, that's tough." The interviewer, supporting this point of view, chimed in, "That's war," and the bombardier answered, "Absolutely."

The pounding of Iraq involved killing people and destroying targets, whether military or civilian. Many of those dropping the bombs go about their daily business without a pang of conscience, with the media defending their slaughter of innocents.

During Vietnam, high-tech bombing was increasingly abstract with pilots merely interacting with technology rather than perceiving the actual effects of their bombing on people and the environment. Much of the bombing in the Gulf War was even more abstract, using laser-guided computers where the pilot merely pushed buttons. The months preceding the bombing involved detailed "software work" to digitally map and plot strategic installations. Net-works kept track of targets to program and guide 'precision long-range weapons' and to undertake 'battle damage assessment.'

Bombing crews were mere nodes in a system, technical operatives pushing buttons to release missiles at targets "derealized" into mere data on a computer screen. It was often the computer program that guided the bombing "mission." The pilots merely flew to their site, avoided anti-aircraft fire, dropped their munitions and flew away.

"Many young people have developed incredible hand-eye-brain coordination playing these [video] games. The Air Force believes these kids will be outstanding pilots. Watch a 12-year old take evasive action and score multiple hits while playing Space Invaders, and you will appreciate the skills of tomorrows' pilots."

Source: President Ronald Reagan, speaking at a high school in Orlando Florida, 1983. Cited in *Missile Envy: The Arms Race and Nuclear War* (1986), by Dr. Helen Caldicott.

The whole experience had a video game feel to it. If one had been excited by playing bombing games in simulators, the whole experience had a positive libidinal charge. Some TV commentators and military experts seemed to have wargasms in their ecstasies over the video bombing footage. They "oohed" and "ahhed" as if getting libidinal enjoyment from the pornography of destruction. In celebrating the technology of destruction, the media transformed the bombing into a positive and celebratory experience rather than one of tragic empathy with human suffering.

Source: Excerpted from "The Pounding of Iraq," *The Persian Gulf TV War*. <www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/papers/gulfwar7.htm>

