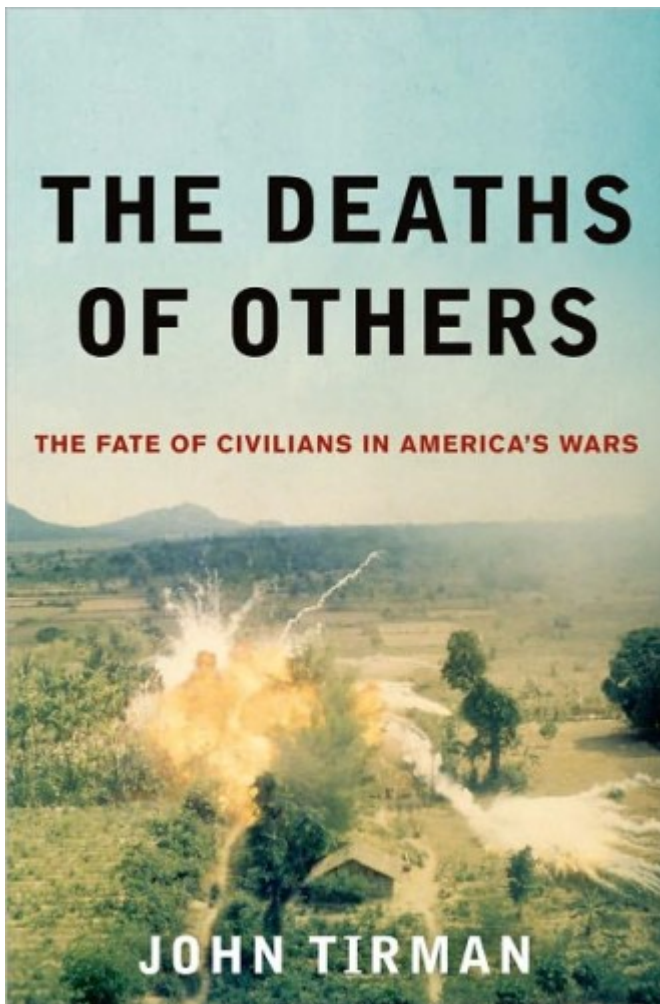


# The Deaths of Others, by John Tirman

reviewed by [Timothy Mark Renick](#) in the [October 18, 2011](#) issue

## In Review



## The Deaths of Others

By John Tirman  
Oxford University Press

Friedrich Nietzsche observed that the human capacity to forget is not solely the result of inertia: "It is rather an active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of

repression." According to Nietzsche, we forget not merely because we have to but because we want to—and we forget selectively, picking and choosing what we remember in order to construct the world in which we choose to live. At times such willful forgetting is an act of self-defense and even empowerment, but more often than not it is an act of self-deception. Frequently the results are tragic.

Nietzsche's insights about the nature of forgetting inform and direct this work by John Tirman. *The Deaths of Others* explores the history of the wars in which Americans have engaged, going back to the time of the first European settlers 400 years ago and extending to current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Tirman, executive director of the Center for International Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, seeks to uncover and explain a disturbing phenomenon: American wars are becoming more deadly, especially for noncombatants. Since the beginning of the 20th century, he writes, wars have caused the deaths of "more and more civilians as a share of total deaths, flipping the one-to-nine ratio of civilian-to-soldier mortality in the First World War to nine-to-one in many ethnic conflicts that occurred after the Cold War ended."

Tirman argues that the majority of Americans largely ignore the realities of modern war, including the disproportionate toll that military actions take on noncombatants. Although many Americans recognize and mourn the significant number of deaths suffered by U.S. troops in Korea (33,000 casualties), Vietnam (58,000), Iraq (4,500) and Afghanistan (over 1,000), far fewer can speak accurately about the civilian death tolls in these same conflicts: 750,000 in Korea, over a million in Vietnam and hundreds of thousands each in Iraq and Afghanistan. The American Civil War and World War I were extremely bloody conflicts, to be sure, but they were typified by exchanges between military forces on battlefields, and civilian deaths were the exception. As has been the case with recent conflicts in which the United States has been involved, population centers are increasingly becoming the ground zero of modern war.

The United States is far from the only culprit in this changing calculus of war. Since the outbreak of World War II, Germany, Japan, North Korea, China, the Soviet Union, North Vietnam, Iraq and dozens of insurgent groups, among others, have contributed to the transformation of the nature of warfare and its victims. Tirman does not deny this fact. The United States, however, is his focus in this volume for at least two reasons.

First, Tirman argues that American politicians, military leaders and media have made a concerted effort to mask the toll suffered by civilians as a result of U.S. actions. The pattern is seen in President Truman's depiction of the dropping of atomic bombs on the Japanese population centers of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II as acts of self-defense directed at military targets. It is found in Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's assurances to the American public that the Clinton-era economic sanctions against Iraq (which, according to UNICEF, resulted in the deaths of several hundred thousand Iraqi children from malnutrition and disease) were targeted at Saddam Hussein's regime and were worth it. The pattern also is evident in the media's reporting of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq: according to one study of 1,800 network stories produced by ABC, NBC, CNN and other major outlets, only 4 percent of reports mentioned civilian casualties. According to Tirman, the truth about America's wars simply has not been told.

Second, Tirman concentrates on the United States because he believes that Americans exhibit a large and troubling gulf between perception and reality when it comes to war. Americans see themselves as the protectors of the innocent and the defenders of freedom. At least publicly, every 20th-century war that the United States has engaged in has been defended by means of just-war principles, often on overtly Christian moral grounds. Americans widely and steadfastly believe that the wars that they engage in are actions of last resort entered into for the purpose of protecting innocent life against unjust oppression. Americans see themselves as the good guys.

Why, then, are so many innocents dying as a result of American military actions? This is the question at the heart of *The Deaths of Others*, and Tirman's answers range from the historical to the mythical.

Part of what makes the United States distinctive, according to Tirman, is a pervasive indifference to the deaths of noncombatants that has been bred, in part, by a particular feature of U.S. wars over the past century: despite the horrific number of civilian deaths inflicted during World War II and the conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, almost none of these deaths were suffered by American noncombatants on American soil. The attacks of September 11, 2001, provided Americans with a shocking, if momentary, glimpse into the realities of civilian death and suffering, but the number killed in those attacks—and the number directly affected by the loss of loved ones—pales in comparison to the number of civilian deaths caused by the subsequent U.S. military responses in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"The deaths of many of your villagers affect your sensibilities about the conflict differently from the death of a neighbor fighting in an army far away," Tirman tells us. Americans have the luxury of ignoring the horrible impact that war has on noncombatants because so few Americans have ever experienced the ravages of war.

Another part of what makes the United States unique when it comes to attitudes toward civilian deaths, Tirman explains, is a powerful myth about our national origins that still shapes the perceptions of millions of Americans (including many national leaders). The "errand into the wilderness," as it was described by the Puritans at the time Europeans first settled in America, was presented as an inherently religious undertaking—a sacred covenant to spread God's word to the heathen. Unlike the complexities and ambiguities of Christian sectarianism in the Europe they had left behind, what the settlers found in the new world was a crystal-clear dichotomy between Christian believers and unchristian indigenous peoples. In this mythical context, conflicts with native peoples inevitably assumed a religious significance. As Cotton Mather wrote at the time, "The spirit of God against whom we had *Rebelled*, permitted the *Devils*, from the *Depths of Hell*, to assault us." Indians became identified with Satan, and attacks both from and upon native peoples soon became infused with religious purpose and meaning.

In a series of chapters, each dedicated to a specific American war, Tirman argues that this same mythic model defines how Americans perceive their nation's military actions to this day. Whether fighting communists in Vietnam and Korea or Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan, "the necessary conditions of regarding the native populations as savage . . . and the wars both as reactive and as an errand to the world's tamable hinterlands were altogether present." According to this interpretation, the United States is unique not because of the amount of violence it engages in, but because of the significance that Americans ascribe to this violence. Tirman explains, "The hope of vanquishing the communists and the Arab terrorists was more than mere defense or imperialism; it was a morality play in which the protagonist is triumphant physically (safe, secure, prosperous) and renewed morally through the completeness of triumph."

This mythic model works in one sense: it allows Americans to construct a reality that explains and justifies, at least to themselves, their violent actions. The myth mitigates the psychic terror of death by valorizing American military casualties as justified sacrifices to and for God, and it minimizes the significance of the deaths of

others by casting the victims as heathen, savage and godless. As Tirman writes, "These powerful psychological constructs prospectively demonstrate how large majorities of the American public as well as the political and information elite could ignore the scale of mayhem that occurred in American wars in Korea, Vietnam and Iraq."

Tirman suggests another sense in which the myth has failed the United States—with devastating impact on the nation's global image. The victims of American military actions do not view our acts through the lens of the myth of American exceptionalism. They do not see the deaths of their neighbors and loved ones as part of God's plan. Rather, they experience the civilian deaths caused by U.S. military actions much like Americans experienced the attacks of September 11—as unjust, devastating and requiring a response in kind. A difference exists between these two cases, though: the American acts of war do not last for a few hours and result in the deaths of thousands; in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq, they have lasted for years, with hundreds of thousands of civilians losing their lives.

Admittedly, Tirman presents a very harsh account of American foreign policy—one that many readers will contest. The power of *The Deaths of Others*, however, is its ability to get even the skeptical reader to confront a disturbing question: If, as a nation, Americans have indeed managed to forget the reality of our own military actions, is this an act of empowerment or is it a tragic delusion?