Counting the dead: Mourning every loss

by Donald W. Shriver in the January 10, 2006 issue

After 9/11, a New Yorker might take comfort in the thought, “The terrorists will now pick some other city.” But like San Francisco, New York remains a handy port city for smugglers of nuclear bombs. It’s said that al-Qaeda has been working on the idea for ten years. If you were a terrorist, would not that weapon appeal to you as the way to trump 9/11?

The fact-based, nonpartisan film *Last Best Chance* validates our fears. Among the facts is the discovery by monitors of al-Qaeda “chatter” on the Internet that some Muslim scholars who have been studying the past 50 years of conflict between Western powers and Islamic populations have counted the Muslim dead at 4 million. Were that many Americans to die from a nuclear bomb, the event would be, in al-Qaeda’s view, justified revenge.

How those historians came to this number we don’t know, but we may be certain that they did not get much help from U.S. government archives. In the Gulf War of 1991 and in the current war, the government has forbidden its employees to investigate the number of Iraqi dead. In March 1991 a demographer employed in the Department of Commerce, Beth Deponte, investigated Iraqi deaths in the war just ended. She came to the number 158,000. For publicizing that number she was promptly fired.

In December 2003, an Iraqi Ministry of Health official proposed counting the number of Iraqi dead in the second war. He was quickly told by the Pentagon to cease and desist. One journalist reported that “the Pentagon said it wasn’t possible to estimate Iraqi civilian casualties, and was unhappy that anyone else in government attempted to do so.”

As recently as November 7, on the PBS *Newshour*, the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Peter Pace, spoke against estimating the Iraqi dead in a certain operation, saying that such a count would take the focus off “success” in the

mission. The number doesn't matter, he implied. Success is what the public ought to be hoping for.

Private research has listed the number of Iraqi deaths at 30,000, and on December 12 President Bush finally cited that figure himself in responding to a question. It was the first time Bush had commented on the Iraqi death toll. The White House said later that there is no official U.S. estimate of Iraqi deaths, and that the figure of 30,000 is based on media estimates.

Death in all its forms is the great challenge to our belief in the worth of a human life. Not to have one's death noted somewhere by someone is a final assault on human dignity—or so the funeral rituals, the family pictures of the deceased, and daily listings of names in obituary columns all assume.

Journalism took an impressive step in recognizing this truth after 9/11, when *New York Times* reporters interviewed victims' family members and compiled for publication a picture of each identifiable victim and a brief biography.

The Vietnam War Memorial in Washington embodies this understanding with its inscription of all 58,248 names of Americans killed in that war. The panoply of names running along those yards and yards of marble has acquired the reputation of being America's most eloquent war memorial. Thousands come to touch the place where a once-beloved comrade, son, daughter or parent is named. Homes across America have on their walls framed rubbings of these names.

By contrast, the new World War II memorial, further up the Mall, has a wide central panel of 4,000 gold stars, each representing a hundred lives, indicating the more than 400,000 American military deaths of 1941-1945. Like all earthly things, memorial spaces are cramped by finitude. What wall would contain the names of all 400,000? Or the names of the 60 million killed in World War II? Or the 175 million that Robert McNamara says is the toll from wars in the 20th century?

Numbers can numb. Joseph Stalin was counting on public numbness to mass death when he made his famous cynical remark, "The death of one person is a tragedy. The death of a million is a statistic."

That remark came to mind some years ago in a conversation with two lay leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church. "How many Americans died in World War II?" they asked. "About 400,000," I answered. "Oh," they exclaimed, "it's nothing!" Before

one challenges that “nothing,” one has to understand that the American total represents 2 percent of the 20 million deaths suffered by Soviet soldiers and civilians in that war. If in a similar way we compare the deaths in the current Iraq war (more than 2,100 dead so far) to all of American deaths in 20th-century wars (at least 650,000), the former statistic will tempt many to the same “Oh, it’s nothing.”

To the credit of U.S. military leaders, “force protection” is high in their priorities. The Soviet army lost 300,000 soldiers in its attack on Berlin alone—three-fourths of the total of American deaths. The American military wants its soldiers and the public to know that the life of an American will be given care, and that includes care for the body of a wounded or dead American. As far as this policy goes, it is commendable. But it does not go far enough.

Jewish commentators on the Holocaust have cautioned that we must beware of too frequent reference to “the 6 million.” Better, they say, to note that in that genocide “a person died 6 million times.” When you visit Auschwitz, you view a bin full of eyeglasses which the Nazis collected before the wearers were marched to the gas chambers. The guide is likely to say, “Try to remember that behind each pair of glasses were the eyes of a real human being.”

Nowhere in the world are there so many signs of a new, sober “culture of memory” as in Germany. Compulsive and overdone as the proliferation of memorials to the Holocaust may seem to many Germans themselves and even to their visitors, revulsion at what their fellow citizens did in the Nazi era has penetrated private and public conversation in Germany as in no other country. German memorials, history books, annual ceremonies and public speeches all say: “Let us remember what our own society did to millions of our neighbors. Let the world remember before it is too late.”

One striking aspect of the German memorials is how consistently they portray a struggle to contradict Stalin’s dualism between individual and mass murders. Rosters of dead soldiers’ names abound on German church walls: “They died for the Fatherland.” But these days, some of those memorials are undergoing significant revisions of text. Sometime in the 1990s Berliners placed a stone in a park inscribed, “To all our war dead.” Soon another group draped a counterinscription over the stone: “To all the dead of our wars.” The contrasting possessives shifted viewer attention from 5 million German dead to the 60 million dead in World War II.

On a wall of St. Nicolaus, a Gothic brick church in Wismar, one sees the usual sets of names—the soldiers who died “for the Fatherland, 1914-18—1939-45.” But revisions are here too: an inscription that reads, “Guide our feet in the way of peace,” and a new border spread 360 degrees around the names of those fallen German soldiers, which mentions “Guernica, Rotterdam, London, Stalingrad . . . Auschwitz, Dresden, Hiroshima.”

Such expansion of public empathy for the total human costs of war presents a challenge to memorial designers. It challenges American Christians to put into practice signs of grief for “all the dead of our wars.” The suggestion will strike some of us as unpatriotic, as dismissive of the evils that our enemies did or meant to do, an insult to American soldiers who died combating those evils.

Christians should know biblical answers to these objections: We believe that Christ died for all; why then should we not mourn the deaths of all? We say that we are obligated to heed the teaching, “Love your enemies . . . do good to those who misuse you.” Why then should we not show at least some love for our enemies by publicly witnessing to our sorrow on their behalf?