



## **Are The Lives Of All Humans Equally Valuable?**

**From Thinking Outside the Boxe's Sydney Correspondent**

Before I begin, it is important to point out that this article will not be an analysis of the arguments put forward by the controversial ethicist Peter Singer. As such I am in no way arguing that the life of one individual is worth more or less than that of another. Instead, my intention is to look at the evidence that suggests that on a broader basis society does quite often, for a variety of reasons, appear to consider that one person, or group of people is more important and valuable than another.

This tendency to view people in this way should not be surprising given that we are frequently encouraged to indulge in the polar view of 'myself' or 'I' as opposed to the 'other'. Take for example George W. Bush's bold declaration that "you are with us, or against us". At the most basic level this divides the world into no more than 'Cowboys' and 'Indians', and as every child knows, the cowboys always win. Using this analogy I would suggest that broadly speaking the Cowboys are the white middle and upper classes that have dominated Western society right from the age of Classical Greece through to the present day. If you disagree, think about how closely money is connected to power and who has, and who has always had, the majority of it. And the Indians are everyone else. They are the African American slaves; the native people of a great number of nations; the poor inhabitants of the third world; and increasingly the innocent civilians of the Middle East and North Africa, whose deaths are regarded as collateral damage both by Western military forces and the terrorists who target their fellow countrymen regardless of religion.

Notably, a study conducted by the Combating Terrorism Center at the West Point Military Academy revealed that between 2006 and 2008 non-Westerners were 38 times more likely to be killed by an Al Qaida attack than Westerners. It can obviously be argued that this is largely due to the fact that Al Qaida is based in the Middle East. However, a comparison of statistics between 1995 and 2003 showed that Al Qaida was becoming more indiscriminate in its attacks.

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When two passenger planes crashed into the Twin Towers of New York's World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 nearly 3,000 innocent people were killed, most of whom were American citizens. The shock and outrage that was so rightly felt was partly a justifiable anger at the terrorists who masterminded and carried out the atrocity, but it was largely an overwhelming sense of shock that a terrorist attack of this magnitude could actually be carried out on American soil. The United States and its allies have now fought the 'war on terror' in two nations as a direct result of this terror attack. The number of civilian Iraqi's and Afghani's killed during this war on terror is widely disputed but a very conservative estimate by Brown's Watson Institute for International Studies has come up with a figure of 132, 000. These civilians died as a result of both coalition action and terrorist activities.

The loss of these innocent lives can be justified as very unfortunate collateral damage (in the words of the U.S. Government) that has occurred in pursuit of the greater goal. It is also possible to argue that the term 'collateral damage' dehumanises these innocent individuals, thereby diminishing the worth of their lives in comparison with the lives of the soldiers who have died fighting the war on terror, and perhaps more importantly, the lives of the 3,000 people who were killed on September 11, 2001. This is not to suggest that we should not value our countrymen and women highly. After all, what kind of society would we find ourselves in if everyone considered human life to be worthless.

The lives lost on that day on September 11, 2001 can also be compared with the toll terrorism has taken on other nations. America's National Counterterrorism Center's 2009 Report on Terrorism reported that in 2009 there were 10,999 terrorist attacks worldwide. Of these 2,458 occurred in Iraq and 2,126 in Afghanistan. These 10,999 attacks resulted in over 58,000 victims including nearly 15,000 deaths in 83 countries worldwide. In the Philippines on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November, 34 members of the media were killed, the largest number of reporters ever killed in a single incident.

History also demonstrates clearly that in recent times not all humans have been regarded as of equal worth. In Australia, a Referendum held as recently as 1967 voted overwhelmingly to amend the Constitution to count indigenous Australians in the



overall population of the country. What this means, quite incredibly, is that prior to the Referendum, Australia's first people were technically regarded as *Fauna* (in NSW under the Flora and Fauna Act).

In an irony of sorts, Australia's national broadcaster, the ABC recently televised a report revealing that Canada, a nation that has spent millions of dollars clearing deadly asbestos from public buildings is still mining asbestos and selling it to India, where the use of asbestos is still legal. In India the dangers of asbestos are not well known and it is used widely in the manufacture of cheap (and therefore popular) roofing sheets. The dangers of asbestos have been known in Australia for 30 years and clearly the Canadian Government is of the same opinion. In the report, an Indian anti asbestos campaigner Madhumita Dutta states "I think they (the Canadian suppliers) are racist..it's such a double standard". The reporter, Matt Peacock puts it more bluntly early in the story when he says, "But what's unsafe in Canada it seems is still safe enough to export to India". Madhumita Dutta is far too kind. Like the cowboys of the wild west, the Canadian Government and the asbestos industry just don't care about the lives of Indians.

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