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EDITORIAL

Rules of Engagement

The news of the Italian journalist whose car was sprayed by American gunfire on the way to the Baghdad airport stunned the world. But perhaps the worst thing about the wounding of the reporter, Giuliana Sgrena, and the killing of the Italian intelligence agent who was shielding her is that the attack wasn't unique.

On Jan. 18, American soldiers on patrol near Mosul were ordered to stop an oncoming car. After giving some warning shots, six soldiers sprayed the vehicle, firing at least 50 rounds. Chris Hondros, a photographer for Getty Images, said that when the car had come to a stop, he "could hear sobbing and crying coming from the car, children's voices." A car door opened, and six children, one only 8 years old, tumbled into the street, splattered with blood. The parents of four of the children lay dead in the front seat, their bodies riddled with bullets. Back at the base, the company commander told the soldiers that there would be an investigation, but that they had followed the rules of engagement.

Both cases - and presumably hundreds more like them - are a dreadful reminder of the human cost of America's war with Iraq and the ensuing occupation. Iraqi civilians don't have to live only in fear of suicide bombers and masked insurgents. They also must fear being mistaken for an insurgent by jumpy American forces, which are told to shoot first and ask questions later.

American soldiers operate under rules of engagement that give them the authority to open fire whenever they have reason to believe that they or others in their unit may be at risk of suicide bombings or other insurgent attacks. No one can fault an American G.I. at a checkpoint who fires on a car that refuses to stop, because the insurgency has targeted such checkpoints with impunity. But with every additional civilian who is killed by American fire, the human cost rises - both in terms of the lives lost and the psychological damage suffered by the Americans in uniform.

More broadly, these accidents further harm the United States' already shaky image abroad. And they play into the hands of extremists, who use them to vilify America and the American soldier.

It is the responsibility of those at the top of the chain of command - the ones who write these rules of engagement - to make sure that such rules are as close to mistake-proof as possible. That means studying hard the approach to each and every checkpoint put up by the United States military to make sure civilians understand that they should slow down. It means studying tactics used by others, like the British in Northern Ireland and the Israelis in the occupied territories, to gather every shred of useful information out there about how to construct checkpoints in a way that makes their presence obvious to anyone.

None of us want our soldiers killed by suicide bombers who get too close. But neither do we want these soldiers to have to live forever with the knowledge that they killed a heroic intelligence officer, or that they mowed down the parents of four Iraqi children in front of their very eyes, by mistake.