

FactCheck.org Stands Behind False Report on U.S. Deaths During WWII

On Jan. 20, 2021, Annenberg Fact Check (FactCheck.org) published a summary review of President Biden's inaugural speech. During that speech, Mr. Biden said the number of COVID-19 deaths for the year equaled the number of Americans who lost their lives during WWII.

FactCheck.org committed a methodological error in that fact check. Mr. Biden offered no indication he was restricting his claim to Americans in the armed services. But to fact check his claim, FactCheck.org turned to data on deaths for those in the armed services. The methodology was classic apples and oranges:

According to the Johns Hopkins [COVID-19 dashboard](#), updated at 12:21 p.m. on Jan. 20, around the time Biden made his remarks, the U.S. had 402,997 deaths from COVID-19 so far (there is some lag in reporting). According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, there were 291,557 battle deaths in World War II. There were another 113,842 deaths among service members not in theater. That comes to 405,399 total U.S. deaths in World War II.

Contrary to FactCheck.org's report, the [DVA](#) gave no number of overall U.S. deaths during WWII. The report clearly and implicitly gives numbers of deaths of those from the armed services:

World War II (1941 –1945)	
Total U.S. Servicemembers (Worldwide)	16,112,566
Battle Deaths	291,557
Other Deaths in Service (Non-Theater)	113,842
Non-mortal Woundings	670,846
Living Veterans ⁵	389,000

FactCheck.org's methodology, therefore, excluded consideration of civilian casualties. No fact checker worthy of the name should fact check an apple using orange data without transparently justifying its method to readers. FactCheck.org made no such attempt to justify its method. The faulty approach resulted in FactCheck.org falsely reporting to readers that 405,399 U.S. deaths occurred during World War II when the total was at least 10,000 greater than that. [Nearly 10,000 civilian](#) Merchant Marines were killed when their vessels were attacked or sunk by the enemy. Other civilians also were killed during military action, such as those who [died at Pearl Harbor](#).

I sent FactCheck.org a correction request on Jan. 30, 2021. [As of Feb. 9, 2021](#), the article showed no sign of any correction.

I find it hard to imagine any legitimate excuse for sticking with the false report. The fact check should note the distinction between civilian and military service and report the numbers in a way that recognizes that distinction.

It ought to go without saying that fact checkers committed to doing corrections openly and honestly should act to make a correction in response to solid evidence showing they reported inaccurately.

Thanks for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

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