

PolitiFact Stands Behind False Report on U.S. Deaths During WWII

On Jan. 20, 2021, PolitiFact 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.

PolitiFact 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, PolitiFact turned to data on deaths for those in the armed services. The methodology was classic apples and oranges:

As Biden was speaking, the [Johns Hopkins University coronavirus tracker](#) was reporting 402,269 deaths in the United States. That is just shy of the 405,399 U.S. deaths during World War II, according to the [Congressional Research Service](#).

Contrary to PolitiFact's report, the CRS gave no number of overall U.S. deaths during WWII. The report says it gives numbers of deaths of those from the armed services:

This report provides U.S. war casualty statistics. It includes data tables containing the number of casualties among American military personnel who served in principal wars and combat operations from 1775 to the present. It also includes data on those wounded in action and information such as race and ethnicity, gender, branch of service, and cause of death. The tables are compiled from various Department of Defense (DOD) sources.

The report goes on to say:

U.S. casualty statistics are information on war fighters who have fallen in global or regional conflicts involving the United States. The data are gathered on deceased, wounded, ill, or injured active duty U.S. military personnel and Guard/Reservists.

PolitiFact'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. PolitiFact made no such attempt to justify its method. The faulty approach resulted in PolitiFact 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 PolitiFact a correction request on Jan. 31, 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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