# the fall
of a pseudo-icon
### The toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue as image management

> *"Soldier Watches Toppling" was accorded the most national and international acclaim of all the still images taken of the Saddam Hussein statue being pulled down in Baghdad. Like most of the images of the event shown on broadcasts or in print, this photo was taken at close range, making it difficult to estimate how many people were in the crowd that day. This image was offered temporarily as a summing up of the result of the Iraq War—and it was, for one aspect of the war, for a short time. News organizations, however, must contextualize for the readers and viewers what is shown. Photojournalism is about the big picture, not just the great shot.*
Photograph by Goran Tomasevic, © Reuters 2003

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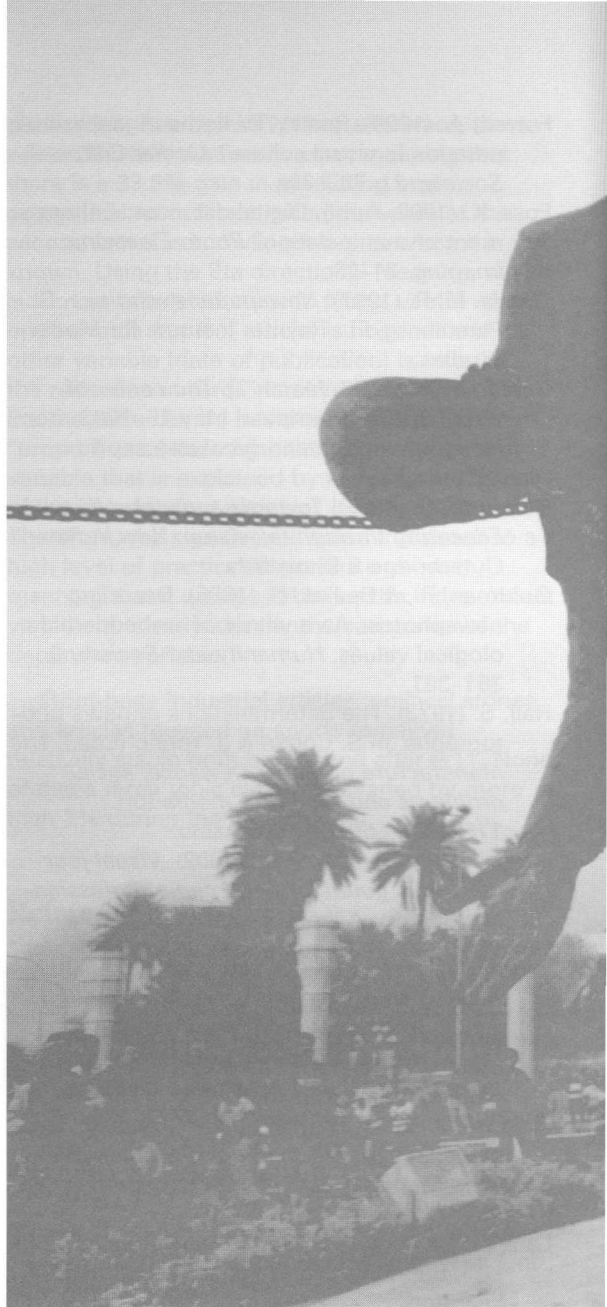
On April 9, 2003, the 21st day of America's war with Iraq, the 40-foot bronze statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad's Firdos Square was pulled down in front of dozens of still and video photojournalists—and, thus, the world. Studying "icons" such as the Saddam-toppling pictures is of interest to researchers endeavoring to judge the relation of photojournalism to the events that it portrays both as news and as history (Domke, Perlmutter, & Spratt, 2002). This article analyzes the most published photograph of the Saddam Hussein statue toppling as an icon, including the activities leading to the toppling, as well as the event's significance.
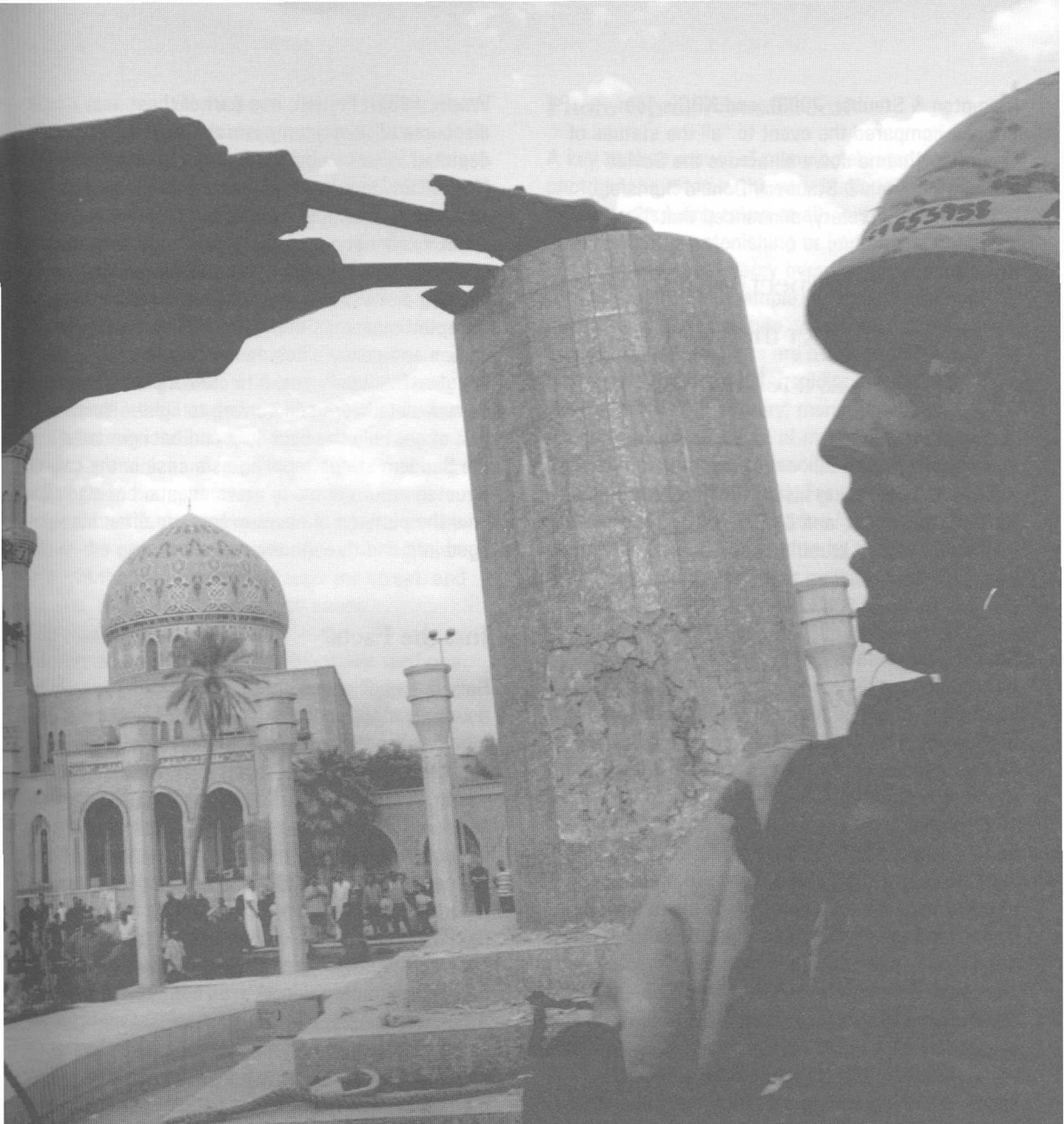
ecent history's most celebrated and most documented iconoclasm occurred on April 9, 2003, the 21st day of America's war with Iraq, when the 40-foot bronze statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad's Firdos (the Arabic word for Paradise) Square was pulled down in front of dozens of still and video photojournalists. The resulting images—which tended to show the parabola of the falling of the statue, an American soldier covering Saddam's face with the Stars and Stripes, or Iraqis stomping on the fallen statue—led most of the world's news broadcasts and appeared on the front pages of most newspapers and magazines. In doing so, the news industry instantly imprinted the title of "icon" on the scene: The picture became famous but also was denoted by journalistic and political elites as emblematic of the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime. "The dealing with a statue: a deeply symbolic act," ABC's Peter Jennings said (Bianco, 2003). The *Boston Globe* proclaimed, "It was liberation day in Baghdad"

(Rampton & Stauber, 2003), and NBC's Tom Brokaw compared the event to "all the statues of Lenin [that] came down all across the Soviet Union" (Rampton & Stauber). Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. defense secretary, announced that "Saddam

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Hussein is now taking his rightful place alongside Hitler, Stalin, Lenin, and Ceausescu in the pantheon of failed brutal dictators, and the Iraqi people are well on their way to freedom" (Miga & Guarino, 2003, News p. 002).

Studying icons such as the Saddam-toppling pictures is increasingly of interest to researchers attempting to gauge the relation of photojournalism to the events that it portrays both as news and also as a precursor to the verdict of history (Domke, Perlmutter, & Spratt, 2002; Goldberg, 1991; Hariman & Lucaites, 2004; Monk, 1989; Perlmutter, 1997b, 1998, 2004; Perlmutter & Wagner, 2004; Spruill, 1983). Photo icons are crucial units of study because the claims made about their power tend to be global and totalistic, although often these "powers" are shown to be modified or complicated under closer scrutiny (Bossen, 1982; Perlmutter, 1998). These icons often receive universal recognition as well as being said to change the world. Ascribed effects range from emotional shock, summing up larger events, and pushing policymakers to action.

A critical first step, however, in any attempt at understanding the scope and influence of a given icon is a review of the circumstances surrounding its creation. The "backstage" events are often hidden from the actual audience that receives and perceives the single image or scant few seconds of video or film. As visual anthropologist Sol Worth observed, most audiences see only edemic (edited, published) views of the world rather than the cademic (as photographed, unedited, and unprinted;

Worth, 1981). Further, it is part of the discourse of photojournalism that events are depicted in news photos or video as being just "found" or "captured" rather than as the products of a long and complicated trail of creative decisions. Examinations of the provenance of icons, in contrast, reveal insights into the icon making and shaping process but also challenge many of the accepted meanings that mass audiences and discourse and policy elites derive from the famous images. This study seeks to offer a preliminary— as new details are still coming to light—illumination of not only the backdrop and background of the Saddam statue toppling as a case in the constructed nature of many news events, but also of how the pictures of news events are often managed into and through the news stream.

Just the Facts?

How the small group of Iraqis attempting to pull down the statue and the crowd watching came together has become almost a legend of urban warfare. Some sources report a random group of young Iraqi men in track suits walking through the streets of Baghdad spontaneously beginning to pull down the statue with a rope given to them by U.S. forces (Marines Tell, 2003). Photojournalists and reporters, who happened to be eating lunch outside the Palestine Meridien Hotel, were attracted by the spectacle. According to other reports, because the perimeter around the park was cordoned off by the American military, the U.S. government must have staged the event and brought in a crowd (Niman, 2003). A few claim the majority of people watching the toppling were journalists and photographers and that it was simply a large-scale photo op or pseudoevent, if not an actual outdoor stage play (Pilger, 2004). Some describe the event, labeled as an exercise in public relations, "as a perfect stunt executed by the U.S. military and hotshot Washington public relations experts" (Cobb, 2003, p. C9).

Although the origin of the moment is unclear, the follow-up is certain. After a small crowd of Iraqis tried for nearly an hour to bring down the statue (built in commemoration of Saddam's 65th birthday), U.S. Marines offered the services of a winch

from a tank recovery vehicle. The first pull broke the statue at the shins, bringing the bronze Hussein halfway down, dangling off its 25-foot-high pedestal. At this point the crowd, which had grown in size—by invitation or natural aggregation we do not know—began pelting the statue with rocks and shoes.[1] With a final tug, the statue snapped from its pedestal, leaving only the twisted metal of the feet with two rusted pipes sticking out of them. The crowd roared when the statue finally crashed to the ground, and many Iraqis rushed forward to attack the hollow form, hitting its face and head with their shoes. Marines and Iraqis excitedly shook hands and exchanged high fives. Small groups of spectators raised their hands in front of their faces and murmured prayers as they sat on the grass in the square. Several Iraqi men dragged the torn-off head through the street, and children rode it and beat it with shoes.

Reuters photographer Goran Tomasevic was one of many who shot the scene.[2] One of Tomasevic's photographs, "Soldier Watches Toppling" (see accompanying photo) was eventually accorded the most national and international acclaim of all the still images taken that day.[3] In this photo, a crowd of fewer than 100 Iraqis and reporters gathers around the outer perimeter of the base of the 40-foot bronze statue of Saddam Hussein. The image shows the statue of Hussein being pulled down by a chain (attached at one end to a winch on the tank recovery vehicle, not pictured) wrapped around the neck of the statue. A rope also hangs from the neck of the statue, a remnant of an earlier attempt by Iraqis to take down the statue. The statue has been pulled halfway down from the base, forming a 90° angle. The statue is broken at the shins and hangs on only two poles still attached to the base. In the foreground is a U.S. Marine whose body is facing the camera, head turned over his right shoulder. He appears to be watching the falling statue. The image of the statue stands against the background of the "14th of Ramadan" mosque with its columns, but also palm trees and a blue sky. These latter elements are elegant reminders of the region of the world in which the event is taking place, but, metaphorically, one might read them as suggestions of Iraq's presumably brighter post-Saddam future.

Photo-Op or News Event?

A key to the renown of many celebrated war photographs often is the very implausibility of such photographs being taken at all; with the regard attached to the astonishing or improbable photograph comes controversy over its authenticity (Griffin, 1999). For example, to achieve the best photographic composition, well known American Civil War photographers are believed to have moved the bodies of dead soldiers (Carlebach, 1992). In the 20th century, many famous war images were the subject of manipulation ranging from outright staging to fanciful editing (Brugioni, 1999; Jaubert, 1986/1989). For example, in 1943 the British illustrated magazine *Parade* published an image of what appeared to be a action shot of British soldiers picking their way victoriously

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through the smoke, sand, and rubble of Tobruk, North Africa; the picture was in fact staged before the battle by a British army film crew aptly nick-named the "Circus". (Jaubert, p. 177). The problem is so acute that even famous images that scholar-ship has found to be authentic—that is, taken of events naturally occurring in front of the photographer and not incited or created by the photogra-

pher, such as the "Dying Spanish Militiaman" or the "Flag-Raising at Iwo Jima"—have been questioned (Perlmutter, 1999). More recently, an award-winning *Los Angeles Times* photographer was fired after it was discovered that one of his published images from the Iraq War was a composite of two other images.

We argue that the partially staged nature of the Saddam Hussein statue toppling further complicates the issue of the authenticity of war photography. The iconoclastic scenario's imagery was not faked in the Photoshop digital-manipulation sense—it actually did happen—but the statue's location was the primary contributor to the massive coverage of its demise. This is commonplace among icons: The "Man Standing Against Tanks" near Tiananmen Square was so well photographed because he was within telephoto lens range of the hotel to which most foreign photojournalists had retreated after the 1989 Chinese government crackdown (Perlmutter 1998). Firdos Square, as mentioned, faces the Palestine Meridian Hotel,

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where the majority of reporters and photographers covering the war were headquartered. Simple proximity allowed complete coverage of the statue toppling, thus creating one of the greatest photo opportunities in recent imagination. Firdos Square was an excellent place for a photo op—for Saddam, originally, to place his statue and later for his topplers to garner maximum publicity for his vicarious downfall.

Yet, there is a complication to the simple proximity-equals-access equation. Many independent photographers who could have been available to

shoot the event were not present because on April 8th U.S. forces, in a preliminary raid on Baghdad, fired a tank mortar into the Reuters office in the hotel, launched an air strike on Al Jazeera's office, and assaulted the Abu Dhabi television office, Al Jazeera's primary competition, with small arms fire (Niman, 2003). The attacks were responsible for the deaths of a Reuters correspondent, a Spanish Telecinco correspondent, and one of Al Jazeera's best known correspondents. Six other journalists were wounded, and a false report claiming the death of Goran Tomasevic was even filed by one newspaper. The group Reporters Without Borders (Mari, 2004) declared, "The U.S. Army deliberately and without warning targeted journalists." The Committee to Protect Journalists charged that the United States, by attacking journalists, was in direct violation of the Geneva Convention (Simon, 2003). Pentagon officials claimed they were only returning fire after being fired on with rockets from the direction of the Palestine Meridien Hotel. Pentagon officials also claimed that weapons were fired from the Al Jazeera and Abu Dhabi television offices—charges that the journalists deny. Whatever the facts, the result was that many journalists not embedded with the U.S. military were pinned down under fire and were not present when the statue was taken down.

The ambiguity of the events also was actuated by one of the most frequent editing decisions of photojournalism: how to crop a scene. Most of the images shown on broadcasts or in print were shot at close range or cropped tightly, making it difficult to estimate how many individuals were actually in the crowd. Pictures of the event released later, mostly via the Internet, revealed a sparse crowd of about 200 people. Some sources claim that reporters and photographers composed one third of the crowd. Questions also have arisen about who actually attended the event, especially because the military had secured the perimeter. The majority of reporters and anchors implied that the toppling was a real image of Iraqi liberation (Zurawick, 2003). However, one eyewitness claimed it was a "rent-a-crowd brought in from Saddam City" (Watson, 2003).

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all. The knocked-down statue had many news agencies proclaiming Baghdad had fallen and the war was won, with the only evidence being the pictures of the toppling (Barnes, 2003). In addition, the scene was considered important enough to be breaking news: Television networks interrupted their regular programming to cover the event live. Yet, 6 days later 20,000 Iraqis rallied in the streets of Nasiriyah to oppose the U.S. military presence in Iraq. "Yes to freedom, yes to Islam," the protesters chanted, "no to America, no to Saddam," (Rampton & Stauber, 2003). This latter event received moderate-to-almost-no media attention; here the press acted as a legitimator of one form of protest (toppling the statue) but as a delegitimator of another (cf. Kim, 2000; Larson & Chen, 1992; Perlmutter & Wagner, 2004).

Clearly, the media embraced the statue toppling as a supercharged moment of symbolism. "The huge statue of Saddam Hussein falling in Baghdad symbolically reflected the end of his regime. Watching the dramatic scenes in the streets of Baghdad yesterday flashed back memories for me of the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union," said CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer (Zurawick, 2003). But was this really the case? The Iraqi people did not bring down the statue—Americans did. While doing so, one U.S. Marine placed an American flag over the statue's head, an image of conquest and death, as opposed to liberation. This action seemed to indicate that this was a struggle between the United States and Hussein, rather than for the Iraqi people (compare the Tomasevic photograph with "Soldier Placing American Flag Over Statue," at www.commondreams.org/headlines03/0409–07.htm). Within a few minutes, the American flag was removed and replaced by a pre-Hussein flag of Iraq. In Tomasevic's photograph, "Soldier Watches Toppling," the ragged rope, the Iraqis' liberation tool, hangs limply from the statue's neck, replaced by a metal chain, an American chain.

Finally, this photograph, as with many photojournalistic icons, can be interpreted as a representation of a primordial theme (cf. Perlmutter, 1997a, 1997b, 1998) embedded in a particular visual and literary culture—the toppling of a dictatorial regime. The destruction and defacing of old symbols has been repeated throughout history and can be traced back as far as ancient Assyria (Nylander, 1980). Immediately, reporters, anchors, experts, and U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld compared the statue-toppling scenes to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. In modern times, this kind of liberation footage is predictable war imagery. Joyous crowds dancing in the streets and the defacing of old monuments and symbols are not only expected but also practically required: a "plug-n-play" symbol. We offer the caution that the news industry was, in that sense, too quick to play the plug offered at Firdos Square.

Conclusion

As documentary filmmaker Ken Burns said, "When we repeat an image over and over again, we're forgetting all the other places we could also be looking at that moment. These images become justification, proof of what we want them to become. That's the nature of iconic images" (Gilbert & Ryan, 2003). The "Saddam's Toppling" image was offered temporarily as a summing up of the result of the Iraq War—and it was, for one aspect of the war, for a short time. Undoubtedly, Tomasevic and his colleagues shot a visually interesting event; that is the fundamental duty of his profession. News organizations, however, are required to contextualize for the readers and viewers what is shown. Pictures, thus, should be regarded as visual anecdotes, because they show circumscribed vistas and cannot, however wide-angle the lens or deep the field, take in all that is needed to know about any scene (Perlmutter, 1992; 1997b). Photojournalism must be about the big picture, not just the great shot.

That the images of the Iraq war have varied so drastically in their inferred meaning—from signifying total victory to symbolizing an insurgency quagmire—and may well change in meaning again—sums up the dilemma of photojournalistic icons. On May 1, 2003, off the coast of California, President George W. Bush landed in flying gear on the deck of the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln—which sported a banner reading "Mission accomplished"—and announced, "Major combat opera-

tions in Iraq have ended." The war, said Bush, had been carried out "with a combination of precision and speed and boldness the enemy did not expect, and the world had not seen before," (Elliott, 2003). However, the mission was not accomplished then and still is not. The reconstruction of Iraq has proven far more difficult than any official (or even most prewar critics) assumed it would be. Furthermore, had the media chosen to report the Saddam statue-toppling episode in its entirety, the other possible future could have been symbolized as well. As Marines prepared to bring down the statue of Hussein in Firdos Square, shots were fired at them and sent many running for protection. The assailants were never found. In hindsight, such a scene would have been the most appropriate image from that day to foreshadow what was to come.

Notes

[1]As one commentator noted, "'Showing the sole' of the shoe or foot to the face of an enemy is an insult in Iraqi culture" (Zurawick, 2003, p. 2). Notably, this same symbolic and physical act has been subsequently carried out by Iraqis attacking the dead bodies of Americans killed by insurgents.

[2]Tomasevic is a Serb who has covered Iraq for the past year and a half. He won the 1999 Yugoslav Press Photo Award for the general news category. The day before the toppling, Tomasevic was in his room in the Palestine Meridien Hotel on the 15th floor when a shell from a U.S. tank slammed into the building, killing two journalists filming from the balcony in the room next door.

[3]We compared 72 front pages of the top newspapers in the United States, listed according to Newseum, and 12 international newspapers. Tomasevic's photo was prominently featured and replicated more than any other image of the toppling of the statue.

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