

Photojournalism and Foreign Affairs

by David D. Perlmutter

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News pictures can be problems for modern statesmen. As then-Secretary of State Warren Christopher once declared, "Television images cannot be the North Star of America's foreign policy."¹ Updating this lament for the age of pixels and the Internet, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld recently complained to Congress, "We're functioning with peacetime restraints, with legal requirements, in a wartime situation in the information age, where people are running around with digital cameras and taking these unbelievable photographs and then passing them off, against the law, to the media, to our surprise, when they have not even arrived in the Pentagon."²

Yet, these are ancient concerns. In the world's first major treatise on governance, Plato's *Republic*, the philosopher argued that most artists should be banned from an ideal state because they upset public opinion with "emotional" images that "too easily fool the senses, confusing reality with falsehood." Today, even if such a proscription were desirable and constitutional, it would not be practical. Modern technology allows anyone with a digital camera and a Web connection to upload a picture that, in theory, is available for global consumption. The instant, "live from ground zero," 24/7 nature of news tends to compress or even collapse the old news cycle, whereby editors usually had at least a day to consider what was "fit to print" or air.³ In addition, millions of Web sites complement and compete with traditional news media. As a result, foreign affairs as perceived by the public

¹ Statement of the Hon. Warren Christopher, Secretary of State, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Nov. 4, 1993.

² Rumsfeld Testimony before Senate Armed Services Committee, May 7, 2004.

³ Susan D. Moeller, *Shooting War: Photography and the American Experience of Combat* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); David D. Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy: Icons of Outrage in International Crises* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998); Philip Seib, *Headline Diplomacy: How News Coverage Affects Foreign Policy* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997); Philip Seib, *Going Live: Getting the News Right in a Real-Time, Online World* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

and policymakers are defined by pictures more than ever: what we don't see, what we do see, and how visions of war, relations, trade, or diplomacy are captioned and contextualized.

Not all images gain equal stature, influence, or importance. Thousands of news pictures representing events in far-off lands show up in print, on broadcasts and cablecasts, and on the Web each day. Only a select number become photojournalism icons in the realm of foreign affairs, so familiar that they can be summed up in a few words: "Marines raising the flag at Iwo Jima," "Saigon shooting during Tet Offensive," "Rabin-Arafat handshake," "Man standing against the tanks near Tiananmen," "Desecrated bodies of American soldiers in Mogadishu," "World Trade Center struck," "Toppling of Saddam's statue," "Abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib," and "Hostage held in Iraq." The claims about the powers of these icons are almost unlimited: they drive public opinion, they overturn government agendas, they force policy, they make history—they change the world. Few policymakers are happy about this situation, but most assume it to be the case.

To take one clear example with direct current import, in his autobiography, Secretary of State Colin Powell explains his reasoning for advising an end to hostilities in the earlier Gulf War while Saddam Hussein was still in power:

Saddam had ordered his forces to withdraw from Kuwait. The last major escape route, a four-lane highway leading out of Kuwait City toward the Iraqi city of Basra, had turned into a shooting gallery for our fliers. The road was choked with fleeing soldiers and littered with the charred hulks of nearly fifteen hundred military and civilian vehicles. Reporters began referring to this road as the "Highway of Death."

I would have to give the President [George H. W. Bush] and the Secretary [Dick Cheney, then the Secretary of Defense] a recommendation soon as to when to stop, I told Norm [General Norman Schwarzkopf]. The television coverage, I added, was starting to make it look as if we were engaged in slaughter for slaughter's sake.⁴

It is hard to imagine such a rationale besetting George Washington, William Tecumseh Sherman, or George S. Patton, but those military leaders practiced their craft before the advent of CNN. Today, then, a policy that does not "look good" on television, on the front page of the newspaper, or on a Web site may be unsustainable.

Was Powell's apprehension warranted? Certainly, pictures are often as important as the reality, in the minds of the viewers as well as the policymakers. In the case of the "road of death," appearances were deceiving. Postwar studies found that most of the wrecks on the Basra roadway had been abandoned by Iraqis before being strafed and that actual enemy casualties were low. Further, and perhaps most important, opinion surveys showed that the American public's support for the war was largely unaffected by images of

⁴ Colin L. Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Ballantine, 1995), p. 505.

bomb damage to Iraqis and Iraq. Arab and Muslim public opinion was, of course, another matter, about which Powell may have been rightly concerned.

The main differences between the 2003 Iraq War and the 1991 Gulf War centered on the issue of control. Most American war planners of 1991 were of the Vietnam generation; some, like General Schwarzkopf and Powell, had fought in Vietnam. It is unsurprising, then, that restrictions on the press through the guise of “pool reporting” were tight. Basically, for most of the short length of the 1991 war, Americans saw only pictures that were provided by the Department of Defense. Government planners understood that there would be a rebellion in the press if they supplied no images—the news media needs strong visuals. So we watched Patriot missiles shooting up in the air, laser-guided bombs taking out bridges, and a host of other remarkable tech-war images. We learned only after the conflict that many of these images were not showing what we were told was happening. For example, regarding images of “scud-busting,” the U.S. Air Force’s own *Gulf War Air Power Survey* concluded that:

[I]t remains impossible to confirm the actual destruction of *any* Iraqi mobile launchers by Coalition aircraft. . . . Most of these reports [of kills] undoubtedly stemmed from attacks that did destroy things found in the Scud launch areas. But, most of the objects involved—though not all—now appear to have been (1) decoys, (2) vehicles such as tanker trucks that were *impossible to distinguish* on infrared or radar sensors from mobile launchers and their associate support vehicles, or (3) objects that were unfortunate enough to have Scud-like signatures. [Emphases mine.]⁵

By 2003, communications technology had improved to the point where the individual journalist could uplink to a satellite. For the air and ground phase of the initial invasion of Iraq, embedded journalists were able to send their reports home accompanied by startling footage. But when the regime fell and the insurgency began, the Department of Defense was essentially left with no counter-images to provide against the relentless scenes of burning American vehicles and smoking Iraqi buildings. It is not that journalists are conspiring against the good news of much of Iraqi reconstruction, but that modern televisual news finds nothing newsworthy in the greater part of Iraq, where reconstruction is under way. This is a universal principle of news: one bombed hotel is more photo-worthy than a hundred rebuilt schools. The modern policymaker, then, must provide images to support the policy, not just chafe at “negative” coverage.

The actual influences of visual images on foreign affairs are thus worthy of sober assessment, not myth-making. In fact, the supposedly strong effects of pictures are often elusive or explained by other causes. We need a guiding theory of image strategies that policymakers should consider before

⁵ E. A. Cohen, ed., *Gulf War Power Survey* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Air Force/Government Printing Office, Part II, 1993), pp. 330–1.

making any assumptions about the effect of any given iconic image on foreign affairs.

From Bas-reliefs to Photoshopping

For most of recorded history, communication was conducted without the benefit of mass media of any kind. Even when modern humans first started using pictures and writing systems, messages were created by one individual for other individuals to view. Yet, urban civilizations and empires needed to distribute messages about matters of state, and especially foreign affairs, via images to large numbers of illiterate people. There were two main remedies for this technological gap.⁶

First, pictures could simply be shown to massed groups of people. When Roman emperors conducted a triumphal parade through the capital city, slaves walked along the lines of onlookers holding up large paintings portraying, as the historian Tacitus put it, “scenes of foreign mountains, rivers, and battles,” or wagons carried dioramas with scenes of combat or landscapes.

Second, most ancient rulers resorted to mass(ive) communication, to the effect of, “Look upon my works.” Ramses II, the thirteenth-century BCE Egyptian pharaoh, for example, commemorated his (purported) actions at the battle of Kadesh on the 100-foot walls of a great temple. He portrayed himself as a giant, smiting insect-like enemies. In the accompanying narrative, he boasted that he personally struck down “every warrior of the Hittite enemy, together with the many foreign countries which were with them.” The Assyrians employed similar images and epigraphs. One king, Ashur-nasir-pal, decorated his palace with reliefs illustrating his cruelty to enemy prisoners of war. The pictures were not displayed purely for vanity’s sake: Bronze Age ambassadors were meant to gaze upon them and be awed by the mass slaughter.

The eras we call the Dark and Middle Ages brought no new developments in the technology of distributing pictures. In fact, as infrastructure such as the Roman road networks atrophied, people had even less opportunity to “see” images from the front. Some of the most famous pictures of war from this period, such as the Bayeux Tapestry commemorating the 1066 Battle of Hastings, were like cave paintings in that the only way for large numbers of people to see them was to file by in person.

The first real new development in the interplay of pictures and foreign affairs came during the fifteenth-century era of printmaking. It is no coincidence that Gutenberg lived in a time of religious war within Europe and the start of the building of worldwide empires. Both Protestants and Catholics

⁶ Sian Lewis, *News and Society in the Greek Polis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); David D. Perlmutter, *Visions of War: Picturing Warfare from the Stone Age to the Cyberage* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1999); Gavin A. Sundwall, “Ammianus Geographicus,” *American Journal of Philology* 117.4, 1996, pp. 619–43.

would use printing technology to create propaganda tracts, illustrating the horrors perpetrated by their enemies. Empire-builders would employ pictures to make the case for the conquest of foreign lands.

The invention of photography in the 1840s allowed the “capturing” of events with a mechanical device, although it was almost fifty years before photojournalism was regularly practiced,⁷ and not until the 1930s that pictures were first regularly sent “over the wire.”⁸ Developments accelerated from the first black-and-white halftone used in transferring a photo to print, the miniature still camera, and roll film (1880s); radio-wireless transmissions of data (1895); commercial use of the Leica single-lens reflex camera (1925); and finally to the widespread use of color photography (1950s). By the 1960s, critics and researchers were already talking about “living-room wars”—yet news-film stock took about a day to be flown from, say, Saigon, and then to be processed to appear on the evening news or in afternoon papers. The launch of satellite transmission (1962), the employment of video and fiber-optic glass tubing (1970s), and the widespread use of the commercial Internet, digital photography, and commercial cell phones (1990s) further compressed the time between the pictured event and its delivery to an audience, so that now pictures of the Iraq War are available to viewers worldwide seconds after they are taken.⁹ As Frances Cairncross has noted, “As recently as the 1970s, more than half of all television news was at least a day old. Today almost all news is broadcast on the day it occurs.”¹⁰ And much news content is now being “downloaded” rather than viewed.

Mass visual propaganda as we know it was born in the twentieth century. Negative-photography, motion-picture film, the halftone process, cheap color processing, and mass printing presses all allowed millions of any one image to be produced. Techniques of mass persuasion, whether in the service of communism, Nazism, or consumer capitalism, multiplied. When Marshall McLuhan asserted that “the medium is the message,” he was exaggerating for effect: what was significant was that people in the global electronic village were getting almost all of their information about each other from mediated words and news images rather than personal experience.

In the last two decades, inclusive of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the onset of the war on terrorism, the media

⁷ Michael L. Carlebach, *The Origins of Photojournalism in America* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).

⁸ Jonathan Coopersmith, “From Lemons to Lemonade: The Development of AP Wirephoto,” *American Journalism*, 17(4) 2000.

⁹ See David D. Perlmutter, “Photojournalism (Still Photography)” in Donald H. Johnston, ed., *Encyclopedia of International Media and Communication* (San Diego: Academic Press, 2003); see also Menahem Blondheim, “The Click: Telegraphic Technology, Journalism, and the Transformations of the New York Associated Press,” *American Journalism* 17(4), 2000.

¹⁰ Frances Cairncross, *The Death of Distance: How the Communications Revolution will Change Our Lives* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1997), p. 8.

world has been further revolutionized. First, there is the expansion of what we define as “the media.” People—especially younger audiences—get their news from a fragmented hodgepodge of sources such as Matt Drudge, blogs, friends’ e-mails, “The Daily Show,” and Jay Leno. The generation that received its news via Walter Cronkite and the local newspaper is graying; mainstream news still exists, but it has thousands of gadfly competitors.

The second crucial development was digital photography. Now that pictures are amalgamations of pixels, any foreign scene can be faked or altered via “Photoshopping” digital-editing software. Many such doctored shots now fly through the Internet and e-mail, and some have even broken into traditional media, to the embarrassment of newspapers and broadcasters.

Policymakers assessing the uncontrolled nature of the global digital media world might be forgiven for sympathizing with the warnings of Plato and Socrates. Secretary Rumsfeld must realize that it is harder to keep secrets under these circumstances. Certainly, the Internet-digital genie cannot be put back in the bottle. But the interplay of pictures and public affairs can be better understood. Indeed, looking at some past and present examples of “powerful pictures,” we find both more and less than meets the eye. What emerges is a set of guidelines for policymakers, the press, and the public.

Saigon, 1968: The Picture that Lost the War?

The [Saigon] execution was added to people’s feeling that this is just horrible. This is just terrible. Why are we involved in a thing like this? People were just sickened by this, and I think this added to the feeling that the war was the wrong war at the wrong place.—John Chancellor, *NBC News*

On February 1, 1968, outside a Buddhist temple in Saigon, the capital of the Republic of Vietnam, Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, chief of the South Vietnamese National Police, shot a “Vietcong suspect.” It was one small piece of violence among the carnage of the Tet Offensive—attacks made mostly by Vietcong irregulars throughout South Vietnam starting at the Vietnamese lunar new year. A number of Western television crews and a few still photographers were present at the Saigon scene. One, Eddie Adams of the AP, later described the moments after he witnessed a prisoner dragged into the street: “Some guy walked over [and] pulled a pistol out. . . . I raised the camera thinking he was going to threaten [the prisoner].” The menace became an execution. Adams happened to take his photograph at the moment the victim was shot. At the same time, an NBC camera crew was rolling film, and although someone walked in front of the lens at the moment of impact, the moving images did capture the aftermath. General Loan’s own words are variously quoted, but in the most accepted version, he commented to the journalists, “Many Americans have been killed these last few days and many of

my best Vietnamese friends. Now do you understand? Buddha will understand.”¹¹

Within 24 hours, Adams’s picture—which won the Pulitzer Prize for Spot News Photography—appeared in magazines and newspapers throughout the world. The NBC film was shown on the next evening’s *Huntley-Brinkley Report* to 20 million viewers.

The Saigon execution photo and film seem a classic case of a powerful image that drove public opinion and elite decision-making. Hundreds of politicians, reporters, editors, and scholars have asserted, at the time and through today, that “this was the picture that lost the war,” or “this was the picture that drove the American public against the war.” These claims are not limited to opponents of American intervention in the Indochina conflict. “Powerful picture” believers include hawks and doves, protesters and generals. Robert Kennedy, who was then running for president, asserted: “The photograph of the execution was on front pages all around the world—leading our best and oldest friends to ask, more in sorrow than in anger, what has happened to America?” South Vietnam’s ambassador to the United States, Bui Diem, said that “the immediate reaction to such scenes was a gut revulsion to the barbarity of the war that tended to supersede more rational, long-term considerations.” William Westmoreland concluded that the photo and film “shocked the world, an isolated incident of cruelty in a broadly cruel war, but a psychological blow against the South Vietnamese nonetheless.”

Are these claims accurate? American public opinion did eventually turn against continuing the war in Vietnam. After Tet, no president promised “victory” (by World War II benchmarks) there, only peace with minimal losses and embarrassment.

Yet, by all measurements of public opinion available to us, the “shock” was *not* evident. Surveys showed that support for the war effort actually rose during Tet. Moreover, opposition to the war, which did rise afterwards, was not made up of only doves and protestors. Most Americans who opposed the war in Vietnam did so because, as polls often put it, “they opposed the way it was being fought.”¹² In short, they opposed Johnson’s war, but wanted victory in an all-out campaign. In addition, letters to the editors and the television networks reveal a public unfazed by the Saigon scene. NBC received only 90 comments about the execution footage, most writing to object to its being broadcast during the dinner hour. Data from oral history projects suggest that

¹¹ David D. Perlmutter, “The Myth Behind the Famous Eddie Adams ‘Execution’ Photo,” *Editor and Publisher*, Sept. 22, 2004 (online); George A. Bailey and Lawrence Lichty, “Rough Justice on a Saigon Street: A Gatekeeper Study of NBC’s Tet Execution Film,” *Journalism Quarterly* (49) 1972.

¹² John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973); Jeffrey S. Milstein, *Dynamics of the Vietnam War: A Quantitative Analysis and Predictive Computer Simulation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974); Samuel Kernell, “Explaining Presidential Popularity,” *American Political Science Review*, June 1978.

the Offensive, while acknowledged by Americans, was not classified as a decisively important news story. It did not eclipse the “March Madness” over college basketball, for example. More revealing, letter columns of newspapers and magazines were disdainful of the “Vietcong suspect,” and expressed some version of “he got what he deserved.”

Such sentiments are not unusual or unexpected: people often tie their sympathies to their prejudices or loyalties. To use an extreme example, most of the pre-liberation photographs we have of the Holocaust were created by the perpetrators of the genocide. They saw and used those pictures as bureaucratic errata, souvenir snapshots, or trophy photos, not as we do today, or many in America and Britain would have done if they had seen them in 1942, as visual evidence of evil.

Likewise, would we expect an American audience in 1968 to have any great concern for the fate of one of the enemy? Polling during the war found that whatever one’s feeling about the conflict, a majority of the public had negative feelings toward North Vietnam and the Vietcong. Almost all American distaste for the war was due to losses in American lives and the interminable length of the conflict. In short, the weight of evidence shows that some elites were indeed shocked by the Saigon execution, and some in government panicked at its celebrity, but the American public was neither irrational nor emotional in its reaction.

From this we draw a basic lesson of statecraft, even in a world of new media and technology. As George Gallup once observed, “Inaction hurts a president more than anything else.” When there is a crisis in foreign policy, political scientists have long noted a rallying boost in public opinion for the commander-in-chief. But that surge only lasts if the commander *leads*, that is, offers a clear solution to the crisis. During Tet, President Johnson, depressed, facing criticism from within the administration, and uncertain of his own course, was largely absent from the public sphere and offered no rallying cry toward any new initiatives. For the public, that meant war as usual—something for which in 1968, no one, neither doves nor hawks, had patience. The Saigon execution picture, thus, changed few minds; failure of leadership was the more powerful foreign affairs catalyst.

Tiananmen, 1989: The Man Against the Tanks

I was so moved today by the bravery of that individual that stood alone in front of the tanks rolling down, rolling down the main avenue there. And I’ll tell you, it was very moving. And all I can say to him, wherever he might be or to people around the world is we are and we must stand with him—President George H. W. Bush

In the spring of 1989, student demonstrations in the People’s Republic of China began to receive saturation media attention. While unrest occurred all over the country, events in Tiananmen Square in Beijing became the focus of

news cameras. World audiences witnessed the saga of protests, hunger strikes, confrontation with officials, the erection of a “Goddess of Democracy” and then, on June 4, the crackdown of the Chinese government and the repression to follow.

The one image that came to symbolize the entire Tiananmen Spring movement was taken not in the Square, but several blocks away, after the main events were over, and it contained none of the violence that crushed the protests. A column of Chinese army tanks rumbled down East Changan Boulevard, just below the tourist hotel to which most foreign journalists had retreated. A young man stepped in front of the lead tank. It stopped and so did the others in the column. The words of the man are not known exactly, but according to one report he shouted, “Why are you here? . . . You have done nothing but create misery. My city is in chaos because of you.” Then, caught on video and still photography, a stalemate ensued as the man refused to budge and the tanks neither crushed him nor maneuvered around. Finally, some bystanders rushed out into the street, convinced the man to withdraw, and whisked him away. His fate is unknown to this day.

Unlike the Saigon shooting, the “Man against the tanks” drew universal celebrity *and* a consensus of interpretation. People from across all nationalities and walks of life claimed to admire this heroic deed. In 1998, *Time* magazine voted the defiant man one of the top-20 revolutionaries and leaders of the twentieth century. President Bush, at a White House news conference, said that the man’s stalwartness and the “restraint” of the tank soldiers convinced him that “the forces of democracy are going to overcome these unfortunate events.” Practically every commentator in the West and certainly most members of Congress were on record praising the man and extolling the photograph as summing up the universalism of democratic aspirations.

The picture, however, raises some issues about the “powers” of news photography to effect political change. Certainly, a picture may become celebrated; it may symbolize a famous event for many people and be passed down in history as its encapsulation; it may spur an emotional reaction in many people; the meaning of the image may even be almost universally agreed upon—in this case, that the protest movement was “good” while the government of China were oppressors in the wrong. But, even with all those powers in play, a picture may not actually change the geopolitical landscape, or may do so only fleetingly.

In this case, fifteen years later, we might ask, what exactly did the picture do? Despite rhetorical outrage, the Bush administration could not permanently break off relations with China, and the Chinese government knew it. Trade suffered in the short term, military exchanges in the middle term. Today, the government of China is not beloved by the American public, but Chinese products are ubiquitous in the American home. Crucially as well, the administration understood the difference between a public sentiment and a voting bloc. Surveys showed that bad feelings toward the Chinese leadership

did not influence U.S. voting behavior. Indeed, an ABC-*Washington Post* poll of June 15–19, 1989, found public support for suspension of military sales was at 92 percent, yet a majority (54 percent) rated the president's response to Tiananmen as "just about right." The lesson: Sometimes a rhetorical and superficial response to a news icon is all that is required of political leaders, when the "crisis" the icon spurs seems to be waning *and* the objective effect on American citizens is small.

Somalia, 1992–93: Entrance Icons vs. Exit Icons

The people who are dragging around bodies of Americans don't look very hungry to the people of Texas—Senator Phil Gramm

The media age suggests a simple rule for government leaders: To justify a policy, point to a picture. On December 4, 1992, When President George H. W. Bush announced that American troops would be sent to Somalia to assist the UN relief efforts, he said, "Every American has seen the shocking images from Somalia." These included news video and still photos of swollen-bellied, fly-beset children. He continued, "The people of Somalia, especially the children of Somalia, need our help. . . Only the United States has the global reach to place a large security force on the ground in such a distant place quickly and efficiently and, thus, save thousands of innocents from death." The connection between pictures and action was seemingly direct. Bush's press secretary Marlin Fitzwater later claimed that "TV tipped us over the top." Historian Michael Beschloss explained that the president "responded to the outrage of the American public over television pictures of the Somalian famine."

Ironically, a year later other pictures, it is commonly thought, "drove" Americans out of Somalia. These showed the aftermath (for American soldiers) of the battle of Mogadishu, a fiery raid intended to capture warlord General Mohamed Farah Aidid, who was designated Public Enemy Number One by the UN. American audiences saw images of Somalis desecrating and dragging through the streets the bodies of U.S. soldiers, as well as another soldier's battered face on video taken by his kidnappers. The White House assured the public that President Clinton "finds those pictures reprehensible, and he wants to make sure something is done about that." Then, in political response, the Clinton administration eventually announced a pullout of troops from Somalia.

The Somalia intervention and exit are often cited as clear-cut cases of icons driving public opinion and public policy. Yet, here too we note complexity. First, certainly the news pictures, which began in earnest after the visit of a Congressional delegation to Somalia, did have an effect on what news audiences were *told* was an important issue. "Tonight," Jane Pauley announced early in the coverage, "Somalia has moved to the top of the global agenda." Yet, the agenda was moving in that direction anyway. Many aid

groups had targeted Somalia, the UN was also setting up operations (for which they needed American protection), and the president was already aware of crisis and the possibility of a capstone good deed for his presidency. Moreover, the world had witnessed so many starving African baby images over the last half century that they had become generic: in almost no case, from Biafra to the Sudan, was a military response considered the option of choice. In retrospect, it is not clear whether the Somalia starvation images spurred intervention or rather were excellent illustrations for it.

The collapse of the Somalia venture also raises a challenge to the “powerful picture” commonplace. Notably, the mission, dragging on, was already unpopular: support was less than 41 percent by September 1993, according to some polls. Crucially as well, few Americans were paying attention to Somalia before the Battle of Mogadishu; hence the shock of the images of defeat and humiliation. As in Vietnam, the primary concern of the American public was the American soldier. A Time/CNN/Gallup poll found that people who had seen the pictures the day after they were aired were more likely to support an exit from Somalia. But here again the issue of leadership in times of crisis arises. Further polling uncovered a duality in the American public, the majority of which would have supported the president in *any* decisive action he chose—to pull out (and solve the problem of American deaths) or to push in (avenge American deaths). In short, the public wanted a strong response in answer to potent images. Clinton, unlike LBJ, complied, albeit by calling for a retreat.

Iraq: The Rise of the Hypericon?

History becomes telescoped over time. Great, long-drawn-out events are now recalled in collective memory by a few images, facts, and phrases. Nevertheless, in today’s media, current history is being speeded up, at least in its photographic portrayals. These new indelible images might be called the hypericons—they pass by fleetingly, gain attention, and then are replaced quickly by new icons. The Iraq War and insurgency and the war on terror, while still in progress, exemplify this phenomenon. Since 9/11, a number of pictures have received saturation coverage in turn, from Saddam’s capture in his bunker through the all-too-numerous orange-jumpsuited hostages. Again, what “powers” do the images have? Are they any different for being digital and delivered via Web and satellite in real time versus being taken on film stock, flown to America, and then shown on the evening news or printed in the newspaper? Three current icons serve as examples of the complexity of the issues.

On March 31, 2004, Iraqi insurgents killed four American civilian contractors in the city of Fallujah. A civilian mob then beat the corpses, dragged them through the dusty streets, and hung two from a nearby bridge.

Several cameras captured the horrific events. Various photos emerged on Web sites and in the traditional media: “Contractors hanging from bridge,” “Iraqis beat burnt corpses with shoes and cheer,” and “Body dragged through streets.” Many mainstream newspapers and broadcasters, concerned about the various sensitivities involved, showed pictures of lesser violence, cropped or digitally edited the photos. For example, Bill Shine, Fox’s Vice President of Production, notes that “We made the call that it [the footage] was too graphic in nature to put on our air.” Other media on the front page of the newspaper. Richard Tapscott, managing editor of the *Des Moines Register*, noted, “The photograph, ‘Contractors hanging from bridge,’ is detailed enough that you can see the bodies hanging from the bridge and that they are charred”; the paper ran the photo on an inside page in black and white.¹³

On April 9, 2003, the twenty-first day of America’s war with Iraq, the 40-foot bronze statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad’s Firdos Square was pulled down. Part of the job was done by American soldiers, but a group of Iraqis, probably no more than a hundred, was also present to participate in the iconoclasm. More than a dozen photo and video journalists captured the incident. Pictures of the events—notably shown in medium shots that seemed to make the crowd larger than it actually was—were exhibited worldwide. “If this isn’t symbolism, I don’t know what is,” announced NBC’s Katie Couric. Concluded Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. Defense Secretary, “Saddam 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.” Missing in these images are some ulterior contexts: the statue fall was in essence a photo-op by the U.S. military, with the participants invited in and the area closed off. Ominously, gunshots were fired at one point, sending crowd and troops to cover.

On April 7, 2004, an employee of a civilian firm working for the Department of Defense took several digital pictures inside a cargo plane parked at Kuwait International Airport. One was of more than 20 flag-draped coffins of American service people who had been killed in Iraq and were scheduled to be shipped to Germany and then on to the United States. The worker e-mailed the picture as an attachment to a friend who lived in Seattle who, in turn, showed it to the local paper, the *Seattle Times*, which ran the picture on April 15 within a story about casualties in the war. Since 1991 this practice has been illegal by Department of Defense (DoD) injunction, but only during the Iraq War has the policy been fully enforced. Other papers picked up the picture as well as many Web sites and then newscasters. Additional coffin photos began to appear—some fakes, some miscaptioned. A controversy ensued: Was the DoD policy keeping the American people from seeing the consequences of war? What about the rights of the families of the deceased to

¹³Quotations from: David D. Perlmutter and Lesa Hatley Major, “Images of Horror from Fallujah,” *Nieman Reports*, Summer 2004.

privacy? What should the public see from the war—World War II—era censorship or anything that the media chose to print, air, or webcast?

New icons have continued to stream forth from this war: Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse, the hostage executions, and so on. The visual news system demands to be fed such pictures—now almost hourly. Edward Girardet suggests, “When such bang-bang footage is not available, the story does not appear quickly and powerfully for viewers. . . . Journalists, particularly television cameramen, are under pressure to bring back spectacular images to satisfy network appetites.”¹⁴ A war that is moving forward to capture the enemy’s cities, to win visible victories, tends to yield “good”—for the warmakers—footage. So images from the march to Baghdad pleased the Pentagon; but occupation and an anti-insurgency war, chaos, and rioting are natural sources of “bad” footage. Despite many successes in the rebuilding of Iraq’s infrastructure, no one at the DoD is happy with the way the war has been covered after, say, the autumn of 2003, or that photos from Abu Ghraib have become symbols in the Arab world of American imperialism.

Again, the political effects of the pictures depend on the actions of the leadership. Photos such as those taken at Fallujah set up a crisis in foreign policy, much as the similar pictures from Somalia had. Yet President Bush’s response speech promised no solution except “staying the course,” and subsequent events only reinforced perceptions that the administration was being indecisive. At the time, the American military was poised outside of Fallujah and the public was being told that several thousand fanatic insurgents were entrenched within. Heavy fighting was interspersed with civilian evacuations, negotiations, and tough talk: a Marine general threatened that the rebels had “days, not weeks” to disarm. And then, nothing. The violence in Fallujah continued.

In sum, the American public has historically been willing to “stay the course” to march to Berlin or island-hop to Tokyo, but not to watch its soldiers die each day in an insurgency war. Hence no one picture, according to surveys, has shocked public opinion, but rather support for the war has declined over time.

Pictures and Policymakers

The above cases suggest some enduring lessons about the interplay of pictures and foreign affairs. First, modern journalism demands action images: if policymakers don’t provide them, then journalists will seek them out on their own. It follows that policymakers must anticipate the images that a policy will engender as much as they anticipate its material effects. In the Iraq War, it is

¹⁴ Edward Girardet, “Public Opinion, the Media, and Humanitarianism,” in T. G. Weiss and L. Minear, eds., *Humanitarianism Across Borders: Sustaining Civilians in Times of War* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1993), p. 51.

clear that the administration did not create a plan for the post-invasion “image” battlefield. For example, there is considerable visual evidence of the immense war crimes and crimes against humanity of Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime, but these have appeared in media only occasionally. Why was there not a sustained publicity effort by the Departments of Defense and State to “show” the world—especially Muslim nations—Saddam’s atrocities? From the point of view of visual persuasion, the lack of any such campaign constitutes a major failure.

Of equal importance is the leadership’s quick reaction to “icon”-inspired crises. The machinery of the Departments of State and Defense has been slow to react to negative imagery from Iraq, and failed to expect the unexpected. Democratic governments cannot censor any images for very long—pixels will out, via the Web or other nontraditional channels. It is increasingly feasible and economical for anyone, from terrorist groups to governments (e.g., the new “Pentagon Channel”), to bypass traditional media. The need for speed is augmented in today’s media world because sensational images will appear before world audiences practically in real time; responses by policymakers must be equally quick and direct but also considered. This is only possible if the “image” scenarios are as comprehensively preplanned as battlefield options and contingent outcomes.

Finally, the American public is neither overly emotional nor irrational in its reaction to news images—no matter how disturbing those images are. The public will, however, be concerned about the fate of Americans and what America is doing in the world; policymakers should assess what the public will look for in a given picture and what its likely reaction will be. Pictures do not “drive” foreign affairs unless policymakers let them. Time and again, decisive leadership has been the best response to the outrage an



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