Media images of war

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Abstract
Photographic images of war have been used to accentuate and lend authority to war reporting since the early 20th century, with depictions in 1930s picture magazines of the Spanish Civil War prompting unprecedented expectations for frontline visual coverage. By the 1960s, Vietnam War coverage came to be associated with personal, independent and uncensored reporting and image making, seen as a journalistic ideal by some, and an obstacle to successful government conduct of the war by others. This article considers the idealized 'myth' of Vietnam War coverage and how it has influenced print and television photojournalism of American conflicts, skewing expectations of wartime media performance and fostering a consistent pattern of US Government/media collaboration. Upon analysis, pictorial coverage of US wars by the American media not only fails to live up to the myth of Vietnam but tends to be compliant and nationalist. It fails to reflect popular ideals of independent and critical photojournalism, or even the willingness to depict the realities of war.

Media representations of war are of interest to media scholars for many reasons. First, as reports or images associated with extreme conflict and matters of life and death, they tend to draw intense public attention, and potentially influence public opinion. Second, as high-stakes artifacts of modern news reporting, they highlight the application of professional norms and practices to the presentation of highly charged content. Notions of objectivity and balance, reliance on official sources and press releases, access to theaters of action, collaborations with subjects and beliefs in photo-realism and documentary recording are all issues that are tested by the results of wartime reporting and image-making. Third, they inevitably reflect cultural perspectives and reproduce traditions of cultural representation. When applied to the representation of conflicts,

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such perspectives frequently invoke notions of ethnic identity and nationalist mythology, thereby highlighting important historical issues of national formation, cultural bias, and international and intercultural relations. Finally, the nature of war reporting and image-making reveals much concerning the influence of politics and social authority on media representations: the nature of government/press relationships, the role of political consensus and dissent in steering media agendas, the filtering and fixing of images as historical evidence, and the social establishment of photographs as cultural icons, narrative prompts and markers of collective memory.

Published and telecast images of war[1] are widely presumed to sway public perceptions and attitudes, potentially reinforcing or eroding public support for war policy; therefore, governments and political interests work conscientiously to control, channel, limit, or delay image production and circulation. Such efforts are aimed not only at shielding particular images from public view but at promoting and facilitating the distribution of preferred types of images and establishing an approved universe of imagery as accepted public record. The most frequently reproduced images become the signposts of an established and familiar historical landscape, prompts that elicit an underlying framework of myth, which channels and reifies particular versions of a war's history and directs our encounters with subsequent and related images.[2] The content and meaning of photographic images is not a product of happenstance or transparent recording. Images of war do not appear randomly for spontaneous public appraisal, nor are they simply the results of photographers' personal experiences and encounters with wartime events. War is a high-stakes enterprise; public perceptions and public support are never left to chance. Every war necessarily involves competing propaganda and no image remains insulated from such machinations. Therefore, a full consideration of any image of war must include an analysis of the conditions under which the image is produced and the institutional practices by which the image is distributed, selected for display or publication, and reproduced across media formats.

Images of war do seem to have an inherent attraction. The attention paid to war-related news photography and video, the reproduction and sale of large numbers of war photography books, the long popularity of the war movie genre, the success of cable television channels devoted exclusively to military documentaries, and even the popularity of contemporary war-themed video games, confirm a widespread public fascination with depictions of warfare. Undoubtedly, this has something to do with the fact that war images offer viscerally exciting and voyeuristic glimpses into theaters of violence that, for most viewers, are alien to everyday experience (Taylor, 1998).[3] Images originating in war zones, by definition, potentially offer glimpses of life-threatening conditions and events. For many, such portrayals of violence or threat seem to excite an estranged, fearful and yet persistent curiosity. Brothers (1997) comments:

> In war photography … responses are magnified. Danger hovers at the edges of all such images; the passions they record are always the most extreme. The possibility of dying that is their subtext, for their subjects as much as the photographer, means they make urgent claims on our attention, allowing us both to feel a sense of our own mortality and to hold that sense at bay. The forcefulness of their messages makes them unlike any other genre of image, the power of their desire to communicate impelling them towards representations that touch us more deeply and more directly. (p. xi)

Accordingly, many essays on war photography have reflected upon the potential emotional effects of such images on viewers (Woolf, 1938; Goldberg, 1993; Sontag, 1977, 2002, 2003; Taylor, 1998; Perlmutter, 1999; Sorenson, 2004). Sontag (1977) writes:

> …war and photography now seem inseparable, and plane crashes and other horrific accidents always attract people with cameras. A society which makes it normative to aspire never to experience privation, failure, misery, pain, dread disease, and in which death itself is regarded not as natural and inevitable but as a cruel, unmerited disaster, creates a tremendous curiosity about these events – a curiosity that is partly satisfied through picture taking. (p. 167)

How do viewers respond when they witness traces of the traumatic consequences of war, however vicariously? One would expect that responses are highly variable and that there is no conclusive answer to this question. However, we do know it is natural for people to give heightened attention to visual indicators of potential threat or danger. And we do know that movie producers operate on the assumption that people will be attracted to and fascinated by dramatic images of action. Dramatically charged images are also valued by news organizations for their capacity to grab and hold viewer attention, and photojournalists are accordingly trained and encouraged to choose conflict zones and dangerous locales ('international hot-spots') in which to seek out and produce 'high impact' pictures.[4] *Conflict* is routinely considered to have maximum 'news value' and is, in fact, explicitly recognized in journalism textbooks as a primary criterion for defining news.[5]

Commenting on this tendency of news coverage in the contemporary media environment of 'infotainment' and '24/7 news', Thussu (2003) observes:

> Apart from occasional positive news stories, good news simply does not make for compelling television, which thrives on violence, death and destruction – be that from natural causes (earthquake, floods, hurricanes) or human causes (wars, riots, murders). Television news requires *visual impact* and a *dramatic story*, and on this measure, wars and natural disasters score more highly than peacetime events. Wars and civil conflicts are, therefore, good news for 24/7 networks: audiences turn to news channels when there is a natural or man-made crisis. In fact it has been argued that the rolling news networks have to be conflict-driven or else they will cease to operate as successful businesses. (pp. 123–4, emphases added)

Long before the rise of television infotainment and the 24/7 news cycle, war photography trafficked in such emotional content, seeking above all 'dramatic visual impact'. But in an interesting and sometimes ironic sense, the emphasis on war photography's emotional impact is closely tied to a presumption of photography's verisimilitude and objectivity, and therefore its ability to convey a direct and authentic sense of real events to the viewer. The period between the world wars was a time when modernist notions of news surveillance and photographic objectivity were becoming institutionalized in the norms and conventions of professional media practice, first in the European picture magazines of the 1920s and 30s (and later *Life* and *Look* in the US), and then in the daily press throughout most of the industrialized world between 1930 and 1950. The emergence of modern photojournalism during this era coincided with the idea that pictorial media – photography, motion pictures, and then television – could monitor the world's events and deliver views

of the world's realities across great distances. Of course, the documentary nature of photography (and by extension, motion pictures) has been an ongoing issue of debate since the very introduction of photography, with vociferous arguments concerning photography's status as 'art vs science' raging even in 19th-century photographic journals (Griffin, 1995). But it is only in the 20th century that the notion of photo recording was coupled with the rise of national mass media industries to produce a professional ideology of photo reporting.

Brothers' valuable monograph, *War and Photography: A Cultural History* (1997), focuses on the newly emerged British and French picture press of this period and describes in great detail the importance of the Spanish Civil War as a context in which photographs of conflict, destruction and death first became a routine part of modern journalism coverage. It is here that Robert Capa and David Seymour (aka Chim) began their storied careers striving to produce dramatic, on-location photographs of the violence of the Spanish Civil War for the European picture magazines of the 1930s. Published in newly popular French, British and American picture magazines such as *Vu*, *Regards, Match*, *Picture Post* and *Life*, as well as illustrated daily and weekly newspapers (*Le Matin*, *Paris-Soir*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Herald,* the *Daily Worker; L'Illustration*, the *Illustrated London News*, *Reynold's News*), their gritty and graphic photographs of soldiers (men and women) in action, bombed homes and villages, maimed children, corpses and grieving survivors were something completely new for reader/viewers of the time, raising the visual expectations of the image-viewing public ever after. Such photographs became both a mark of the new capacity of modern media to deliver images of ongoing world events, even from difficult and dangerous locations, and prototypes for a new genre of photojournalism: *war photography*.

War as the proving ground of modern photojournalism

Since the Spanish Civil War, theaters of conflict have been seen as a proving ground for photojournalists, and war photographers have been celebrated as the daring and heroic figures of a particular scopic regime; a regime which utilized the technology of modern media to bring apparently authentic views of distant events to our breakfast tables and living rooms. Webster (1980) describes this modernist notion of photographic communication as a 'technicist ethos' of photographic recording married to an unarticulated and mystical sense of natural creativity (pp. 2–3). Modern cameras could do the work, if only courageous men and women carried them into the heat of battle, and were inspired to lift their eyes and trip the shutter at 'decisive moments'.

Attempts to photograph the Spanish Civil War established for the first time this idea that an ongoing record of war could be made and delivered to distant audiences. Cameras had been widely used in the First World War but, for the most part, they were single-plate cameras with relatively long exposure times, unable to stop action or be transported and set up easily in war zones. Competing armies used photography for certain military purposes, including keeping records of daily reconnaissance, but civilian or press photographers had virtually no access to the battlefronts due to strictly enforced censorship, and very few images from this immense and unprecedented conflict were ever published (Lewinski, 1978: 63).[6] In the Spanish Civil War, censorship was enforced more tightly

by the Fascist insurgents than the Republican Loyalists but in general the freedom of movement enjoyed by journalists and photographers was comparable to that which existed in Vietnam (Brothers, 1997: 206). And, like in Vietnam, daring exercises of photo newsgathering, such as Robert Capa apparently keeping his head up under fire to capture the 'moment of death' for a Loyalist militiaman, were lionized as courageous recordings of heroic scenes (see Figure 1). Although numerous other Capa photographs from Spain were published between 1936 and 1939, it was largely on the strength of this single image that his reputation skyrocketed. In 1938, the London magazine *Picture Post* proclaimed that Capa was 'The Greatest War Photographer in the World' (Fulton, 1988: 144). And although the authenticity of 'Death of a Loyalist Militiaman' has been challenged almost from the beginning – with new evidence recently published that indicates the picture was, in fact, staged (Rohter, 2009) – the image remains an icon, not only of the Spanish Civil War, but of the ideal of war photography itself.

By the outbreak of the Second World War, it was taken for granted that events of the war would be photographically recorded. The military establishments of Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Russia and the United States all trained and utilized thousands of photographers and motion picture cameramen in their mobilizations for war, and millions of wartime photographs, as well as millions of feet of wartime motion picture footage, still survive in museums, archives and private collections. By the 1940s, picture magazines and motion picture theater newsreels had become pervasive features of everyday culture in the

Figure 1. Death of a Loyalist Militiaman, Cerro Muriano, Spain, 5 September 1936. Robert Capa © 2001 by Cornell Capa/Magnum Photos. Reproduced with permission.

industrialized societies and a new class of professional and military photojournalists, including Robert Capa, Carl Mydans, Margaret Bourke-White, Ralph Morse, Horace Bristol, Wayne Miller, Barrett Gallagher and W. Eugene Smith, among others, were making lasting reputations for their dramatic war photographs.

However, this technical and psychological readiness to photograph the war at its outset was accompanied by a determination on the part of the warring nations to control and use the media to their own advantage. Despite the new capacity for extensive photo recording, this was a highly censored war, and public commitment to the war effort on all sides meant that government control largely went unchallenged. The gap between the millions of war images created and the relatively few selected for publication and public exposure was enormous. In *War Photography: Realism in the British Press* (1991), Taylor recounts the effectiveness with which the British Government worked with the British press to tightly filter and control images, whether of military activity in various theaters of war, or of civilian life and the effects of German bombing at home. Moreover, the press worked willingly to construct inspiring narratives of patriotic duty and national unity, continually reaffirming the connection between victory on the battlefield and heroic perseverance at home. Stories and photographs of 'Men "making their way out" and then returning "their mission successfully accomplished" were plentiful', writes Taylor, and they were matched by recurrent images of the continuity and endurance of British family and community life at home, undaunted and stoic in the face of the German blitz (p. 24). Few disruptions to this cohesive narrative were permitted. When potentially disturbing images were published, such as photographs of damage from the blitz in London, they were faithfully countered, often on the same page, by photographs of ordinary workers determined to carry on or smiling families beginning a new day around the breakfast table, sometimes with bomb-damaged ruins visible through the kitchen window behind them. Taylor's analysis foregrounds the success with which governments and the press were able to mold whatever images came into their possession into approved versions of wartime events.

Roeder, in *The Censored War: American Visual Experience during World War Two* (1993), similarly recounts the ways in which unity of purpose in the US media helped to avoid any ambiguity in American representations of the war. In describing the public–private cooperation on the US side of the Atlantic, Roeder writes: 'The Office of War Information suggested, but usually depended on others to execute' (p. 82). He continues: 'In addition to the major responsibilities assumed by the Office of Censorship and the military public-relations branches, more than thirty other agencies were involved in censorship of one sort or another.' Yet 'Private organizations also had a say about which images reached the public' (p. 83). Commercial media empires – Henry Luce's *Time* and *Life*, the production studios of Hollywood, Madison Avenue advertising agencies – generally stayed on script to foster uncomplicated images of 'good and bad', 'us and them', 'right and wrong'. It was not just that private media tended to promote 'flag-waving patriotism', which they did, but that they so effectively managed a nuanced combination of propagandistic journalism and fictional reconstruction, using an often seamless stream of pictures in both the news and entertainment media to present idealized representations of heroic determination and military success to the American public. Disturbing photographs from the front were buried away in the Pentagon's 'Chamber of Horrors', and filmmakers sent overseas to document the war (including famous directors

John Ford and John Huston) often found it both easier and more realistically convincing to stage and illustrate events than to use first-hand footage. This was a war of unimaginable scale and carnage and, as Roeder comments: 'artists and visual journalists had few viable guides as they struggled to communicate the overwhelming experiential reality of World War II' (p. 94). They responded to this problem by creating integrative narratives of Americans working together, whatever the problem, and whatever their regional background or ethnicity. The themes of national unity in diversity and unwavering commitment to final victory became leitmotifs for news reports and newsreels, as much as for Hollywood movies.

Vietnam

If media portrayals of the Second World War represent a controlled and propagandistic rationing of pictures from the front, with some of the most widely remembered icons being those arguably staged symbols of victory from the last months of the war – e.g. the 'Flag Raising at Iwo Jima' by Joe Rosenthal (23 February 1945), the 'Raising of the Soviet Flag over the Reichstag' by Yevgeny Khaldei (2 May 1945) – the photographic portrayal of the Vietnam War provides an example of an historical record that has been filtered and shaped over time to represent a powerful, but largely mythological, vision of independent and largely unfiltered coverage. Here we find a body of images that reflect the shifting complexities and contradictions of the war itself, as well as the inherent difficulties of photographically 'recording' any calamitous human events of such scale. Still, in the US, the idea that Vietnam was an 'uncensored war' and that the circulation of graphic images from the conflict effectively turned American public opinion against the war effort, has long been repeated as conventional wisdom, despite the fact that several careful scholarly and investigative analyses of media coverage of Vietnam indicate that US media representations were broadly supportive of US Government war efforts until very late in the conflict and that images of losses and suffering due to the war were carefully rationed by the media throughout (Hallin, 1986; Wyatt, 1995; Knightly, 2004).[7]

Some of the best known images of the Vietnam War today were, in fact, never seen by the bulk of mass media viewers during the war itself. Ron Haeberle's photographs of the massacre at My Lai, for example, were not published for more than 20 months after the March 1968 killings took place, selected images first appearing in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* on 20 November 1969. And, even after their publication by the Cleveland paper, Haeberle's My Lai photos received limited exposure, with *Life* magazine wavering for months about purchasing the pictures and many other publications shying away from printing such images.[8] Seymour Hersh's written account of the massacre (without pictures), was distributed by the Dispatch News Service on 13 November 1969, a week before Haeberle's photos appeared in the *Plain Dealer*, and seems to have had a greater impact on public awareness of the incident than Haeberle's photographs. Unlike Haeberle's eyewitness records of the incident, Hersh's story resulted from his discovery and investigation at home in the US of the secret court-martial of Lt William Calley, Jr at Fort Benning, Georgia (Knightly, 2004: 429–30).[9] Hersh's second story on My Lai appeared on 20 November, the same day the first photographs by Haeberle were published. With general media reluctance to publish Haeberle's photos, it was Hersh's

written account that circulated most extensively, although knowledge of the existence of the photographs seems to have led to increased media attention to the written story after 20 November, including the publication of reports in *Time* and *Newsweek* in early December, and an interview on CBS television news with one of the soldiers who had participated in the My Lai attack shortly thereafter. Still, the images themselves never saturated media channels in the manner that, for instance, photos from Abu Ghraib did more than three decades later.[10] And none of Haeberle's images have become frequently reproduced icons of the war on the same scale as more dramatically personalized pictures, such as Larry Burrows' 'Reaching Out', Eddie Adams' 'Rough Justice on a Saigon Street', John Filo's 'Kent State Massacre', or Nick Ut's 'Accidental Napalm'.[11]

The important point here is that it was not until US troop withdrawals were already under way after 1970 that most Americans learned about such scandals as the My Lai massacre, with large segments of the population remaining untroubled by the news (Oliver, 2006) or refusing to believe the story in any case (Opton, Jr, 1971). And reporters and photographers who attempted to publish stories and photos of victimized Vietnamese civilians in the late 1960s and early 1970s not only continued to meet resistance from the mainstream US media but in some cases were even blacklisted or banned.

Among those whose work was hindered or withheld, Knightly (2004) notes the cases of Martha Gelhorn, a long-time and highly respected war correspondent, and Magnum photographer Philip Jones Griffiths. Gelhorn tried to publish a series of articles on the numbers of Vietnamese casualties, refugees and orphans caused by American bombing. After her articles were rejected by US newspapers, she published a five-part series in *The Guardian*. Afterward, however, her visa application to return to Vietnam was denied, and she was never allowed to report from South Vietnam again (pp. 427–8). Griffiths' unflinching photographic depictions of the war, including stark images of military and civilian hardship and suffering, were similarly rejected by US media organizations. Knightly writes:

> Philip Jones Griffiths, one of the few photographers to concentrate on what the war did to Vietnamese civilians, had great difficulty in finding an outlet for his work in the United States. 'I was told time after time that my photographs were too harrowing for the American market.' When, eventually, a book of his photographs, *Vietnam Inc.*, was published in the United States [in 1971], the South Vietnamese government banned his return to Saigon. (p. 428)

Griffiths, himself, later wrote in 1996:

> Being British, and a photographer, I had a privileged overview of the contest. I spent five years immersed in Vietnam trying to make sense of what was going on. All that was needed was a cool head, a sharp eye, and a modicum of humanity to qualify as a serious observer. My book *Vietnam Inc.* examined every aspect of the war and, I hope, helped illuminate the subject.

> At times the Vietnam War, like all wars, had the drama of the Forces of Darkness murdering the Innocents. The task, of course, was to see beyond the obvious. All wars produce the familiar iconic images of horror, which do little to further anyone's understanding of a particular conflict. My purpose was to understand the nature of the war, and reveal the *truth* about it, with photographs providing the visual proof. The photographs are the *evidence*. (p. 116, emphases in original)

Griffiths' idealism is both admirable and moving, but such photographic truth-telling is almost never welcome in a country at war. And, contrary to popular myths about the US media's coverage of Vietnam, such candid visual reporting rarely reached American news consumers. American media organizations largely strove to maintain their cold-war allegiance, both to their country and to the military and government sources on which they depended. They were certainly not looking to publicize American military misconduct, and the record shows that they had little stomach for the stark and often gruesome realities of what was actually happening in the Vietnamese countryside. Yet, increasing divisions among political elites in the US, and between the US military and the government, created a widening 'credibility gap' that made the media's search for a comfortable consensus increasingly awkward.

As Hallin's (1986, 2003) rigorous analysis of US television coverage of Vietnam shows, network news programs neither showed the 'literal horror of war', nor did their reports play a leading role in the collapse of American support for the war at home. In fact, the television networks, like the major newspapers and news magazines, stayed closely tied to official perspectives even as public opposition to the war grew. It was only the enthusiasm with which reporters touted the war's success that waned over time:

> As for television coverage of Vietnam, it was, in fact, highly sanitized. Contrary to conventional wisdom, there were only very few occasions on which people saw the 'true horror' on their television screens … A lot of the bloodiest footage was left on the cutting room floor … television also tends to be particularly wary of political controversy and television not only tended to stay away from footage that would offend audiences or advertisers, but also from more controversial issues. (2003: 2–3)

In the early to middle years of US military involvement in the conflict (1961–7), television and newspapers almost uniformly presented an idealized picture of US intentions and the progress of the war. As the conflict dragged on without clear progress (1968–72), despite Nixon's election promise to end the war, and as opposition grew with the ending of college deferments and the institution of a draft lottery, the media reluctantly, though still infrequently, accepted stories and images of frustrated American soldiers and unfortunate collateral damage. However, the occasionally disturbing stories and images that began to emerge after the 1968 Tet offensive were delivered within a continuing context of media support for American aims and intentions. Hallin writes:

> Stories of these incidents of course focused attention on civilian victims of the war, and no doubt contributed to some weakening of the moral dichotomy television had set up between Americans and the enemy – though some television commentary made a point of reinforcing that dichotomy on the occasion of My Lai. ['My Lai was for Americans an exceptional horror,' said ABC's Howard K. Smith. 'My Lais for the other side are a daily way of life', *ABC News*, 28 May 1970]. But My Lai coverage was usually cautious and dispassionate, a great deal of it focused on legal issues in the trial of Lieutenant Calley, rather than on the massacre itself, which of course became an 'alleged massacre' once charges were filed. So it may be that for much of the viewing public, My Lai was less an atrocity, comparable to those they had heard about on the other side, than confirmation that American morale was on the decline. Many Americans, incidentally, did not believe the news of the My Lai massacre.

This is not to say that the average story on American troops was about fragging, drug abuse, or war crimes. The portrayal of American soldiers remained highly sympathetic through the end of the war, but the image of the soldier eager for a fight gave way to that of the reluctant warrior whose battle was mainly to survive. One reporter, wrapping up a story that included footage of an officer persuading reluctant troops to go out on a mission by assuring them it was not an offensive operation, but necessary to protect other troops, concluded, 'one thing does seem for sure: the average American soldier no longer wants any part of this war – even in a defensive posture. (Jim Bennet, *ABC News*, 13 April 1972, news tape quoted in Hallin, 1986: 180)

It was only after years of unified US media support for the war, and continued support after 1968 for Nixon's plan to gradually shift the bulk of frontline combat operations from American to South Vietnamese forces, that snippets of dissent were allowed to penetrate routine news coverage and enthusiasm for the war was blunted. Even reporting on the Tet offensive, with Associated Press (AP) photographer Eddie Adams' photo 'Rough Justice on a Saigon Street' winning the Pulitzer Prize[12] and NBC News (but not other networks) airing filmed footage of the same execution on national television, did not substantially change the Washington-centered perspectives of news reports on the war. But, as details of the brutal massacre at My Lai emerged during the Calley trial, and American deaths continued to mount despite Nixon's promise of imminent 'peace with honor', major US news organizations told their Vietnam staff members to 'shift the focus' of coverage from the conduct of the war to peace negotiations and the winding down of US involvement (Epstein, 2000[1973]: 17, 250; Knightly, 2004: 437). And, in an apparent attempt to avoid the possibility of increasingly negative coverage of the war, the same news organizations began steadily withdrawing their attention and resources from the war inside Vietnam altogether. Between 1968 and 1972, the number of news correspondents accredited by the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) dropped by more than 50 percent, from 637 to 295 (further plummeting to only 35 by 1974) (Knightly, 2004: 437). According to Epstein (2000[1973]):

…the executive news producer [at *NBC Evening News*] told the news staff that the 'story' was now negotiations, not the fighting, and although combat footage was sent to New York from Saigon virtually every day for two months following the decision, the producers of the evening news program elected to use combat film on the program only three times. (p. 18)

ABC News Executive producer, Av Westin, wrote to correspondents:

I have asked our Vietnam staff to alter the focus of their coverage from combat pieces to interpretive ones, pegged to the eventual pull-out of the American forces. This point should be stressed for all hands. (Epstein, 2000[1973]: 17)

It is clear that these shifts in news coverage were largely driven by policy changes in the White House, although they may also have reflected skittishness on the part of news organizations concerning the potential for more unwelcome pictures and the growing public fatigue and resignation they sensed in their audiences. According to a recent historical study of American public reactions to news of the My Lai massacre by Kendrick Oliver (2006),

revelations of the massacre had little effect on overall American public opinion concerning the war, as did other evidence of Vietnamese civilian suffering, visual or otherwise. However, according to Oliver, seeing American soldiers tried for war crimes had a bigger impact, suggesting to many that national leaders no longer had the will to do whatever was necessary to win. American sympathies were less in line with the Vietnamese than with American soldiers, who seemed caught in a war for which national commitment was faltering.

In this context, that photographic *evidence* of the *truth* of the war sought by Griffiths, evidence that potentially could have shifted the American consensus concerning US involvement in the war, was never allowed to accrue, not only because the governments of the US and South Vietnam worked to limit such exposure but because there was little desire on the part of the media or the public to confront such realities.[13] Images were vetted and rationed cautiously by news organizations, not only in deference to government and military officials, but for fear that they would alienate mainstream audiences. The idea that there was ever really a 'living room war', or that American news consumers were bombarded by an 'anti-war media' with a daily, or even weekly, diet of shocking combat images and civilian victims is, at best, a gross exaggeration.[14]

Cultural icons and war photography

It was in June of 1972, when US military involvement in the war was rapidly winding down, that AP photographer Nick Ut made his powerfully emotional image 'Accidental Napalm' (sometimes captioned 'Terror of War'). This time a photo of civilian trauma was sent almost immediately along the AP wire and promptly published. It was picked up by *Newsweek* and *Life* magazines, eventually winning the Pulitzer Prize for Spot News in 1973 (Rubin and Newton, 2001).

'Accidental Napalm' shows a scattered group of five terrified children running along a paved roadway towards the viewer, a wall of black smoke in the near distance. The children are followed by four soldiers, who seem to be herding the screaming children forward, away from the cloud of smoke behind. At the center of the picture, and in the center of the group of children, runs a 9-year-old girl, naked, screaming, her arms outstretched and body taut with pain. News film taken at the same time shows the girl's skin scorched and shredded as she runs past. The story of the girl, Kim Phuc, and her eventual recovery and immigration to the US has been well documented. And, despite the fact that the picture was made at a time that American troop levels were declining and the American media were paying less attention to the war, 'Accidental Napalm' is today regarded by many as 'the defining image of the Vietnam War' (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007: 173).[15]

It seems ironic to consider this photograph emblematic of America's war in Vietnam. After all, the soldiers in the background are South Vietnamese, not American. The 'accidental napalm attack' on this girl's village occurred after the Nixon administration's 'Vietnamization' of the war was well underway. US troop levels were rapidly declining, and Americans were looking forward to the day when the last of their troops would finally leave Indochina. But Hariman and Lucaites argue that the making of an icon 'can take time' (p. 173) and that its formation has more to do with tapping into 'climates of feeling' than with the representation of historical evidence (pp. 175–83). They make a strong case for Ut's photo taking on its real significance only over a span of years,

building from structures of feeling emerging only near the end of the war and continuing into the years after the war's conclusion:

> By 1972 there had been many, many press reports and a number of striking photos that would suffice as evidence for any claim that the United States was fighting an immoral war. Indeed, by 1972 the public had seen burned skin hanging in shreds from Vietnamese babies, a bound Vietnamese prisoner of war being shot in cold blood, the slaughtered bodies of My Lai, and similar pictures of the horror of war. The iconic photograph could not have been effective solely because of its news value, nor does it appear to be especially horrific … The story is one of 'Accidental Napalm,' as the photo was captioned in some reports; the strike was by South Vietnamese forces, not U.S. troops; the girl was immediately tended to and taken to a hospital. As an indictment, there isn't much that would stand out after cross-examination. And why would a still image come to dominate collective memory of what is now called the first television war, a war the public experienced via kinetic images of firefights, strafing runs, and helicopters landing in swirls of dust and action?
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> An image of suffering can be highly persuasive, but not because of either the realism ascribed to the photo or its relationship to a single set of moral precepts. A structure of public moral response has to be constructed, it has to be one that is adapted to the deep problems in the public culture at the time, and it has to be consistent with the strengths and weaknesses of the medium of articulation …
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> This ongoing mediation of public life can be explicated both by examining how the photograph's artistry shapes moral judgment and by tracking subsequent narrative reconstructions and visual appropriations of the image in public media. (pp. 174–5)

In a previous essay (1999), I addressed similar problems, concluding that iconic war photographs from every historical period, whether Gardner and O'Sullivan's 'Death of a Rebel Sharpshooter' at Gettysburg, Capa's 'The Death of a Loyalist Militiaman' from the Spanish Civil War, Rosenthal's 'Old Glory Goes Up on Mt. Suribachi, Iwo Jima', or Ut's 'Accidental Napalm' assume their role as icons by shedding their historical specificity, transcending the particulars of their time and place of origin – what Hariman and Lucaites (2007) call their 'news value' – and resonating within a more enduring structure of myth. In the case of US war photographs, this structure of myth invariably relates to nationalism and the constellation of national mythologies that Hariman and Lucaites describe as a discourse of 'U.S. public culture'.

Further reflection suggests that photographs become iconic, i.e. broadly symbolic, as they are circulated and reissued in various contexts within a cultural system of other relevant visual signs.[16] The relationship of photographs to history becomes increasingly tenuous as photographs are published and republished in various contexts and begin to take on a widely recognizable form as cultural emblems. In these cases, history and image are rearranged to a point where history becomes irrelevant and the photograph's institutional use fixes it to particular national, cultural and professional myths. Moreover, certain types of photographs, especially those that emphasize dramatic aesthetic form but lack specific historical detail, most readily lend themselves to this abstraction process.

Such metaphoric pictures are precisely the images that become most widely celebrated and are most likely to receive Pulitzer Prizes or World Press Photo awards and become the models that elite photojournalists strive to emulate.

How does such icon formation relate to the particular case of Vietnam War photographs and 'Accidental Napalm'? It is my contention that many images of war initially attract attention, not because they introduce novel content or perspectives, but because of their ability to elicit emotional responses tied to an existing public mood and collective public memory. But, attracting the attention of editors or viewers is only the first step. Hariman and Lucaites articulate a process of culture by which they believe certain photographs attain iconic status in a relatively democratic and unstructured fashion. Such attempts to connect the impact of particular images to climates of public consciousness and emotional predisposition, indeed to 'civic identity' itself, are important and intriguing, if a bit elusive. Public structures of feeling are certainly important in shaping the history of an image because, as Hariman and Lucaites argue: 'Emotionality is a source not only of their appeal but also of their value' for 'democratic publics' (p. 36). But emotional value and the potential for 'civic performance' alone do not explain the role of images within media systems. Comparing the My Lai photo of massacred women and babies heaped and strewn along a dirt road (Figure 2) – a deeply emotional and haunting image that taps into public feelings of shame and regret over a misguided and often capriciously brutal war – with the 'Accidental Napalm' photo, which elicits many of the same emotional responses, one wonders whether the aesthetic articulation of one image can account for its 'public' embrace as a celebrated icon while the other stalks the background of consciousness in relative obscurity. Perhaps there is something more to this process than a 'democratic and unstructured' public embrace of those images that 'artistically coordinate available structures of identification within a performative space' (p. 135). I am skeptical of the idea that 'Accidental Napalm' became the preferred image simply because it 'became a moment when the Vietnam War crystallized in U.S. public consciousness', that it 'embodied a process of cultural fragmentation that was accelerated by the war and its coverage', and that 'the features of that composition then became a template for remaking the public world through its continued circulation in the public media' (p. 207). Instead, we need to keep sight of the tangible institutional processes by which the selection and circulation of such images takes place; and the commercial and overtly political forces that routinely bring some images, and not others, to the public's attention.

It is certainly true that the formation of an image's status is established over time, and in relation to the context of other images reproduced and circulating in the years following a picture's first appearance. In this regard, the publication of books, a more enduring medium for photographs than newspapers, magazines, or television, provides an important context within which any particular image will be foregrounded and judged in public consciousness. Today's Vietnam War photo book collections – including the well-known compilations: *Larry Burrows: Vietnam* (2002); Catherine Leroy's *Under Fire: Great Photographers and Writers in Vietnam* (2005); Philip Jones Griffiths' *Vietnam, Inc.* (2006[1971]); *Eddie Adams: Vietnam* (2008) and others – include many images that were never published during the war. In fact, the majority of photos in these compilations were not part of daily news coverage at the time of the war. For this reason, these and other books of Vietnam photographs are not reliable reflections of the photo coverage contemporary viewers saw during

Figure 2. Unidentified Vietnamese bodies on road, report of Army review into My Lai incident, 16 March 1968. © Ronald L. Haeberle, US Army photographer.[17]

the war years. More general surveys of famous photojournalism, on the other hand, tend to reprint only a handful of the most famous Vietnam War photos, without offering the viewer much sense of the broader nature of pictorial coverage at all. Together, the tendency to expand the impression of visual coverage, on the one hand, and to compress and intensify it into a few familiar icons, on the other, create a peculiarly unrepresentative sample of imagery, whose composite effect is to reinforce the myth that Vietnam coverage was unrestrained and wide ranging, and yet characterized primarily by particularly shocking photos of wartime horrors. It is easy to see how such inconsistent impressions can lead to exaggerated claims about the media's role in the war.

The myth of Vietnam coverage and its impact

The popular narrative of Vietnam War coverage is one that arose from a discourse of military disgruntlement and political evasion in the final years of the war and after. Ignoring systematic academic studies that find a very different pattern of routine reporting during the war (Hallin, 1986; Hamilton, 1989; Wyatt, 1995; Oliver, 2006), the popular Vietnam narrative reproduces and revisits the most dramatic and sensational images – and to a lesser extent the stories that accompany them – while disregarding the historical record of mundane government-centered reporting that actually dominated Vietnam coverage. The end result is the media myth that sensational and demoralizing images of military and

civilian casualties characterized routine Vietnam War coverage. This myth was consistently repeated by commentators on Pentagon policies regarding press access in Grenada, Panama, the First Gulf War and the Iraq invasion. And it has been reflected in the narration and image track of television documentaries and anniversary television specials on the Vietnam War. The Accuracy in Media organization produced *Television's Vietnam* (1984), narrated by Charlton Heston and shown on PBS stations as a conservative rebuttal to PBS's own 13-part series *Vietnam: A Television History* (1983), explicitly blames the media's preoccupation with sensational images of wartime brutality for patterns of misreporting that eventually undermined the American war effort. In *Television's Vietnam* a great deal of attention is given to the sensational (and wholly atypical) *NBC News* film of General Loan executing the Viet Cong suspect in the street, which is treated as emblematic of the coverage of the Tet offensive of 1968. The filmmakers use voice-over tape from an interview with journalist Peter Braestrup, who had previously written about media coverage of the Tet offensive in his book *Big Story* (1977). Braestrup says:

> In journalistic terms it was fantastic. It is not often that a television cameraman, or a still cameraman for that matter, gets on film happening right there before your eyes one man blowing another man's brains out … kind of the supreme melodrama … I think it was regarded as a great piece of film and the fact that it was regarded as a great piece of film tells you a lot about journalism. It was a kind of super pornography. It evoked strong reactions among those who saw it apparently … It was a kind of ultimate horror story that you captured in living color. But in terms of information it told you almost nothing. That's the chronic problem especially for television and for the still photos, the difference between drama and information. (quoted in Culbert, 1998: 424)

The emphasis on these 10 seconds of *NBC News* footage is crucial to the documentary's broader assertion that the media's reporting on Vietnam was misleading and irresponsible. Yet Braestrup's commentary, on reflection, is quite ambiguous. He attests that it is 'not often' that one gets such extraordinary footage, 'pornographic' even, and suggests that the footage made a powerful impression precisely because it was so atypical. He does not address the fact that the footage was not rebroadcast in the months following its first appearance, and was largely forgotten until years later, when the footage was included again and again in retrospectives on the Vietnam War, and used as an indication of the psychological dissonance the war caused for many Americans. Still, Braestrup recoups the documentary's intended message by concluding that the search for such dramatic imagery, and its lack of information, is a 'chronic problem' for television and photojournalism.

Braestrup's comment rests on the assumption that photographing the most dramatic and emotionally powerful consequences of war – 'right there before your eyes one man blowing another man's brains out' – is the kind of 'fantastic journalism' that any news photographer would strive to record, if possible; and that modern media's preoccupation with drawing viewer attention and building audiences precludes a focus on more useful public information. The assumption for the producers of *Television's Vietnam* is that, for this reason, giving the media open access to cover a war is inevitably at odds with military and national objectives. However, the infrequency with

which such sensational images actually appeared in the media coverage of Vietnam undercuts the argument.

In the same sense that retrospective photo books have provided a more permanent context for reiterating collective memories of Vietnam, cinema has tended to be a more lasting medium for recapitulating the myths of the war and its coverage. Cinema, more than television (at least until the recent era of YouTube) has been distributed through multiple channels for repeated viewings (theaters, television, video purchase and rental), whereas television news reports, with few exceptions, have historically disappeared after a single broadcast. Hence, ironically, fictional films may have exerted a greater impact on public impressions of historical events such as the Vietnam War than reporters and news organizations.

Shortly after the My Lai story broke, producer–director Joseph Strick and cinematographer Haskell Wexler collaborated on the documentary film *Interviews with My Lai Veterans*, which received the Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Subject in 1971. The film includes no images from My Lai, but presents powerful eyewitness testimony of the event, interweaving footage of separate interviews with five US soldiers who were all present at the massacre, some openly admitting culpability, others appearing to have been innocent, emotionally scarred bystanders. However, as a documentary short, it enjoyed extremely limited distribution, despite its awards, and over time this powerful film has faded into obscurity. Other films featuring actual first-hand footage of warfare and its consequences in Vietnam, such as *Hearts and Minds* (1974) the 1975 Academy Award winning feature documentary by producer Bert Schneider and director Peter Davis, and *Frontline* (1980), a gritty compilation of up-close combat footage by Australian cameraman Neil Davis, also failed to reach mass audiences (although *Hearts and Minds*, which Columbia Pictures initially owned and refused to release, was eventually sold to Warner Brothers and released in selected theaters).

On the other hand, a series of fictional Hollywood films made after the war were shown to commercial theater audiences nationwide, aired on broadcast and cable television, and released on video and then DVD, receiving much greater exposure than any of the news coverage and photojournalism discussed here. Nearly all of these films take as their subject the trauma of Vietnam for Americans: *The Deer Hunter* (1978, dir. Michael Cimino), *Coming Home* (1978, dir. Hal Ashby), *Apocalypse Now* (1979, dir. Francis Ford Coppola), *Platoon* (1986, dir. Oliver Stone), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987, dir. Stanley Kubrick), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989, dir. Oliver Stone), *Rambo: First Blood* (1982, dir. George P. Cosmatos) and the *Rambo* sequels (1985, 1988). Such films undoubtedly established a prominent lens in American public culture through which to see and think about the Vietnam War. In what Schatz (1999) has described as 'Hollywood's deferred response to – and effective reconstruction of – the Vietnam War itself", each of the films portrays Vietnam as an indescribable hellhole to which young American men are condemned and from which they cannot escape intact. These are stories in which the war is about American sacrifice and tragedy, with Vietnamese suffering as a backdrop, if it is visible at all. Intentionally or not, the corpus of post-Vietnam Hollywood films creates an image of the war in which the young American soldier was the primary victim, betrayed by his government, by the media and by the American people.

Given this structuring frame, it is easier to understand how many Americans today can view the war both as a failure of government and the military, *and* as an 'uncensored'

and real-time 'television war' in which reporters bent on exposing every transgression effectively undermined the American military effort. The deepest strain running through American mythic views of the war is that it was primarily American soldiers who 'got screwed' (never mind the millions of Vietnamese deaths). According to this myth, American soldiers were undermined at home by both the media and the public, and were forced to endure the horrors of the fiasco on the ground in Indochina; forced to watch buddies lose limbs, or worse, to witness the slaughter of Vietnamese villagers, and to see little girls seared by napalm. The imagined protagonist, the gaze, is always American.

> The final influence that had a profound effect, especially on television but on all of the media, had to do with the morale of American troops … The main characters in television's portrayal of Vietnam, in this 'living room war,' were the American soldiers in the field. In this sense Vietnam coverage was no different from traditional American war coverage. It was in some sense the Ernie Pyle tradition of war reporting – not quite as gritty as Ernie Pyle, but similar in the sense that it, too, focused on American soldiers in action. That was the main content of the television coverage of Vietnam. (Hallin, 2003: 4)

What is less readily apparent is how this focusing of public perspectives and sympathies through visual images was accomplished so efficiently. Do affecting images randomly emerge and spontaneously elicit collective civic identity? Or is there a more intentional and purposeful process at work, developing and constructing memes of collective memory, emotion and performance? Is it only certain rare and exceptional icons that provide meaningful civic orientation amid the profusion of mass media imagery?

A common characteristic of war imagery across conflicts seems to be the condensing of emotional appeals and cultural perspective into a small range and number of images, even in this era of massive reproductive capacities. Even among photographs that share nearly identical content and formal characteristics some images rise to the level of icons while others do not. And recognized icons are often used to support conflicting ideas. Timing seems to be a significant factor. Harold Evans (1978) notes that a photograph by Dickey Chapelle of a street execution in Vietnam in 1962 was very similar in content and form to Eddie Adams' 'Rough Justice on a Saigon Street' but was rejected by the press and never printed (p. 3). Political support seems to play a role. Adams' 'Rough Justice on a Saigon Street' was utilized by supporters as well as opponents of the war to plead opposite positions (Hamilton, 1989: 178–80). As Perlmutter (1998) points out, this has been true for a number of icons, including the famous Tiananmen Square image of the lone man facing down a tank.[18]

Hariman and Lucaites (2007) also recognize the malleability of images, and the powerful factors of timing, context and use in the process of icon formation, although they seem reluctant to let go of the idea that exceptional, traumatic and transcendent images exert their own power for the viewing public:

> We can almost see the winnowing shed of media history at work. One must question the mechanism, however, for it is unlikely that the nation first selects a story and then supplies the pictures. The images themselves and the uses made of them will influence the collective scriptwriter. Indeed, the inability to lay Vietnam to rest, despite the short-term attention span

and near total historical amnesia of the U.S. media, may be due in part to the fact that collective memory of that war was defined by images that are themselves traumatic. (p. 172)

In the years since Vietnam, the influences of social and political power on image distribution have once again become more apparent, and newly anointed icons of the Gulf War and the Iraq invasion have cast further doubt on the authority of war images.

War images as malleable constructs: the reassertion of government control after Vietnam

For the last 30 years, the media myth of Vietnam has provided a constant touchstone against which the media coverage of every new conflict has been compared. According to this popular version of history, Vietnam was an 'uncensored war'. Reporters, photographers and motion picture camera operators enjoyed unprecedented freedom of movement in Indochina, freedom of access to troops, battle zones, and the civilian populations of South Vietnam and neighboring countries, freedom to report the war in any way they saw fit, and the ability to freely dispatch any pictures or stories that they produced to news operations in the US, Canada, Western Europe, Japan, Australia and other parts of the world, which would air and print these dispatches on a daily basis. It is also part of the myth that a liberal American media, as well as British and Western European reporters, were highly critical of the war and routinely presented stories and images that emphasized American casualties, civilian suffering, and a lack of US military progress towards victory in a way that eroded public support for the war at home and effectively undermined the US war effort, eventually leading to America's 'defeat'. Often one or more of the now iconic images of the war is given special responsibility for undermining American morale.

A more condensed version of this myth is that Vietnam was a 'living room war', that Americans watched the war unfold nightly on their television sets, and that the daily onslaught of horrific images turned the American people against their own military. 'The media lost the war', is a slogan still repeated by many, and taught as a cautionary tale in military communication and public relations training programs.

Since the 1970s, successive US Governments and the US military command have conscientiously worked to avoid a repeat of the kind of media access and exposure they feel was detrimental in Vietnam. During American military expeditions of the 1980s, in Grenada and Panama, government and Pentagon officials attempted to strictly control media access, banning the press and civilian photographers altogether from the initial invasion of Grenada (1983), the first major US military operation since Vietnam, and permitting only a small pre-approved pool of mostly television reporters to accompany the US expeditionary force to Panama (1989). The US plan for Grenada seems to have been partly inspired by the success of British media policies during their war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands in the spring of 1982. When the British task force sailed to the South Atlantic on its mission to recapture the Falkland, South Georgia and South Sandwich islands from Argentina, only 20 reporters, two photographers and a crew of media technicians were allowed to travel with them, accompanied at all times

by press relations 'minders'. Other journalists were effectively banned from a 200-mile maritime exclusion zone in the South Atlantic. No photographs reached the British media for the first 54 days of the conflict, and there was a 23-day delay before photographs of the retaking of South Georgia were received in London. Although sharply criticized by sectors of the British press, especially after the war when members of the press discovered that they had been used to feed misinformation to the Argentinians, the government nonetheless found the policies a highly successful strategy for managing press coverage of the war.

In October 1983, shaken by recent events in Lebanon, where a US Marine contingent (along with French soldiers who were part of the multinational force in Lebanon) suffered nearly 300 casualties from the truck-bombing of their barracks in Beirut, and news footage of the chaos and carnage afterward was widely broadcast, the Reagan administration was intent on controlling reporters' access to the US invasion of Grenada as strictly as the British had kept reporters out of the Falklands. Civilian journalists, photographers and TV camera operators were prohibited from entering the invasion zone around Grenada until after the island had been taken. For the Reagan administration, this strategy was highly effective. It successfully prevented divergent accounts of military operations or government objectives from appearing in press coverage. US television networks willingly aired the Defense Department's own footage of the military operation in their nightly news reports, and alternative versions of events surfaced only later, when military missions and US policy objectives were concluded. The rapid execution and conclusion of the Granada campaign allowed the government to control and direct media coverage of these events almost completely.

This success informed the approach taken to media policy by the first Bush administration during the invasion of Panama in December 1989 and the Persian Gulf War the following year. During the invasion of Panama, the government allowed only a small 'pool' of 14 reporters, chosen by the military, to accompany American troops. Most of the 14 were from television news operations; only 3 were newspaper reporters (Merida, 1990). As reflected in television network news broadcasts, pool reporters could only recount their limited view of the operation from inside invading military units. More independent perspectives and reports from the streets of Panama were effectively excised from US media coverage. More complete documentary reports of the invasion became available only after the overthrow of Panamanian president Manuel Noriega's government and the conclusion of military operations. The documentary film *Panama Deception*, like *Interviews with My Lai Veterans* and *Hearts and Minds* 20 years earlier, revisited military actions post facto through interviews with Panamanian witnesses, US military officers and government insiders, and included independently shot video on the streets of Panama to report a version of events very different from US news coverage of the invasion. Finished and released in 1992, *Panama Deception* won the Academy Award for Best Documentary in 1993, but was repeatedly refused airing by PBS. In the end, the American public was effectively shielded from revealing images and information regarding US military actions in Panama. The lesson for future government policy was that tightly restricting press access was a successful strategy for maintaining government influence over media coverage.

The First Gulf War: ideologies of war photography and mechanisms of image control

When preparations were underway for military action in the Persian Gulf in the late summer and fall of 1990, media access to military activities in the Gulf region was severely restricted by the Pentagon from the outset and the military again channeled information to reporters through a government selected press pool. The system was designed not only to control the flow of information to the media, allowing the military to determine where pool members could travel and what stories they could report on, but also to monitor press performance; journalists had to remain with escorts at all times and all stories were reviewed by a military official before being published. Competition for places in the press pool was intense. If a publication was not a member of the pool, they were unable to gain access to war zones. Scores of journalism organizations ended up locked out of the pool and some tried to challenge the government policy in court.[19]

Most mainstream journalism organizations, however, fully cooperated with the government-imposed system, resulting in a convergence of reporting that was stunningly homogeneous. Indeed, in many cases the photographs of American (and allied) military activity that appeared in US media might just as well have been planned and produced by the government itself; control and management of the images of the war through cooperative pools of private media outlets were as effective in constraining and channeling the nature of coverage as overt censorship and public/private collaborations had been in the Second World War.

For example, in a study of all 1,104 pictures published as part of ongoing Gulf War reporting in *Time*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report* between January and March 1991, we found that pictorial coverage of the war converged around a narrow range of picture types, dominated by 'backstage' images of US troops and weaponry (Griffin and Lee, 1995). The most frequent type of published image fell into a category we labeled 'cataloguing the arsenal'. These were pictures of various types of US military weaponry – missiles, rockets, fighter jets, artillery, 'smart bombs', tanks and other types of armored vehicles – often taken prior to the war itself, and sometimes even reproduced from arms catalogs and weapons industry brochures. Photographs of American troops constituted the second most frequent category of published pictures, but troops were shown almost exclusively in non-combat situations. Most commonly, photos showed soldiers posed in groups in backstage launching areas in Saudi Arabia, in transit from US bases to the Persian Gulf, or even during exercises in the Southern California desert. In all, only 3 percent of the published pictures showed events occurring in actual combat zones. For every picture of actual combat, there were approximately eight non-combat photos of American military hardware and five non-combat photos of American troops.

Commentators in several newspapers (*The Boston Globe,* the *Los Angeles Times, Christian Science Monitor, The New York Times,* the *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch* and *Wall Street Journal*, among others) interpreted this as a gigantic publicity campaign for the US arms industry. Kellner (1992) attributed it to the media's general preoccupation with 'images of techno-war' (pp. 157–63); Gerbner (1992) described it as part of the 'Gulf War Movie' constructed by news media largely owned and run by entertainment companies; and Katz (1992) wrote:

We saw portraits of the technology – advertisements for smart planes, tanks, missiles, and other equipment in dress rehearsals of what they are supposed to do in combat, but we rarely, if ever, saw them in action. Indeed, it was as if there was no other side. (p. 8)

The dearth of actual combat coverage was echoed in the lack of images revealing destructive consequences of the war. Our data supported the observation made by many other commentators that this was a 'sanitized war'. Only 27 of 1,104 pictures in the US news magazines (about 2%) showed any signs of wounded or killed soldiers, and most of these were photos of flag-draped coffins in US home-town funerals (or simply head-and-shoulders portraits of the dead reproduced from graduation or military ID pictures). The total number of images of hurt or killed civilians from all sectors of the conflict – Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Israel – was 19, less than 2 percent of published pictures.

Again it is worth noting that some of the most frequently acclaimed icons of the war are the most unusual and atypical pictures, those least representative of patterns of daily news coverage. And some of the images that have been described as icons in the years since the Gulf War were never published until after the war. One photograph that was published during the war, and is now considered iconic, is a picture of a wounded and grief-stricken American soldier in an evacuation helicopter (Figure 3). He sits with his face contorted in grief on the left side of the frame, another wounded soldier with his head and eyes wrapped in bandages sits in the middle, and an apparently occupied body bag is visible laying on the helicopter deck to the right. Taken by Pulitzer Prize winning photojournalist David Turnley, the picture won World Press Photo of the Year for 1991. This was the only photograph published in any of the dozens of news magazines we analyzed that exhibited a human expression of trauma comparable to Vietnam photos such as 'Reaching Out' by Larry Burrows, 'Kent State Massacre' by John Filo or 'Accidental Napalm' by Nick Ut. The photo stands in stark contrast to the great body of Gulf War images, so many of which are of the techno-war variety, and its atypical content may have contributed to its selection for the 1991 photo awards. A digital slide show, 'The Unseen Gulf War', presenting some of David's brother Peter Turnley's unpublished photographs from the Gulf can be viewed at http://www.digitaljournalist.org/issue0212/pt01.html

Some of the most often talked about and reproduced images of the Gulf War were not photographs at all but still frames from Defense Department videos or snippets of video from CNN newscasts. One such image is the widely-seen still frame of a smart-bomb targeting screen (complete with cross-hairs) which was reprinted in numerous magazines and books and arguably became the leading icon of the war. The video segment from which this frame was reproduced was first shown at a Pentagon press briefing, and ostensibly put viewers right in the seat of a stealth F-117 fighter bomber, witness to the precision of a laser guided bomb as it descends on its target. This simulated view, both in its motion-video and still-frame versions, was quickly seized upon as an emblem of a new kind of high-tech warfare, spawning descriptors such as 'Nintendo warfare' to characterize the abstract electronic imagery that seemed to be replacing images of soldiers in combat. It was telling that this image could be seen as representative of the war, given that the exact time, location and source of the video image remained unspecified (and so remained highly abstract). Moreover, it was not an

Figure 3. American Soldier Grieving for Comrade, Persian Gulf War, 1991. © David Turnley/ CORBIS. Reproduced with permission.

image obtained independently but one fed to the press by the Pentagon. The media fascination with this image seemed to confirm the views of theorists such as Baudrillard (1995), who argued that the style and representation of the Gulf War was so far removed from previous standards of warfare and its representation that the war existed more tangibly for observers as a series of screen images (and other abstract symbolic representations such as maps, radar signals and video game simulations) than as a set of concrete, first-hand experiences (pp. 29–30).

Another image that might have become an emblem of the war, if it had not proved to be a gaffe, is the television screen image of a CNN correspondent in a gas mask telling viewers, erroneously, that Scud missiles carrying nerve gas have struck the city of Tel Aviv. This was one of the great faux pas of modern war reporting. Israeli citizens were unnecessarily alarmed by rash and erroneous CNN broadcasts that contradicted national reports of the Israeli Broadcasting Authority, yet carried the authority of dramatic 'live' images of correspondents in gas masks (Griffin and Kagan, 1999). In addition, frequent television images of US news reporters standing under palm trees or in front of hotel cabanas in the Saudi desert announcing that flares of light in the night sky represented 'patriot missiles intercepting Scuds' also proved to be unfounded, an unfortunate result of reporters striving to report 'live' on the war without any real access to theaters of action.

Impressions of rockets and flares in the night sky over Baghdad also stand out for many as a key image of the Gulf War, although some that I have talked to confuse the

opening night of the war, when CNN's Bernard Shaw, John Holliman and Peter Arnett described the scene of night-time bombing from their hotel window by phone, without any accompanying pictures, with photographic images of the Baghdad skyline taken at other times when the city was under attack from the air.

One other image now often reproduced as an icon of the Gulf War is 'Incinerated Soldier', a photograph by then *Time* magazine photographer Ken Jarecke. The photograph was taken just hours before the cease-fire announcement along the infamous 'highway of death' where retreating Iraqi troops were obliterated by American air power. It shows the gruesomely charred face, shoulders and arms of an Iraqi corpse looking out through the open windshield of a burnt-out truck. Jarecke took the photo while accompanied by a military public affairs officer who allowed it to be sent back, with other photos, to editorial offices in New York City. As part of the press pool arrangement, Jarecke's pictures were not only sent to *Time* but also to AP for distribution to wire service clients. However, *Time* declined to publish the photo and AP editors refused even to make it available on the wire service for clients to consider. (The London *Observer* was the only publication to print it soon after the war.) It did not appear in the US until Jarecke wrote about it for an article in *American Photographer* magazine six months later (July/August 1991). And it did not appear in the American news media until *Time* published its end of year review on 30 December 1991.

Once again, it seems, the process of bestowing awards on the most unusual and dramatic war photographs, and then reproducing those images over time in wartime retrospectives and photo collections, has created and solidified a narrow set of iconic symbols in the public imagination. The implications of this are complicated, for potentially such icons could penetratingly symbolize essential attributes of a particular historical period, perceptively represent cultural or ideological ideals or even provide a vivid emotional sense of traumatic conditions. But isolating exceptional images from the larger context of media coverage diminishes their capacity to convey circumstantial conditions and the motivating causes of conflict (national or geo-political interests, ethnic antagonisms, post-colonial pressures). If key images used to symbolize a conflict do not provide a view of the conflict's historical circumstances, then they can only evoke the personal/emotional/universal (a generalized impression of pain, anger, terror, grief, resignation, perseverance, or triumph that might present itself similarly in any situation). On the other hand, if a selected image does not resonate with important themes or issues characterizing prevailing media coverage of the war, they can only denote an isolated and individual incident, of passing interest perhaps, but not necessarily part of the field of representation that underpins the discourse of the war. In both cases, images only contribute to an ephemeral stream of disconnected media content that is perpetually focused on the present and encourages a kind of collective amnesia concerning both the causes of conflict and the forces of control governing our encounters with war. This creates confused and distorted impressions of warfare itself, making it easier for governments to manipulate public opinion and manufacture consent for security policies and military adventures; and it creates confusing expectations of media coverage that overestimate the ability of journalists and photojournalists to provide transparent records of events, and underestimate the capacity of government, military and industrial organizations to shape media coverage.

The Iraq War: established genres for picturing war

The representation of war involves issues central to the study of the visual itself. The ease with which the US government, particular political interests, defense industries and commercial media organizations were able to cooperatively produce a kind of 'Gulf War Movie' (to use Gerbner's, 1992, phrase) that was free of contradictory images and explicitly promoted American hegemony, the superiority of Western technology, and a controlled (and sanitized) sense of global dominance, made it inevitable that a recurrence of war in the Gulf region a decade later would result in similar patterns of imagery. And, indeed, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 closely followed patterns of visualization that characterized the First Gulf War (Griffin, 2004; Fahmy and Kim, 2008). This was partly the result of similar restrictive military policies, such as the banning of picture taking at Dover Air Force Base, the distribution point for caskets of dead American soldiers returning to the United States, but even more the result of established photographic genres inherited from the First Gulf War.

As with the First Gulf War, the press anticipated an inevitable attack by US forces by visually illustrating a build-up of military hardware and power. Again, photographs cataloguing the American arsenal and the mobilization of American troops prior to combat dominated pictorial coverage. Troops were mostly pictured 'backstage', encamped in the desert (in Saudi Arabia?) waiting for word to move out. Fleets of jet fighter-bombers were shown waiting in ranks on the decks of aircraft carriers at sea. Armored convoys were pictured massing along the Iraqi border. Soldiers tested their biochemical suits and masks. Photographs of George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein faced off against each across magazine and newspaper pages (Griffin, 2004, 2008).

Then, after weeks of build-up, the arsenal was unleashed. At first, images of actual combat remained limited to pictures of fighter planes taking off, missiles firing from the decks of ships, and puffs of smoke rising over the city of Baghdad. But when convoys of vehicles and troops poured across the border into Iraq, there were between 570 and 750 reporters and photographers embedded with US and British military units. This was a significant policy change. The 2003 Pentagon decision to allow journalists to live, travel and work alongside soldiers in assigned military units was in stark contrast to the restricted mobility and pool-and-review procedures of the 1991 Gulf War, and was even a sharp change from 2001 policies in Afghanistan when reporters were often confined to briefing rooms. In this invasion, many more reporters and photographers were close to the frontline troops, and therefore closer to combat zones. And, indeed, the presence of embedded photojournalists resulted in more pictures of troops in action and more pictures of Iraqis caught in the 'chaos of war', than had been seen during the First Gulf War (Griffin, 2004; Fahmy and Kim, 2008). Still, overall patterns of photo coverage did not change. The same genre categories that predominated in 1991 were the most dominant in 2003: backstage images of weaponry and troops, portraits of US political and military leaders, and portraits of enemy or 'terrorist' leaders together made up more than 50 percent of all pictures published in American news magazines (Griffin, 2004). And the same categories of imagery were absent from US publications: images of human casualties, whether Iraqi, British, or American; images of destruction to homes or other infrastructure; pictures taken from the perspective of Iraqis.

Easy to overlook, but important to note, was the uniformity of visual representation across US news publications and television networks. The system of embedding

journalists with the military, like the press pool-and-review system that had been employed in the First Gulf War, worked to create a convergence of reporting and visualization. For example, the same three leading photographic genres (the arsenal, troops, political leaders) comprised half or more of all visual illustrations in each of the three US news magazines (49% in *Time*, 53% in *Newsweek*, 58% in *US News & World Report*, Griffin 2004). The same dominant narratives also characterized the reporting of all major news organizations, not surprising given that reporters were similarly placed alongside troops of the invading convoys. Early on, the potential for sandstorms to impede the invasion's progress became a common theme. As convoys were underway along major Iraqi highways, the 'push to Baghdad' quickly became an overriding narrative for reporting. Progressing towards, and then 'closing in', on Baghdad was a recurring motif for both written reports and photography during the first month of the war, right up until the fall of Saddam's Government and the story's dénouement: the pulling down of the Saddam statue in Firdos Square – shortly after which President Bush announced the end of major combat operations.

Television footage and published photographs prompted and supported this narrative with remarkable cohesion. One image after another of armored convoys moving along Iraqi highways were shown, with accompanying headlines and superimposed call-outs such as 'Moving Out', 'Halfway to Baghdad', 'Almost There', and 'Closing In' (see Figure 4). These images steadily and predictably led up to the crowning icon of the invasion, the falling Saddam statue, usually printed with superimposed captions that read, 'Toppled' or 'Free' (see Figure 5) (Griffin, 2008).

The presence of photojournalists traveling with the invading troops did produce one genre of images that was almost completely absent from the First Gulf War coverage: pictures of Iraqi civilians. These included photographs of displaced Iraqi civilians fleeing or traveling along the roadways (sometimes waving at troops), photos of captured Iraqi soldiers or militiamen, photos of Iraqi children and adults receiving humanitarian aid from American and British soldiers and medics, and photos of groups of Iraqis cheering the arrival of US troops. There seems to have been a special effort made to make and publish images of US and British soldiers providing aid to civilians, as these images alone outnumbered all pictures of civilians (of any nationality) published during the First Gulf War.

The time period examined in studies of both the First Gulf War and the Iraq invasion were very similar (approximately two months from the outset of open hostilities in each case) but the invasion of US and Allied troops deep into Iraq in 2003, accompanied by reporters and photographers, logically led to more published pictures of Iraqi civilians. And under these conditions one would also have expected a significant increase in the number of combat images, and in the number of civilian casualties or deaths. Yet, photographs of combat were still largely absent from US visual coverage and images of civilian casualties and death remained rare (Griffin, 2004; Fahmy and Kim, 2008). Fahmy and Kim (2008) found a slightly higher percentage of images in *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* depicting what they termed 'human toll and destruction' than was found in the US news magazines, but the bulk of these images were of material damage and destruction and not human losses or suffering.

In the Iraq War, as in the First Gulf War, there were also pictures that proved false or misleading. Videotape of the purportedly daring rescue of wounded war hero Private Jessica Lynch from her Iraqi captors proved to be staged and spun by the US military at
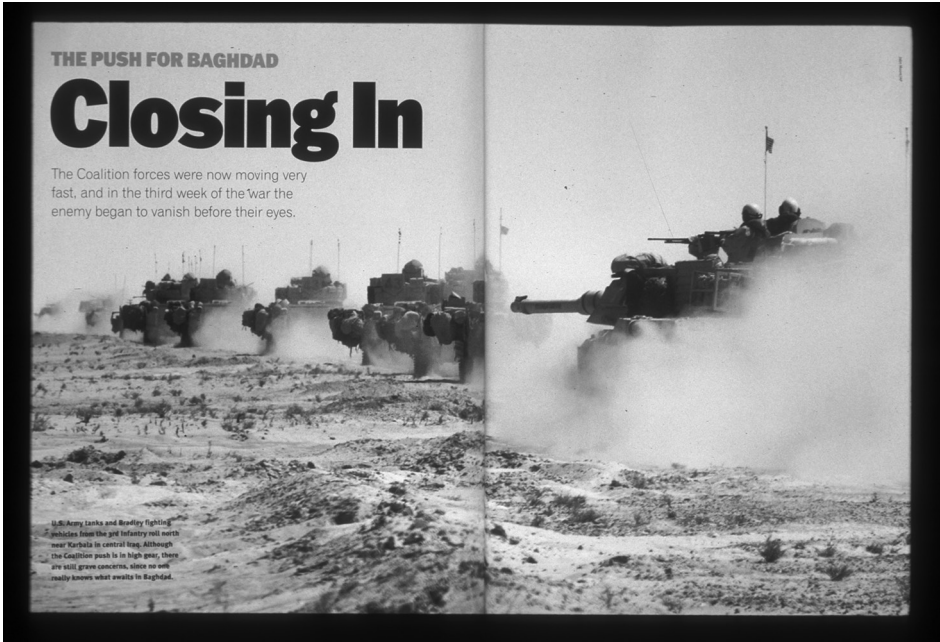
Figure 4. 'Closing In': U.S. Army Tanks and Bradley Fighting Vehicles with the 3rd Infantry Division Task Force 1-64 Move North near Karbala in Central Iraq, Wednesday, 2 April 2003. © Photograph by John Moore, Associated Press, Newsweek, 14 April 2003. Reproduced with permission of Associated Press Images.

a time when the invasion seemed to need a public relations boost back home. In fact, Private Lynch was taken from a civilian hospital where she was not being held by force, and had not been shot by Iraqi troops as claimed, but was being humanely treated after an accident in her vehicle. According to multiple sources, doctors from the hospital had already informed US officials of Lynch's presence there and had tried unsuccessfully to return her to American forces. Nonetheless, Lynch's 'rescue' made her an icon of the war. Her picture appeared on the covers of *Time*, *Newsweek* and *US News & World Report*, on the front pages of scores of newspapers, and was splashed across dozens of television news and infotainment programs. She was decorated for bravery upon her return to the United States, and was the subject of an NBC made-for-television movie, which fictionalized the story of her combat and rescue by further embellishing the already fabricated story originally released by the Pentagon.[20]

Controversy has also swirled around perhaps the most famous icon of the war, the photo of the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square. This picture was initially presented as a candid photograph of jubilant Iraqi citizens spontaneously pulling down the huge symbol of the Iraqi dictator. However, it was later learned that the scene was closely managed by a US Colonel and PSYOP (Psychological Operations) team who cordoned off the square, allowed a relatively small group of Iraqi émigrés to gather
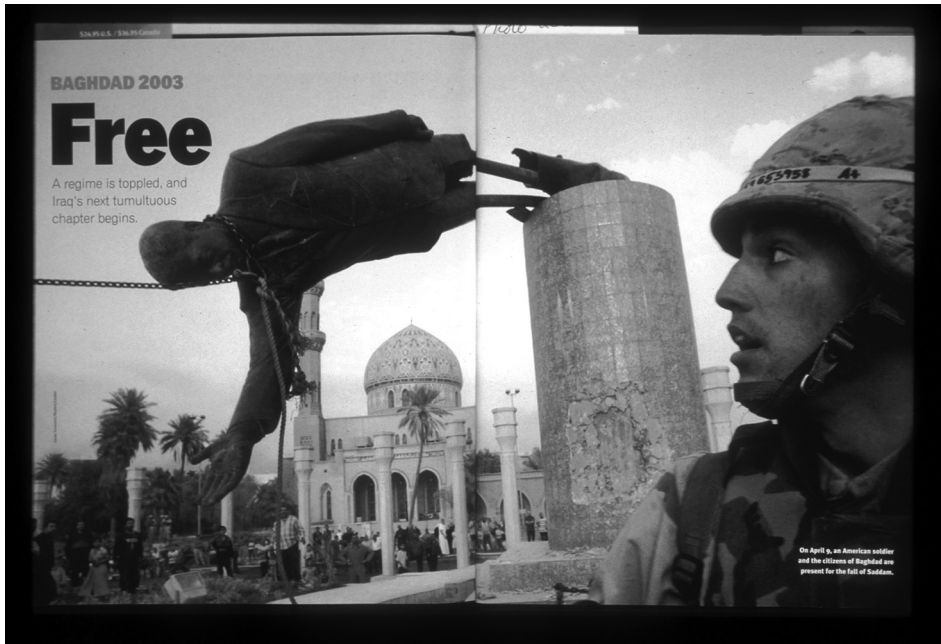
Figure 5. 'Free Iraq', Firdos Square, Baghdad. © Photograph by Goran Tomasevic, Reuters/ Landov, *Newsweek*, 9 April 2003. Reproduced with permission of Reuters.

around the statue, and then used armored vehicles and steel cables to pull the statue down for the cheering Iraqi group (Fahmy, 2007; Griffin, 2008).

Overall, US war coverage in Iraq stands in stark contrast to modernist expectations of photographic witnessing and recording, providing instead a prime example of government managed and institutionally constrained reporting and featuring a limited and sanitized range of visual depiction. The Pentagon policy of embedding journalists with military units proved to be an effective refinement in the management of news coverage, successfully aligning the perspectives of reporters and photographers with the invading forces. Commercial media industries readily conformed to these new arrangements in order to gain easy access to official information, enjoy military transportation and protection, and ensure their capacity to bring viewers daily updates of a highly saleable, America-centric story of US military power and triumph.

However, as the story of taking Baghdad and toppling Saddam concluded, and the dramatic invasion turned into a long drawn-out occupation, US media organizations began pulling reporters and photographers out of Iraq. Reminiscent of the media withdrawal from Vietnam after 1969, US journalists were pulled back from Iraq as soon as the conflict became more ambiguous. During 2003, the number of journalists embedded with US troops dropped from well over 500 in March and April to about 100 by late fall. By 2005, that number had dropped to 48, and by 2006, to 26. By 2004, few reporters ventured out of the protected Green Zone in Baghdad and, by 2008, the number of newspaper and

television correspondents assigned to the Iraq War by major news organizations had been sharply cut. As of June 2008, some major US news organizations, such as CBS, no longer stationed a single full-time correspondent in Iraq and reporters at all of the TV networks were complaining that they could no longer get war-related stories on the air (Stelter, 2008). As coverage diminished, audiences also lost interest (Carruthers, 2008). Without a clear and compelling story, and no promise of a satisfying resolution, images of war, however informative or important, seem to be ignored. In her essay 'No One's Looking: The Disappearing Audience for War', Carruthers writes:

> If the war itself registers only dimly, one might ask whether the fundamental issue is less spectatorial inattention than a paucity of images? Since the heady days of March and April 2003, when the Pentagon's 'embed' system purportedly delivered the 'best war coverage ever', television airtime for Iraq has dwindled. The insurgency has become old news: … US news organizations have responded by downsizing their operations …

> But whatever the deficiencies of news coverage, television is scarcely the sole source of imagery. Dissatisfied with mainstream media and frustrated by an administration curtailing the war's visual record, many independent filmmakers have been drawn to Iraq. The result: a significant corpus of documentary films. These films have, however, signally failed to attract viewers. (p. 72)

Carruthers' description of dwindling public interest, and the rise of independent and non-commercial reflections on the war struggling to gain public attention, clearly echo the final years of the Vietnam War, when interest in the war shifted from mainstream news organizations to independent media producers. The Iraq War seems to provide yet another demonstration of the fact that the impact of visual images is fleeting and erratic, their power inescapably tied to the contexts in which they appear and the strategies by which they are filtered and used.

Conclusion

Images of war, like photographic records of other dramatic crises and events, are often treated as spontaneous, powerful and authentic depictions of real events and real human experience. As such, they are thought to connect the viewer of the image with the depicted encounter and emotional experience of the individual photographer/reporter/artist who confronted the scene. We therefore tend to treat images as primarily the products of individual photographers, as the records of their particular encounters and life experiences, and try to explain them by learning more about the photographer's life – his or her motivations, intentions, temperament, approach to work and the details of the encounters and interactions that appear in his or her pictures. We want the photograph, or filmed footage, to be a proxy for that encounter that we, as viewers, might experience at some level ourselves. We also want to be the recipients of an emotional and experiential transfer that goes beyond a simple 'recording' of the event to provide us with a human connection to the courage, determination, pain, or suffering of the picture's actors.

As highly charged traces of conflict and mortal threat, images of war especially appeal to these human predilections for emotional identification. They can easily seduce us into

thinking that we can experience human events vicariously, at home in our dens or living rooms, if we only have the right cable or satellite TV subscription, or internet access; and that we can know something of the tragedies and triumphs felt by those directly affected by the war simply by 'seeing the pictures'. Much late 20th-century writing on war photography is colored by the idea that Vietnam represented a war in which the public directly experienced war through images. This notion, that previous wars had been censored and sanitized, but that Vietnam, with its flow of daily graphic horror, demonstrated the power of images to change public perceptions and political attitudes, lived on as a lesson both for officials intent on preventing such public access to theaters of conflict in the future and for those convinced that visually exposing the realities of war could forestall its reoccurrence. Alas, the media myth of Vietnam fails on both accounts. To the surprise of many, photographs leaked from Abu Ghraib had little discernible impact on the continuation or progress of the war in Iraq.[21] And the disclosure that iconic images of Jessica Lynch, and the toppling of the Saddam monument in Baghdad, were not the candid and authentic images that people first assumed seemed to have little impact on interest in the Jessica Lynch story or pride in the American victory over Saddam.

But the serious ramifications of the ways in which we represent war necessitate that we consider such images with more sophistication. We should not confuse news and documentary images with those of entertainment fiction, no matter how much the news produced by entertainment conglomerates encourages us to do so. This requires that we study the production and use of these images at multiple levels, and stand back from our tendency to 'witness' them as the shared experiences of our photographer proxies.

First, we must remain conscious of the fact that contemporary news operations, driven as they are by marketing concerns, routinely exploit fear, voyeurism and emotional fascination to boost circulation and ratings. Since war photography potentially produces dramatic and violent images, it can potentially fill a need on the part of media organizations for exciting and attention grabbing content. However, the reporting and picturing of war in today's news organizations involves negotiations among many competing professional motivations and desires: to attract audiences, yes, but also to secure and maintain access to powerful and official news sources; to cultivate relationships that might gain access to new sources; to avoid public offense or backlash; to conform (at least in appearance) to normative professional standards of non-involvement, balance and objectivity, to seem serious and information oriented. These professionalized practices and competing news values inevitably shape and limit the perspectives and images that make it into news publications and programs, regardless of the intentions and personal experiences of individual image makers.

Depictions of war that are published, posted or telecast, as opposed to the vast stores of photographs and motion picture footage that never reach the public eye, are invariably the product of a complex combination of political pressures, negotiations with governments over media policy and access, negotiations with military censors, negotiations between photographers and editors, exchanges among editors along the transom, and the implications of various production contingencies – from time and space limitations, to page design and video packaging constraints, to image cropping and scaling. The impact of these multiple pressures and considerations affects the use of any given image, determining the extent to which a picture truly serves a descriptive or illustrative function, or rather is reduced to marking familiar territory as a more abstract symbol.

The processes of selection and focus in news editing and publication choices gravitate ever more towards single images and short snippets of video. Condensed image markers and symbols provide simplicity and versatility in multiple media contexts and avoid the potential complexity, specificity and limited applications of extended photo essays and longer, more detailed, audio-visual presentations. The photo essay has disappeared from mass circulation magazines, the TV news sound bite has inexorably shrunk, documentary film units have long been eliminated at every network, investigative and long-form journalism have passed on, and newspapers are in their death throes. The time constraints of increasingly shorter news production cycles exert a tremendous pressure on both photographers and editors to seek out images that will serve as simple and quickly recognized symbolic markers of news categories and content, making it even more difficult to publish images that represent events in unfamiliar, more direct, or more expansive and complex ways. Thus, analyses of both television news and published images of war suggest that news images rarely reveal new or previously unseen views and information but most often recapitulate or symbolize already recognized motifs or themes of preconceived written and spoken reports (Griffin, 1992; Griffin and Lee, 1995; Griffin, 2004).

Easily recognized and standard images efficiently prompt preferred news frames (Griffin, 2004) and so prove useful in environments of overt political pressures and government censorship. Standard images also have a greater currency within industrial media systems, providing possibilities for repeated sales through image banks and stock photography houses (Frosh, 2003). Moreover, symbolic rather than descriptive images are more likely to gain currency as abstract icons when sufficiently reproduced, and photographers and media organizations consciously and unconsciously reproduce established cultures of imagery, seeking to emulate genres and icons that have been celebrated in the past. Photojournalism prizes (Pulitzer, National Press Photographers Association, World Press Photo) routinely reward pictures that manifest culturally established iconic features in newly made photographs of new conflicts and world events. Contemporary photographs that are redolent of religious themes, for example, with figural poses or gestures that reflect the Crucifixion, the Pietà, the Madonna and Child, etc. are frequently published in the most highly visible locations – the covers of magazines, the front page of the newspaper – and receive accolades in photo contests. It was not surprising, then, in the early days of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, to hear a CBS news reader on *48 Hours* claim: 'the search is on for the one great image that will define the battle of Iraq' ('Defining the War', *48 Hours*, CBS, 1 April 2003; quoted in Hariman and Lucaites, 2007: 291).

In short, to understand why we get the steady diet of war images that we do, and why many other types of revealing and informative images remain unseen, we need to view war photographs not as reflections of the events and experiences photographers encounter in war zones, but as the results of a continuing practice of cultural production that is also a tool of government management, media business and political persuasion.

Notes

1 I use the term 'images of war' advisedly throughout the article to refer to any and all pictorial representations of warfare and its activities, but especially to photographically based images, whether published in newspapers, magazines and books, presented in documentary and news footage, telecast, or posted and circulated via the internet.

2 I use the term 'myth' in this article in a way that follows the definition proposed by Barthes in 'Myth Today' (*Mythologies*, 1972); that is, as a story or a particular version of history or events by which a culture accounts for, explains, or makes sense of some social phenomenon, set of cultural practices, or set of natural or historical conditions. This use of 'myth' does not depend on a story's truth or falsity but simply refers to the presence of a commonly repeated narrative that is invoked largely without reflection. A given myth might be essentially true, completely implausible, or true in some respects while false in others, but in any case its truth value is irrelevant to its status as a cultural myth. The 'media myth of Vietnam' refers to the popularly accepted understanding that has been perpetuated of the role played by the media in Vietnam, an understanding that is invoked irrespective of historical research or verification.

3 Anecdotal reports suggest that those people who have directly experienced combat or other forms of extreme violence in their lives seem to feel less distance and exhibit different levels of emotional tolerance for depictions of warfare. For example, there were several newspaper reports of Second World War veterans having to leave the theater during the film *Saving Private Ryan* because violent scenes of the Normandy Beach landings triggered traumatic flashbacks for them.

4 Surveillance of the environment, with particular attention to signs of threat or conflict (whether visual, audio, or tactile) is a powerful adaptive sensitivity in humans as well as other species. In the middle of the 20th century, pioneering mass communication theorists Harold Lasswell (1960[1948]) and Charles Wright (1960, 1975) described the systemic role and purposes of communication media in industrialized societies and identified a key function of media use as 'surveillance', the routine monitoring of the environment for conditions, changes or threats. Shoemaker (1996) later observed that the media 'surveillance function' is rooted in adaptive biological and cultural impulses to monitor signals of conflict or threat; that we are, in fact, 'hard-wired for news'.

5 Conflict and drama have been identified in numerous studies of journalism as primary 'news values' driving the selection and focus of news stories. In a parallel way, textbooks advise photojournalists to focus on decisive moments of action or conflict to create pictures with 'simple and immediate impact'. For classic studies of news culture and motivating news values, see Epstein (2000[1973]), Tuchman (1978) and Gans (2004[1979]). For a useful overview of the professional culture and news values identified by journalism studies, see Campbell et al. (2009). For examples of institutionalized photojournalism practices and norms, see Kobre (2008), the most widely used photojournalism textbook in university classrooms, and Horton (2000).

6 For an excellent account of the use of photographs from the First World War by the British Government and in the British press, see Taylor (1991).

7 People who presumably have not carefully read Hallin's invaluable book, *The 'Uncensored War': The Media and Vietnam* (1986), sometimes cite the title in support of claims that there was, in fact, no regulation or control over reporting from Vietnam. (I have witnessed this at several conference presentations over the years.) Apparently, such readers have even failed to notice Hallin's use of quotation marks around 'Uncensored War' in the title.

8 After the first images appeared in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* in November 1969, several other newspapers, such as the *New York Post*, ignored Haeberle's copyright claims and simply copied some of the images from the *Plain Dealer*.

9 Hersh's discoveries were also tracked by a reporter for *The New York Times*, Bob Smith, whose story appeared in the *Times* the same day.

10 A comparison of the circumstances surrounding the publication of Haeberle's My Lai photographs and the circulation of the Abu Ghraib photos would make an interesting analysis in its own right, but remains tangential to this article.

11 One or more of these images are routinely reprinted in collections of the most noteworthy photojournalism of the 20th century, including such books as *Great News Photos and the*

Stories Behind Them (Faber, 1978), *Eyes of Time: Photojournalism in America* (Fulton, 1988), *Eyewitness: 150 Years of Photojournalism* (*Time*, 1998) and various collections of photography from the Vietnam War, such as *Under Fire: Great Photographers and Writers in Vietnam* (Leroy, 2005). Haeberle's My Lai photographs do not appear in any of these books. However, it is worth considering what role media holding companies play in this. Many photo compendia have been published by divisions of Time–Life books, for example, and it seems likely that they are most likely to publish photographs for which they already own copyrights or have easy access through image banks (see Frosh, 2003).

12 Adams' execution photograph won the Pulitzer Prize for Spot News in 1969.

13 Noting the relative disinterest in 'the pain of others' that has characterized public responses to previous wars, including Vietnam, Carruthers (2008) has observed a similar falling-off of public interest in news of conflict in Iraq.

14 My personal experience as a teenager and avid TV network news viewer during this period is consistent with the systematic findings of Hallin (1986) and Wyatt (1995). I first saw photographs of My Lai on a poster at an anti-war rally in 1971. I saw comparable images utilized by activists in alternative political magazines and on posters, but I never saw images of war atrocities or civilian casualties during my years of regular network news viewing.

15 Others argue that Eddie Adams' photograph, 'Rough Justice on a Saigon Street,' of the execution of a Viet Cong suspect by national police chief General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, is the most memorable image of the war. Hariman and Lucaites (2007: 195–7) argue that there are essentially 'four icons of the Vietnam War': the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk in a Saigon intersection (Malcolm Browne, 1963); 'Rough Justice on a Saigon Street' (Eddie Adams, 1968); 'Kent State University Massacre', of a young woman screaming over the body of a Kent State University student shot by National Guardsmen (John Filo, 1970); and 'Accidental Napalm' (Nick Ut, 1972).

16 *Looking for An Icon* (2005), a film by Hans Pool and Maaik Krijgsman, documents photojournalists searching for that single dramatic image that will be widely published and republished and become a symbolic icon of a war or world event. Focusing on four World Press photo winners, including Eddie Adams' 1968 photo of the public execution of a Viet Cong prisoner, an anonymous photographer's last image of Salvador Allende during the 1973 coup, Charlie Cole's 1989 photo of a lone student confronting tanks in Tiananmen Square, and David Turnley's 1991 photo of a grieving soldier during the First Gulf War, the film examines the process by which photos become icons, revealing that once a photo is published, social forces are at work beyond the photographer's control.

17 This image is the work of a US Military or Department of Defense employee, taken or made during the course of an employee's official duties. As a work of the US Federal Government, the image is in the public domain (see http://www.defenselink.mil/multimedia/about.html).

18 Perlmutter (1998) explores several cases of the variable and even oppositional use of the same photographic icon and its implications for foreign policy and foreign relations.

19 Numerous progressive publications joined *The Nation* in a lawsuit (*The Nation Magazine* vs the US Department of Defense), which maintained that the pool system, the military escorts and the security review violated First and Fifth Amendment rights of the press. The case was dismissed in April 1991 on the grounds that the war was over and the issue was moot. Other cases by Agence-France Press and the American Civil Liberties Union were allowed to lapse.

20 See Kampfner (2003) and the BBC Documentary *War Spin*: *Saving Private Jessica: Fact or Fiction?,* with BBC correspondent John Kampfner, which aired on 18 May 2003.

21 I discuss the transient influence of the Abu Ghraib photos in a forthcoming essay.

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