

# Telling War's Deadly Story at Just Enough Distance

David Carr

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**FYI**

David Carr reports on media for the *New York Times*. Prior to joining the *Times*, Carr wrote commentary and criticism about the media for *Inside.com*. The article was published in the *New York Times* just after the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003.

In the darkness of a conference room at *Time* magazine last Friday, a war of terrible and beautiful images unfurled on a screen: the steely-eyed marine taking aim, the awe-struck Iraqi pointing to bombers in the sky, the bloodied head of a dead Iraqi with an American soldier standing tall in the background.

The last image was an appalling but vivid representation of American dominance in a very violent week. But Stephen J. Koeppe, deputy managing editor of *Time*, dismissed the photograph as a candidate for the issue to be published today. "You want a little picture with your blood," Mr. Koeppe said. The photo and editorial staff assembled in the half-light murmured in agreement.

Large numbers of Iraqi soldiers have been killed, according to the Pentagon, and more than 2,000 Iraqi civilians, the government of Saddam Hussein said, many of them in the last week. But when James Kelly, the managing editor of *Time*, lays out the 20 pages of photos intended to anchor the magazine's coverage of the war, there were pictures of soldiers, battles and rubble, but no corpses.

The squeamishness about the carnage that is war's chief byproduct is not restricted to *Time* magazine. During an era when popular culture is filled with depictions of violence and death, and the combination of technology and battlefield access for reporters has put the public in the middle of a shooting war, the images that many Americans are seeing are remarkably bloodless. The heroic narrative is shaped in part by what editors and producers view as a need to maintain standards and not offend their audience. But some cultural critics say that the relatively softened imagery has more to do with a political need to celebrate victory without dwelling on its price. If this is war, they ask, where is the gore?

"War is about dead people, not gorgeous-looking soldiers," said Susan Sontag, author of *Regarding the Pain of Others*. She suggested, "Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessentially modern experience."

It does not get any more modern than a correspondent in the midst of a firefight with a satellite phone and a live visual feed to a 24-hour news channel. But the leap in technology comes with a trade-off in visual clarity. The resolution of the video images is low enough and absent in detail that the war appears scary and chaotic, but rarely bloody.

The real-time field reports are a long march from the work of Matthew Brady, the Civil War photographer whose pictures showed the dead, Americans all, stacked like cordwood. There, too, technology was destiny. Mr. Brady's cumbersome photographic process put a premium on the stillness of the subjects, and no subjects are more patient than the

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dead. But as photography evolved toward light-weight cameras and higher-speed films, the dead became less visible.

The images of the victims of American wars past—the villagers of My Lai, the charred head of an Iraqi soldier from the Persian Gulf War—created significant controversy when they were published. Some editors and photographers say war photography is edited with a heavier hand because of its ability not just to offend the viewer, but to implicate him or her as well.

“The distinction with war photography is that we have willed that person dead,” said Harold Evans, author of *Pictures on a Page*, adding, “We have willed it by sending the soldier there to do that dirty work for us.”

Mr. Evans was a vocal defender of publication of the picture of the Iraqi soldier immolated in his vehicle, which created an outcry when it appeared in the *Observer* of London. Daniel Okrent, then managing editor of a weekly version of *Life*, declined to publish the picture.

“It was too horrible, but then I remember thinking, how can it be too horrible to depict war?” Mr. Okrent said. “I don’t know if we did the right thing.”

Mr. Kelly of *Time* is in the midst of wondering about similar things. As a way to communicate the costs of the war, he chose a photograph of an Iraqi boy being tended to by his aunt who had been severely burned in a fire near Baghdad, in addition to losing both his arms and his family.

“You don’t want to give the reader a sanitized war, but there has to be some judgment and taste,” he said.

Ms. Sontag wondered whom such standards actually protect. “The friends I have all over the world are seeing horrifying images of what is happening when those bombs drop,” she said. “I am always suspicious when institutions talk about good taste. Taste belongs to individuals.”

John Gaps III, photography director of the *Des Moines Register*, agreed to a point. “Any time you

start applying the word *taste* to war, you minimize and trivialize what is happening on the battlefield,” said Mr. Gaps, a former Associated Press combat photographer.

Arab news executives said their Western counterparts were misleading viewers and readers by showing a war without death and pain.

“What happens in Iraq is not covered honestly on CNN, BBC,” an Al-Jazeera news executive said in a telephone interview from Doha, Qatar. “We don’t see any of those killed by the American forces.” It also explains, he said, why the rest of the world feels so differently about this war than most Americans do.

Network news executives gave various reasons for their limited tolerance of gore compared with their Arab colleagues. For one, they said, there are more Arab reporters roving around the towns and villages of

the country on their own, while many Western journalists travel with military units that fight and move on. “I don’t think people have been walking around body-littered fields,” said Jim Murphy, executive producer of the *CBS Evening News*.

Steve Capus, executive producer of the *NBC Nightly News*, said his program is able to communicate the reality of war without reveling in death or injury. “You watch some Arab coverage and you get a sense that there is a bloodbath at the hands of the U.S. military,” he said. “That is not my take on it.”

Ted Koppel, the anchor of *Nightline*, who is traveling with the Third Infantry Division in Iraq, said the conflict might seem bloodless to viewers at home because it sometimes even seems sanitized to troops who rely on long-range weapons.

“This war is fought in many respects at arm’s length,” Mr. Koppel said. “The damage is done, people are killed, but without the people who do the killing seeing very much of the consequences until hours or days later, when they advance.”

By then, he said, Iraqis have often removed their dead soldiers’ bodies. *Nightline* has focused its cam-

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eras on bombing victims more than perhaps any other American news program. One recent night, the program focused on civilians mistakenly hit by fire from the Third Infantry Division. One man's chest was bloody, and the camera did not shy away. Another man's left eye was gouged; it showed that, too.

"The fact that people get killed in a war is precisely what people need to be reminded of," Mr. Koppel said.

Ephemeral American standards—no one seems to know where the line is, yet very few transgress it—seem consistent for still and motion photography. The objective, said Howell Raines, executive editor of the *New York Times*, is "to try to capture the true nature of an event, whether it's a disaster like the World Trade Center or a war, but also to do so with restraint and an avoidance of the gratuitous use of images simply for shock value."

Sometimes the shock value of particularly gruesome imagery can have a practical effect. The last time Saddam

Hussein was backed into a corner by the United States—in 1991—broadcast reports showed the "highway of death," seeming to indicate an assault on fleeing Iraqis that had turned into mass killing. By some accounts, the administration's fear of the negative publicity led top United States officials to declare a cease-fire without a move first to capture Baghdad or to destroy Republican Guard units. Saddam Hussein lived to fight another day.

John Szarkowski, former director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art and author of several books on photography, said that the scarcity of truly horrific images of war preserves their power when they eventually appear.

"I don't think that editors should feel an obligation to print every bloody picture that comes in," he said. "After a while, people get inured to the suffering in the photograph, and that is not good for anyone. In that sense, each successive image has less impact than the one that came before it."

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#### **CONSIDER**

- 1** Do you believe that coverage of wars has the ability to influence public opinion? If so, what obligation does the news media have to remain objective? What would you say to someone who argued that reporters shouldn't try to be objective at all?
- 2** Use the Internet to investigate coverage of the Iraq War in other countries. How would you compare what you found to coverage of the war in the United States?
- 3** What are your thoughts on the coverage of the Iraq War? Do you feel like the news media has sanitized the war? Why or why not?

## **FYI**

### **ITEM 5.13 ■ George Bush Meeting with Burned Soldier**

Advances in armor and medical technology have translated into a much higher survival rate for soldiers injured in the Iraq War. With these advances, however, come new challenges as soldiers return home scarred and disabled. While much controversy has been raised about the treatment these soldiers receive, it is clear that the challenges are not only medical but also emotional.