



Picturing America's 'War on Terrorism' in Afghanistan and Iraq

Photographic motifs as news frames

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ABSTRACT

Following research on depictions of the Persian Gulf War of 1991, this article discusses the nature of US news-magazine photo coverage of the 'War on Terrorism' in Afghanistan and the military invasion of Iraq. The analysis suggests that news-magazine photographs primarily serve established narrative themes within official discourse: that published photographs most often offer prompts for prevailing government versions of events and rarely contribute independent, new or unique visual information. Despite claims of 'live' and spontaneous coverage, photographs from Afghanistan and Iraq, like those from the Gulf War in 1991, are characterized by a narrow range of predictable, recurrent motifs. Repetitive images of the mustering and deployment of the American military arsenal overshadow any fuller or more complex range of depiction. And when dominant news narratives, such as the fall of the Taliban or the fall of Baghdad, come to a close, photographic coverage of continuing events in Afghanistan and Iraq falls off sharply.

KEY WORDS ■ Afghanistan ■ discourse ■ Iraq ■ news frames ■ news-magazines ■ photojournalism ■ visual representation ■ war photography

Introduction

Expectations for war illustration have shifted throughout a century of expanding press photography, television coverage, and now internet circulation. Following the unprecedented escalation of photographic and newsreel production that accompanied the Second World War and the subsequent expansion of photographic news coverage of warfare and conflict across the globe in the second half of the 20th century, purveyors of journalism have increasingly relied upon the camera to promote news presentations as unproblematic *reflections* of events occurring beyond viewers' direct experience. News audiences, for their part, have increasingly taken for granted a routine access to

candid, seemingly unvarnished, and sometimes horrifying visual images of world events and conflicts as they occur, especially in the wake of the 'living room war' myth established by Vietnam War coverage (Hallin, 1986). By the 1990s, live satellite broadcasts of such news events as the 'Fall of the Berlin Wall' and the military suppression of student protests in Tiananmen Square had prepared viewers to readily accept network promises of a 'live TV war' in the Persian Gulf.

This essay presents a comparative analysis of American news-magazine photo coverage during three US military incursions into southwest Asia: the 1991 Gulf War, the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In each case, we chose to study the published photographs and illustrations found in national circulation news-magazines – *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News & World Report* – because the magazines offer a week-by-week compendium of war news, featuring prominently scaled, color photographs purporting to illustrate each conflict throughout their reports. Because news-magazines hit the stands more than a week after the events they report, they serve as a kind of news digest – compressing, recapitulating, elaborating upon, and sometimes even critiquing the television and newspaper reports of a previous week. In the case of the first Gulf War study, surveys of daily newspapers and analyses of the television imagery on CNN (Griffin and Kagan, 1999) also suggested that news-magazine photographs served to parallel and reinforce patterns of news illustration in other media, offering a set of visual 'highlights' that frequently reiterated news images found in the previous week's newspapers and television reports.

This parallel seems somewhat less clear in recent coverage of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Because weekly magazines follow a longer news cycle than television or daily newspapers, a more detailed, in-depth or analytical view of events is often available; and this is equally true with regard to pictures, where a photo essay of several pictures may illustrate a story that in the newspaper was accompanied by only one visual emblem. But the particular value of the news-magazines as a research sample does not rest primarily with their reliable generalizability to other media. Rather, they offer an opportunity to analyze complete populations of images published during particular periods of conflict (rather than samples) in magazines that enjoy national circulation and are read disproportionately by the professional classes. Moreover, as weekly compendiums of photo-reporting, collected and displayed on library shelves in tens of thousands of libraries across North America and the world, the news-magazines represent part of the process of establishing *enduring* images of historical events (Brennen and Hardt, 1999). It is from the photo agency collections of magazine photographers that pictures are most often re-published in later editions, such as 'The Year in Pictures', or

reprinted in books such as *The War in Iraq: A Photo History* (Life Staff and Editors, 2003) or *21 Days to Baghdad* (Time Editors, 2003). It is these repeated and enduring representations of social and political events that sustain a dominant representational paradigm with regard to the role of the USA and its military in world affairs (Kuhn, 1962).

Enduring images, like the handful of famous photographs from the Vietnam War that serve to shape and delimit popular imagination of the war (Griffin, 1999), also contribute to the construction and preservation of cultural myths underlying conventional commercial photojournalism practices (Barthes, 1972; Goldberg, 1993). Indeed, analyses of news-magazine photo coverage of American military interventions in the Middle East in 1991, 2001, and 2003 indicate a highly restricted pattern of depiction limited largely to a discourse of military technological power and response. This discourse suggests an American myth of providential supremacy, at the same 'time' that it promotes an impression of on-the-ground, first-hand recording of events. This serves the marketing imperatives of the commercial media in the USA, constructing spectacles of seemingly spontaneous event-driven stories, even as it manifests the social practices involved in press-government relations – arrangements such as the Pentagon 'pool system', the 'embedding' of journalists with military units, or even just the restriction and channeling of access through systems of press briefings.

The Persian Gulf War, 1991

In response to a spate of impressionistic observation and commentary concerning the 'Persian Gulf TV War' in 1991, we constructed a more precise and systematic inventory of the types, the range, and the frequency of photographic images presented in American news-magazines during the course of the war. This included an analysis of the genre, form, and content of all 1104 Gulf War-related pictures published in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News & World Report* dated 21 January 1991 through 18 March 1991, the complete population of US news-magazine photos published during the ten weeks of 'Desert Storm' (Griffin and Lee, 1995).

A complete report of this study's findings can be found in Griffin and Lee (1995), but a few points bear mention before proceeding to a discussion of the coverage of recent military expeditions in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the study of the first Gulf War, news-magazine photographs provided a reliable shorthand of motifs that tracked with reports even as they seldom added precise information or unique detail to the written account (Griffin, 1992). They tended to be emblematic of news themes, marking the emphases of news

reports but rarely providing literal illustrations of events or even unambiguous depictions of particular times and places.

As every photojournalism student quickly learns, news organizations emphasize pictures with simple and immediate 'impact'; they desire photographs that can be 'read quickly and easily', and that symbolically support the verbal text, often as a prompt or lead-in for the reader's eye. As easily recognized symbols and cues, they 'stand in', so to speak, for the more elaborately detailed and specific reporting and descriptive visualization that one might imagine in idealized news coverage. As simple thematic cues, they frequently serve as the most highly visible markers of news emphases and frames. If the photographs published in *Newsweek* or *Time* are heavily weighted towards pictures of military hardware, one can reasonably expect that the accompanying articles discuss technical military prowess as a central theme. The Griffin and Lee (1995) study identified a narrow and consistent emphasis in the pictorial coverage of the Gulf War that resonated closely with the observations of media scholars concerning newspaper, magazine, and television reporting (see Hardt, 1991; Banks, 1992; Gerbner, 1992; Katz, 1992; Kellner, 1992; Mowlana et al., 1992; Zelizer, 1992, among others). This supported our notion that the range and emphases of photographs may provide not only a barometer of news coverage but a useful index of the more enduring image of the war being constructed for news-magazine readers; that photographic motifs may serve as prompts or frames for a digest of news themes.

Research on the role of photographs in memory and in news recall also suggests that photographs may be more important for their role in priming pre-existing interpretive schema, linking the viewer's memory to familiar news categories and scenarios, than for their specific referential or descriptive function (Griffin, 1999; Kuhn, 1995; Schudson, 1995; Schacter, 1996; Zelizer, 1998). More than they describe, photographs tend to symbolize generalities, providing transcending frames of cultural mythology or social narratives in which the viewer/reader is led to process and interpret other information on the page or screen.

The photo study of the first Gulf War found that all three news-magazines presented narrow and virtually identical patterns of pictorial coverage. The 12 most numerous categories of pictures (of 36 initial coding categories) were the same for all three magazines, accounting for 76 percent of total news-magazine pictures. Three categories of pictures, 'Cataloguing the Arsenal', 'US Troops', and 'US Political and Military Leaders', dominated coverage of the war across the board, accounting for half of all published pictures. The coding category 'Cataloguing the Arsenal' was created to account for the many illustrations we encountered of the US military arsenal. This included photographs and other graphic illustrations of US warplanes, tanks, missiles, naval vessels, electronic

targeting devices, and other weaponry, many of which were reproduced from arms catalogs and arms industry promotional materials. At the start of our research, we had no idea that this category would comprise more pictures than any other or that so many of the images would be 'file photos' taken prior to the war, sometimes displaying weapons tests and simulations, sometimes originating with the arms manufacturers themselves. 'Cataloguing the Arsenal' comprised nearly one-quarter (over 23 percent) of all Gulf War news pictures, while, by contrast, photographs of actual combat activities occurring within the Gulf region were relatively rare (approximately 3 percent of published pictures).

Photographs of US 'troops' – anonymous groups of American soldiers in non-combat situations – constituted the second largest category of pictures at 14 percent. These included photographs of soldiers in their encampments, as well as file photos showing troops engaged in preparatory or training exercises (in the Mojave Desert of Southern California, in Saudi Arabia, on ships at sea, and in other locations outside Kuwait or Iraq). The large number of 'arsenal' and 'troops' pictures, along with the lack of photos from actual combat locations created a pattern of coverage in which images of 'backstage' preparation and/or simulation far outnumbered more spontaneous or candid pictures of 'front-stage' events. The overall effect was to advertise and celebrate the scope and reach of US military technology and power, without actually providing much photojournalistic coverage of ongoing activities in the Gulf.

Aside from pictures of military hardware and photographs of troops, the only large category of images involved photos of political and military leaders, especially pictures of President George H. W. Bush with cabinet members, Defense Secretary Cheney, or generals such as Colin Powell. Iraq's leadership was represented almost exclusively by pictures of Saddam Hussein. Only two photographs of UN ambassador Tariq Assiz interrupted this symbolic monopoly. A recurring motif within the pictures of political leaders was the placement of pictures of George Bush and Saddam Hussein across the page from each other, sometimes sandwiched into the same frame. Covers for issues of both *Newsweek* and *US News & World Report* also placed the two leaders facing each other. One *Newsweek* cover carries close-ups of the two men facing each other beneath the headline, 'Showdown!'.

The predominance of 'backstage' and 'catalog' images set the tone for Gulf War coverage that was distant, abstract, and lacking in spontaneity. The narrow and consistent emphases of the photographs chosen for publication effectively marked the predictable emphases of the news reports. US technological and military superiority was the major preoccupation of news coverage across media, despite the fact that most images of the military were 'canned'. US media seemed to revel in the 'resurgence of the US military' and the news-

magazines were no exception. One *US News & World Report* cover proclaimed, 'The US Military Reborn!'. On television, this was reflected in the time spent interviewing military 'experts' about technology, strategy, and firepower, as well as in the fascination with 'Nintendo' imagery supplied by the Pentagon.

Across the media, coverage of the military 'build-up' overshadowed coverage of the relatively short-lived conflict itself. Remarkably little of the photojournalistic coverage of the war provided any images from the war zone or from those areas on the ground most affected by the military attacks, despite the many claims made by journalists and media organizations about 'bringing the war home' to viewers. In the news-magazine study, we identified more than 500 'backstage' and file photographs during the ten weeks of 'Desert Storm' but only 38 of current combat activity. Even taking into account that these magazines were addressing a specifically American audience during a time of national military mobilization, the pattern of depiction was starkly limited. Our analysis provided empirical support for the impressions of media scholar Elihu Katz, who noted that the military build-up prior to Desert Storm

mobilized huge audiences for a live television war . . . But the fact is that we didn't see a war at all. . . . 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. (Katz, 1992: 8)

Whether this was primarily the result of tightened control over media coverage by the military after Vietnam – a development that included US bans on media access to the military invasions of Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989, following the successful British experience in the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas conflict – or changes in media technology and ownership that have promoted entertainment and simulation at the expense of information and investigation is unclear. It is clear that the 'live war' that never materialized on television was replaced by what some commentators called a 'virtual' war, a steady stream of illustrated events, the source and specificity of which were mostly uncertain. Observing the virtual nature of media coverage, Baudrillard (1995) provocatively claimed that 'the Gulf War did not take place', noting that the war existed more as a media event than a physical occurrence. Der Derian elaborates on this idea in his study of the uses of video and cyber entertainment for US military training, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military–Industrial–Media–Entertainment Network* (2001). In any case, the surrogate nature of pictorial coverage in 1991 established a precedent for photojournalism a decade later.

News-magazines after 9/11: picturing the 'War on Terrorism'

After September 11, 2001, media coverage of a newly declared 'War on Terrorism' began. Although this was, in many respects, a new type of 'war', many of the same expectations for news coverage and visual access remained. Images from the September 11 attacks dominated the visual representation of this new war for several weeks, until gradually '9/11' became condensed into a few repeated photographic icons and other images of 'war' began to surface.

In order to gauge the nature of pictorial coverage after 9/11 and provide some comparison to coverage of the Gulf War, photographs published in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News & World Report* were again inventoried. As before, the news-magazines provided an accessible digest of photo coverage for analysis. Although these magazines are clearly targeted at upscale readers, the display and use of these magazines at news-stands, supermarkets, pharmacies, and in myriad waiting rooms (from dentists' offices to auto repair shops) often lends itself to browsing and visual scanning more than sustained reading, making the news-magazines a ready visual summary of news events, especially in times of crisis.

Issues published in the wake of the September 11 attacks again used their longer format to recapitulate and digest the daily press reports of the previous week while providing a more prominent visual presentation of events than newspapers, including pictures that would become established through repetition as enduring icons. In their book *The Press Effect* (2003), Jamieson and Waldman give an interesting account of this process:

As September 11 unfolded, the nation's news-magazines scrambled to assemble special issues making sense of what would quickly be reduced to the shorthand of the 'terrorist attacks.' Among the concerns of the assembled editors was selection of the cover pictures that would digest the meaning of the day . . .

A special September 24 issue of *Business Week* showed the second tower at the moment of impact and the first smoldering. The September 24 issue of *People* placed a sepia-toned image of the second plane about to hit the World Trade center with the first tower in flames and Manhattan skyline a hazy blur under a ceiling of smoke. The *Newsweek* special edition showed the explosion produced on impact by the first plane. Each focused attention on the terrorist act itself. From memory revived by repeated portrayal, readers filled in what was to follow . . .

But the photo that would recur throughout the following days and weeks was none of these. It was instead some version of the shot carried on the cover of the September 24 *Newsweek*. In it three firemen secure an intact US flag to a pole protruding from the rubble of the World Trade Center, in a moment reminiscent of the one created by servicemen in Joe Rosenthal's Pulitzer Prize-winning World

War II photo of Marines raising the flag at the top of Mount Suribachi, Iwo Jima, in February 1945 . . .

This was one of the visuals intercut by *ABC News* into the speech delivered by President George W. Bush at the National Cathedral memorial service three days after the attack. It was the picture left in a Taliban headquarters raided by US forces the weekend of October 20. Attached to those calling cards was the message 'Freedom Endures.' Soon thereafter the picture capped a promotional spot for the History Channel that included such memorable moments as JFK's delivery of 'Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.' The image was even engraved on a coin, hawked on late-night television by opportunistic entrepreneurs. It was the digestive image through which significant news outlets and then the popular culture invited us to see September 11. By selecting this image rather than those of impending destruction or twisted ruins, *Newsweek*, *ABC*, and then the US government invited audiences to interpret the US action and resolve through one iconic moment and not others, through an image transforming tragedy into triumph. (Jamieson and Waldman, 2003: 141–2)

The 'War on Terrorism' in Afghanistan

As defined by the Bush administration, the 'War on Terrorism' began with the hijacking and crashing of four airliners on September 11, 2001. News reaction to the attacks initially took the form of disaster coverage, exhibiting the familiar formula for disaster reporting noted by Fair and Chakravartty (1999) and Eaton (2001). The first stage, 'disaster strikes', focused news coverage on the spectacle of explosions and fires and the scale of destruction and suffering. In the second stage, the focus shifted to 'rescue efforts' and the heroism of rescuers. Third, attention was given to the 'mobilization of aid efforts', with stories on volunteers, aid campaigns, and blood donors. Fourth, attention turned to secondary effects: disruption of economic activity, the suffering of survivors, and the families of victims.

In the weeks after 9/11, news-magazine pictures of the 'War on Terrorism' followed this formula very closely. However, each stage of the disaster coverage gradually condensed into a repetition of key symbolic photographs, icons that served as ready prompts for the viewer. By the end of October, the news focus began to shift away from disaster coverage altogether, becoming increasingly preoccupied with execution of the US military's 'War on Terrorism'.¹

Until the invasion of Iraq, the War on Terrorism was not marked by any clearly defined period of military action. Indeed, a salient characteristic of the War on Terrorism, as it has been defined and presented to the public, is that it is a 'war' without clear boundaries. Therefore, pictures accompanying a variety of stories related to this war were included in this stage of the analysis, including illustrations found in magazine sections labeled: 'Terror', 'War on

Terror', 'Trail of Terror', 'America Strikes Back', 'How Scared Should You Be?', 'Special Report: Why They Hate Us', 'The Air War', 'Anthrax: A Spreading Scare', 'Special Ops: Can Our Commandos Finish the Job?', 'Protecting America: What Must Be Done?', 'The Hunt for bin Laden: US Forces Zero In on the Evil One', and 'American Taliban: The Saga of John Walker'. The analysis began with the same set of coding categories used by Griffin and Lee (1995) in the analysis of Gulf War pictures, adding new categories as the need became apparent.²

Not surprisingly, 'War on Terrorism' coverage included a significant focus on life and events in the United States.³ In coverage of the September 11 attacks, there were a large number of photographs of victims, survivors, and their families, as well as pictures related to terrorism's impact on daily life within the United States. However, an interesting pattern emerged in this regard. By the middle of October 2001, pictures related directly to September 11 – photos of the Ground Zero devastation, portraits of victims and their families, pictures of rescue and clean-up activities – increasingly gave way to photographs of military activity in Afghanistan and illustrations related to the anthrax scare. Yet, by the middle of December the October–November surge in pictures from Afghanistan was already waning and there was a return to pictures of the World Trade Center collapse and other September 11 related subjects. It was as if Afghanistan had come up short as a source of war-related photographs and editors felt the need to return to pictures from the September 11 attacks and their aftermath in order to represent the continued existence of a 'war' visually. A steady stream of war illustration seemed harder to sustain in Afghanistan than it had been in the Gulf War and an image of the war had to be cobbled together from a greater range of material. One could sense the magazines struggling with a relative dearth of visual material: there was not the same period of build-up to provide pictures of 'troops', 'technology' and 'weapons'. Although these types of images still constituted half of the eight most frequent picture types, they were far fewer in number than they had been in 1991.

End-of-year 'special issue' pictorial reviews appearing in December and January also returned, as would be expected, to the attacks of September 11 as the year's most important event. In doing so, however, they used photos of the 9/11 attacks to provide greater visual drama for a slightly different story: the ongoing 'War on Terrorism' in Afghanistan and 'elsewhere'. Pictures of the World Trade Center and its victims were linked to images illustrating 12 other facets of the 'war'. Thirteen relevant types of photographs in *Newsweek's* end-of-year pictorial review, listed in terms of relative frequency and prominence are given here:

- 1 the World Trade Center attack and disaster, reproducing prominent photos of the towers exploding in fire, victims falling to their death, and survivors rushing desperately away from the buildings;
- 2 heroic firefighters and rescue workers paired with waving American flags;
- 3 suspected terrorists or terrorist leaders (Osama bin Laden, Mohammed Atta, Zacarias Moussaoui, Saddam Hussein, ID photos of the September 11 hijackers);
- 4 President George W. Bush shown in various presidential settings and poses;
- 5 funerals, and family members, of World Trade Center victims;
- 6 US troops pictured in preparatory, non-combat, situations;
- 7 the US weapons arsenal arrayed against Afghanistan;
- 8 Osama bin Laden alone, usually shown in frame-grabs from videotapes;
- 9 administration officials or members of President Bush's 'wartime cabinet' (Cheney, Rove, Rice, Rumsfeld, Ashcroft, Powell);
- 10 symbols of Islam as a source of conflict and concern in the world (pictures of Islamic schools, militants, demonstrators, covered women, boys throwing stones);
- 11 Afghan fighters (usually identified in captions as 'Northern Alliance' troops), sometimes shown in combat (running or shooting);
- 12 pictures related to the 'anthrax scare' and homeland security in the US; and
- 13 photos of John Walker, 'the American Taliban'.

Not surprisingly, these are the same pictorial topics reflected on *Newsweek* covers from 24 September 2001 to 7 January 2002. They include cover pictures of firefighters at Ground Zero with the American flag waving and the headline 'God Bless America' (24 September), the face of Osama bin Laden (1 October, 26 November, and 24 December), US troops (8 and 29 October), a child in a turban holding a gun at an anti-US demonstration in Islamabad with the headline 'Islamic Rage' (15 October), anthrax emergency clean-up workers (22 October), the American flag again (5 November), President Bush and his wife Laura with the headline 'Where We Get Our Strength' (3 December), a photo illustration of an anonymous suspected terrorist (10 December), John Walker as a Taliban prisoner (17 December), and the World Trade Center exploding in flames (31 December–7 January).

By January 2002, *Newsweek* and *Time* both abandoned regular sections labeled 'war on terror' and the number of published pictures related to the war began to drop off sharply. In *Newsweek*, for example, the number of war-related pictures dropped from an average of 56 per issue from 24 September 2001

through 7 January 2002, to 40 in the 14 January 2002 issue, 10 in the 21 January issue, 25 in the 28 January issue, and two in the 4 February issue. Most of the February and March 2002 issues of *Newsweek* contain no war-related pictures whatsoever.⁴

War photojournalism: 1991 and 2001

Although expected differences are apparent in the published news-magazine photographs of the Persian Gulf War in 1991 and the new 'War on Terrorism' in 2001, certain tendencies continue. As with Gulf War coverage, no significant differences among the three news-magazines are apparent. Often, identical photographs appear in more than one publication. Also, the pictorial coverage in both cases tends to fall into a narrow pattern of repetition, with a small number of photo genres compressing the range of visualization available to news consumers. For example, approximately two-thirds of the 894 pictures published in *Newsweek* from the 24 September 2001 issue through the 28 January 2002 issue fall into just four general categories of content. The largest single category shows the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and their aftermath. As previously noted, coverage of the attacks follows a conventional 'disaster' protocol, with the disaster spectacle itself dominating early coverage and later 'special issue reviews'. This category contains 153 or 17 percent of published pictures while occupying 78.5 pages or 22.5 percent of the total picture space in 18 issues of *Newsweek*.⁵ The unprecedented nature of the World Trade Center assault resulted in a photographic record of visual spectacle unlike anything in 1991 Gulf War coverage. But, as the 9/11 spectacle gave way to coverage of US military operations, published pictures fell back into a pattern reminiscent of 1991.

The four other largest categories of news-magazine pictures, 'US political leaders', 'Terrorist/enemy leaders', 'Non-combat troops', and the 'US weapons arsenal' constitute about one-half of all published pictures in 2001. In *Newsweek*, 159 pictures (18 percent) and 38 pages of picture space show images of 'terrorists' – Osama bin Laden, other Al Qaeda leaders and suspects, and leaders identified as having terrorist connections (e.g. Saddam Hussein, Omar, Abdul Rahman, etc.). Across the 18 issues of *Newsweek*, one in every 20 war-related pictures are portraits of Osama bin Laden, the icon of terror in American news coverage of the 'War on Terrorism', identified in headlines and captions as 'the evil one'. US political leaders are featured in 93 pictures (or 10.4 percent of the total), less than the percentage of 'terrorist leader' pictures but scaled larger with 43 pages of picture space. The greatest share of these are pictures featuring President Bush, alone or as the central figure (48 pictures, 5.4 percent, 26 pages of space). More than one in 20 war-related pictures are

images of George W. Bush, (about one-13th of the picture space). Together, pictures of George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden, personifications of the conflict, make up 10.3 percent of all of the 'War on Terrorism' pictures and 12.3 percent of the picture space. 'US Troops' and 'Cataloguing the Arsenal' constitute over 11 percent of *Newsweek* pictures and 14 percent of picture space, despite the fact that, in Afghanistan, most of the military action against the Taliban was conducted by 'allied Afghan forces' and that a great deal of US military activity involved small-scale, covert, or 'Special Ops' raids. Although there were fewer 'arsenal' pictures than in the Gulf War, where pictures of the US military arsenal was the single biggest category, 'Cataloguing the Arsenal' remained one of the largest picture genres, rivaling 'Political Leaders' and behind only pictures of the disaster at the World Trade Center. The relatively large number of photos showing the 'Troops' and the 'Arsenal' was again accompanied by very few photographs of actual combat activity, whether by Afghan or US fighters. 'Backstage' illustrations of troops and weapons again largely stood in place of combat-zone pictures.

As in 1991, photographs one might expect to see in wartime photojournalism – pictures of ongoing combat, images of casualties, and pictures of war dissenters – are largely missing. Contemporaneous combat photographs are only about 1.5 percent of the published pictures and about half of those were furnished by (and attributed to) the US Department of Defense. Human injuries or death also appear in only 1.5 percent of the pictures. In those rare cases where wounded or dead bodies are shown, they are, without exception, bodies of foreign or enemy participants, never US soldiers. In *Newsweek*, five casualties were shown out of 894 pictures, all of them Afghan or unidentified 'allies' of Al Qaeda. As with the Gulf War coverage, images of the destruction and human cost resulting from American military action were largely absent, even as images of destruction, death, and disaster were emphasized so forcefully and repeatedly in the many published images of the September 11 attacks.

It is also important to note that in the midst of a war that so greatly affected Afghanistan and its neighbors, we saw remarkably few images of people who live in that part of the world. The almost complete absence of pictures illustrating aspects of the cultural, economic, or geopolitical contexts surrounding the conflict is stark. Special articles on the training of Islamic militants in Pakistan, Egypt, and elsewhere attempted to provide an explanation for the attacks of Muslims against the USA. These were usually accompanied by photographs that offered symbols of Islamic fervor. For example, the 15 October 2001 *Newsweek* cover story is entitled 'Islamic Rage'. The 17 December issue juxtaposes a photograph of the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina with two featured articles on 'The Muslim Wars', a photograph of

a Palestinian boy throwing a stone (accompanied by the caption 'Young Warriors') is juxtaposed with a photo of the World Trade Center exploding in flames. Such stories and pictures visually stereotype Islam and its 'threat' in emblematic ways, fitting the stereotypes of the Islamic world that many have observed and Said (1978, 1997) has theorized. Just as static symbols of warfare ('weapons' and 'troops') stand in for spontaneous coverage of combat, generalized images of Muslim people and places are inserted, along with repeated pictures of Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, and other religious or nationalist leaders, to provide some tangible image of a largely invisible (and inexplicable?) enemy.

The invasion of Iraq, 2003

With the 2003 invasion of Iraq, it was natural to expect a re-run of the Gulf War in the American news media and, indeed, at times the pictorial coverage evoked a feeling of *déjà vu*. But what is perhaps most interesting are the ways in which sometimes very different types of pictorial material still served to frame news presentations in accordance with familiar themes. Like the news-magazine photographs of 1991, the pictures published in February, March, and April of 2003 focus heavily on (1) cataloguing the US military arsenal, (2) unengaged troops, first training and mobilizing for invasion, and then moving in armored convoys across the Iraqi desert, and (3) US political leaders, especially President Bush and members of his cabinet. Once again, this same emphasis in published pictures constitutes about half of all photos appearing in the news-magazines in the weeks just before and during the Iraq invasion (49 percent in *Time*, 53 percent in *Newsweek*, 58 percent in *US News & World Report*, 17 February through 28 April 2003).

As with the first Gulf War, the press anticipated an inevitable attack by US forces and preceded the onset of the invasion with a pattern of pictures establishing a predetermined frame. For example, in the 24 March issue of *Time* (an issue that hit the news-stands before the invasion began), three photographs dominate most of the table of contents page: the largest photo at the top shows Lieutenant Colonel Laura Richardson (with other soldiers behind her) hugging her daughter goodbye in a hangar at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, before departing for the Gulf region; the second photo just below it shows Iraqi civilians (an elderly man with a cane holding the hand of a young boy, a woman covered in black carrying a package, and a young man) 'skirting sandbagged defensive positions' in the streets of Baghdad; the third photo is a close-up of the face of an American marine wearing a gas mask 'enduring a "spray attack" drill in the Kuwaiti desert'. Here, in the summary of contents for this 'pre-war' issue, the layout of photographs already provides an interpretive

frame: 'the US builds up the troops and weapons of its military machine as Iraqis wait for the inevitable attack'. The cover story for this issue, 'An American family goes to war', continues on later pages with large color photographs of the Richardsons, 'the first husband and wife battalion commanders in the new married-with-children military'. Laura is shown marching through the desert at Camp Victory, Kuwait. Her husband Jim is pictured sitting in the cockpit of an F-16 fighter jet at Camp Udairi, Kuwait. The accompanying captions read: 'Commander of a Black Hawk battalion, she is a rising star in the army' and 'While his wife ferries the troops, he provides the protection and firepower' (pp. 26–7). See Figure 1.

Like so many other stories and photo essays in the pages of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News & World Report*, the pictures accompanying the story of the Richardsons encapsulate the predominant theme: the massing of troops and weapons and the gathering of an overpowering and irresistible American military force. Few pictures of British forces appear. An adjacent story in the same issue of *Time*, entitled 'Second Wave', makes this explicit by predicting, before the invasion, the events and outcome of the war: 'After beating Iraq and destroying its bioweapons, US forces, packing lots of cash, will try to rebuild the infrastructure – and win back a little good will' (p. 34).

Within these frames, the 'cataloguing of the arsenal' is again quite extensive. The magazines contain recent photographs, file photographs, and

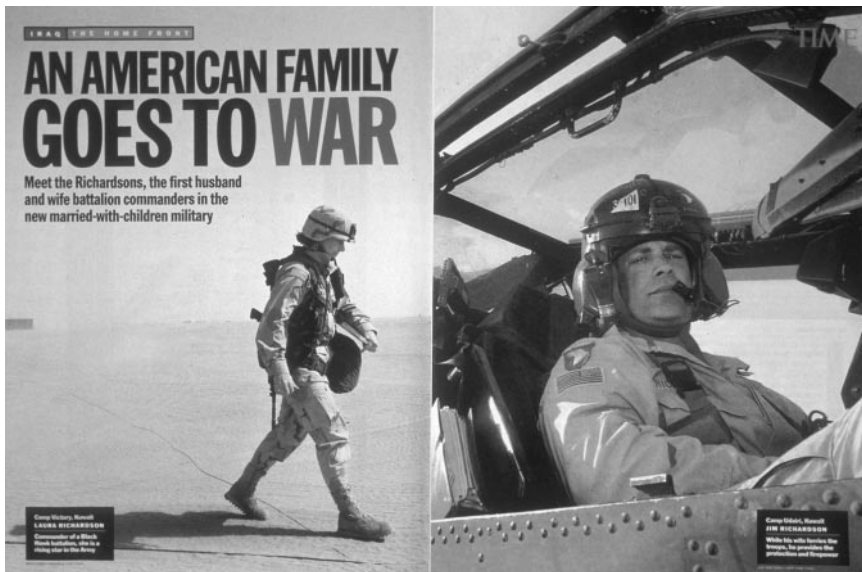


Figure 1 An American family goes to war (*Time*, 24 March 2003)

numerous graphic illustrations of aircraft carriers, missiles, stealth fighters and bombers, drones, chemical suits and masks, and various classes of tanks, armored vehicles, mobile artillery, and rocket launchers. Special sections are included that provide a 'program' for identifying the various sorts of weaponry: to distinguish an M1A1 Abrams Tank from an M2A2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle, an M110 203mm self-propelled howitzer from an M-102 105mm towed howitzer, an F-16 fighter jet from an F/A-18 Hornet, or a cruise missile from a tomahawk. There is a great preoccupation with photographs of fighter planes lined up on the decks of aircraft carriers, of pilots in the cockpits of warplanes, and with the seemingly endless lines of tanks and armored vehicles 'rolling' into Iraq. Several photographers seem to have a fancy for highly stylized silhouettes of fighter jets on aircraft carrier decks, usually featuring the silhouette of a deck-hand waving signs as he directs aircraft into place. Early in the war, there were many pictures of soldiers wearing full biochemical suits and masks.

In 1991, several commentators referred to coverage of the war as a kind of 'advertisement' for the American arms industry and, in fact, it was widely reported in the months following 'Desert Storm' that American arms sales abroad had spiked following the conflict.⁶ In 2003, with reporters now 'embedded' with military units, a similar parade of American arms includes numerous pictures of tanks, armored vehicles, and weapons but now more of the photographs showed them 'in action' moving across the Iraqi desert. In a kind of paean to US military prowess after the fall of Baghdad, the 12 May 2003 issue of *US News & World Report* features the cover story 'A Day in the Life of the Military'. The cover photo shows a US Navy fighter pilot performing a 'Top Gun' aerobatic stunt and the accompanying eight-page photo spread celebrating the military inside is underwritten by the Boeing Company.

Many of the published photographs of soldiers in 2003, as in the Gulf War, are 'backstage' scenes of 'troops,' engaged only in preparations or exercises. The same issue of *Time* (24 March 2003) that features the Richardson family also provides a preview of military activities in Iraq. Under a section banner that reads 'With the Troops', three photographs are stacked across two pages. The first shows two US soldiers pretending to capture a third, who is playing the role of an Iraqi. The faux prisoner lies on his stomach, his chin in the sand, as one of the captors squats before him with his automatic rifle pointed directly at the 'prisoner's' head. The caption states: 'POWS: Dealing with prisoners would be a big task. In Kuwait, Marines practice.'

The second photo shows a US soldier who has thrown himself down on his stomach in the sand facing the camera. He is wearing a biochemical mask and pointing an automatic pistol towards the photographer. Tanks are visible on the crest of a sandy slope behind him. The caption reads: 'WEAPONS

HUNT: The hunt for bio arms would begin quickly. Above, a marine drills with a mask.' The third photo shows two soldiers loading yellow packages into boxes. The captions reads: 'AID TO CIVILIANS: Each Marine vehicle will carry meals, like these, into Iraq to feed local people.'

Again, these photos seem to reflect predominant themes established prior to the onset of the invasion. And not surprisingly, editors seem to have largely followed this roadmap in selecting illustrations for publication during the conflict. Motifs that were established before the invasion continued as the invasion commenced. Later issues contain numerous photographs of soldiers advancing in chemical suits and masks, apprehending Iraqi prisoners (often in the same pose as the rehearsal), and providing food and water to civilians and captured Iraqi soldiers. This includes at least two published photos in which captured Iraqis are held by US soldiers, their arms tied behind them, one soldier pointing a gun directly at their head while another generously pours water into their mouths.

The pictorial display of advanced weapons and the massing and training of troops found in each news-magazine issue is accompanied by routine photographs of President George W. Bush and other high-ranking members of his administration, particularly Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Karl Rove, and Paul Wolfowitz, meeting in offices and around conference tables or, in a few cases, speaking to troops directly. The three largest frequency categories of pictures – weapons, troops, and leaders – are like the three legs of a stool: they support a routine structure for nearly every issue around the time of the invasion.

Yet, there are numerous images in the April 2003 editions of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News* that were rare in coverage of the earlier conflicts. Undoubtedly, this is the result of embedded photojournalists traveling with invading troops. This time we see numerous photos of Iraqis, which fall mainly into five categories:

- 1 pictures of groups of Iraqi civilians (sometimes waving) along roadways on which American armored convoys are moving;
- 2 pictures of Kurdish fighters allied with the US and Britain in northern Iraq;
- 3 pictures of captured Iraqi soldiers or militiamen;
- 4 pictures of Iraqis receiving humanitarian aid from American or British soldiers; and
- 5 pictures of crowds cheering US troops in Iraqi cities.

There seems to have been a special effort to make and publish images of US and British soldiers providing humanitarian aid to Iraqis. Eleven such photos appear in the magazines between 7 and 21 April. Several pictures show soldiers

holding (and presumably rescuing) infants, a motif that is repeated with more than coincidental frequency. In several photographs, female soldiers, British and American, are shown assisting Iraqi women.

The number of combat photos is also increased over both the Gulf War and the conflict in Afghanistan, although perhaps less than one would expect with 'embedded' reporters. Photographs from combat zones in the Gulf War were 3 percent of published pictures. Among the March/April 2003 photographs, they constitute slightly less than 10 percent. As is typical in war coverage, some of the most dramatic and memorable photographs fall into this category, sometimes skewing our perception of the extent to which they characterize the bulk of coverage. One such picture shows soldiers of the American 7th Infantry Regiment attempting to secure a bridge at the town of Hindiyah. A wounded Iraqi woman is trapped on the bridge, reportedly in the crossfire between American troops and Iraqi defenders. Reproduced in numerous newspapers and magazines, this photograph served to symbolize the 'unavoidable' reality of 'collateral' casualties in war, accompanied by headlines such as 'Inroads Paved with Pain'.

While the presence of photographers with invading military units resulted in more pictures of troops in action and more pictures of Iraqis caught in the 'chaos of war', overall patterns of photo coverage did not drastically change. The same picture categories that predominated in 1991 were the largest in 2003. And the same types of pictures were relatively absent: pictures of casualties, whether Iraqi, British, or American; pictures of the damage done to Iraqi homes and the Iraqi infrastructure by the bombing; pictures from the Iraqi point of view. Rather than open up a greater range of photo possibilities, traveling 'with the troops' further reinforced a purely American-centered perspective. The dominant visual discourse remained the same: we saw an overwhelming and unstoppable American military machine relentlessly roll across Iraq to Baghdad. The 'Road to Baghdad' became the predominant theme of coverage and the photographs consistently evoked that theme.

Photographs as priming motifs for news narratives

The 'push to Baghdad' became an organizing narrative for coverage during the invasion and each issue of the news-magazines (as well as the daily newspapers at my breakfast table each morning) carried photographs of armored convoys on the move. The pictures by themselves repeatedly advanced the idea that getting to Baghdad was the primary goal and that US success could be gauged by the number of miles left to the capital city. One of the most frequent

pictures appearing in all three magazines was that of armored convoys stretching along a highway or across the desert. One of these pictures in *Newsweek* is accompanied by the headline 'Halfway to Baghdad'. One double-page photograph of tanks speeding along in *Time* is accompanied by the headline: 'Push for Baghdad: CLOSING IN'. A *US News & World Report* picture of a tank convoy approaching the Baghdad airport calls out, 'Rolling in, Moving Out'. Images that are not illustrative of moving ahead often involve obstacles to be overcome: a bridge to be taken, prisoners to be processed.

'Rolling to Baghdad', of course, culminates in Iraqi 'liberation' and the 'toppling' of the Saddam regime. And so 'Saddam toppled' becomes the climax of the story, after which President Bush declares 'major combat' to be over. Again, photographs serve to prime and anchor this story, with numerous shots of Saddam statues toppling as the visible symbols of Baathist collapse and American success. In the end, it matters little whether the most prominent of these pictures, showing the large statue of Saddam pulled down in front of the Palestine Hotel in Baghdad, was staged (as evidence from Reuters and AFP, 9 April 2003, indicates that it was). In the mythic story served by these photos in American news-magazines and on American television, this image had already become the accepted symbol of 'liberation' and 'victory'.⁷

Media predispositions to publish some types of photographs and not others seem to be related to these issues of narrative and closure. Photos of Saddam's statue toppled amid cheering groups of Iraqis provided the closure that the 'road to Baghdad' story required. To question the legitimacy or meaning of the photographs would have meant re-opening the story for interpretation. In May 2003 issues, the news-magazines sought further closure by carrying large-scale photos of American soldiers greeted by friends and relatives as they returned home. A large photograph of a young man embracing his father and mother beneath the headline 'Coming Home' appears in the 5 May issue of *Newsweek*, while in *Time* a young soldier points to the regimental patch on his shoulder and cheers as family members applaud. Of course, the US Administration encouraged this desire for closure with photos of President Bush flanked by Abrams tanks in Ohio (*Time* published a double-paged photograph with the headline, 'Taking Aim at 2004: Can Bush win a second term on a platform of tanks and tax cuts?') and landing aboard the deck of the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln to declare 'Mission Accomplished'.

The fact that the ongoing conflict in Iraq during the summer and fall of 2003 contradicted this rush to closure seemed to inject confusion into US media coverage of Iraq, with the number of published pictures falling off sharply and a coherent narrative yet to emerge.

Conclusion

The present analysis of photographic war coverage in American news-magazines lends further support to the idea that news photographs prime and reinforce prevailing news narratives rather than contribute independent or unique visual information. Photo coverage in the US news-magazines routinely supported Washington's 'official' version of events. The American President was prominent in the pictorial coverage, appearing in pictures as a strong and confident leader. US troops, weapons, and military hardware dominated the depictions, providing an image of a powerful and determined nation ready and able to vanquish its enemies. The enemy itself was reduced to stereotypical emblems. And the subtleties and complications of global economics and foreign affairs remained invisible. Finally, the human and economic costs of war were largely absent from news portrayals.

Previous studies by this author and others (Lichty, 1973; Braestrup, 1977; Hallin, 1986; Ericson et al., 1987; Griffin, 1992; Eldridge, 1995; Griffin and Lee, 1995; Griffin, 1999) suggest that the construction of news presentations within routine news formats rarely utilize pictorial material in a manner that adds independently specific details or informational substance to news reports. Perhaps it should come as no surprise then that pictures in these news-magazines are most often employed as uncomplicated symbolic markers of pre-established classes of content, and serve to prime viewers towards certain dominant discourse paradigms and frames of interpretation. As conventionalized motifs, news photographs more often reinforce preconceived notions and stereotypes than reveal new information or provide new perspectives. Counter to continuing popular perceptions of photographic media, photographs do not simply reflect events occurring before the camera but are inextricably implicated in the constructive process of discourse formation and maintenance. The analysis of news-magazine photographs from the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan reaffirm that the published pictures of the mainstream press do not provide natural, spontaneous, or independent views of locations or occurrences. Rather, they apparently prompt and reinforce those versions of events that have already been established in public discourse and entrenched in media institutions by powerful social interests.

But we might be excused for thinking that there is more interplay than this between the institutional relationships and routines of news construction and the less predictable vagaries of human life and events. Particularly in times of crisis, or amid the 'chaos of war', one might expect that unvarnished photographs could surprise us, that they might inevitably expose the horror and folly of human and state violence. This is the story perpetuated about photojournalism in Vietnam, that the unblinking honesty of the camera

inescapably revealed the horrors and contradictions of the war, turning a nation against its own government. This is the story told about the collapse of the Soviet Union, that uncensored images of life in the West led a people to throw off their government to go shopping.

A close analysis of recent US war photojournalism indicates that photography is in no way de-linked by its status as a 'recording technology' from the economic, social, and political forces that shape the limits and propriety of representation. In fact, the range of photographs appearing in US commercial news-magazines are arguably more severely restricted than the language of reporters and columnists that appears there. The myth of the photograph revealing human suffering, opening the viewer's eyes to the conditions of the downtrodden, and provoking movements for social reform – a myth that academic histories of photography have promulgated – is nowhere apparent in the routine workings of the picture press. Representational legitimacy remains inextricably tied to power, even if the links are complicated by layers of social hierarchy and specific historical relationships (Hall, 1973). Within the commercial enterprise photographic representation has not escaped its sublimation to the established discourse of government leaders or the concerns of commercial marketing. It is more likely to produce enduring symbols of that discourse than to give us a liberated view.

Notes

- 1 The shifts in news focus are explicitly cued by the section headings and banners used in the news-magazine formats. In sections of the magazine devoted to articles on the war, each page exhibits a banner with a heading such as 'striking back at terror'.
- 2 Categories pertinent to the 'new war on terror' not found in the Gulf War coverage included images of the catastrophic destruction of September 11, domestic police action, firefighters involved in rescue operations, victims of the 9/11 attacks and their families, and anthrax investigation and clean-up.
- 3 By contrast, pictures related to domestic implications of the 1991 Gulf War were rare.
- 4 The 18 March issue is an exception, containing a story on renewed special operations missions against Al Qaeda along the Afghan–Pakistani border accompanied by 16 photographs (eight are ID photos of the US soldiers killed in this operation).
- 5 The overall disaster theme comprised three specific coding categories for pictures: (1) Attacks and disaster spectacle (55 pictures covering 34 pages of space – the average size of each photograph being more than six-tenths of a page); (2) firefighters, rescuers, and rescue attempts (49 pictures covering 24 pages of space – the average size of each picture almost exactly one half page); and (3) victims, survivors, memorials, and families (49 pictures covering 20.5 pages of space – an average of about four-tenths of a page devoted to each picture). Together these

three categories contain 153 or 17 percent of all of the pictures and occupy 78.5 pages or 22.5 percent of the total picture space in these 18 issues of *Newsweek*.

- 6 See, for example, 'Post-Gulf Weapons Bazaar Open', *Christian Science Monitor*, 18 March 1991; 'George Bush, in the Arms Bazaar', *The New York Times* editorial, 6 June 1991; and 'White House Girds to Promote Huge Arms Sales to Many Nations', *Wall Street Journal*, 24 July 1992.
- 7 The release of photographs in the British press and some American publications revealing how the scene was staged by American troops with Iraqi expatriates seemed to have had no effect on the continued use of this symbol by mainstream American news organizations.

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