

ICONIC PHOTOS OF VIETNAM

In one of the most chilling images of the Vietnam War, South Vietnamese Brig. Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan, right, executed this man at point-blank range in front of a group of journalists for allegedly being a Viet Cong captain in Saigon on Feb. 1, 1968. Below, terrified children, including 9-year-old Kim Phuc, center, flee an aerial napalm attack on suspected Viet Cong hiding places on June 8, 1972.



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Egyptians read newspapers at a stand in Cairo showing images of alleged abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. forces at a detention center in Baghdad.

Arab world expresses anger at images of inmate abuse

By the Mercury News

The images of American soldiers abusing Iraqi prisoners, widely distributed by the Arab media, are helping to unify opposition against the United States among Arabs in several nations — even those in Iraq who had tended to be supportive, according to Juan Cole, a University of Michigan history professor specializing in the Middle East.

The erosion of confidence in the United States has occurred over the past few months but increased recently when U.S. forces moved in to punish insurgents in the city of Al-Fallujah for the deaths of four private commandos and with the news that U.S. forces had targeted Muqtada al-Sadr, a rebel Shiite cleric.

The photographs have provoked anti-American comments from some who have in the past supported the U.S. democracy efforts, said Cole, citing a statement quoted in the Iraqi newspaper Al-Zaman from Sayyid Rahim Abu Jari al-Saidi, secretary-general of the Iraqi Democratic Bloc: "We lived under oppression and torture in the former regime. ... We had hoped that the United States of America would participate with us in achieving democracy in Iraq. ... They had made promises, but what has happened, what we have seen and experienced,

has plunged us into dejection and despair. It is as though democracy is dead in the United States but its facade is being kept in place by the American administration."

Here are some other excerpts of reaction from the Arab media, as collected by the BBC:

■ "The Iraqis consider the images as an abuse of the Iraqis' humanity and dignity, which is meant to humiliate and insult them on top of the occupation imposed on them."

— *A news announcer on Al-Jazeera, a key news channel*

■ "What the U.S. forces did and are doing in Iraq confirms to us what we had always warned of, namely, that the aim of this invasion and occupation was primarily to humiliate the Arabs and Muslims and was never for changing a dictatorship or establishing a model of democracy, justice and human rights."

— *The Arab newspaper Al-Quds al-Arabi in an editorial, which added that the video clips could give Al-Qaida ammunition for recruiting more followers*

■ The abuse of prisoners "will adversely affected the Western countries and the pedestal U.S. and Europeans place themselves in respect to the violations of human rights."

— *Iran's state news agency, quoting a former diplomat*

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panded public consciousness or in some way impacted policy: The Vietnam photos helped galvanize the anti-war effort and also encouraged other citizens to support the troops. The Somalia photo influenced President Clinton's decision to withdraw troops from the African nation. The Highway of Death photos sullied the image of a quick, clean war.

Fast-forward to the war in Iraq. We've seen photos showing the murders of four contractors — the burning of their bodies, and the repugnant dismembering and hanging of torsos on a bridge in Al-Fallujah. And the photos of the melancholy garden of coffins draped in red, white and blue in a plane's cargo area. And now the disgusting treatment of Iraqi prisoners of war by a few of America's soldiers.

Over the past 10 days, the images of brutality have been broadcast and published around the world: Iraqi prisoners piled naked in a pyramid, a wired and hooded Iraqi, an inmate pinned under a stretcher, a female soldier holding a leash tied to the neck of a naked prisoner.

Visual information

Such images are articles of visual information whose ability to convey messages of truth and report authentic facts is immeasurable. Journalists know that, citizens understand this, the American government tries to control this (the Pentagon acknowledged it had asked CBS to delay initial broadcasting of the prison images) and terrorists seek to abuse this. Thus decisions about compelling and often disturbing photographs will never satisfy all of the people all of the time, and that is not the role of the messenger.

Newsroom leaders and decision-makers agonize over "doing the right thing" when trying to decide whether to show visual truths — and not just write about those truths — because the visual images are more searing. "We are not taking a particular side" by publishing photos, said Michel du-Cille, picture editor of the Washington Post, after making the decision to

publish prison photographs last week. As Marcia Prouse, director of photography at the Orange County Register put it, "Does the news value of the photograph outweigh the taste factor?"

How is "taste" defined? A dictionary definition might describe it as a form, style or manner showing propriety. Newsrooms use less abstract tests, such as:

■ How would a person react to this image over a bowl of Cheerios or a

Newspapers that have struggled with whether to print images of abuse and death could face more difficult decisions if new photographs of brutality in Iraq become public in the coming days.

glass of orange juice?

■ Does the photo show dead bodies?

■ Does the photo show blood?

■ Does the photo show people naked?

■ What if my child saw this?

In many newsrooms around the country, some of the recent Iraq photos failed the litmus test. Many journalists argued against running the photos, just as many argued it was important to run them, but in the end certain images were not published. Indeed, many editors — reflecting the generally stricter litmus tests of the past 10 to 15 years — argue that viewers and readers don't want to see such pictures. On the other hand, some observers might say that newsroom leaders are too concerned with being besieged by calls, letters and e-mails, or with facing subscription cancellations or channel changing.

Policy disagreement

Whatever their decision on the new photos, many news organizations disagree with the Bush administration's ban on taking photos of dead soldiers' homecomings, a policy intended to show respect for the soldiers' families. "I believe there should be a free flow of information between the government and the media," said

Jeff Cohen, editor of the Houston Chronicle.

Complicating decisions these days are technological innovations and the ubiquitous digital cameras. Everywhere you look there are citizens with cameras challenging historic notions of who is a journalist.

In recent weeks we have seen a former Maytag Aircraft cargo worker — not a journalist — take photos of soldiers' coffins being loaded onto aircraft bound for the United States. She said she wanted to shed illumination on the care and integrity being rendered to America's fallen soldiers.

It was a citizen with a cause and Web site (www.thememoryhole.org) — not a journalist — who filed a Freedom of Information Act request that led the Department of Defense to release several hundred photographs of dead soldiers' caskets arriving at Dover Air Force Base.

And it is ostensibly a U.S. soldier — not a journalist — who documented the interrogation tactics and objectionable actions in the Abu Ghurayb prison near Baghdad.

Fewer iconic images

Prouse of the Orange County Register notes that "there are fewer embedded photographers in the region and that the activities now are so spread out that the violence is more random," thus leading to more dependence for images on freelancers and civilians. She also is concerned that throughout this war there have been "a lot more images of the conflict" and thus the powerful iconic images are fewer and farther between.

Whether it is with powerful still or video images, the primary role of photojournalism is to visually document and report on the significant events of the day and on the varied viewpoints in our common world. As Americans sift through lots of images from Iraq, they ought to be able to trust that photographers and editors have thought enough about their choices to give them ones that, while they may be upsetting, will illuminate what they need to know about the impact of war on the people involved in war.