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Project report
STS390, “Media, war and peace”
Spring session, 2004
Science, Technology & Society
University of Wollongong

‘ The Pictures That Lost The War.’¹

THE CASE-STUDY – THOSE DAMNING PHOTOGRAPHS

In early April, the US air force released more than 300 photos in response to a freedom of information request. The photographs depicted the flag-draped coffins of dead US soldiers being returned home from Iraq,² and ultimately revealed the deadly carnage of the Iraq conflict.

President Bush attempted to halt the release and keep the images censored from public viewing, however he was not quick enough and the age of digital information led to the images being spread across networks worldwide.

Later that same month, CBS newsmagazine then released pictures of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison being inhumanely tortured and humiliated by American soldiers.³ Many of the images did not just contain the prisoners, but also contained the soldiers committing the atrocities, smiling in glee and posing for the cameras.

¹ Glasgow’s Sunday Herald- As Cited in Brendan O’Neill- 5th May 2004

² Christel K (Producer for ABX News in Germany)- As Cited in Eric Kirschbaum- Monday April 26th 2004

³ Eric Deggans (Times TV/Media Critic)- May 9th 2004

These 'happy-snaps' showed prisoners pulled barbarically on leads, handcuffed with panties on their heads, attacked by vicious dogs, covered in human faeces, and forced to pose in styles of execution.

Even more disturbing were those where prisoners were made to perform all kinds of lewd sexual acts for the benefit of entertaining the military.

These images have instigated a worldwide furore and '*moral outrage*'⁴ -or to use the cruder description of one particular reporter- They have caused an '*International Shit-storm!*'⁵

From a simple glance at the shockingly disturbing images- it isn't hard to see why.

The photos of the coffins returned to America and the photos taken of the Iraqi prisoners of war have in their own ways instigated a massive 'backfire' on the US administration, the Coalition forces, and more significantly- the entire war effort in Iraq.

The strong reaction to the released images reveals how censorship, unjust attacks, and a correlation of the two can '*backfire*'.

CENSORSHIP AND THE MILITARY.

' Since the dawn of civilisation, there has been an attempt to control speech and writing. Ideas that those in power disagree with are censored. Ideas that are useful to

⁴ Eric Deggans (Times TV/Media Critic)- May 9th 2004

⁵ Brendan O'Neill- 5th May 2004

*those in power are placed before the public eye as advertising, evangelism, marketing or education.*⁶

Freedom of the press is a contentious issue- particularly when it comes to war.

On the one side of the coin, censorship of some information is of course necessary if its release will in any way jeopardize a particular mission. This necessity of censorship however, applies only to very specific details, which a reporter with basic common sense would more than likely omit from reporting.

The argument on the other side of the coin is much stronger.

In this era of photographs and films, the media is effectively the one solid check the public has on the government of the day. Without freedom of the press, a government is *'free to exploit its own powers unchecked by the people for whom it is to protect.'*⁷

Censorship of information inhibits important freedoms, especially in times of war.

Those in a free society need, and indeed should, know all relevant information if they are to decide whether to go to war, whether to stay at war, and whether a war is just.

The relationship between the media and the military has historically been a haphazard one.

The first known war journalism occurred during the 1898 Spanish-American war and the primary role of the reporters was purely to praise the war effort.⁸

Then, during the Two World Wars, the press were made to feel an integral part of the media and thus only reported the positive aspects of the war.⁹

⁶ Anon; 'Censorship' – 3rd February 2002.

⁷ Anon; 'The Fight Between the Military and the Media.'

⁸ Anon; 'Press Freedom vs Military Censorship'- April 2004

⁹ Anon; 'The Fight Between the Military and the Media.'

However when the Korean and Vietnam wars came around, the world was a different place. Television sets were becoming a normality and freedom of information, a popular ideal. It was during these two wars that the media began to take an increasingly critical view of the military and reports were often far from rosy.¹⁰ The Vietnam War was particularly significant as the uninhabited access of the media meant that the public was able to witness the mistakes of the government first hand. One particular conflict between American forces and South Vietnamese Buddhists was captured by a reporter who then transmitted the atrocious images to the public.¹¹ Support for the war dropped around 20% in direct correlation with the release.¹² The American public were shocked by the images and as the death toll rose, so did public contempt.

The Vietnam War revealed to the US government that its biggest threat today could quite possibly be the media. The administration thus recognised the need to initiate guidelines for reporting, and establish filters to censor out the sensitive information. Before the 1991 Gulf war (i.e. The 1st time the US illegally invaded Iraq), the Pentagon issued a list of guidelines for the media to follow which included the obvious rules- like not reporting on operations or strategies- as well as rules regarding the reporting of casualties.¹³

¹⁰ Anon; 'Press Freedom Vs Military Censorship'- April 2004

¹¹ Anon; 'The Fight Between the Military and the Media'

¹² Hammond 1962, 181- As Cited in – Anon; 'The Fight Between The Military and the Media.'

¹³ 'Military Censorship of the Press'- 2001

Many within the press viewed the guidelines as a '*system of enormous control*' however the rules (although rewritten) were again put into place before the Iraq 2003 war regardless of their restrictive nature.¹⁴

The mainstream media has obediently followed these guidelines and the result has been an inaccurate, one-dimensional account of the Iraq conflict.

The release of the coffin photographs and the images of Iraqi prison torture have illustrated that censorship is indeed rampant when it comes to war times, and there is even an indication that it may in fact be more prevalent than in the past.

The act of censorship in the case of the coffin photos was obvious from the outset, however the images of prison torture have indiscriminately revealed censorship of a more general kind. This censorship is that which has been occurring since the prelude to the Iraq war and includes the filtering out of negative news and only presenting those stories which paint the American administration in a positive light. It is this censorship, which has been a necessary tool in justifying the Iraq War.

BACKFIRE- THE THEORY.

*'Information has a built-in momentum toward emancipation.'*¹⁵

The backfire process can be understood by applying the theory and concepts from the article, '*Making Censorship Backfire.*'¹⁶

¹⁴ Anon; 'Press Freedom Vs Military Censorship.'

¹⁵ Paul Andrews- May 17th 2004

This article accurately describes how the suppression of certain information can actually act as a *'catalyst'* for the expansion of its reach.

Examples such as the New York State Department of Education political stunt in June 2002, and the Solzenitsyn Affair in the Soviet Union reveal how attempts at censorship and repression of information, *'lead to far greater awareness of the target than would have occurred without the interventions of censors.'*¹⁷

A theoretical approach to the analysis of the coffin photo-scandal is that of the *'Boomerang Effect'* which was born out of the study of political propaganda.

Propaganda (as revealed in the article) is *'the systematic promotion of a particular point of view, often through dissemination of selective or false information.'*

The Bush Administration was effectively utilising such propaganda in an attempt to filter the information received by the public- such that the better outcomes (whether these exist is evidently debateable) received prominent media coverage and the atrocities to human life were swept under the carpet.

When we understand backfire as *'a process'* we can see that backfire was already occurring in the Iraq war a long time before the release of these photographs.¹⁸

Worldwide hostility against the US Administration was apparent during the prelude to the war and there subsequently has been a ping-pong effect, consisting of multiple claims and counter-claims over the wars justification.

¹⁶ Sue Curry Jansen & Brian Martin; 'Making Censorship Backfire; Counterpoise, Vol 7, No 3, July 2003, pp5-15.

¹⁷ Sue Curry Jansen & Brian Martin- July 2003

¹⁸ Brian Martin (Draft Document)- February 2004

The damning photographs are now playing out their part in this continuous process of backfire.

Censorship quite often backfires when it becomes known as the public feel they have been cheated on, lied to, or misled. Thus the result is that information, which may have initially been censored for minor reasons, is transformed into something major and more significant.

The analysis of the backfire effect evidences the crucial role played by information and communication. In this age of technology and global communications, information now has the ability to spread like wildfire, and thus governments must give careful consideration to possible ramifications of overt censorship before seeking to employ such a repressive tool.

The necessity or justifications for any censorship must be adequately weighed against the public interest as, '*Censorship may not suppress alternative views but rather generate them, and, by doing so, undermine its own aims.*'¹⁹

The release of the prison photos also produced an additional backfire effect by revealing scenes which could only rightly be described as an '*attack.*'

Historical evidence reveals that attacks of all kinds have the potential to backfire on their perpetrators. When an attack is perceived to be '*unjust*' a more prominent backfire is likely.²⁰

¹⁹ Antoon de Baets (2000)- As Cited in Sue Curry Jansen & Brian Martin- July 2003

²⁰ Brian Martin (Draft document)- February 2004

The determination of an '*unjust*' attack is relevant to the cultural period of the time, however historical events illustrate that worldwide there has been a consistently '*common sense of injustice*.'²¹

In March 1960, the '*Sharpeville Massacre*' instigated unprecedented public outrage as the images of protesters being assaulted and killed by the police evidenced a conflict that was '*grossly disproportionate*.'²² The photos taken in Abu Ghraib prison revealed a struggle of a similar kind- The oppressor Vs the oppressed.

Backfire thus became unavoidable, as the absence of justice was indisputable. Further discussions in this report will reveal that due to the horrific nature of the images, any actions taken by the US Administration to inhibit the backfire have thus far been unsuccessful.

THE BACKFIRE OF THE COFFIN PHOTOS

*'We count every screw driver, but not the casualties of war.'*²³

The excessive media attention given to the photos have ensured that their circulation has been far-reaching. The public now has to face the reality of losses which they were previously able to remain ignorant and naïve about, and this dose of reality is proving fatal to American policymakers.

²¹ Brian Martin (Draft document)- February 2004

²² Brian Martin (Draft document) – February 2004

²³ Statement by US officer during 1991 Gulf War- As Cited in John Pilger- May 2004

By attempting to censor these photographs, and effectively ‘*sanitize*’ the war²⁴, the administration appears to lack the integrity and candour that is required from leaders. This integrity has apparently become the first casualty of the Iraq war and now the public is beginning to smell a big rotten rat!

It now appears that the primary reason for censorship was policy. The US were afraid that if the public were to see the loss of life- the true cost of the war- they may ‘*turn against the war.*’²⁵

The backfire of censoring the photographs meant that the attention given to them upon their release brought to the forefront the controversial subject of casualties of war. People began asking for numbers and they were subsequently published.

In the ‘*bad month*’²⁶ of April, 134 US soldiers lost their lives, and a more significant number were injured seriously.²⁷

It seems difficult to understand how a ‘peace-loving’ society like America is able to justify the war effort when the losses are of such a magnitude that it wishes to keep them concealed. The more acceptable proposition is that such censorship has been utilised, ‘*in order to sell an increasingly unpopular Iraqi invasion to the American people.*’²⁸

This would explain why the government refrains from referring to the coffins as coffins, and instead labels them as ‘*human remains pouches*’ or ‘*transfer tubes.*’²⁹

²⁴ Eric Deggans (Times TV/Media Critic)- May 9th 2004

²⁵ Russ Kick (author)- As Cited in Eric Deggans- May 9th 2004

²⁶ Colin Powell- As Cited in Bill Van Auken- May 2004

²⁷ Bill Van Auken- May 2004

²⁸ Ray Rivera- April 22nd, 2004

²⁹ Bill Gallagher- April 27th 2004

It would also help explain why President Bush has not attended a single funeral or service for any of the dead soldiers, which has now risen to nearly 1000.³⁰

In any event- opposition to the war in light of the casualties is growing and over 50% of Americans now believe that the troops should pull out.³¹ Alternate political parties are also trying to cash in on the backfire by promising the public that they will stop the unnecessary war if they are to gain power.

This case study also contains elements similar to the events surrounding publication of Salman Rushdie's book, '*The Satanic Verses*.' The Iranian government at the time attempted to censor the book and issued a '*Fatwa*' to this effect against its author and any affiliated publishers. Ultimately however this '*Fatwa*' failed in achieving its objective of information repression. The result consisted of the book achieving worldwide bestseller status, and its author becoming a '*household name*.'³²

The censorship battle has been raging ever since the release of the coffin photos. The result has been a very publicised war of words between freedom of information activists and those joining Bush on his slimy soapbox who claim that suppression of information is necessary.

Ultimately, the excessive attention given to the photos has meant that instead of a select few viewing them if they were uncensored from the outset- millions have now seen them and the backfire effect is growing hostility against the US administration.

³⁰ Hal Bernton- April 22nd 2004

³¹ CBS/New York Times Poll- As cited in Bill Van Auken- May 2004.

³² Shapiro, 1989 – As Cited in the article, 'Making Censorship Backfire.'

BACKFIRE OF THE PRISON TORTURE PHOTOS:

The backfire occurring as a result of these images has been multifarious and the process of the backfire is still continuing. For this report, I have chosen to discuss the evidence of backfire that I feel to be the most significant. Because backfire is more of a 'process' than a theory, many of these events are intertwined with each other but for the purposes of this report they will be discussed separately.

BACKFIRE- MISTRUST IN COALITION

*'The superpower in Washington is being challenged by the other superpower....the superpower of public opinion.'*³³

Perhaps one of the more obvious backfires from the release of the photos is that they have acted as primary agents for the diminishment of trust in the American administration.

This result was illustrated effectively by one particular newspaper article titled 'One Nation, Deceived', which began with the statement, 'The Star-Spangled Banner still waves in many hearts, and 9/11 still remains- but there is a growing sense of betrayal.....A betrayal of trust.'³⁴

³³ Statement made by John Pilger (leading journalist)- As Cited in IPS/GIN;
'Journalists: Us Media Censorship is 'Rampant.'- July 17th 2003

The American government is beginning to lose the confidence of its own people- even those who initially supported its going to war. Gallup polls, which were taken last month in the region, revealed that 48% of Americans now oppose the Iraq War compared to a previous 18%.³⁵ Such a leap in numbers reveals that the public is beginning to intuitively smell '*something corrupt and dirty*' about the war and their government.³⁶

I myself conducted a survey amongst individuals in 2 other Coalition countries and achieved similar results. The survey was taken of 20 persons in London of various age and backgrounds and another 20 from the local area of Wollongong as a representation of the Australian view.

From the questions asked it was revealed that 68% of the Australian group and 42% of the London group feel that they trust the administration (and their own governments) much less as a direct result of the revealed photographs. (Also interesting to note here is that a large proportion of the remaining percentage believe, and indeed expect, that their governments are liars anyway!)

These results have been graphed and can be found at the end of this report.

The growing feeling of mistrust against the Coalition has also led to a greater focus on certain acts of hypocrisy, in particular, those regarding the treatment of prisoners of war. America's history in this area has been somewhat haphazard and, on many occasions, downright conflicting.

³⁴ Frank Harris III- May 19th 2004

³⁵ David Walsh- May 2004

³⁶ David Walsh- May, 2004

. In March 2003, US prisoners of war were aired publicly on Iraqi State TV in direct contravention of the Geneva Conventions which state that, '*Prisoners of war must be dealt with humanely at all times and not put on display for propaganda purposes.*'³⁷

The administration cashed in on the incident and utilised it as a means of separating the good guys from the bad guys.

One particular American TV program made the distinction clearer by asserting that Americans would never take such actions with Iraqi prisoners, as this would be contrary to the administrations policies.³⁸

In the months since such declarations were made, the dividing line between the good guys and the bad guys has become less clear.

When Saddam Hussein was captured, the images were '*paraded across*' airwaves all over the world.³⁹ Instead the condemnation of this action as also being in clear violation of international law, the West rejoiced in the scenes and praised the administration for a job well done.

Now, with the release and circulation of the photos taken in Abu Ghraib, the double standards have been exposed yet again. Although the US has a pretty rough history when it comes to abiding by UN conventions, they loose greater integrity for violating those, which they have specifically condemned enemies for contravening in the past.

BACKFIRE – THE LEGITIMACY OF THE IRAQ WAR.

³⁷ Jim Naureckas- February, 2004

³⁸ The Fort Worth Star Telegram (3/24/03)- As cited in Jim Naureckas- February, 2004

³⁹ Jim Naureckas- February, 2004

‘The smoking gun is now turning out to be a dribbling water pistol.’⁴⁰

The growth of mistrust in the US administration around the world has led to individuals and nations alike asking the bigger questions about the Iraq war. These questions are not just limited to the war like activities or atrocities such as the Iraqi prisoner abuse- but extend also to concerns about the war in general.

Although it is true that many wars are necessary, the justifications for the Iraq war have always been somewhat cloudy.

Thus far, almost everything we have been told about the necessity for invasion has proved false. Weapons of mass destruction are yet to be found, Saddam Hussein in fact has no links with Al-Qaeda⁴¹, the Arab-Israeli conflict is far from being helped, and the threat of Islamic terrorism has skyrocketed- much less been diminished.

And now, with these damning photographs of brutality, questions are being asked about what is perhaps the last remaining shred of justification for the war- The liberation of the Iraqi people.

To say that the contention of liberation now appears quite weak is a gross understatement.

For the last few decades, the administration has built up an image of the Iraq country, as being run by animals and the purpose of the war was to bring this aggressive

⁴⁰ Nicholas von Hoffman- 18th September 2003

⁴¹ John Dyson- April 19th 2004

dictatorship down and replace the governance of the country with the healthier version of an *Americanised* democracy. However the release of the photos from Abu Ghraib Prison reveal who the true barbarians really are. More to the point, for many, they signify *'the folly of our adventure into Iraq.'*⁴²

During the prelude to the war, President Bush made many assertions regarding the *'torture chambers'* and *'rape rooms'* which existed under Saddam and which the US were aiming to *'liberate'* the Iraqi people from.⁴³ Such assertions now appear rather flawed. The administration has appeared to put a much stronger focus on exposing atrocities of the past rather than *'preventing new ones.'*⁴⁴

The coalition itself is even beginning to appear confused and divided over the purpose of the Iraq war. The photos taken in Abu Ghraib prison were taken by fellow soldiers of the perpetrators and then released by these soldiers who thought that the *'world ought to know'* of the atrocities occurring in post-war Iraq.⁴⁵

Such whistle blowing among troops, while a war is in progress, is an unprecedented event and reveals more than mere *'disgruntlement within the ranks'* - It reveals a loss of solidarity among troops and a *'profound uncertainty'* of their mission in Iraq.⁴⁶

With this reigning cloud of confusion, the hope of finding any justification for the invasion into Iraq is diminishing very quickly.

⁴² Bill McLaughlin- Associate Professor of Communications at Quinnipiac University in Connecticut- As Cited in Erin Deggans- May 9th 2004

⁴³ Elizabeth Sullivan- May 6th 2004

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Sullivan- May 6th 2004

⁴⁵ CBS News report- As Cited in Brendan O'Neill- 5th May 2004

⁴⁶ Brendan O'Neill- 5th May 2004

*'It is one thing to fight and risk dying for a just and honest cause; it is another to be misled. All the flag-waving in the world cannot make up for being sent to war under false pretences.'*⁴⁷

BACKFIRE IN THE ARAB WORLD

*'The nauseating image of an American woman guard, posing with a cigarette dangling from her mouth while pointing at the genitals of a naked hooded prisoner, is already burned forever into the minds of millions of Iraqis and fellow Arabs.'*⁴⁸

One discernible aim of the Iraq war seems to have been the projection of a positive image of the Coalition abroad. Such an aim was explicit when remnants of the previous regime were *'knocked down'* to *'send a message'* to the world that the Iraqi people had now been liberated.⁴⁹

However the release of the prison photographs sends quite a contrasting message. One need only read one or two Arab newspapers or visit their websites to see that the war for *'Arabs hearts and minds'* has indeed been lost.⁵⁰

The moral difference between Saddam's regime and the US *'liberators'* was a crucial one in gaining the support of Arab Nations. Although it is true to say that not all

⁴⁷ Frank Harris III- May 19th 2004

⁴⁸ Statement made by Daniel Sneider- Thursday May 6th 2004

⁴⁹ Brendan O'Neill- 5th May 2004

⁵⁰ Daniel Sneider- Thursday May 6th 2004

Arabs were optimistic about the war from the outset- many more are now viewing the US administration as an *'arrogant oppressor'*⁵¹

The mistrust in the US government that has resulted from the release of the damning photographs (obviously among other things but to dwell on all the reasons for not trusting the administration would result in an epic) has brought new focus to the capture of Saddam Hussein. Unlike the fall of Hitler or Mussolini, when Saddam was captured he was found in a hole from where he was able to exert no influence or control.⁵²

While the insurgents in Iraq appeared to be fighting against Saddam, many people in the Arab world are now under the belief that the truth of the situation entails a different story- That the insurgents were actually fighting against the US. It is now becoming extremely difficult to tell the difference between *'legitimate American business and gangsterism.'*⁵³

It is also clear that the strength and superiority of the US forces has lost much of its status in the region with many Arabs viewing the continued fighting in Fallujah and Najaf as a *'serious US defeat.'*⁵⁴

This appearance of weakness in the Arab world raises many concerns that radical groups may attempt to leap in and seize power.

⁵¹ View of Abdel Basset Turki- (resigned human rights minister in the Iraqi govt)- As cited in Daniel Snieder- Thursday 6th May 2004.

⁵² David Walsh- May 2004

⁵³ David Walsh- May, 2004

⁵⁴ Anthony Gordesman (Specialist on Iraq conflict)- As cited in Daniel Sneider- Thursday 6th May 2004.

The common view now held in the region is that the US should basically get out while they still can- for the benefit of Iraq if not for its own soldiers. The longer the administration remains in the region without turning political and security power over to the Iraqi's- the hostility in the Arab region is sure to grow.

BACKFIRE ON THE MEDIA

‘ The great power of silence is threatening to dominate us all. ’⁵⁵

As the public begin to ask more and more questions about the legitimacy of the Iraq war, the spotlight has also been thrown on the media and the role it has played throughout the conflict.

The mainstream media channels for the most part have provided us with a very biased account of the incidents and any alternate accounts and views have apparently become stuck in the political filter.

The media has a strong role to play in the shaping of public opinion; thus the more attention, or less attention, that a news story receives, often determines how the public will rate the issue's importance.

One particular example is the media's constant reluctance to use the term '*lie*' in relation to false allegations made by the coalition. When it became apparent that George Bush had blatantly lied in a speech, by claiming that Saddam Hussein had

⁵⁵ Statement made by Robert Fisk (leading journalist)- As Cited in IPS/GIN;
‘Journalists: US Media Censorship is ‘rampant.’- July 17th 2003.

sought '*significant quantities of uranium from Africa*'⁵⁶, the media decided not to question it too heavily. Any reporter who did mention the lie tended to sugarcoat over the affair by calling the allegation '*dubious*' or saying that the President had simply '*outpaced the facts*.'⁵⁷

Overall, revelations are indicating that the media did not perform its appropriate duty to the public, and instead put itself 'at the service of the state.'⁵⁸

Instead of being neutral and objective, the media became puppets of the Bush administration and ultimately, '*if George Bush said 'it's a war' or said 'it's a dinosaur, that's what the media saw and that's what the media said.'*⁵⁹

The backfire here is that now the public is beginning to see that the mainstream media is not the non-partisan entity it proclaims to be. Although reports did not outrightly support the war, they were ultimately muted on the important issues.⁶⁰

Reports like those depicting US soldiers handing out pencils to Iraqi children were given greater coverage over stories involving coalition casualties, whether fatal or non-fatal. This '*aggressive pursuit*'⁶¹ of favourable news coverage effectively swept the significance of human cost under the political carpet.

A study conducted by the Columbian Journalism Review of the 6 most influential newspapers in Iraq concluded that none of them '*held the Bush administration to an*

⁵⁶ New York Times- 7/6/03- As cited in Jim Naureckas- August 2003

⁵⁷ Dana Milibank (Washington Post- 22/10/02)- As cited in Jim Naureckas- August 2003.

⁵⁸ Nicholas Von Hoffman- September 2003.

⁵⁹ Nicholas Von Hoffman- September 2003

⁶⁰ Jim Goldsborough- April 19th 2004

⁶¹ 'Is Media Bias Filtering Out Good News From Iraq?' - October 28th 2003

*adequate standard of proof when it came to launching not just a war, but a pre-emptive war opposed by most of the world.*⁶²

Also lacking on the mainstream channels in the prelude to the war was a single report into the humanitarian disaster, which was to be the obvious consequence of the conflict.⁶³

Instead of being an information providing resource for the public, the media produced half-hearted accounts, and focussing purely on the stories that received the desired ratings.

In the survey I conducted among an Australian group and an English group, the backfire on the media was clearly illustrated. When asked if they thought they were receiving a full and complete account of the Iraq war from the media, 80% of the Australians and 82% of the English answered in the negative. (See the graphs at the end of this report.)

Thus even the media have not escaped the backfire effect from the photographs.

FATAL RESULT OF BACKFIRE

The photos taken in the Iraqi prison were obtained by the CBS network two weeks before they were released to the public. This delay in broadcasting was at the request of military officials who expressed strong concerns about the possible ramifications for US soldiers being held by ‘*insurgents*.’⁶⁴

⁶² Jim Goldsborough- April 19th 2004

⁶³ Rachel Coen and Peter Hart- May/June 2003

⁶⁴ Eric Deggans (Times/TV Media Critic- May 9th, 2004

This concern appeared later to be quite a reasonable one, as the horrific film of an American hostage being beheaded by insurgents was released worldwide.

The killing of Nicholas Berg was stated to be a direct result of the treatment of Iraqi prisoners of war, and the horror became far-reaching as the terrorists bypassed censorship filters on the internet so that *'terror reached the terrified unedited.'*⁶⁵

As a result, many in the public now feel intimidated and threatened by the Iraqi insurgents.

Concerns have also been expressed regarding future ramifications in the world of terrorism. Due to the inhumane and *'porn-like'* qualities of the images, there is a fear that the images may, *'become motivational training posters in terrorist camps for years to come.'*⁶⁶

BACKFIRE ON AMERICA

'The issue is not whether a majority or minority of Americans performs such acts but whether the nature of the policies prosecuted by this administration and the hierarchies deployed to carry them out makes such acts likely.'⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Donald G. McNeil Jr- May 16th 2004

⁶⁶ Donald Winslow (editor of News Photographer Magazine- As cited in Eric Deggans- May 9th 2004

⁶⁷ Susan Sontag- May 23rd 2004

Although the photographs released from the prison show particular individuals committing the atrocities, for many, the actions speak much louder about America as a country and its policies.

A growing view is that the soldiers only acted in such a manner because they were under the belief that such *'torture'* is ok. Indeed as one reporter pointed out- they are merely following the precedent which has been set out by the many war prisoners being held *'indefinitely and incommunicado at Guantanamo Bay, contrary to the laws of war and elemental habeas corpus guarantees.'*⁶⁸

Although the dirty action is occurring at the lower ends of the chain- the hands at the top are far from clean. The images represent the corruption occurring as a direct result of the distinctive policies of the Bush Administration.

The nature of the images- containing smiling soldiers- posing while torture is being committed appears almost unprecedented. By looking back through the images from the Two World Wars, it becomes apparent that while photographs of dead enemies were commonplace, it was an absolute rarity for soldiers to also be in the photos.

The only other time in history when this occurred was in the period from the 1880's to the 1930's when perpetrators of the black lynchings would often be in the background of a photograph.⁶⁹

Such *'posing'* occurred then because participant's felt *'completely justified'* in what they were doing.⁷⁰ Obviously the soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison felt the same way.

⁶⁸ Elizabeth Sullivan- May 6th, 2004

⁶⁹ Susan Sontag- May 23rd 2004

⁷⁰ Susan Sontag- May 23rd 2004

This thus has greater implications for the administration they are acting under, than any self-moral lacking on the part of the soldiers.

‘Somewhere along the line- they were either told or winked at.’⁷¹

ACTIONS TAKEN TO INHIBIT THE BACKFIRE

With the release of the hidden coffin photos and the inherent evidence of political propaganda, it became necessary for the Government to employ strategies, which would effectively *‘censor the fact of censorship.’*⁷²

Thus the claim of protecting the soldier’s families became the call-cry of the government in an attempt to *‘cloak their actions in legitimate terms.’*⁷³

The US administration thus attempted to inhibit the backfire by proclaiming that such censorship was necessary in order to protect the families of the dead soldiers.

However the general reaction to such statements was an opposing belief. Many saw the photos as a way of paying tribute to the fallen soldiers and that by releasing these to the public, they would be thus given, *‘...the honour they deserve.’*⁷⁴

⁷¹ Senator Bill Nelson (Florida Democrat)- As Cited in Susan Sontag- May 23rd 2004

⁷² Brian Martin and Sue Curry Jansen- July 2003

⁷³ Brian Martin and Sue Curry Jansen- July 2003

⁷⁴ William M. Arkin- May 2nd 2004

Even families of the dead soldiers responded to the censorship of the photos in a negative way. One particular father who lost a son in the conflict revealed that the photos actually did a '*service*' to his son and that it is downright stupid for a government to attempt to hide the '*realities of war*' from the public.⁷⁵

The statements made regarding the protection of the families were thus a failed attempt to inhibit the backfire. In a backfire upon backfire effect, the administration is now appearing to be ashamed of the losses as they are quite frankly- embarrassing to a military superpower which is using high technology precision bombing against a much inferior nation.⁷⁶

Another strategy employed was the use of threats aimed at those printing the damning photographs. A military contractor lost her job upon releasing the photographs and apparently, '*..violating U.S Government and company regulations*'⁷⁷ - and this action sent a significant message to anyone else with similar intentions.

Upon the release of the prison photographs, the coalition government representatives have each come out and expressed their '*shock*' and '*shame*' over the scandal.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Dave Zweifel- May 3rd, 2004

⁷⁶ William M. Arkin- May 2nd, 2004

⁷⁷ Hal Bernton, 'Woman Loses her job over Coffins Photo;' Seattle Times, April 22, 2004.

⁷⁸ Kim Pilling; 'Alleged abuse of Iraqi prisoner 'utterly unacceptable' - Scotsman, 2nd May 2004- As cited in Brendan O'Neill- 5th May 2004

Action was also taken by the US government in an attempt to inhibit the backfire of the prison photos, but such action has been far from successful.

It has long been known that a picture speaks a thousand words. When it comes to war, images become even more important as they often lay down the tracks of how important world conflicts will be judged and remembered.⁷⁹

Thus- simple words being said by the administration will not erase the images from people's minds. All the '*sugar-coating*' in the world cannot diminish the prevailing view that it is not the individual soldiers themselves who have betrayed us, but those who sent these soldiers to war under false pretences.⁸⁰

President Bush took the big step of making an apology for the actions of the military, however the apology has been '*difficult to swallow*' and has ultimately clang hollow on the ears of the public.⁸¹

CONCLUSION

All in all, it appears that the backfire has been so strong in this case that '*recovery*' is virtually impossible.⁸² The strength of an image is impenetrable and the message it holds is quite often irreversible.

⁷⁹ Susan Sontag- May 23rd 2004

⁸⁰ Frank Harris III- May 19th 2004

⁸¹ Eric Deggans (Times/TV Media Critic)- May 9th 2004

⁸² Eric Deggans (Times TV/Media Critic)- May 9th 2004

Just like the infamous picture of little Vietnamese girl Kim Phuc covered in Napalm became the representation of the entire Vietnam conflict, these pictures are not a small footnote to the Iraq war but *'they are the war.'*⁸³

Images have the power of speaking the absolute truth- of having more substance than mere allegations. Even the media world was surprised at the seismic worldwide reaction, which is *'only gathering and getting stronger.'*⁸⁴

Perhaps the aptest description of the power these images hold was defined by a US reporter who stated that, *'When Iraq is but a flicker in the memory of an elderly generation, the world will still remember the photographs.'*⁸⁵

Images displaying horror are also more likely to be remembered over the happier ones. Thus it is far more likely that the image of a female soldier dragging a prisoner on a leash will remain in our minds over that of the Saddam Hussein Statue being toppled by Iraqis.

This case study of photos taken during the Iraq war reveal how attacks which are perceived as unjust – and censorship on all levels contain the inherent potential to backfire against their perpetrators. It reveals how due to the very process of backfire- these images have effectively become...

***'The pictures that lost the war.'*⁸⁶**

⁸³ Elizabeth Sullivan- May 6th, 2004

⁸⁴ Jeffrey Fager (60 Minutes II Producer)- As Cited in Eric Deggans- May 9th 2004

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Sullivan- Thursday May 6th, 2004

⁸⁶ Glasgow's Sunday Herald- As Cited in Brendan O'Neill- 5th May 2004

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