

Photography and War

War photography raises questions about freedom of the press, with government control inevitably at issue. There is always the possibility that censorship by the government and self-censorship by photographers, editors, and publishers, combine to limit what we see about any particular military situation.

The history of the century has been the history of changing versions of the conflict between the government and the press, and changing photographic coverage. In World War I, censorship was heavy, access to the front for photographers was limited, and there were relatively few photographs of actual combat. (Some of the supposed war photographs look staged.) In World War II, for the first time, photographs of American dead were published. After initially being held back by censors, a photo of three American corpses lying on the beach after a landing in the Pacific appeared in *Life* magazine.

In Korea, the nature of the war ("police action" in official parlance) led to some nasty fighting and, in David Douglas Duncan's famous photographs, a sense of exhaustion rather than triumph. In Vietnam the photos (and television images, both a rival and complement) were more explicit and more shocking: images of a Buddhist monk burning himself to death, a napalmed young girl running down a road, a South Vietnamese general executing a Viet Cong suspect, Vietnamese villagers massacred by U.S. troops at My Lai. All became icons of the war and helped turn public opinion.

The Pentagon and the government learned from what they perceived as a mistake of allowing the medium too much freedom. The press was throttled at Grenada and again during the Gulf War, where photographers were kept away from the combat zone except under tightly controlled conditions. In the Gulf War, virtually no combat photographs were published, so that it was left to images of the aftermath to suggest what had happened — and then a photograph of an incinerated Iraqi soldier caused a controversy because of its graphic revelation.

That picture was a shocking reminder of what actually happened. In a world where the United States public and politicians want only casualty-free wars, the imagery of war is becoming video images showing cruise missiles and plane-launched bombs, along with official shots of the military in effect "on parade," i.e., in controlled, even staged circumstances, and shots — how ironic that term — of refugees, the casualties of war.

In the aftermath of Vietnam, government control of the media in wartime is once again an acute issue. The situation now resembles that during the pre-Vietnam era. The military wishes to strictly limit access and publication; the press insists on the right to see all and show all.

"War photographs" implies more than just pictures of combat: it can refer to military photographs in general, photographs of civilians caught in the middle of conflicts, or images of "the home front." For many people, the photographs of the concentration camps, which came out only after World War II, were too much. These photographs may be the most shocking ever published. After them there could be equally graphic horrors (from Cambodia or Rwanda, for example) but not the initial shock at what human beings had done, or the shock of seeing it presented so unflinchingly in a photograph. As war photography and photographs of other extreme situations such as famines have become increasingly explicit, it has been argued that seeing such images desensitizes people to the horrors and produces "compassion fatigue." Some say that even the special realism the camera brings to the depiction of war can no longer shock, for we have seen too much, and true shock is no longer possible.