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DEALING JUSTLY WITH DEBT

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Arturo C. Porzecanski • Thomas I. Palley

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Representing Contemporary War

David Campbell

Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 144 pp., \$20 cloth.

Despite living in an age commonly understood as being awash with images of atrocity, there are few writers who theorize the relationship between political conflict and its pictorial representation. This relative absence means that various assertions about the power of pictures have come to dominate popular understanding. Foremost among these are two fundamentally contradictory claims, which, Susan Sontag observes, are “fast approaching the stature of platitudes.”¹ One, the “CNN effect,” is that the power of news imagery is such that it can alter the course of state policy simply by virtue of being broadcast. The other, the “compassion fatigue” thesis, argues that the abundant supply of imagery has dulled our senses and created a new syndrome of communal inaction.

Susan Sontag’s 1977 book, *On Photography*, remains one of the classic statements about the politics of representing violence, and an important starting point in working through the merits of the above claims. Although it may seem like an anachronistic practice in the contemporary pictorial economy of international news, photography remains an important portal through which the politics of images generally can be considered. While television, with its stream of video imagery, may be the premier source of news and information from distant places, its very preponderance may limit its staying power in the minds of the viewer. As Sontag

argues, “photographs may be more memorable than moving images, because they are a neat slice of time, not a flow. Television is a stream of underselected images, each of which cancels its predecessor. Each still photograph is a privileged moment, turned into a slim object that one can keep and look at again.”²

Partly because of its role as contemplative moment, photography provides an important interpretative resource for television and its images, helping to set a standard by which the mundane is marked off from the significant. The famous BBC film of the 1984 Ethiopian famine—shot by Mohammed Amin and Michael Buerk at Korem in October of that year—had an impact in the United States because, in the words of William Lord, the executive producer of ABC’s *World News Tonight*, “it was as if each clip was an award-winning still photo.”³ In addition to providing something of an interpretative code for the meaning of video, the ubiquity of video in the representation of the other has given the photograph a renewed role as a site for reflection. As John Taylor argues, “The immediacy and

¹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 104.

² Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), pp. 17–18.

³ Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 117.

normality of television imagery have revived photojournalism.”⁴

This was certainly the case on and after September 11, 2001. Many newspapers published remarkable images captured by photographers who were at or near the World Trade Center as soon as they learned of the disaster. With Manhattan being one of the world’s most media rich environments, some of the world’s best-known photojournalists found the biggest story of recent time taking place in their backyard. With the Web sites of well-known media outlets offering a cost-effective capacity for publishing the work of these photojournalists, we were able to see the powerful images of James Nachtwey and Anthony Suau, along with Susan Meiselas and Gilles Peress, faster than was previously possible. Even television networks helped to support Sontag’s contention that the photograph offers a privileged moment. On the Friday after the September 11, 2001, attacks, two news programs in England concluded their broadcasts with a series of still images, each static on the screen for much longer than usual, to the accompaniment of somber music.

Being a site for contemplation does not necessarily make the photograph an instrument for political change. According to Sontag, the image itself cannot create a possibility that otherwise does not exist: “a photograph that brings news of some unsuspected zone of misery cannot make a dent in public opinion unless there is an appropriate context of feeling and attitude.” The image can, however, help develop an attitude. While a photograph “cannot create a moral position” it can “reinforce one—and can help build a nascent one.”⁵ As a result, the event or issue has to be identified and named as an event or issue before photography can make its contribution. This means “the possibility of being affected morally by

photographs is [determined by] the existence of a relevant political consciousness. Without a politics, photographs of the slaughter-bench of history will most likely be experienced as, simply, unreal or as a demoralizing emotional blow.”⁶

In Sontag’s 1977 account, however, the question of an image’s power was also a product of its repetition and usage as much as the previously existing political context through which it was read. Indeed, Sontag went as far as to suggest that “concerned photography”—the self-consciously humanistic work of recognized documentarians—had saturated popular consciousness in the previous thirty years to such an extent that the communal conscience had been deadened rather than aroused. Because shock depended on novelty, repeated use bred familiarity and passivity if not contempt.

Despite being assured in her conclusions on the power of photography, perhaps the most significant of Sontag’s 1977 arguments was that photography has an intrinsically double character from which its meaning could not be easily fixed. This double character stemmed, Sontag wrote, from two imperatives that have continued to give it force as a very particular aesthetic genre. From the fine arts, photography was driven by beautification. From a combination of the sciences and nineteenth-century literary forms, photography was animated by the desire for “truth telling.” Together, these two imperatives produced a struggle that, at best, resulted in an uneasy coexistence that was never very far from erupting in a debate about the merits of one over the other. Being irresolvable, this clash of the two impera-

⁴ John Taylor, *Body Horror: Photojournalism, Catastrophe and War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 46.

⁵ Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

tives is in many ways at the heart of photography's continued appeal. As Sontag writes: "Photographs are, of course, artifacts. But their appeal is that they also seem, in a world littered with photographic relics, to have the status of found objects—unpremeditated slices of the world. Thus, they trade simultaneously on the prestige of art and the magic of the real. They are clouds of fantasy and pellets of information."⁷

PHOTOGRAPHS AND POWER RECONSIDERED

That Sontag should return to the themes of *On Photography* in her new book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, and that this return should be followed by the most media-saturated war in human history, provides us with a significant context for assessing Sontag's contribution to an account of war photography. For what is most significant about Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* is its openly expressed doubt about the assured claims of *On Photography* concerning the power of photographs.

This revision stems from Sontag's recognition of the "dual powers of photography" to both "generate documents" (the pellets of information) and to "create works of visual art" (the clouds of fantasy).⁸ This structural undecidability inherent in photography means that a number of—indeed, almost any number of—responses to a particular image is possible. Given the time for contemplation allowed by the fixing of the image, the construction of meaning arises from the complex interplay of the photographic representation, its location, accompanying text, moment of reading, as well as the frames of reference brought to it by the reader/viewer. They might turn us off, or turn us on; they might frighten us, or they might anger us; they might distance us, or

make us feel proximate; they might weaken us or they might strengthen us. But whatever the response, it is not media saturation that leads to political inaction: "People don't become inured to what they are shown—if that is the right way to describe what happens—because of the *quantity* of images dumped on them. It is passivity that dulls feeling."⁹

With this observation, Sontag not only challenges the compassion fatigue thesis; she questions the notion of the CNN effect. With regard to inaction in Bosnia despite the steady stream of images of ethnic cleansing that made their way out of Sarajevo, Sontag argues that people didn't turn off because they were either overwhelmed by their quantity or anaesthetized by their quality. Rather, they switched off because American and European leaders proclaimed it was an intractable and irresolvable situation. The political context into which the pictures were being inserted was already set, with military intervention not an option, and no amount of horrific photographs was going to change that.¹⁰

Having been subjected in the last two years to the media-saturated events of September 11, the war in Afghanistan, and the war in Iraq, we might think that being immersed daily in the visuals of distant wars has been a historical constant. Up until World War II, images of atrocity were relatively rare, and conflict came to us textually and somewhat late. Up until the Vietnam

⁷ Ibid., p. 69.

⁸ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 76.

⁹ Ibid., p. 102.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 101. For an argument against the CNN effect in relation to images of Bosnian atrocity, see David Campbell, "Atrocity, Memory, Photography: Imaging the Concentration Camps of Bosnia—The Case of ITN versus *Living Marxism*, Part II," *Journal of Human Rights* 1, no. 2 (2002), pp. 157–58; see also www.virtual-security.net/atrocity/atrocity2.htm.

War, photographs of combat and its consequences—or, at least those photographs of combat and its consequences that were released for use—were often positive in both their intent and effects. In large part, that is because these images were produced by official cameramen who were either commissioned by the military for this particular purpose (as in the case of Roger Fenton and the Crimea War) or at least had their presence sanctioned by the authorities (as with Matthew Brady during the American Civil War). Thus, our status as a “spectator of calamities,” and a spectator of distant calamities in real time, is a thoroughly modern if not late-modern experience, Sontag points out. Indeed, “The understanding of war among people who have not experienced war is now chiefly a product of the impact of these images.”¹¹ Given the structural undecidability of photographs, this centrality of images to our experiences means we can be subject all too easily to imperatives that then employ pictures in their service, trading on the sense of immediacy that comes from their documentary mode to banish any thoughts of the fantasy that springs from their role in the visual arts.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Sontag maintains the position established in *On Photography* that photographs can buttress and expand a previously established moral disposition, but they cannot create that disposition themselves out of nothing. This is particularly true in the context of conflict. When a war is unpopular and that feeling has come to be prior to the taking of photographs,

The material gathered by photographers, which they may think of as unmasking the conflict, is of great use. Absent such a protest, the same antiwar photograph may be read as showing pathos, or heroism, admirable heroism, in an unavoidable struggle that can be concluded only by victory or by defeat. The

photographer’s intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it.¹²

PICTURES AND WAR: IRAQ 2003

In the Iraq war of 2003 imagery was central to the conflict and often the subject of conflict itself. In this context, the Pentagon’s strategy of “embedding” reporters and their camera crews with fighting units, and having them operate at the behest of that unit, continues the long-running tradition of a close relationship between the media and the military. Although the details of the arrangements and their effectiveness have changed over time—from the combination of accreditation and daily briefings in Vietnam, the restrictions on access that resulted from the dependence for transport in the Falklands, to the selected pools and video briefings in the Persian Gulf War of 1990–91, and the embedding of Iraq 2003—at no stage in the post–World War II period has the U.S. or U.K. military operated without detailed media management procedures designed to influence the information (specifically the pictorial) outcomes.

Given this, Sontag is perhaps surprisingly sanguine about the genuineness of war photography in the contemporary period. While recognizing that many of the now iconic combat images of the pre-Vietnam period were staged, she sees Vietnam as a watershed such that “the practice of inventing dramatic news pictures, staging them for the camera, seems on its way to becoming a lost art.”¹³ Insofar as Sontag is referring to the likelihood of individual photographers seeking

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 38–39.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

to deceive, she may be right. There was, however, at least one notable instance in Iraq of digital manipulation. This resulted in the *Los Angeles Times* sacking award-winning staff photographer Brian Walski, whose altered image of a British soldier in Basra (he had combined two photos into one to improve marginally composition) was used on the paper's front page.¹⁴

Walski knowingly violated the *Los Angeles Times* editorial policy that expressly forbids "altering the content of news photographs," and quickly accepted responsibility for his error in "tweaking" the picture.¹⁵ What is interesting about the Walski case is that the error he made was not in constructing the image per se, but the stage in the process of production of the image at which he did his tweaking. In essence, all photographic images, even when considered in isolation, involve substantial amounts of tweaking—reducing the three-dimensional, color-filled world to a two-dimensional, framed, flat image (often in black and white) requires the photographer to exclude much that exceeds the frame. But those tweaks inherent to the taking of a photograph occur before the shutter is clicked. Walski's error was to engage in tweaking after the shutter had been clicked. This demonstrates two key features of the relationship between photographs and reality in war. First, even in the age of the digital image, where there is no negative to secure an understanding of the original photograph, Walski's case shows there remains a strong sense of the shutter freezing a moment of reality, such that this moment is privileged as the original that cannot ethically be altered.

Second, and even more important, the Walski case demonstrates that the larger and more significant ways in which pictures structure reality through exclusions are themselves excluded from the discussion

about manipulation so long as the professional responsibility not to alter what the shutter secures is maintained. Taking this wider view, Sontag's belief that the age of inventing and staging war images is behind us seems seriously misplaced. That is because in the contemporary period the issue of inventing and staging dramatic news pictures has escalated from the actions of a few individuals seeking to deceive to the whole purpose and structure of the military's media management operation.

In a revealing coincidence, the story about Walski's error appeared in Britain on the same day as news of Private Jessica Lynch's rescue from captivity was reported. Lynch's release was made public through the Coalition Media Center (CMC) at the U.S. Central Command headquarters in Qatar. This \$1.5 million briefing operation, with a futuristic, Hollywood-inspired set replete with plasma TV screens, is housed in a remote warehouse hundreds of miles from the battlefield, but offering the military overview desired by its U.S., U.K., and Australian media minders. The CMC was integral to the strategy of embedding reporters with military units, for those on the front line provided images and stories from an unavoidably narrow perspective, while the journalists at the CMC were given what was said to be the broad overview but in effect only amplified the narrow perspective desired by the Pentagon and its partners. As one media critic observed, the five hundred or more "embeds" (with one hundred cameras) were "close up at the front" while the

¹⁴ Duncan Campbell, "War in the Gulf: US war photographer sacked for altering image of British soldier," *Guardian*, April 3, 2003, p. 5; and Stephen Bates, "Media: Faking it," *Guardian*, May 5, 2003, pp. 2–3.

¹⁵ Jay DeFoore, "Brian Walski Discusses His Doctored Photo," *PDNewswire*, May 7, 2003; available at www.pdn-pix.com/news/archive/2003/050703.html#4.

six hundred CMC journalists were “tied up in the rear.” This meant the military could be confident journalists would produce “maximum imagery with minimum insight.”¹⁶

The Lynch story demonstrated how well this operation could function. CMC journalists were roused from their sleep in the early hours of April 2, thinking that a major story (such as the death of Saddam Hussein) was breaking. Instead they were presented with an edited five-minute military video—shot through a night lens, producing green, grainy images of silhouetted figures—detailing the Special Forces rescue of Private Lynch. The video encapsulated a narrative familiar to viewers of *Black Hawk Down* and *Behind Enemy Lines*—that the U.S. military “never leaves a fallen comrade.” A single still image was taken from this operation and circulated widely, showing Lynch lying on a stretcher aboard a U.S. Special Forces helicopter, smiling grimly from under a U.S. flag draped across her chest.

That Jessica Lynch is a fair-skinned, nineteen-year-old blonde female from West Virginia did not hurt in the process of devising stories of heroism surrounding her captivity and rescue. Said to be suffering gunshot and stab wounds, and having been reportedly mistreated during her detention in an Iraqi hospital, a much-used *Washington Post* story from April 3 cited unnamed sources as describing how Lynch had fought bravely during the battle of March 23 that led to her capture, firing a weapon repeatedly despite being hit and seeing many of her comrades killed.¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, the cinematic quality of this description led to quickly produced TV documentaries (the Arts and Entertainment network screened *Saving Private Lynch* within two weeks of her rescue) and a massive effort to secure an exclusive interview upon her recovery, with CBS (which is part of the media conglomerate

Viacom) offering a package of media inducements that included proposals for shows and publications from CBS News, CBS Entertainment, MTV (who dangled the prospect of Lynch co-hosting an hour-long program, with a concert held in her hometown of Palestine, West Virginia), Paramount Pictures, and Simon & Schuster books.¹⁸

Apparently Lynch cannot recall any aspect of her time in an Iraqi hospital or subsequent release. But subsequent media investigations have discovered that most of the dramatic elements of the early accounts of Lynch’s condition and return are open to serious question. A BBC documentary, which interviewed staff involved in Lynch’s care after the war had been declared over, revealed that she had no war wounds but was diagnosed as a serious road traffic accident victim, had received the best available treatment from Iraqi medical staff, and that their attempt to return her to U.S. forces in an ambulance had been repelled at a U.S. military checkpoint.¹⁹

While the basic coordinates of the Lynch story were not invented (she was injured, captured, then recovered), the account was staged, insofar as the particular narrative

¹⁶ John Kampfner, “War Spin,” *Correspondent*, BBC2, May 18, 2003. For critical accounts of the CMC operation, see Michael Wolff, “Media: ‘You know less than when you arrived,’” *Guardian*, March 31, 2003, p. 2; and Michael Wolff, “Media: I was only asking,” *Guardian*, April 14, 2003, p. 6.

¹⁷ Michael Getler, “Reporting Private Lynch,” *Washington Post*, April 20, 2003, p. B6.

¹⁸ Alessandra Stanley, “In Hoopla Over a P.O.W., A Mirror of U.S. Society,” *New York Times*, April 18, 2003, p. B9; and Jim Rutenberg, “To Interview Former P.O.W., CBS Offers Stardom,” *New York Times*, June 16, 2003, p. A1.

¹⁹ Kampfner, “War Spin”; John Kampfner, “Features: The truth about Jessica,” *Guardian*, May 15, 2003, pp. 2–3. Many of these features were confirmed by the *Washington Post*’s reexamination of the story two months after its initial account. See Dana Priest, William Booth, and Susan Schmidt, “A Broken Body, a Broken Story, Pieced Together,” *Washington Post*, June 17, 2003, p. A1.

that was attached to and derived from the military footage of her release was constructed by the Pentagon's media operation to convey a heroic and redemptive meaning. However, deliberate manipulations of this kind by the military's media managers were not new in Iraq nor confined to the Americans. In Afghanistan, for example, in an effort to justify the Royal Marines' role on the supposed front line of the global war against terrorism, the U.K. Ministry of Defence transported journalists to film a controlled explosion in the mountains outside Kabul. Alleged to be a recently discovered al-Qaeda weapons bunker it "was in fact a 'friendly' arms dump belonging to a local warlord who was an Afghan ally of the American-backed provisional government in Kabul."²⁰

Nor are such instances of overt manipulation the main problem. One of the principle effects of having journalists, cameramen, and photographers embedded with particular units was to ensure that the stream of images coming back from the front line revolved around allied military hardware and personnel. As *New York Times* staff photographer Vincent Laforet—who spent twenty-seven days aboard the USS *Abraham Lincoln* in the Persian Gulf—wrote afterward, "My main concern was that I was producing images that were glorifying war too much. These machines of war are awesome and make for stunning images. I was afraid that I was being drawn into producing a public-relations essay."²¹

Laforet's concern is well founded, but the media outlets themselves share responsibility for the glamorizing coverage of war achieved through the embedded system. The fact that reporters and photographers were embedded might have increased the prospects of favorable coverage but did not guarantee such coverage. While one *Boston Herald* reporter was so embedded he felt

comfortable in calling out Iraqi positions to his military unit (and thus played a role in killing three Iraqi soldiers), a *Washington Post* story on the shooting of civilians has led to a Pentagon investigation of the unit responsible.²² These differing outcomes have produced an ongoing debate in media circles about embedding in which journalists are clearly undecided about the costs and benefits of the arrangement.²³

Nonetheless, what is most striking about the embedded journalists' coverage of the Iraq war is the way in which the images of the conflict produced by the allies' media was so relatively clean, being largely devoid of the dead bodies that mark a major conflict. In this outcome, the media is a willing accomplice. An account of a *Time* magazine editorial meeting helps explain this:

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

The last image was an appalling but vivid representation of American dominance in a very violent week. But Stephen J. Koepp,

²⁰ Jon Swain, "War doesn't belong to the generals," *British Journalism Review* 14, no. 1 (2003), pp. 23–29; also available at www.bjr.org.uk/data/2003/no1_swain.htm. In a similar vein, while Australian reporters are at some distance from their country's forces, Australian Department of Defence training videos have been supplied and used by the media to provide both still and moving images said to be Australian forces in action in Iraq. See Margo Kingston, "In Howard we trust, but why?" *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 26, 2003; available at www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/03/26/1048653740850.html.

²¹ Vincent Laforet, "Photographer Worried about 'Glorifying War,'" *Editor & Publisher*, April 23, 2003; available at www.editorandpublisher.com/editorandpublisher/headlines/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1871177.

²² Nancy Bernhard, "Embedding Reporters on the Frontline," *Nieman Reports* 57, no. 2 (2003), pp. 87, 89.

²³ For a U.K. perspective, see Roy Greenslade, "Media: Fighting talk," *Guardian*, June 30, 2003, p. 6.

deputy managing editor of *Time*, dismissed the photograph as a candidate for the issue to be published today. "You want a little picture with your blood," Mr. Koepp said. The photo and editorial staff assembled in the half-light murmured in agreement.

Large numbers of Iraqi soldiers have been killed, according to the Pentagon, and more than 2,000 Iraqi civilians, the government of Saddam Hussein said, many of them in the last week. But when James Kelly, the managing editor of *Time*, lays out the 20 pages of photos intended to anchor the magazine's coverage of the war, there were pictures of soldiers, battles and rubble, but no corpses.²⁴

The relatively bloodless coverage of conflict (and not just that in Iraq) derives from the media outlet's invocation of the criteria of "taste" and "decency." This is most often expressed as a concern for the anticipated reaction of readers and viewers, now readily available to newspapers through the offices of ombudsmen and readers' editors. Often this concern is so strong that some U.S. newspapers have the presumptive principle that "intrusive" images containing bodies or blood will *not* be run, or, at the very least, only after extensive editorial discussion.²⁵ Their British counterparts demonstrated similar self-imposed restraints.²⁶ Television broadcasters are even more bound because of regulations, so that while their cameramen record the complete picture of death and destruction in war, and their reporters lament their inability to convey the full truth, the vast majority of that footage is simply deemed too gory to be shown.²⁷

The media's concern for taste and decency has meshed perfectly with the military's long-established aversion to images of death. In World War I, the British War Office prohibited the appearance of bodies (regardless of whether they were British or German) in any official photograph or film, an edict that led also to the censorship of war paintings that

depicted dead soldiers.²⁸ In the Persian Gulf War, the sensitivity was so great that in one instance pool photographers had film ripped from their cameras to prevent publication of images recording the aftereffects of a Scud missile attack on U.S. barracks in Saudi Arabia that left twenty-five soldiers dead.²⁹

The same sensitivities—though now extended to the captured as well as the dead—were on display in Iraq when al-Jazeera broadcast images of U.S. prisoners of war and U.K. casualties. U.S. networks held back from showing the footage for at least a day before releasing it in very short clips with identifying features obscured.³⁰ Despite the

²⁴ David Carr, Jim Rutenberg, and Jacques Steinberg, "Bringing Combat Home: Telling War's Deadly Story at Just Enough Distance," *New York Times*, April 7, 2003, p. B13.

²⁵ Randy L. Rasmussen, "Arriving at Judgments in Selecting Photos," *Nieman Reports* 56, no. 3 (2002), pp. 67–70; and Michael Larkin, "Deciding on an Emotion-Laden Photography for Page One," *Nieman Reports* 55, no. 3 (2002), p. 77.

²⁶ Annie Lawson, "Editors show restraint with war images," *MediaGuardian.co.uk*, March 31, 2003; available at media.guardian.co.uk/iraqandthemedial/story/0,12823,924949,00.html.

²⁷ Both reporters and cameramen in a series of U.K. documentaries discuss this conundrum openly on the media and Iraq. See Jon Snow, "The True Face of War," *The War We Never Saw*, Channel 4, June 5, 2003; and Fergal Keane, "Iraq: The Cameramen's Story," BBC4, June 30, 2003. For the view of three U.K. television news editors that reveal the restraints, see "Media: What can you show?" *Guardian*, March 31, 2003, p. 7.

²⁸ Michèle Barrett, "Review: Shell-shocked," *Guardian*, April 19, 2003, p. 34.

²⁹ Patrick J. Sloyan, "What Bodies?" *Digital Journalist*, November 2002; available at www.digitaljournalist.org/issue0211/sloyan.html.

³⁰ Bill Carter and Jane Perlez, "The Networks: Channels Struggle on Images of Captured and Slain Soldiers," *New York Times*, March 24, 2003, p. B6. Subsequent broadcast of a seven-second clip of the bodies of two U.K. soldiers, filmed by al-Jazeera but used in a BBC documentary, drew criticism from their relatives, the Ministry of Defence, and the British prime minister, but the BBC was not deterred from its use. Jamie Wilson, "Blair fails to get BBC to remove Gulf bodies footage," *Guardian*, May 29, 2003, p. 6.

Bush administration's frequent disregard for international conventions, and notwithstanding the Pentagon's earlier release of pictures from Guantánamo Bay of captives in degrading confinement, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld rushed to decry the broadcasts as a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions. While the International Committee of the Red Cross says any image "that makes a prisoner of war individually recognizable" is a violation of Article 13 of the third Geneva Convention of 1949, this issue was complicated by a number of factors.³¹ First and foremost, al-Jazeera was broadcasting Iraqi TV footage rather than producing the images. Moreover, it was doing so at the same time as numerous U.S. and European networks were broadcasting images of Iraqi POWs, some of which were provided by Pentagon and Ministry of Defence film crews in Iraq. That made Iraq and the allies (rather than the broadcasters) equally culpable, because only states are subject to the convention.

Nonetheless, this issue propelled al-Jazeera into the limelight. Al-Jazeera took an editorial decision during the Iraq war to show all the shocking images that came its way (whether taken by its eight crews inside Iraq or from tapes supplied by other sources). The fact that al-Jazeera's images were, in the words of John MacArthur, "too honest," had the paradoxical effect of making al-Jazeera the story rather than the images and what they represented.³² Given that its cameras were the only ones outside both the system of embedded journalists and the Western media's adherence to codes of "taste," al-Jazeera's images of the conflict were unrelentingly horrific. Yet they were no more than what appeared, in actuality, before its camera lenses. The footage of civilian casualties and dead soldiers (whether Iraqi, U.S., or British) was unedited and unpackaged. The sense of

immediacy and proximity that these images achieved—whether as video or still frames grabbed from that video—gave them a force unmatched by the cleaner, more distanced pictures produced by journalists at the CMC, just down the road from al-Jazeera in Qatar. Al-Jazeera's approach led some television executives to argue they had a credibility problem with worldwide audiences who see the shocking images on non-Western channels. While refraining from advocating that the BBC emulate al-Jazeera, the deputy director of BBC News, Mark Damazer, deemed his network's coverage "too conservative" and in need of a rethink with respect to the broadcasting of shocking images.³³

THE CHALLENGES OF REPRESENTATION

The extensive management of the media coverage of war—as a conjunction of official restrictions and self-imposed standards—has for the most part diminished the verisimilitude of the resulting images. Constrained by the confines of the Coalition Media Center, reporters seeking an overview were (in the words of Michael Wolff) in danger of becoming little more than a series of "Jayson Blairs," constructing colorful accounts of scenes they had never witnessed.³⁴ Organized around imagery of the

³¹ Anthony Dworkin, "The Geneva Conventions and Prisoners of War," *Crimes of War Project* 24 (March 2003); available at www.crimesofwar.org/special/Iraq/brief-pow.html.

³² Quoted in Snow, "The True Face of War."

³³ Jason Deans, "BBC's war coverage was 'too conservative,'" *MediaGuardian.co.uk*, June 25, 2003; available at media.guardian.co.uk/broadcast/story/0,7493,984976,00.html.

³⁴ Ciar Byrne, "US TV networks 'kissed ass,' says Wolff" *MediaGuardian.co.uk*, June 25, 2003; available at media.guardian.co.uk/iraqandthedia/story/0,12823,984899,00.html. Jayson Blair was the *New York Times* reporter whose fabrications resulted in upheaval at the newspaper.

armed forces and their personnel, these reports were more than sympathetic portrayals of the war—they were themselves part of the war. The “media was weaponized” and the imagery was “a force-multiplier” exercising pressure on the Iraqi leadership.³⁵

In this context, photography has its work cut out for it. The speed at which (dis)information circulates in the media-managed battle space means the time for contemplation and critique offered by the still image is more compressed than ever. Nonetheless, while the images are unlikely to lead to change, especially in the short time available, they become part of what Sontag calls the vast repository of pictures that make it difficult to sustain the “moral defectiveness” of ignorance or innocence in the face of suffering. Images may only be an invitation to pay attention. But the questions photographs of war and atrocity pose should be required of our leaders and us: “Who caused what the picture shows? Who is responsible? Is it excusable? Was it inevitable? Is there some state of affairs which we have accepted up to now that ought to be challenged?”³⁶

The conclusion of *Regarding the Pain of Others* is itself something of a battle cry: “Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing—may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don’t forget.”³⁷ The *Guardian* used this Sontag quote in a short editorial to support its publication, twelve years after the event, of many previously unseen photographs from the

Persian Gulf War.³⁸ Under the title “Blood in the Sand,” and edited by Don McCullin, these unsparing images “reveal[ed] the true horror of the Gulf war,” and their publication was timed to coincide with the global antiwar marches on February 15, 2003.³⁹

Photographs such as these do not let us forget. But we will be allowed to forget if timely outlets for images of war are not found. That on the brink of another war in Iraq pictures of the carnage from 1991 could be published for the first time is an indictment of the amnesia and superficiality Sontag cites as indices of “moral defectiveness.”⁴⁰ With that amnesia, Sontag argues, comes heartlessness. But it is not the photographs that are the problem. It is passivity—not pictures—that dull feeling. How, then, can we use the pellets of information that photographs bear to dissipate the clouds of fantasy in the official coverage of war and overcome the passivity it enables?

³⁵ Lucian K. Truscott IV, “In This War, News Is A Weapon,” *New York Times*, March 25, 2003, p. A17. The weaponization of the media also preceded the conflict, especially when it came to the issue of weapons of mass destruction. One of the underreported elements of the Blair crisis at the *New York Times* was that “the paper’s bioterrorism expert, Judith Miller, admitted her main source on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction programme had been the Pentagon’s favoured Iraqi, Ahmad Chalabi. That in turn suggested that the Pentagon and Mr Chalabi had used the paper to help create justification for war.” Suzanne Goldenberg, “US paper gripped by new crisis of ethics,” *Guardian*, May 30, 2003, p. 19.

³⁶ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 117.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

³⁸ “The Pity of War: It is right to confront images of death,” *Guardian*, February 14, 2003, p. 23.

³⁹ *Guardian (G2)*, February 14, 2003, pp. 1–17.

⁴⁰ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 114.