

As toll mounts, U.S. casualties are nearly invisible

# Where Have All the Bodies Gone?

By Pat Arnow

In a week in June when 15 GIs were killed in Iraq (6/13–19/05), the war pictures in the **New York Times** (6/19/05, 6/20/05) featured dazed Iraqis after a suicide bombing, a Marine patrolling, the twisted remains of a vehicle, wounded children, a civilian casualty in a morgue. No photographs featured American casualties—a typical absence in U.S. coverage of the war.

There are notable exceptions. One of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize photos for breaking news photographs awarded to the **Associated Press** showed a controversial image of the charred bodies of American contractors hanging from a bridge in Fallujah.

Most of the other 20 photos in the portfolio on the Pulitzer website are more typical of Iraq War photography, with graphic images of death, grief, humiliation—only when these things involve Iraqis. There is the shooting of an Iraqi election worker, a wounded Iraqi, grieving Iraqis, two pictures of dead Iraqi children, two of Iraqi prisoners.

Images of American loss are generally much less graphic. Two photos show American Marines paying respects to dead but unseen comrades. One picture of a wounded GI is unusual because it shows his bloody arm. Pictures of American casualties usually appear after wounds have been cleaned up and agony is no longer visible.

## Picturing Vietnam and Iraq

The images of war that appear today offer a marked contrast to the pictures of the dead and wounded from the Vietnam War, whose media coverage is credited with spurring protests through graphic images. A search of **AP** photos (via the New York Public Library database) of “casualties in



U.S. Marines pay their final respects at a memorial service at Camp Blue Diamond, on the outskirts of Ramadi. Few photographs coming out of the Iraq War show injured or dead Americans. (AP Photo/Jim MacMillan)

Vietnam” from 1966–73 returned 60 results. Nearly 30 showed injured GIs, many with faces fully visible, often looking agonized—as in an image of a crouching medic treating a grimacing and bloody soldier in the field.

At least five showed dead GIs, like a photograph of two dead soldiers lying in the foreground while two comrades take cover in the background. Others showed dead and wounded Vietnamese, including the famous photo of the young naked girl running in terror from a napalm attack.

A search of **AP** for “casualties in Iraq” from 2003 to June 2005 returns 490 images. While flag-draped coffins and respectful photos of funerals abound (one even shows a soldier in an open coffin), just three wounded Americans appear in pictures. Two are in hospitals, and one is in

the field. More than 30 photos show dead or wounded Iraqis, including 10 of injured children. Many of the pictures feature a wasted landscape, twisted ruins of charred vehicles destroyed in car bombs. But the Americans patrolling and conducting operations look good.

**Time** magazine’s online photo essays show the progression of the war in Iraq but give little sense of American loss. In 35 photos over four photo essays, just three wounded Americans appear. There is also one picture of a dead Iraqi, and another of a wounded Iraqi. In the “Picture of the Week” for November 13, 2004, Army operating room nurses stand with a shrouded body of a GI in a morgue in Baghdad.

While **Time** rarely shows casualties in the field, they have published two sensitive and graphic photo essays (7/21/04,

3/21/05) showing soldiers' trying to live with disfiguring wounds.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning Iraq photos by David Leeson and Cheryl Diaz Meyer are most telling about what images of war get shown. In a portfolio of 20 photos from the 2004 breaking news award, nearly half show wounded or dead Iraqis—soldiers and civilians including children. These include one of a man burning after U.S. soldiers had fired on his truck, a child with a bloody wound, and skeletal remains. Two others show prisoners—in one, near-naked men—completely subjugated by their American captors.

### **The body of the “other”**

The photos of the dead, wounded and captured Iraqis are ugly, but they're actually not as grotesque as pictures of enemies in previous wars, says John Louis Lucaites, an Indiana University professor who teaches a course on images of war. He points to a full-page picture of the desiccated head of a Japanese soldier topped with a helmet propped on a tank printed in *Life* magazine (2/1/43). In a *Life* “Picture of the Week” the following year (5/22/44), a young woman, chin resting on her hand, looks thoughtfully at a skull before her on the table. “Arizona war worker writes her Navy boyfriend a thank-you note for the Jap skull he sent her,” read the caption.

“The placement of the skull is clearly a signifier of humiliation as well as victory,” Lucaites wrote in an article about representations of war (**Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies**, 3/04). “We chose not to value the body of the ‘other,’ particularly in the context of war where we’re trying to dehumanize the enemy,” Lucaites explains in a recent interview.

Judging from the outcry over the photos of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, pictures of “enemy” humiliation are not treated lightly. That’s progress. But pictures of American casualties are less in evidence than images from the end of World War II through Vietnam.

It’s not that media necessarily shy away from showing grisly images. In an evening news broadcast about the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in January, **ABC World News Tonight** (1/27/05) showed not just the living skeletons discovered in the death camp in 1945. It also presented visual evidence of modern-day genocides—skeletal remains emerging from the dirt of Rwanda, stacks of skulls in

Cambodia and a man turning over a skull in his hand in Sudan’s Darfur.

What these images show are people in other lands. Media freely portray death and suffering elsewhere—men, women, even children, from the tsunami, from Haiti,



A U.S. Army medic wraps the arm of a wounded American soldier in Vietnam, as another GI cradles the injured man's head. Photographs of dead and injured American soldiers in the Vietnam War gave a much more realistic picture of the war's cost to U.S. troops. (AP Photo/John Nance)

from the school siege in Beslan, Russia. But not Americans.

Some note the disparity. When the **New York Times** (12/28/04) published a front-page picture of a grieving woman surrounded by dead babies after the tsunami, several readers objected. Commenting in public editor Daniel Okrent’s column, one wrote (1/16/05), “Why no similar photographs of dead and mutilated GIs and civilians in Iraq?”

David Perlmutter, author of *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy* and a professor at Louisiana State University, suggests an answer: “The most powerful image of war is the picture of a dead American.”

### **Institutionalizing the taboo**

In avoiding images of American casualties today, the media are hearkening back to a time when the taboo was institutionalized. From World War I onward, formal government censorship dictated that no dead or wounded U.S. soldiers be shown in newspapers. As the fighting dragged on in

World War II, the public became blasé, says William Hammond, historian at the Army Center of Military History. “The propaganda and censorship people decided the public was so far removed from the action, it wasn’t too real for them. So they

worked very hard to get it more real.” Censors allowed publication of the first picture of American war dead—three bodies on Buna Beach in New Guinea. Taken by George Strock, the photo appeared in *Life* magazine (9/20/43).

Notably, the Americans’ faces were not shown; through the Korean War, pictures continued to preserve soldiers’ privacy in death. No such care was taken with pictures of the enemy.

Even in Vietnam, the images of Americans were restrained compared to those of Vietcong. Looking at pages of thumbnail images on a computer screen, many showing dead and wounded, it’s clear which ones are American: Men are carrying the soldier, someone is trying to help, someone is in mourning. The pictures with limbs askew, blood, men alone as others walk by—those are the enemy dead.

It doesn’t matter which war it is, even a controversial one like Vietnam. “The news media is supportive of its government,” says Hammond, who wrote *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War*.



One of the few photographs on the Associated Press website of an injured American soldier. He is being unloaded from a Marine medevac helicopter at the 31st Combat Support Hospital in Baghdad. (AP Photo/John Moore)

As respectful as pictures of American wounded and dead in Vietnam are, they are still more graphic than had been shown since the Civil War, when Matthew Brady's pictures of both Confederate and Union dead shocked the nation. In Vietnam, the injured men in the field look pained, blood leaking from bandages; comrades crouch as they run with stretchers. The price of war for American GIs was clear.

Such freedom for photographers to show the public something of the horrors of war didn't last. In Grenada and the first Gulf War, the press was nearly shut out, a *de facto* censorship.

### Freedom to shoot

In the current Iraq war, it's not censorship but self-censorship that stops the media. Though there is a ban on pictures of soldiers' coffins coming into Dover Air Force Base, in the field "there is no prohibition on showing people that are killed or injured," says Department of Defense spokesperson Jim Turner. Until next of kin are notified, faces should not be shown, he adds. (DoD regulations specify 72 hours.)

The media follow the rules and then some. "There is a serious timidity among the press in America right now to challenge the administration on its policy in Iraq," said Kelly McBride of the Poynter Institute (*Christian Science Monitor*, 1/19/05).

When images of a dead GI dragged through the streets of Mogadishu appeared in the American media, outrage turned the public against the mission and led to with-

drawal from Somalia. That caused the media to be "more careful and more cautious," *60 Minutes* producer David Gelber told Lori Robertson in the *American Journalism Review* (10-11/04). That's "not necessarily a good thing," he says.

Embedding the press leads to more access, but may also lead to holding back. "Having embedded journalists is a wholly odd notion," says Indiana's Lucaites. "You can't help but imagine that embedded journalists are going to bond with that group. They're going to be interested in protecting the people that are protecting them."

In offices far from the action, some editors admit to inordinate care in their cover-

age. "Early on in the war, I think all the media, including the *Washington Post*, we went with the wave of trying to tell the story, but we weren't going against the American authorities," Michel duCille, picture editor of the *Post*, told *AJR* (10-11/04).

The *Seattle Times* (4/18/04) ran groundbreaking pictures of coffins filled with American military dead lined up in an aircraft in Kuwait. Photo editor Barry Fitzsimmons is circumspect about running the photos of casualties, however: "The *Seattle Times* has been very conservative with the display of bodies."

Breaking the taboo against showing dead and wounded GIs in Vietnam has been credited with an erosion of support for war (though frank images of war losses can also boost support back home, as World War II's censors realized). "Gallup says that a majority of Americans now favor U.S. troop withdrawal before the fighting ends," wrote Harry F. Waters of *Newsweek* in the midst of the Vietnam War (1/6/69). "Anyone who regards that as a desirable objective would have to credit television with helping to shape the consensus with the vivid impact of its on-scene coverage."

By that standard, anyone who supports the occupation of Iraq should credit today's media for avoiding more graphic images of U.S. casualties today. Of course, it's not supposed to be the job of mainstream media to shape a consensus, whether pro- or anti-war—but to report reality. ■

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