

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Death on the Front Page

By **MARTHA A. SANDWEISS**

Published: April 4, 2004

AMHERST, Mass.

The public outcry after many newspapers printed grisly images of the charred bodies of American civilians in Falluja, Iraq, should have come as no surprise. Photographs are powerful, and Americans have long found it difficult to face those that capture the horror of war.

The Mexican War, from 1846 to 1848, was the first American war to be photographed. Working with the awkward daguerreotype process, photographers could not create pictures of the battlefield dead or wounded. The closest any came were photographs of a slain soldier's grave. But the public preferred patriotic prints and lithographs that inscribed American deaths with a narrative of heroism. An imagined picture of a noble death held more appeal than a picture of a windswept grave site.

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Not until the Civil War did Americans see photographs of actual battlefield dead. By today's standards, these pictures were tame. The laborious wet-plate negative process made it impossible to take pictures of battlefield action, so the photographers captured the casualties of war during the brief window between the end of a battle and the burial of the bodies.

Even such opportunities were limited. Alexander Gardner, in his celebrated "Photographic Sketchbook of the War" of 1866, employed clever camera angles and deceptive captions so that he could use the same corpses to represent both Union and Confederate casualties. Dead soldiers who conveyed a tale of Confederate desolation in one picture were made to serve a narrative of Union heroism in the next.

Still, these photographs of battlefield carnage stunned Americans, even those who had much greater familiarity with the Civil War than most Americans now have with Iraq. In the fall of 1862 The New York Times reviewed the display of Antietam dead in Mathew Brady's New York gallery, noting: "Mr. Brady has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and

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laid them in our dooryard and along the streets, he has done something very like it."

For the writer Oliver Wendell Holmes, who had rushed to Antietam to look for his wounded son, the future jurist, seeing Brady's photographs stirred painful memories. "It is so nearly like visiting the battlefield to look over these views that all the emotions excited by the actual sight of the stained and sordid scene, stewed with rags and wrecks, come back to us," he wrote. "We buried them in the recesses of our cabinet as we would have buried the mutilated remains of the dead they too vividly represented." Nonetheless, the pictures were as alluring as they were repellent. Crowds pressed up against the windows of Brady's gallery to stare.

The story of war photography since the Civil War is one of technological change — the emergence of half-tone reproduction technologies that allowed photographs to appear in newspapers and magazines, the development of cheaper color printing technologies, the rise of film and television, the spread of digital cameras and the Internet.

So it is a bit of a paradox that while photographers can now finally capture the fury and pace of warfare, few are getting the chance to do so. The news media have been reluctant to publish images of death in Iraq, and the Bush administration has done its best to hamper photographers, even banning photographs of body bags and coffins. Perhaps this absence of other sorts of photographic images from Iraq made the horrific images from Falluja seem even more disturbing.

Those incensed by the pictures should ask themselves what is most troubling, the fact that the violence happened or that we have photographs of it? No image of war is ever as brutal as war itself.

Martha A. Sandweiss is a professor of American studies and history at Amherst College and the author of "Print the Legend: Photography and the American West."

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