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Opening the Aperture:

Examining Images of War

Jeffrey S.B. Albanese

“By controlling every germ,
a spray disinfectant with
tranquilized brains
to stun competitors”

*-Kool Keith
“Ego Trippin’”*

I. Photography granted humans an unprecedented technological extension of their sense of vision. A whole universe of experience became newly available to anyone possessing eyes. People no longer needed to rely on written descriptions or drawings in a travelogue to know what life was like in places they themselves would never see. All the information one needed to know, it seemed, could be contained in an objective, hyper-realistic, visual representation created not by the subjective hand of man, but by the unbiased interaction of photons and chemicals. The veracity of descriptions of any visual phenomena, be they oral, pictorial, or written, became testable when compared with the product of a technology that offered an unfiltered representation of reality.

Despite photography's ability to record images in a way that looks so much like the way we perceive the same image with our eyes, photographs can only approximate human vision. Most fundamentally, photographs are created when light passes through a single lens while human vision involves two lenses. However, the arguments against inherent photographic objectivity more relevant to this paper involve not technological process but rather photographic subject.

Journalists immediately recognized the utility of photography's apparent objectivity as a tool to record irrefutable evidence. In fact, photographers were initially "deemed *recorders*, rather than *reporters*" (Newton 2001: 6). However, the objectivity of the camera soon came into question. It was recognized that it was necessary for the photographer to decide at what to point the camera and when, to the exclusion of some other information. Similarly, whenever the subjects of photographs involve humans and human behavior (as most photojournalistic products do), enormous cultural and social baggage accompanies a viewer's perception. Thus, the same photograph may mean different things to different people depending on their accumulated

cultural and individual experiences. Further complicating the issue are the technological advances making it possible to manipulate photographic information to the point that it no longer represents reality at all.

It is important to acknowledge that journalistic photography is a form of “mediated communication” rather than “objective truth” (Newton, 2001: 4). The public recognizes this fact, and research has found that “despite journalists’ low rank in credibility polls, readers still may intuitively believe images they see in newspapers” (Newton, 2001: 10). While acknowledging these issues, the purpose of this paper requires their bracketing in addition to post-modern refutations of reality and truth altogether. The author recognizes that “media are only as trustworthy as those who made them” (Newton, 2001:7) and believes that “reasonably true images not only are possible, but also are essential to contemporary society,” as they provide important evidentiary information contributing to the informed citizenry so crucial to a functioning democracy (Newton, 2001: 5).

In addition to its perceived objectivity, another property makes photographic information as a means of communicating news particularly intellectually and emotionally salient. Marshall McLuhan has described photography as a “hot” medium: “a hot medium is one that extends one single sense in ‘high definition.’ High definition is the state of being well filled with data” (1964: 36). Being so saturated with data, hot mediums, as opposed to cool mediums, require little participation from the audience to “fill in the blanks” of the message. Lacking a requirement of participation or deliberation, hot mediums have the potential to incite strong emotional, even visceral responses in the receivers of their message. Thus, as McLuhan notes, “to see a photograph of the local slum makes the condition unbearable. The mere matching of the picture with reality provides a new motive for change” (1964: 177).

McLuhan's example provides us with a succinct description of how visual information in the form of photographs can function in a democratic society. Democracies are systems that require feedback from the units they govern (citizens). These units must be informed about their environment if the feedback they provide is to be effective. In a society as large and differentiated as the U.S., citizens must largely rely on information that is mediated in order to obtain knowledge of their environment. Photographs are a source of evidentiary information about a citizen's environment. The combination of the property of "heat" with the knowledge that photographic information provides (the most) reasonably true and objective mediated information would seem to make this information highly valuable to citizens. Thus, the heat of a photograph of a slum evokes an emotional response in its viewer (it is "unbearable") when that viewer matches the photograph with reality. The citizen viewer is therefore motivated to action ("change").

We have learned what it is about photographs that make them so intellectually and emotionally salient to humans, but what is it about humans that makes visual information (photography being its most realistic mediated form) so important? Julianne H. Newton believes the answer lies in prehistory: "the roots of photojournalism can be traced to the beginning of humankind – to that time when seeing clearly could literally mean the difference between life and death" (2001: 29). Throughout the history of human evolution, our ancestors have visually scanned their environment for information about potential physical dangers. Thus, not only are we driven to collect information about our physical environment, we are physiologically pre-disposed to do so with our eyes. Additionally, research suggests that "visual encoding is relatively automatic and cognitively cost-free," in comparison to textual information (Potter, Bolls and Dent, 1997 as quoted in Newton 2001: 27).

Photographic information has become ubiquitous in all forms of news media, especially television news. McLuhan generally characterizes both the press and television as being cool or participatory mediums (1964: 188, 270). However, due to the abundance of visual information contained in print and television news outlets, the temporal organization of television news, and the way memory of news events is formed, all discussion in this paper of visual information in any news media will proceed as if it were in a purely photographic form, and therefore “hot.” As Andrew Hoskins notes, “it is selected moments that, despite all the relentless movement and flow of television, are still elicited from the medium...televsual memory is reduced to flashframes” (2005: 21).

II. As a consequence of the “heat” of images, many politicians and policymakers believe that photographic information in the news media has the potential to constrain policy. This is mainly due to the perceived role television coverage played in America’s failed war effort in Vietnam (MacArthur 1992: 132). Though parts of the Korean War had been televised, at the time, television news was “in its infancy” (Hallin, 1986: 6). With expanded viewership and the creation of the nightly network news broadcast, Vietnam became “the ‘first TV war’ or ‘living room-war’” (Hoskins, 2005: 13). McLuhan believed that television coverage of war had erased “the dichotomy between civilian and military” and made the former a “participant in every phase of the war” (McLuhan and Fiore, 1968: 134). It is believed that this nightly exposure to combat led “the mass public to quickly tire of the violence” (it is “unbearable”), thus constraining the actions of the government and contributing to the eventual success of the communists (Hallin, 1994: 45).

Despite the skepticism of many communications researchers, “the allegation that news images have an especially resonant ability to drive, alter, or overturn foreign policy,” is still a

commonly held belief (Perlmutter, 1998:1). David D. Perlmutter refers to this belief as “visual determinism” (1998: 1) and discusses its underlying assumptions. Firstly, “politicians, like many of us, watch TV” (1998: 1). Politicians, even presidents, watch TV not only to gain information, but also to “gauge” how policies are being discussed or portrayed in the media in order to anticipate their reception by the public (1998: 2). Second, the ascendancy of television news has placed a premium on the gathering of images since television, as a visual medium, requires visual information (1998: 2). Third, technologies such as satellites, which have reduced the time between an image being recorded and being broadcast, “bypasses the normal channels of journalistic filtration and government deliberation,” “compress[ing] [the] traditional news cycle” and “creat[ing] a tension with the measured and deliberative folkways of national decision makers” (1998: 3). Fourth, the veracity of pictures is rarely questioned and their “‘meanings’ are fixed” (1998: 3). Fifth, deriving from Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” the emotional impact of images “override[s] reason” (1998: 4). And last, the anecdotal evidence that, both literally and figuratively, the actions of policymakers “[are] explained by pointing at specific images in the press” (1998: 5). Andrew Hoskins has added three more assumptions underlying the “perceived effects” television coverage had on the Vietnam war: “firs[t], the singularity of ‘the’ audience; secondly, its capacity to effect a change in military strategy and government policy; and thirdly, the actual proportion and unambiguous nature of graphic images of war shown on television at the time” (2005: 15).

Did visual images of war really contribute so much to America’s failure in Vietnam? Does television really have a “pacifist[ic] bias” (Hallin, 1994: 45)? Does television coverage of war inherently “demoraliz[e] the home front” as Richard Nixon and countless other policymakers assert (Nixon, 1978 as quoted in Hallin, 1986: 3)? The assumptions that form the

foundation of what Perlmutter terms “visual determinism” are not without their criticisms. I will link, from Perlmutter’s list, the fourth and fifth assumptions (that the meaning of an image and the emotional responses it elicits are unambiguous) with Hoskins’ first (the “singularity of ‘the’ audience”). Visual determinism seems less convincing when these assumptions are considered in the context of framing.

According to Robert Entman, “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993 as quoted in Perlmutter 1998: 7). Despite their high-definition, the meaning of the information contained in pictures is not “fixed” or “unambiguous.” As Perlmutter notes, “visual images are chronologically and spatially limited anecdotes about specific incidents” (Perlmutter 1998: 17) and “facts or quotes chosen for commentary... are frames meant to affect [their] meaning” (Perlmutter 1998: 39). Pictures need to be contextualized by the press or other political elites in order to have meaning. Similarly, “identical pictures can serve contradictory purposes” (Perlmutter 1998: 23).

Consider AP photographer Eddie Adam’s iconic photograph (see fig. 1) of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, leader of South Vietnam’s police and intelligence units, summarily executing an NLF prisoner on the streets of Saigon during the Tet Offensive. To some, the villain in the photograph is the NLF soldier—an agent of the enemy who killed Americans. To others, the villain is General Loan, a man the U.S. supported and, it seemed, may have committed a war crime. In a 1988 issue of the comic book *The ’Nam*, the photograph is re-created and it is the photojournalist himself who is the villain for putting the scene on the “[f]ront page of every newspaper in the states.” As Franklin notes, “[t]he logic of this comic-book militarism is

inescapable: photographers must be allowed to image for the public only what the military deems suitable” (Franklin 1994: 40).

This relates to Hoskins’ critique of the concept of a mass audience (Hoskins 2005: 15). Just as different frames can construct different meanings for identical pictures, the different experiences of audiences may result in identically framed pictures having different meanings. As Hallin notes, “[o]ne of the traditional findings of research on the effects of mass communication, for instance, is that because of selective perception, the media will often tend merely to reinforce people’s existing attitudes” (Hallin 1986: 107). A photographic image does not have a meaning, but rather meanings. There is not a mass audience, but rather audiences. The existence of a diversity of meanings and audiences results in a diversity of emotional impacts and responses an image has the potential to provoke.

III. Media coverage of war does not occur in a vacuum. It must be situated historically when analyzing its impact on public opinion and governmental policy. However, as Hallin has noted, this has not deterred many people from believing that there was a causal relationship between Vietnam’s status as the first “televised war” and Vietnam being (in 1986, at least) “the country’s most divisive and least successful war” (1986: 105). As noted above, the conventional wisdom among policymakers and members of the military has been that it was television coverage of the Vietnam War that was “the principal cause of what they see as a national failure of will,” a failure which led to military defeat (Hallin 1986: 105).

Hallin has discussed the many reasons why television has been “singled out as the decisive influence on the ‘first domino’ of American public opinion” (1986: 106). According to surveys conducted by the Roper Organization for the Television Information Office, television had become the “most important” and most trusted source of news for Americans by the mid-

1960's. Part of the reason television had become more trusted than other sources of news has to do with the visual nature of the medium (1986: 106). However, there are problems associated with these data. They are based on what people report about themselves, reports that are not always confirmed empirically. Similarly, "it is not clear how much, or in what way, the news will affect their opinions" (Hallin 1986: 107). This is not to say, however, that television does not contribute to public opinion. Evidence "confirm[s] the common sense idea that television - and other media - can indeed, in certain circumstances and in certain ways, shape political perceptions very powerfully" (Hallin 1986: 108).

Stanley Karnow, who covered the Vietnam War for *Time* and *Life* magazines, has noted: "the military feel that they were let down, if not betrayed, by the press" (Hess and Kalb 2003: 24). The confluence of factors that led to the American foreign policy failure in South East Asia are outside the scope of this work. A "failure of will," however, was certainly not *the cause* of a failure of policy. Nonetheless, this is the perception held by many policymakers and members of the military. In his content analysis based on a random sample of television news broadcasts throughout the duration of the Vietnam War (Hallin 1986: 110), Hallin has convincingly demonstrated that, far from being inherently biased against war, television news coverage of the Vietnam War was more likely than print news to leave the issue of intervention unquestioned, and was largely reflective of the level and nature of the debate over the war among the political establishment.

IV. Hallin's analysis of television news coverage of Vietnam is grounded in a "model of objective journalism"—[i]t is useful to imagine the journalist's world as divided into three regions, each of which is governed by different journalistic standards" (Hallin 1986: 116). According to this model, "objective journalism" occurs in what Hallin terms the "sphere of

legitimate controversy”:

[t]he limits of this sphere are defined primarily by the two-party system—by the parameters of debate between and within the Democratic and Republican parties—as well as by the decision-making process in the bureaucracies of the executive branch (Hallin 1986: 116).

The “sphere of legitimate controversy” is bounded on one side by the “sphere of consensus,” which

encompasses those social objects not regarded by the journalists and most of the society as controversial. Within this region journalists do not feel compelled either to present opposing views or remain disinterested observers. On the contrary, the journalist’s role is to serve as an advocate or celebrant of consensus values (Hallin 1986: 116-17).

On the other side of the “sphere of legitimate controversy” is the “[s]phere of deviance, the realm of those political actors and views which journalists and the political mainstream of the society reject as unworthy of being heard” (Hallin 1986: 117). This model determines which issues are debated, unquestioned, or ignored.

Hallin also describes the properties of television media that affect its news coverage. Unlike news presented in print media, which is spatially organized (what McLuhan would describe as participatory, and thus “cool”), news presented on television is organized temporally, and the “audience must be ‘carried along’ from the beginning of the story to the end” (Hallin 1986: 118). This requires television news to have “[a] definite theme or story line” (Hallin 1986: 118). Temporal organization inhibits “in-depth” discussion of complex issues and “thematizes” news reports (Hallin 1986: 118, 120). Television’s reliance on the “unity of a story line” also makes it a more “ideological medium” than the printed press, because a story line requires a particular “world view” (Hallin 1986: 121). Many believe that television’s thematization of news makes it “more openly ‘adversarial’ vis-à-vis political authority” (Hallin 1986: 118). General Westmoreland believed that television coverage distorted the war and presented it as

entirely violent and controversial (MacArthur 1992: 132). However, Hallin notes that television news' "infant" status (its reporters had not yet cultivated the inside sources available to print reporters) and its reliance on images resulted in television news being "centered around public press conferences" (Hallin 1986: 121-2). Similarly, television cannot separate its entertainment function from its news coverage. While critics say this leads to an emphasis on "drama," that "portrays social and political institutions in a particularly negative light" (Hallin 1986: 124), television's reliance on official statements to maintain thematic unity shows that "[i]t is by no means always true that the dramas of television news focus on disharmony or place established institutions or authorities in a negative light" (Hallin 1986: 125). That television news is so reliant on footage of official statements to maintain thematic unity make it more likely to implicitly support issues, especially when they are firmly within the "sphere of consensus."

As a dramatic medium with a need for thematic unity, television news required "sympathetic characters" for its storyline. This effectively personalized the news. As the press was relatively uncensored in Vietnam and had access to "the front," television journalists in the field relied on soldiers for this role. Thus, Vietnam was "covered from 'inside' American policy, from the point of view of those carrying it out" (Hallin 1986: 135). Personalization had the effect of moving the war toward the sphere of consensus.

Hallin found that, when covering the bombing of North Vietnam, an issue which, in print media, was located within the sphere of legitimate controversy, television focused on the professionalism of the pilots carrying out the bombings. When asked about the "effectiveness" of the bombing campaign, pilots interpreted this to mean "how accurately they were hitting their assigned targets" (Hallin 1986: 136-137). However, "the debate about the effectiveness of the bombing had nothing to do with the skill of the pilots. It was a strategic rather than tactical

question” (Hallin 1986: 137). Thus, the strategy of bombing North Vietnam on television was firmly within the sphere of consensus whereas, in the print media, the policy itself was being questioned. The strategy on the ground in South Vietnam was largely treated in the same manner (Hallin 1986: 139).

Richard Nixon, in discussing the anti-war media bias he perceived, noted that, though the media and politicians expressed outrage over events like My Lai, coverage of the war “had been noticeably uncritical of North Vietnamese atrocities” (Nixon 1978 as quoted in Hallin 1986: 147). Hallin has shown that the evidence does not support this claim. In addition to finding that television “painted an almost perfectly one-dimensional image” of Communist forces as “cruel, ruthless, and fanatical—clearly beyond the bounds of Legitimate Controversy” (Hallin 1986: 148), Hallin found that, between August 1965 and January 1968, 20 unfavorable editorial comments and no favorable comments were made regarding the North Vietnamese or NLF forces (Hallin 1986: 148). Their treatment by televised news did not change greatly over the course of the war (Hallin 1986: 149). Overall, Hallin found that “television coverage of Vietnam dehumanized the enemy, drained him of all recognizable emotions and motives and thus banished him not only from the political sphere, but from human society itself” (Hallin 1986: 158). Similarly, many journalists covering Vietnam, like Peter Arnett, admitted they had seen atrocities similar to My Lai and had not reported on them. Seymour Hersh had been turned down by *Life* magazine when he was trying to get his story on My Lai published. A relatively small press syndicate published the initial story before *Harper’s Magazine* published it along with photographs (MacArthur 1992: 137-8).

Coverage of the Tet Offensive, launched at the end of January 1968 by the North Vietnamese and NLF forces in cities across South Vietnam, is often pointed to as “*the* event that

shattered American morale at home” (Hallin 1986: 168). James R. Schlesinger, who was at different times Director of Intelligence and Secretary of Defense under President Nixon, claimed that the press became “totally hostile to our engagement” after Tet (Hess and Kalb 2003: 51). Despite the fact that the NLF and North Vietnam were militarily defeated in the offensive, television coverage of civilian and military casualties spiked during Tet (Hallin 1986: 171). Walter Cronkite famously characterized the war as a “stalemate” (Cronkite 1968 as quoted in Hallin 1986: 170), and nearly two months later, President Johnson announced that he would not run for reelection (Hallin 1986: 170). However, the claim that it was television’s coverage of the brutality and chaos of the Tet offensive that was the turning point leading to a collapse of consensus on the war is spurious.

The war was within the sphere of legitimate controversy before Tet. Television’s main protagonists in the war, the soldiers, had already begun expressing their dismay with the war (Hallin 1986: 166). Public support for the war had been steadily dwindling since 1966, when television news was still referring to Vietnam as “our” war (Hallin 1986: 168). A poll taken in October of 1967 found 47% of Americans reporting that military intervention in Vietnam was a mistake (MacArthur 1992: 136). There was already dissensus among the political elites television relied on to maintain its story line. Secretary of Defense McNamara, an architect and public proponent of the war, had already announced he was leaving the Johnson administration (MacArthur 1992: 135). Members of the Senate had already begun openly questioning American involvement in Vietnam (Hallin 1986: 162). In the immediate aftermath of Tet, television presented equal numbers of pro and anti-war guests (mostly members of Congress) (MacArthur 1992: 136). Coverage was still largely reflective of developments occurring within the political establishment. It just so happened that the political establishment was no longer as strongly

behind intervention as had previously been the case.

What television coverage of the Tet offensive *did* do was expose, with vivid full color images, disparities between the administration's statements about the war and developments on the ground. In the fall of 1967, in preparation for the elections, the Johnson administration began a "'progress offensive' to convince the public that the war was being won" (Hallin 1986: 165). Politicians were sent to Vietnam and reported to the press that the war was proceeding well. General Westmoreland was put in front of the cameras to reassure the public. Hallin found that these official statements were usually televised without commentary by the press (Hallin 1986: 165). Images of the fighting in South Vietnamese cities demonstrated that the administration did not have things under control in Vietnam.

Paralleling the administration's lack of control over the situation in Vietnam was its lack of control over the situation in the media. For two months after Tet, the Johnson administration remained mostly silent (Hallin 1986: 169). In failing to take the initiative and publicly confront the debate over Tet, the administration left a vacuum that the press was left to fill: "[i]f the administration had been clear enough on its direction to maintain an active public stance, Cronkite might never have ended his famous broadcast with a policy statement of his own"—that the war was a "stalemate" (Hallin 1986: 169). As CNN anchor Judy Woodruff has noted, "[w]hen there's a vacuum of policy...it seems to me media coverage is then more likely to fill that vacuum" with the "dramatic pictures" available to serve as a symbol for a crisis (Hess and Kalb 2003: 73).

V. In spite of the problems with the "visual determinism hypothesis," the fact that "objective" journalism is largely determined by the discourse of political elites, and the fact that administrations are usually granted the opportunity by the media to "sell" their policies, the

Pentagon felt betrayed. Instead of working to ensure that no future policy vacuums would be left unfilled, the military and future administrations began formulating a more expedient option—denying the press the ability to expose those voids. It is important to note the differences in level of press freedom between World War II and the war in Vietnam. During World War II, “reporting was considered ‘essential service’” (Hallin 1986: 127) by the military and the administration, who felt that “the mobilization of public opinion” for the war was a necessity (Hallin 1986: 127). Reporters, often working in military uniforms (Hess and Kalb 2003: 20), were routinely accredited by the military and given access to the front as long as they submitted their reports to military censors. This was done to “prevent damage to morale on the home front as well as to deny to the other side information about military operations and capabilities” (Hallin 1986: 127).

Reporters in Vietnam were also accredited by the military and given access to the “front.” However, the military decided that, since “U.S. forces were fighting as guests of a foreign government” in an undeclared war, formal censorship would be unfeasible (Hallin 1986: 127). Instead, correspondents agreed to a set of “categories of information which they were not allowed to report without authorization,” violations of which would result in a loss of required accreditation (Hallin 1986, 128). Even General William Westmoreland, who once claimed that Kim Phuc, the naked 9 year-old subject of Nick Ut’s iconic “Accidental Napalm” photograph, was burned in a hibachi accident (Newton 2001: 164), noted that “[t]he MACV information officer had to impose that penalty only a few times in the four years I was in Vietnam... a distinct credit to the press corps” (Westmoreland, 1976 as quoted in Hallin 1986: 128).

In addition to Gen. Westmoreland, the Sidle Commission, a Pentagon panel established to address the banning of the press from the island of Grenada during the Marine invasion,

attested to the fact that the voluntary press guidelines of the Vietnam War were effective in not exposing the military to risk (Hallin 1986: 128). Nonetheless, the main result of the Sidle Commission represented a major win for the military and future administrations in the battle for control of press coverage and imagery of military operations: the establishment of the Department of Defense National Media Pool (Franklin 1994: 40). Citing security issues, reporters would be given access to future battlefields only under Pentagon supervision.

“[O]perating under the belief that photographic and televised images had helped bring about the U.S. defeat in Vietnam,” and utilizing the National Media Pool, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and Pentagon press liaisons successfully presented the American public with a sanitized war seemingly devoid of human death during the first Gulf War (Franklin 1994: 40). A since-declassified memo emanating from U.S. Central Command, known as Annex Foxtrot, laid out the military’s policy regarding the press pools. Among other rules, the memo emphasized that “[n]ews media representatives will be escorted at all times” (MacArthur 1992: 7). Reporters who wished to cover the war were required to sign a “ground-rules” contract with the military before they could receive accreditation and entry into the pool system. These “ground-rules” involved agreeing to remain with military escorts at all times (MacArthur 1992: 19). Off-the-record interviews were forbidden (MacArthur 1992: 165). Similarly, all “pool material” reporters gathered with their escorts (who determined to what activities journalists would have access) would be subject to “security review”—the Pentagon’s new euphemism for censors (MacArthur 1992: 27).

Where reporters in Vietnam were able to build rapport with soldiers, who were able to air any grievances they may have had on camera, in the first Gulf War, omnipresent military escorts naturally intimidated soldiers being interviewed (MacArthur 1992: 165). Escorts even physically

obstructed reporters from getting information that might run counter to official statements. When NBC correspondent Gary Matsumoto began asking a military chaplain about the mood of the troops, his military escort, Captain Becky Kolaw, jumped in front of the cameras and ended the interview (MacArthur 1992: 170).

Pool reporters relied on the military to bring them to scenes of battle once the ground war began in February of 1991. Thus, it was up to the military to decide what parts of what battles television cameras would witness. Often, the operations reporters had signed up to cover were scrapped. Other times, the military escorts responsible for getting reporters to the scene wound up “lost” in the desert, convincing some reporters that this was the “Department of Defense’s ‘final solution’ for the press” (MacArthur 1992: 191). When reporters were able to witness or record actual fighting, the requirement that transmissions be subject to “security review” amounted to “censorship by delay” (MacArthur 1992: 189). If a report was not cleared in a timely manner, by the time it got to the networks, it had ceased being news and was unlikely to air.

With such restricted movement, the press was unable to verify claims made by the administration or report on the nature of war as they saw it. The Bush administration alleged that 540,000 Iraqi troops were on the Kuwaiti border with Saudi Arabia, in position to invade (MacArthur 1992: 172). Pool journalists on the ground had no access to the scene or to sources who might refute such claims. The vastly inflated numbers were challenged only when a small local newspaper, the *St. Petersburg Times*, bought satellite photos proving the troop levels cited by the administration were false (MacArthur 1992: 173-5). Television cameras could not witness or even discuss with witnesses the fact that “friendly fire” incidents were responsible for 23% of soldiers killed in action and 15% of those wounded (MacArthur 1992: 148). Cameras could not

witness or discuss with witnesses the fact that members of the First Infantry Division literally buried Iraqi soldiers alive on the so-called “Saddam Line” (MacArthur 1992: 201).

Instead, the story of the war, framed by President Bush and General Schwarzkopf as the antidote to Vietnam (Kendrick 1994: 60), became laser-guided “smart bombs,” wonders of technology which minimized “collateral damage” with their surgical ability to limit their destructive powers to military targets (93% of the artillery dropped during the Gulf War were conventional bombs) (MacArthur 1992: 161). Such technological hegemony would surely assuage any squeamish fears that the war might become “another Vietnam.” Television’s dramatic story line was that of a confrontation between good (personified by George Bush and Norman Schwarzkopf) and evil (personified by Saddam Hussein, the “butcher of Baghdad,” (Shohat 1994: 148) who was often compared to Hitler (Hallin and Gitlin 1994: 161)).

Not permitted to gather their own material, television news relied on its one steady source of information: military briefings (Hallin and Gitlin 1994: 154). Military spokespersons found themselves able to “bypass reporters and communicate their points of view directly to the public” (Paletz 1994: 282). As in Vietnam, coverage of the air war effectively pushed the war towards the sphere of consensus by concentrating on the effectiveness and precision of the military technology which left journalists “wide eyed” (Hallin and Gitlin 1994: 155; Paletz 1994: 282). Unlike coverage of the Vietnam War, the military banned the filming of anonymous flag-draped caskets arriving at Dover Air Force Base, citing privacy issues (Franklin 1994: 41).

With little access to soldiers in action to act as sympathetic characters in television’s narrative, the main protagonists of the war became technology. In a photographic content analysis of Gulf War coverage in three leading American news periodicals (*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*), Griffin and Lee found that, “[f]or every picture of actual

combat (3% of the total), the newsmagazines printed about nine noncombat photographs of American military hardware” (1995: 817). Footage of the war was often projected from the point of view of the weapons themselves, weapons that were often referred to as if they were human (“[the Patriot missile] uses quick thinking to outsmart the enemy”) (Hallin and Gitlin 1994: 154). Limited visual footage forced networks to repeatedly broadcast Department of Defense footage recorded by the missiles’ guidance systems, to the delight of those viewers raised on videogames (Franklin 1994: 42; Engelhardt 1994: 90). The missiles destroyed not humans, but inanimate objects such as buildings or tanks (Engelhardt 1994: 88), thrilling eyewitnesses such as the CNN crew who remained in Baghdad during the air war. The bombs and tracers looked “like fireflies, sparklers, and fireworks” in the night sky (White 1994: 129).

When the mechanized eyes of weapons did happen to record footage of the bloody suffering of the humans inside their inanimate targets, it was withheld, and the humans who had viewed it were prevented from publicly describing it—“[t]he army was not ashamed of killing, but only of *being seen* killing” (Norris 1994: 288-9). The body counts of the Vietnam era gave way to “weapons counts”—how many inanimate targets had been destroyed (Engelhardt 1994: 88). It was a war without visible casualties, simply “rumored knowledge of classified army footage of close-up killing that no one ever saw except the guns” (Norris 1994: 289). It was a war mediated not by journalists, but by the human and technological components of a military machine.

VI. The current Bush administration has continued this pattern of reactionary press management policies during the current war in Iraq. During the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan the Pentagon severely limited the ability of journalists to report on military activities in Afghanistan and neighboring nations such as Uzbekistan. Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs

Victoria Clarke met with representatives of major print news outlets in order for the two parties to reach an agreement on the issue of access. Clarke convinced Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to begin a practice which has defined war reportage in Iraq. American and foreign journalists would be “embedded” with military units for extended periods of time, free to report as long as the mission and American lives were not endangered. Thus, Rumsfeld provided the media not only the access they desired, but also “total immersion, [doing] much to change the relationship between the press corps” and the Pentagon (Hess and Kalb 2003: 94).

The dynamics of this arrangement have shaped how embeds report on the war. Faced with the unlikely task of objectively reporting on a war being prosecuted by the very people protecting them, embedded journalists, at least in their reports, became participants in the war—using the first-person singular pronoun with a significantly higher frequency than non-embeds (Fox and Park 2006: 48). NPR’s John Burnett, embedded with the First Marine Division at the start of the Iraq war, was initially optimistic about working with a “wonderful group of guys” (*On The Media* March 7, 2003). Two weeks later, he declared, “...we are clearly being used by the Pentagon, and in some cases for propaganda purposes” (*On The Media*, March 28, 2003). He soon cut ties with the military and attempted to report unilaterally.

Washington Post reporter Carol Morello, an early embed in Afghanistan, described not feeling “embedded” at all: “[w]e spent five days sort of being shuttled from one feature story to the next...almost on a guided tour” (Hess and Kalb 2003: 167). When American and Afghani casualties were brought in to the base at which she was stationed, military officials would not let journalists photograph the incident or even watch—“[a]ny time news came anywhere within an inch of breaking out, we were told that we could not report it” (Hess and Kalb 2003: 167). Non-embedded journalists were sometimes harassed by the military. Tom Squitieri, a reporter for

USA Today, recalled incidents where U.S. Special Forces allowed Afghani locals to hold journalists at gunpoint (Hess and Kalb 2003: 177). Joel Simon, director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, recounted the intimidation, detention, and expulsion of unilateral journalists and photojournalists working in Iraq (*On The Media*, April 11, 2003).

The embedding process certainly has not prevented *any* images the Pentagon might potentially perceive as problematic from reaching the public. During the 2004 siege of Fallujah, Khalid Mohammed, a unilateral photographer with the Associated Press, photographed the charred remains of military contractors hanging from a bridge. The photographs were published in newspapers and aired on television across the country. An Associated Press photograph of a dying Army Specialist named Travis Babbitt (see fig. 2) was published in Newark's *Star-Ledger*. The editors of that paper found themselves having to defend themselves to angry readers who declared that their decision to publish the photograph was unpatriotic. These types of photographs seem to be the exception, however, and the publication of photographs of dead or wounded Americans tends to be few and far between. *LA Times* staff writer James Rainey surveyed eight leading American publications over the six-month period between September 1, 2004 and February 28, 2005. During that time, 559 Americans and Western Allies died in Iraq. Only one photograph of a fallen soldier was published (Rainey 2005).

Embedded photographers, like the pool reporters of the first Gulf War, must abide by a set of ground-rules laid out by the military. Photographs of the dead or wounded generally may not be used if faces can be recognized. If photographs of US soldiers can be published, the requirement of family notification often results in the phenomenon observed in the first Gulf War—that of censorship by delay. Any trust embedded journalists are able to cultivate with the troops protecting them evaporates when those journalists attempt to document their sacrifices

photographically. Tyler Hicks of the *New York Times* and Carolyn Cole of the *LA Times* were transferred out of the unit they had embedded with after photographing dead and wounded soldiers being taken to a field hospital (Rainey 2005). After extensively photographing a particularly tragic incident of “collateral damage,” depicting the blood-soaked child of parents who were killed at a military checkpoint in Tal Afar, Iraq, Chris Hondros was banned from any further work with the unit he was covering (*Democracy Now!*, April 5, 2007). The photographs were widely published in Europe, but few American news outlets carried them. A US General in Qatar requested that *Al Jazeera* stop airing the photographs (Solnit 2005).

On May 15, 2007, Iraqi police fired gunshots in the air to clear Iraqi journalists from the scene of a bombing in Tayaran Square, Baghdad. Two days before the incident, the Iraqi Interior Ministry initiated a policy of banning journalists from scenes of violence, allegedly in order to prevent evidence tampering, assistance to insurgents, and injury to journalists (Black 2007). The International News Safety Institute has questioned these justifications. They point out that insurgents don’t rely on the news to gain information on the success of their attacks (International News Safety Institute). Similarly, Reporters Sans Frontieres notes that real time press coverage of bombings is essential service, as it alerts citizens to security risks. The group has characterized the military’s policy as a news blackout (Black 2007).

VII. The historical touch point informing the government’s current policies regarding press coverage of military operations—the role that images of war played in a national “failure of will” during Vietnam—is greatly exaggerated. However, this must not be construed as a devaluation of the importance of these images to American society or the impact images can have. First, images constitute evidentiary information, in “high-definition,” about the costs, benefits, and progress of particular wars. In this way, they contribute to the ability of the public to grant the

government *informed* consent. In addition to serving an informative function, images (especially when they attain “iconic” status) serve as symbols containing information about the values and ideals of American society.

Chris Hondros’ photographs from Tal Afar, Iraq (see fig. 3) provide an example of how combat photojournalism assists the press in serving the public as the “Fourth Estate.” Hondros, embedded with a Marine Unit at a military checkpoint, photographed the aftermath of a Marine attack on civilians who failed to stop their car at the checkpoint (most likely because they were unable to see the unlit checkpoint at dusk). The attack killed two parents and orphaned five children. Documented incidences of checkpoint violence, one of which being the Tal Afar incident photographed by Hondros, led the Committee to Protect Journalists and Human Rights Watch to petition then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to reevaluate checkpoint protocol (Cooper and Roth 2005). Thus, images of war directly contributed to publicity of a problem the military had the authority and ability to solve.

Images of dead or wounded soldiers or civilians provide important evidentiary information about the human costs of war. They also may provide information that is required for ethical behavior. British archaeologist Timothy Taylor has established the concept of “visceral insulation,” an inevitable consequence of social stratification and specialization:

This phrase describes the way in which the necessary specialization of the modern world screens or insulates people from ‘visceral’ things...Visceral insulation is a recoil from corporeality, as if we feel that, by coming too close to what is bodily, our inevitable mortality will somehow make itself too painfully known (2002: 277).

Control over the imagery of war through press restrictions and the dissemination of bomb-scope footage by the Department of Defense are devices that viscerally insulate the American public, create the appearance of a war from which the human body is absent, and make it easier for citizens to accept war. In March of 2008, the Pew Research Center released the results of polling

that found that only 28% of Americans were aware of how many Americans had been killed in Iraq (Pew Research Center 2008). Perhaps a lack of publicly available images depicting dead or wounded soldiers has contributed to this lack of knowledge about the human costs of war. Perhaps, as Taylor suggests, knowledge of death as an inevitability is the “best spur to ethical behavior,” because “[d]eath signals the end point beyond which our reputations become irrevocable” (2002: 287).

When images become widely circulated, reproduced, and re-appropriated in public art, they may be said to become “iconic.” Some images of war, such as the raising of the flag on Iwo Jima, or Nick Ut’s photograph (see fig. 4) of a napalm-burned Kim Phuc, have become American icons in this way. In examining American photojournalistic icons, Hariman and Lucaites have identified five “vectors of influence” these icons can have on the public: icons “reproduce ideology, communicate social knowledge, shap[e] collective memory, mode[l] citizenship, and provid[e] figural resources for communicative action” (2007: 9).

Though images of war may be, as posited by the visual determinism hypothesis, highly emotional, that emotion is not uni-directionally pacifistic. If war may be thought of as a socially transformative process, it might be regarded as a kind of “rite of passage,” participants of which become the entire society when that war is being prosecuted by a democracy. Thus, like the structure-maintaining symbols of ritual studied by “structural-functionalists,” the highly controlled imagery of World War II (such as the raising of the flag on Iwo Jima) reproduced and reinforced American social ideology by serving as symbols of a benevolent and hegemonic state, promoting strength, solidarity, and pride among its citizens. Like the symbols of “ritual anti-structure” described by Victor Turner (Alexander 1991: 27), the icons of the Vietnam War cast doubt on both America’s benevolence and hegemony, affording the public an opportunity to

reflect upon the social order and reexamine the values of American society and the ideal state of relations between individuals.

In the current war in Iraq, the government and the military have been successful in managing the collection, circulation, and reproduction of the symbols of this war. As they are in control of this war's symbols, those symbols reflect these entities' interest in structural maintenance. Perhaps the symbols of war may best serve American society if they are collected and circulated independently. Turner suggests that the symbols of ritual can potentially incite social change as they exist in a dialectic relationship between the realities of the social structure and the social ideals and values expressed in, what Turner terms, "communitas": a temporary state of egalitarian being in which individuals are stripped of their socially ascribed statuses (Alexander 1991: 1; Turner 1988: 503-5). As Turner notes,

each society requires of its mature members not only adherence to rules and patterns, but at least a certain level of skepticism and initiative... Accepted schemata and paradigms must be broken if initiates are to cope with novelty and danger. They have to learn how to generate viable schemata under environmental challenge (1988: 519)

American society may need to adapt to a rapidly changing environment of increasing global integration, an environment where military hegemony may be obsolete. This would require some sort of alteration of the current social structure in terms of the social values held regarding relations with other states. If the global environment is indeed changing, social flexibility and adaptability will only be inhibited when information is controlled by structure-maintaining entities.

Appendix

Figure 1.



General Nguyen Ngoc Loan
Photo by Eddie Adams, Associated Press

Figure 2.



Army Spc. Ravis Babbitt
Photo by John Moore, Associated Press

Figure 3.



Tal Afar, Iraq
Photo by Chris Hondros, Getty Images

Figure 4.



Kim Phuc
Photo by Nick Ut, Associated Press

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