

## **DO NOT DISTURB**

Photography, censorship  
and the Iraq war

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*Some time ago a publisher called for a friendly chat. He liked my writings about photography, he said, because they were personal and provocative. Thank you very much. He went on to ask if I would write a similar piece for him. It could be as opinionated as I liked, in order to “stimulate discussion and argument.” No problem there.*

*As soon as he received the piece he called to denounce it, saying that it was too one-sided (so much for “personal”) and that he would not publish it because of its inflammatory nature (so much for “provocative”).*

*This censorship of my opinion is ironic in that the piece was about censorship.*

*Here’s what I wrote, slightly expanded:*

Every person who advocates war (any war, anywhere) should first have his head clamped in a vise, with his eyes taped open, and forced to look at every image in Philip Jones Griffiths' latest book, Agent Orange, and to read every word of his searing, heart-rending text.

Philip, as many of you will remember, produced the most savage indictment of war in the history of photography, Vietnam Inc., first published in 1971 and recently reissued by Phaedon Press. This is an essential book for anyone interested in the history of committed photography. His latest project continues the Vietnam story. Since 1980 Philip has returned many times to Vietnam chronicling the continuing devastation on the lives of civilians, their children and grandchildren due to America's saturation bombing with the herbicide known as agent orange and the deadly chemical toxin dioxin.

Look at these images and read Philip's words and no decent human being can fail to be outraged at the powers which waged such cruel chemical warfare on innocent citizens, or to be moved to the point of anguish by the selfless devotion of the families who care for their hideously maimed children.

If there is, or has ever been, a more powerful use of the camera as a weapon against cruelty and injustice then I do not know of it. So do not expect to see these images in any mainstream magazine or flashed on television screens in the USA. You cannot be trusted with the truth.

And that is the lesson from the current war in Iraq. You have heard it said by right-wing pundits, *ad nauseum*, that the press emphasizes the negative aspects of the war and ignores the good news - which would be ironic if it was not so tragic. The fact is that the most negative aspects of war are rarely if ever seen in the press or on television. We see endless, and endlessly similar, scenes of car wreckage in the aftermath of a bombing, rockets pulverizing a building, GIs furtively sidling down alleys and into empty homes, occasional gesticulating civilians, chanting mobs, smoking rubble and close-ups of broken glass, burning debris and twisted metal. In none of these images do we see human emotion. We are not allowed to see dead, dying or wounded soldiers; we are not allowed to see even the flag-draped coffins. We are not allowed to see the war's massive toll on civilians who have been bereaved, maimed and terrorized; no where have we seen the anger, fear and anguish of injured and orphaned children.

We have not looked into the faces of the dead and the dying, and we have not seen the human cost of war because these photographs are prohibited. Yes, we hear the accounts of the reporters; only photographic images can charge these words with emotional power.

We know certain statistics. We know exactly how many GIs have been killed and wounded. But no one at the Pentagon keeps count of the number of Iraqis who have been killed, maimed,

wounded or forced to flee. More than two million Iraqis have already left their homes and are now refugees. If an international agency suggests a figure for Iraqi civilian deaths it is immediately challenged by the administration. Is it 100,000 since the war began (as the United Nations estimates) or one-tenth that figure as the Administration claims? Or one million? Who knows? Who cares?

Why are we not more outraged by this carnage? One answer is that it is largely invisible to us. It is so easy not to see. Yet another smoldering wreck appears on the tv screen, a voice drones “five (or fifty, it makes little difference) people were killed in the latest Baghdad car bombing in a busy market place.” The war seems surreal, not real. It is taking place at the edge of our vision, glimpsed but not engaged. Photography could change all that. More than any other medium, photography jolts awareness, engages the emotions and screams into our eyes: pay attention!

But this Administration with the collusion of the press does not want you to see or pay attention. If you did, you might ask awkward questions, become incensed and start doubting the rationality of those in charge. So you and I are stuck with a scandalous blackout. Since the Iraq war began, the White House has tried to pretend that the war has no costs - banning photos of returning coffins, and shunting the maimed and injured out of sight, said The New York Times. “The President needs to learn that the horrors of this war can no longer be denied or hidden away.”

James Poniewozik in Time has reported that the Administration and its supporters have waged a concerted campaign “to make the acknowledgment of the American deaths in the war a traitorous act.”

According to Michael Yon in The Weekly Standard only nine reporters - only two of them working for the domestic US media - are embedded with our soldiers, compared to 770 during the initial invasion. And, what I want to know is this: who in the media has decided that it cannot show images which might disturb the advocates of war?

While the press deserves a great deal of blame for this censorship (freedom of the press is freedom to censor) the biggest culprit is the Pentagon which creates so many bureaucratic and legalistic difficulties for photographers wanting to venture outside the protected Green Zone that it amounts to enforced censorship.

As Yon wrote: “The government has no right to withhold information or to deny access to our combat forces just because that information might anger, frighten, or disturb us.” It might not have the right - but it does have the power, and is using it.

My hope however forlorn is that there is a group of photographers working in Iraq who have the commitment and passion of Philip Jones Griffiths, and that one day we will see the truth through

their eyes.

*That is the end of my opinion piece. The following is an addendum.*

Apart from the irony of censoring a piece about censorship, another irony is that although I was encouraged to write a provocative article I do not see anything particularly controversial in it. The facts are straightforward, indisputable and have been opined elsewhere. I admit that it is not judicious, balanced or dispassionate; it was not meant to be. True, I let my outrage show, even to the point that my language might be considered to be inflammatory, even offensive. Good.

Anyway I did not fight the publisher's decision to reject the piece. It is his money and he need not spend it on me. He's a nice, generous guy and if he did not like my comments then there is no reason why he should tacitly support them. So I dismissed the issue.

But within a day or two I received a call from a different publisher for whom I sometimes write. He had been sent my piece from his buddy (the world of photographic publishing is a small one) and wanted to take issue with it and me.

The conversation went something like this:

Him: The war in Iraq is very complex, politically; it has lots of ramifications.

Me: Yes, I know, but...

Him: I'm certain, *certain*, the world is better off without Saddam Hussein in it.

Me: Perhaps, but that has nothing to do with my piece. The justification for the war is a different issue, which we can discuss separately if you like. My article was about *photography* and *censorship*.

Him: I am sick of knee-jerk liberals who only emphasize the bad stuff and don't give credit for the good things that are happening in Iraq. Schools are opening...

Me: Fine. My article concerned the refusal of the US media to publish certain photographs and the Administration's suppression of "inconvenient" images. Let's talk about censorship...

Him: Your article gives ammunition to America-haters around the world.

Me: I hardly think the jihadists are reading my articles about photography and, anyway, the US Government is doing a pretty good job of sullyng its own reputation without my help.

Him: Well, I agree with [his friend, the original publisher] that antiwar/anti-American messages like yours are too one-sided and should not be published.

Me: So you advocate the censorship of words and images even if they are true.

Him:

Me: Well?

Him: ...if they damage American interests, yes.

Me: Fair enough. So why don't you publish my piece as it stands and you write an adjacent piece

arguing for your point of view.  
Him: Got a call waiting... *Click*.

This was written early in 2007 when the news media was endlessly debating the “surge” in troop levels in Iraq.