

Awful images change perception of the war

They stir emotions words rarely can

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Wednesday, May 12, 2004

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URL: sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2004/05/12/MNGMO6K22R1.DTL



The video of a U.S. civilian being beheaded by Iraqi extremists represents a profound and disturbing shift in the Iraq conflict: Graphic images are humanizing the toll of the war, heightening emotions on both sides, say experts.

The gruesome display is the latest in a series of pictures that directly show abuse, mutilation and killing. The effect is to intensify the way both Americans and Iraqis perceive the conflict.

"These are images of death at an individual level," said Richard K. Herrmann, a political science professor at Ohio State University. "The vividness of a single person being mistreated is going to have a much bigger emotional impact than pictures of lots of people, or statistics."

By making the war more vivid, "you make it much more potent emotionally," Herrmann said. "The Pentagon has understood this for decades. It's why they talk about 'collateral damage.' What's happening in the past couple of weeks is that we're starting to focus on individual (tragedies)."

The Arab world has seen the Iraq conflict through much starker images from the beginning, as Al-Jazeera and other Arab networks highlighted images of disfigured Iraqi bodies -- especially those of civilians.

"The Arab public has all along seen a different war from the U.S. public," said Juan Cole, a professor of history at the University of Michigan. It was the photos of abuse from Abu Ghraib prison that brought home the darker side of war to Americans, Cole said.

"I suspect that Americans could identify with (an Iraqi prisoner) being attacked by the dogs. These images are dehumanizing but they also humanize. We had a print report of the torture at Abu Ghraib last January, but it made no impact."

An earlier shock to the American psyche came when U.S. news media published graphic images of four private American guards after their bodies were butchered and hanged by Iraqi insurgents last month from a bridge over the Euphrates. More horrifying still was the video shown Tuesday on an extremist Islamic website of a 26 year-old U.S. civilian, Nicholas Berg, being beheaded while his captors shouted "God is great" in Arabic.

Innocent victims

This spate of images shows both Americans and Iraqis as innocent victims, unlike the initial stage of the conflict, in which the images tended to be of U.S. soldiers fighting the regime of Saddam Hussein, said Herrmann, who directs Ohio State's Mershon Center, which studies national security and international relations.

"In these pictures, there's no fight," he said. "There's an innocent victim and murderers. The framing of these pictures is, 'This is murder.' (The images of Berg show) a completely innocent man bound, much like the prisoners we see at Abu Ghraib, with a bunch of black-hooded, fully armed combatants murdering him, not torturing. They show captured people who are utterly defenseless."

But the accumulation of such images may also overwhelm and ultimately desensitize, experts warn. "It leaves people with strong views, but not very deeply thought out views," said Jon Alterman, a former State Department official who is director of the Middle East Program for the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for Council on American-Islamic Relations in Washington, said the organization got a flurry of e-mails Tuesday blaming Islam for Berg's beheading.

Downward spiral

"We've always warned of a downward spiral of mutual hostility and distrust," said Hooper, whose organization condemned the killing. "These images, whether it's the beheading or the images coming out of the Baghdad prison, create further hostility. It's

the kind of hate we really didn't even see after the 9/11 terror attacks."

The escalating cycle of images also shows how much the media has changed, experts say. In the 1991 Gulf war, the Internet was unknown to the general public; now, hooded insurgents can kill an American, release a video of the deed on the Web and have it be picked up within minutes by the international media -- and by anyone with an Internet connection.

Assurances that Americans are bringing peace and prosperity to Iraq, with minimum pain, are belied by a Web site called memoryhole.org, which publishes photos of coffins of U.S. soldiers.

Instant audience

Both cases illustrate how extremists and activists now possess the power of images to spread their views instantly to a global audience, experts say. "They (the images) are a big change for the State Department and other U.S. government agencies that have to deal with them," Cole said.

But, Cole said hopefully, the release of the video showing Berg's beheading might have an effect not anticipated by his murderers: it might generate as much revulsion in the Arab world as it does in the United States because it reduces the Iraq conflict to a single individual to whom anyone can relate.

"It's one of the great tragedies of 9/11: We (as Americans) felt it so tremendously because we could imagine ourselves in the towers," Cole said. "To much of the outside world, it was planes hitting buildings. They couldn't see the people (inside the buildings) that we could see."

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