

# How has photojournalism framed the war in Afghanistan?

---

David Campbell

## PUBLICATION

In *Burke and Norfolk: Photographs from the War in Afghanistan*, John Burke and Simon Norfolk (Stockport: Dewi Lewis, 2011).

Images are central to contemporary geopolitics. We encounter other people and places through a “field of perceptible reality” enabled by visual representations.<sup>1</sup> Photographs, paintings, video, film, computer games – each and every pictorial artefact - helps establish what can be represented and how it can be shown. In turn, those images are made possible by a series of historical, cultural and political frames.<sup>2</sup>

The field of perceptible reality that is the decade-long war in Afghanistan has been enacted in large part through news imagery and photojournalism. We have seen a steady stream of familiar pictures made up of allied forces, Afghan civilians, Taliban casualties and American military families. Photojournalism on the front line has focused on the military struggles of international forces as they combat an ‘elusive’ opponent, with soldiers and their weaponry front and centre. There is also an inevitable regularity to the style of these images. As Associated Press photographer David Guttenfelder notes, the work of photojournalists in Afghanistan “sometimes looks very uniform.”<sup>3</sup>

“Embedded journalism” has been a frame commonly focused upon to explain the nature and limits of what we do and don’t see. That analysis sometimes proceeds on the assumption that there was once a time when photography’s contribution to the field of perceptible reality was free from government controls. As Judith Butler claims in her assessment of the ethics of photography:

Recent war photography departs significantly from the conventions of war photojournalism that were at work thirty or forty years ago, where the photographer or camera person would attempt to enter the action through angles and modes of access that sought to expose the war in ways that no government had planned. Now, the state works on the field of perception and, more generally, the field of representability, in order to control affect...<sup>4</sup>

But the frames through which the visualization of Afghanistan is enacted have a longer and deeper history than is suggested by this view. The conventions of

war photojournalism have been frequently aligned with the state, thereby making the production of an alternative picture a more difficult task. The embedding of journalists during operations in Afghanistan – which grew out of the media’s experience in the US-led invasion of Iraq – is simply the latest in a long line of regulations governing relations between the military and the media.

Embedding involves journalists linking up with military units so they can report from the front lines, and it began formally with the invasion of Iraq. After agreeing to follow the US Public Affairs Guidance or the Ministry of Defence “Green Book,” over 700 journalists embedded with American forces and nearly 130 with British forces (although they were outnumbered by the more than 1400 “unilateral” journalists who were in the war zone). Embedding involves a trade off between “generous access and narrow-aperture coverage.” In Iraq, being able to witness war close-up and live was new, but being on a “slack leash” without the ability to set things in context, constrained coverage. With only two-dozen personnel “dis-embedded” by the US military, the majority of journalists lived happily on the leash. Indeed, when US officials reviewed the system, embedded reporters “were always spoken of as homogeneously supportive of the Pentagon effort.”<sup>5</sup>

Coverage of the invasion of Iraq demonstrated in part the value to government of the embedding process. A survey of US news magazine photographs showed “a highly restricted pattern of depiction limited largely to a discourse of military technological power and response.” The number of combat photographs from Iraq increased from those published in the 1991 Gulf War, but still only comprised ten percent of published pictures. This was less than expected from front-line reportage, and demonstrates that news pictures are less concerned with the first-hand recording of events and more with the repetition of familiar subjects and themes. While individual photographers felt they operated with freedom within the system of embedding, and sometimes even broke the rules, the way their pictures were used in publications did not challenge the official war narrative.<sup>6</sup>

Embedding has played a role in the visualization of Afghanistan, though not from the beginning. When Operation Enduring Freedom began in October 2001, the Pentagon had not yet conceived the specific system of embedding. Moreover, given that the first military operations in Afghanistan were covert actions by Special Forces against a non-state actor, embedding was from the military's viewpoint untenable. As a result, the US-led strikes in Afghanistan proceeded with minimal media access but there were few if any serious protests about this lack.

The early photographic coverage of Afghanistan was, therefore, part of the overall coverage of the "war on terror" arising from the September 11 attacks. That series of events were shaped through their immediate visual representation and fuelled an expanded visualization. Photography is deployed to mark globally significant events, and some US newspapers underwent a "sea change" in their use of news pictures, doubling the number prior to 9/11. Part of this proliferation of images was the use of pictures that, while showing something from the general area, did not depict the specific events being reported. This symbolic function, where the repetition of icons associated with 9/11 provided cues and prompts for viewers, meant photographs became a means of moving the public through its trauma, enabling support for the military action in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup>

When combat began in Afghanistan, the media's absence from the front lines meant the pictures came after the event, showing newly pacified landscapes, families in flight, and women enjoying new freedoms. As Zelizer argues, "images were used in a way that showed less of the war itself and more of the assumptions about the war held by the forces responsible for its prosecution. U.S. journalism was thus complicit, if not consciously so, in using images in ways that upheld larger strategic aims."<sup>8</sup>

Embedding first came to Afghanistan in March 2002 when eight journalists accompanied units engaged in Operation Anaconda. As the first combat operation involving conventional units as opposed to Special Forces, the Anaconda coverage produced pictures that would become a template for later reportage: combat troops

hunkered down in wild terrain, helicopters kicking up dust as they ferried in men and material, and the bodies of Taliban fighters strewn amongst the rocks, all seen from an allied perspective.<sup>9</sup>

The narrow range of visual subjects in the coverage of Afghanistan is evident in two of the most prominent images of the conflict, one celebrated and the other controversial. In May 2009 Associated Press photographer David Guttenfelder was in the Korengal Valley and captured a moment of combat. It showed three soldiers peering into a remote valley, rifles at the ready, the enemy seemingly elusive. It evokes a war machine looking for a reason, certain a threat is out there, but unsure of its form. There's even a moment of pathos, with the man on the left in his red shirt, pink boxers and exposed legs lining up with his comrades. Army Specialist Zachary Boyd was the casually dressed soldier, and after this photograph was widely reproduced in the American press, the Secretary of Defense declared his fondness for the photograph: "Any soldier who goes into battle against the Taliban in pink boxers and flip-flops has a special kind of courage...I can only wonder about the impact on the Taliban. Just imagine seeing that: a guy in pink boxers and flip-flops has you in his cross-hairs. What an incredible innovation in psychological warfare."<sup>10</sup>

Three months later another Associated Press photographer, Julie Jacobsen, drew the Secretary of Defense's ire for her combat photograph. Jacobsen was on patrol with a Marine unit near Dahaneh in southern Afghanistan when the Taliban ambushed them. She photographed the scene, including images of a badly wounded Lance Corporal Joshua Bernard, who later died in the Camp Leatherneck medical unit. The blurred photograph of Bernard shows him slumped in a gully, a bloody leg wound visible, being hurriedly tended by two colleagues. Taken from a distance such that neither the faces nor the uniforms of Bernard and his helpers were identifiable, Jacobsen doubted the photograph would ever be used:

I shot images that day well aware that those images could very possibly never see the light of day. In fact I was sure of it. But I still found myself recording them. To ignore a moment like that simply because of a phrase in section 8,

paragraph 1 of some 10-page form would have been wrong. I was recording his impending death, just as I had recorded his life moments before walking the point in the bazaar. Death is a part of life and most certainly a part of war. Isn't that why we're here? To document for now and for history the events of this war? We'd shot everything else thus far and even after, from feature images of a Marine talking on a SAT phone to his girlfriend, all the way to happy meetings between Marines and civilians. So shooting the image was not a question.<sup>11</sup>

The embedding agreement in fact permitted Jacobsen to take the photo of Bernard. The Second Marine Expeditionary Brigade's regulations stated "Casualties may be covered by embedded media as long as the service member's identity and unit identification is protected from disclosure until OASD-PA [Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Public Affairs] has officially released the name. Photography from a respectful distance or from angles at which a casualty cannot be identified is permissible." Jacobsen had also shown the image to other members of Bernard's squad who raised no objection, and the photograph was withheld by the Associated Press until after the Lance Corporal's burial in the US. Nonetheless, Bernard's father objected to publication, he was supported by the Secretary of Defense, and many American newspapers refused to print the picture.<sup>12</sup>

The widespread publication of the Zachary Boyd photograph, in contrast to the limited circulation of the Joshua Bernard picture, demonstrates that embedding is just one of the frames that structures the visualization of Afghanistan. Whatever is produced within the confines of the embedding process has to be taken up by the mainstream press before a wider public can see. Photo agencies, picture editors, journalists and news editors form a decision-making chain that, working with a set of assumptions about what their audience wants to view, winnows down the range of options to a few chosen images. The news photographs that the public ends up seeing are chosen less for their descriptive function or disruptive potential and more for their capacity to provide symbolic markers to familiar interpretations and conventional narratives.

As a result, much of our media operates within the limits of official discourse, with journalists working on the field of perception through commitments to their national frames. Although we still harbour a belief that journalism is indebted to the ethos of the Pentagon Papers or Watergate, fearlessly investigating government failings, much contemporary war coverage directly or indirectly supports military strategies. For example, although British television broadcasters exhibit more faith in the idea of impartiality when compared to the overt patriotism of their American counterparts, a review of their Iraq invasion coverage found that “when it came to contentious issues such as WMDs or the mood of the Iraqi people...overall, *all* the main television broadcasters tended to favour the pro-war, government version over more sceptical accounts.” The media’s failure to constantly exercise its watchdog role is one of the reasons for the emergence of Wikileaks, which has been described as a “stateless” news organization precisely because of its freedom from national limits.<sup>13</sup>

Hovering over and shaping the field of perceptible reality that is Afghanistan, especially as visualized through news photographs, is a mythic understanding of how the media and the military operated in Vietnam. The conventional wisdom is that Vietnam was a “living room war,” in which a highly critical media subjected its audience to a stream of graphic combat images showing both uniformed and civilian casualties, such that public opinion eventually turned against the war. It has been promulgated by both the military, who blame the media for a lack of patriotism and the eventual loss of the war, and the military’s critics, keen to draw the lesson that if injustice can be shown it can be overcome. This mythic understanding has been behind both the array of post-Vietnam regulations governing the media’s place on the battlefield that culminated in embedding, and the countervailing demand for an unsanitised view of war.

What happened in Vietnam is the opposite of this myth. The best analyses of American coverage demonstrate that newspapers, magazines and television endorsed administration perspectives on the war even as the peace movement

grew. Far from showing an incessant diet of gory visuals, the US media shied away from graphic images. Although journalists and photographers on the ground in Vietnam operated with relative freedom compared to their World War II counterparts, their reports were woven into a narrative consistent with the national frame. The visual icons we now associate with the war – the pictures produced by the likes of Larry Burrows, Philip Jones Griffiths and Don McCullin – were either rejected by the US media, published after the event or simply unrepresentative of most coverage.<sup>14</sup>

Vietnam has shaped both how we came to see Afghanistan, and how we respond to the visual enactment of such a war. There is also an historic connection between the two conflicts. After a decade, allied military involvement in Afghanistan has surpassed the length of the Soviet occupation and the formal duration of the Vietnam War. When withdrawal finally comes it will have been America's longest war. Looking at the role photojournalism has played in structuring the visual reality of Afghanistan we need to be free from the mythic understanding of the media's role in Vietnam.

Throughout the last decade, whatever the intentions of individual practitioners, news photography has re-presented Afghanistan in ways consistent with military strategy. Much photojournalism exists within and reproduces an 'eternal present', obscuring the frames that narrow its perspective. Embedded journalism has contributed to this confined view, but this practice has also been constrained by the way the media generally offers a limited challenge to established positions. In this context, calling for an unsanitised view of the war is bound to be insufficient as a strategy for challenging the official narratives of Afghanistan. What we require is the exposure of all the frames involved in the production of the field of perceptible reality. To that end, enacting an alternative view requires an aesthetic strategy that draws history into view.



## NOTES:

---

<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 64ff.

<sup>2</sup> David Campbell, "Geopolitics and Visuality," *Political Geography* 26 (2007), pp. 358-61.

<sup>3</sup> Coburn Dukeheart, "Shaking it Up: A New Look at Afghanistan," *The Picture Show*, National Public Radio, 7 April 2010, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/pictureshow/2010/04/07/125664494/guttenfelder>. For samples of the conventional imagery, see Boston.com's monthly Afghanistan galleries at <http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/afghanistan/>.

<sup>4</sup> Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Katovsky and Timothy Carlson, *Embedded the Media at War in Iraq* (Guildford CT: The Lyons Press, 2003), p. xv, xvi; Christopher Paul and James J. Kim, *Reporters on the Battlefield: The Embedded Press System in Historical Context* (Santa Monica CA: RAND Corporation, 2004), pp. 54-55; Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, *Too Close for Comfort? The role of embedded reporting during the 2003 Iraq war: Summary report* (Cardiff University, 2004), p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Griffin, "Picturing America's 'War on Terrorism' in Afghanistan and Iraq: Photographic motifs as news frames," *Journalism* (5) 2004, pp. 383, 397. For a photographer's reflections, see Cheryl Diaz Meyer, in *Reporting from the Front: The Media and the Military*, edited by Judith Sylvester and Suzanne Huffman (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), p. 93.

<sup>7</sup> Griffin, "Picturing America's 'War on Terrorism' in Afghanistan and Iraq;" Barbie Zelizer, "Photography, Journalism, and Trauma," in *Journalism After September 11*, edited by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allen (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Zelizer, "When War is Reduced to a Photograph," in *Reporting War: Journalism in wartime*, edited by Stuart Allen and Barbie Zelizer (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Barbie Zelizer, "Death in Wartime: Photographs and the 'Other War' in Afghanistan," *Press/Politics* (10) 2005, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> The view from the Taliban perspective is rare, with Gaith Abdul Ahad's November 2010 photographs an exception. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/gallery/2010/nov/23/taliban-bagland-afghanistan#/>

<sup>10</sup> Michael Shaw, "Pink Skivvies: Whitewashing the Afghan Campaign," *BagNews Notes*, 24 May 2009, <http://www.bagnewsnotes.com/2009/05/pink-skivvies-whitewashing-the-afghan-campaign/>

<sup>11</sup> Julie Jacobsen, "Journal Entries of AP Photographer Embedded With U.S. Marines in Afghanistan," *The Digital Journalist*, September 2009, <http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0909/journal-entries-of-ap-photographer-embedded-with-us-marines-in-afghanistan.html>; Michael Shaw, "Photo of a Dying Marine: The Larger View," *BagNews Notes*, 5 September 2009, <http://www.bagnewsnotes.com/2009/09/photo-of-a-dying-marine-the-larger-view/>

<sup>12</sup> David Dunlap, "Behind the Scenes: To Publish or Not? *New York Times Lens Blog*, 4 September 2009, <http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/09/04/behind-13/>

---

<sup>13</sup> Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, *Too Close for Comfort?* p. 14;

Jay Rosen, "The Afghanistan War Logs Released by Wikileaks, the World's First Stateless News Organization," *PressThink*, 26 July 2010, <http://pressthink.org/2010/07/the-afghanistan-war-logs-released-by-wikileaks-the-worlds-first-stateless-news-organization/>;  
Rosen, "From Judith Miller to Julian Assange," *PressThink*, 9 December 2010, <http://pressthink.org/2010/12/from-judith-miller-to-julian-assange/>

<sup>14</sup> Michael Griffin, "Media Images of War," *Media, War and Conflict* 3(1) 2010, 7-41. The seminal account of Vietnam is Daniel Hallin, *The 'Uncensored War': The Media and Vietnam* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).