From Absence to Absence: The Visual Culture of The 'War on Terror'

After a decade of conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US-led military interventions that made those countries the front line in the 'war on terror' are slowly being wound up. What began with the October 2001 launch of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan is now the United States' longest war, and the American commitment is being scaled back as part of the transition to Afghan security control by December 2014. In Iraq the change is swifter, with President Obama announcing last month US combat forces will withdraw from the country by years' end.[1]

These changes provide useful markers against which to think about the visual culture of conflict, specifically the 'war on terror', over the last decade. This consideration is grounded in the conceptual claim that images are central to contemporary geopolitics. We encounter other people and places though a "field of perceptible reality" enabled by visual representations.[2] 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.[3] As this editorial will attempt to demonstrate, focusing on news photography and photojournalism, the visual culture of the 'war on terror' over the last ten years can be understood as both beginning and ending with absence.

As a response to the attacks of 11 September 2001, the 'war on terror' was inaugurated in President Bush's congressional address on 20 September 2001. Denoting the attacks as an "act of war," Bush mapped a moral geography in which an axis of evil divided those who were with America from those in conflict with America. This moral geography was heavily indebted to the problematic of identity/difference that has historically driven US foreign policy.[4] It also constructed a narrative of terror that obscured other potential points of origin for a war, such as the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, the 1998 East African embassy bombings, or Osama Bin Laden's declaration of a jihad against Jews and Crusaders that preceded those attacks.[5]

Because the 'war on terror' was understood as a new type of conflict, fought against an "elusive enemy" in disparate and dispersed locations, visualizing the event was always going to be a challenge. Through its enactment as a response to something real yet virtual, the 'war on terror' was an event that both privileged representation yet made representation difficult. What overcame this *aporia* is the way the 'war on terror' has, for us, been largely framed by US-led military action, such that the overwhelming majority of photographs we associate with the 'war on terror' are both concerned with and part of US-led military action that began with the 7 October 2011 attack on Al-Qaeda targets in Afghanistan.

It is common to identify the embedding of journalists and photographers with US and allied forces as the primary reason for the affinities between images and strategy. Embedding has played a significant role in the visualisation of Afghanistan, though not from the beginning, because when Operation Enduring Freedom began the Pentagon had not yet conceived the specific system. 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.

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The early photographic coverage of Afghanistan was, therefore, part of the overall coverage of the 'war on terror' arising from the 11 September attacks. 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 published after 9/11. Part of this proliferation of images was the use of pictures that, while showing something from the general area of operations, 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.

What we have come to see from Afghanistan is a steady stream of familiar pictures made up of allied forces, Afghan civilians, Taliban casualties and American military families. Of course there are some exceptions, but generally photojournalism on the front line has focused on the military struggles of international forces as they combat an elusive opponent, with allied soldiers and their weaponry front and centre. Much the same can be said of the visualisations of Iraq since 2003.

Coverage of the invasion of Iraq demonstrated the value to government of the embedding process.7 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." However, while the number of combat photographs from Iraq increased from those published in the 1991 Gulf War, they 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.8 That is because the news photographs 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."9

Throughout the last decade, whatever the intentions of individual practitioners, news photography has re-presented the 'war on terror', in the form of military action in Afghanistan and Iraq, in ways consistent with military strategy. Much photojournalism exists within and reproduces an 'eternal present', obscuring the frames that narrow its perspective, rendering casualties and context as absent. Nowhere was this clearer than in the official White House photo of Osama Bin Laden's killing. Instead of releasing an image of Bin Laden, what we saw was the Obama national security team in the Situation Room watching a monitor on which the event might have been unfolding. The centrality of absence to the visualisation of the war on terror could not have been more obvious. 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 photographic narratives. 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, pluralises perspectives, and seeks to overcome the absences that have marked the pictorial coverage to date.

Dr David Campbell is a member of the Durham Centre for Advanced Photography Studies and Honorary Professor of Geography at Durham University; Honorary Professor in the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland; and a member of the advisory board for the Program for Narrative and Documentary Studies at Tufts University. For Spring 2012 he is A. Lindsay O'Connor Professor in the Peace and Conflict Studies Program at Colgate University, New York. David writes at http://www.david-

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campbell.org/.

NOTES:

1 For an overview of the force posture in Afghanistan and its strategic implications, see "With Afghan drawdown looming, U.S. scales back ambitions," *Washington Post*, 7 October 2011, at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/with-afghan-drawdown-looming-us-scales-back-ambitions/

2011/10/05/gIQA9P8DRL_story.html (accessed 5 November 2011). President Obama's statement on Iraq can be seen at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/10/21/remarks-president-ending-war-iraq (accessed 5 November 2011). Neither of these transitions will see US forces totally removed from either country. It is envisaged some US troops will remain in Afghanistan after 2014, and in Iraq there are controversial plans for the State Department to field its own security forces along with five remaining US bases (now called "enduring presence posts"). See "State Department planning to field a small army in Iraq," *Stars and Stripes,* 21 July 2010, at http://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/iraq/state-dept-planning-to-field- a-small-army-in-iraq-1.111839 (accessed 5 November 2011).

2 Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (London:Verso, 2009), pp. 64

3 David Campbell, "Geopolitics and Visuality," *Political Geography* 26 (2007), pp. 358-61. For analyses of the full range of visual artefacts relevant to the 'war on terror', including the use of visual strategies to contest the conflict, see the"Special Issue on Securitization, Militarization and Visual Culture in the Words of Post-9/11,"*Security Dialogue* 38 (2007).

4 David Campbell,"Time Is Broken: The Return of the Past In the Response to September 11," *Theory and Event* 5 (2002).

5 Stuart Elden, *Terror and Territory: The Spatial Extent of Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), pp. xi-xiii.

6 Michael Griffin, "Picturing America's 'War on Terrorism' in Afghanistan and Iraq: Photographic motifs as news frames," *Journalism* 5 (2004), pp.381--402; 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).

7 It is possible for the embedding process to enable photographic work that questions government policy. In this regard see Simon Norfolk, *Burke + Norfolk: Photographs from the War in Afghanistan* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis, 2011).

8 Griffin,"Picturing America's 'War on Terrorism' in Afghanistan and Iraq," pp. 383, 397.

9 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. 14.