

Breakdown in the Gray Room: The Images from Abu Ghraib

For anyone who is fascinated by images and their social and political effects, these are heady times. From 9/11 on, visual images have had a tremendous influence on public perceptions and have often appeared to be the principal drivers of public opinion. Historians will say that this has been happening for a while, but I would argue that the degree of this effect (in proportion to all other factors) has increased significantly since 9/11, and this makes it more important than ever to try to understand how it works. The only way I've found to do that is to try to slow the machinery down long enough to get a good look at its moving parts.

When I first saw the Abu Ghraib images, I didn't quite know what I was looking at. I didn't recognize them, because I'd never seen anything quite like them. One of the first people I discussed the images with was the painter Leon Golub. I asked him why the "detainees" were hooded. If the aim was humiliation and blackmail—which is what some claimed; that these photographs would be used to convince other prisoners to talk, under threat of receiving the same treatment—it seemed like it would be better to be able to show their faces and identify them. And if they were strictly "trophy" images, for bragging rights back home, then why not show the terrified faces of your victims? Golub explained that these were torture images, and that the techniques pictured—hooding, forced nakedness, sexual humiliation, stress positions, dogs, etc.—were all common torture techniques, right out of the book. Hoods or blindfolds increase the sense of isolation and defenselessness. Essential to torture is the sense that your interrogators control everything: food, clothing, dignity, light, even life itself. Everything is designed to make it clear that you are at the mercy of those whose job it is not to have any mercy. Hooding victims dehumanizes them, making them anonymous and thing-like. They become just bodies. You can do anything you want to them.

One of the things that really drove home what Leon was telling me was a report that appeared in the *New York Times* soon after the Abu Ghraib images appeared on *60 Minutes II* and in the *New Yorker* (Nina Bernstein, "Once Tortured, Now Tormented by Photos," *The New York Times*, May 15, 2004). The article reported on the immediate effects of these images on some of the 400,000 survivors of torture who have sought asylum in the U.S. More than 100,000 of them live in the New York area. When they saw the Abu Ghraib images, it was like flipping a switch. It awoke all

the old traumas and also ignited a new fear for their own safety in America. These are people who came to the U.S. for refuge from torture, so to see the American government *engaged* in torture shook them to the core.

None of this was new to Leon Golub. He has been looking at, thinking about, and transforming this kind of material in his paintings for many years. Between 1979 and 1985, Golub represented the use of torture by repressive Central and South American regimes backed by the U.S. government, and by mercenaries helping them to interrogate subjects. Over the years, Leon has assembled a voluminous archive of images of interrogations and torture from around the world.

Right before the Abu Ghraib images were released, a series of images from Falluja appeared, showing four “private security contractors” being ambushed, burned, mutilated, and hung from a bridge over the Euphrates as carrion. The images from this gruesome unconscious reenactment of Goya’s “Disasters of War” were circulating on the Internet within three hours of the acts, and their appearance the next day on the front pages of many U.S. newspapers and in the lead stories of most television news shows had a chilling effect. They recalled the images from Mogadishu in 1993, of a dead U.S. soldier’s body being desecrated, which hastened the U.S. withdrawal from Somalia and prompted Osama bin Laden’s reputed assertion that the American public cannot stomach this kind of imagery, making America a “weak horse.” Surely the thugs on the streets of Falluja had this in mind on March 31, 2004. They were enraged, but they were also clearly performing for the cameras, just as Chalabi’s men had done a year earlier, when they toppled Saddam’s statue in Firdos Square and symbolically mutilated his corpse and dragged it through the streets. The media-consciousness of the Falluja gang was apparent in their faces, and in the pre-printed signs they displayed, reading “Falluja—the graveyard of Americans.”

One of the reasons these ghastly images had such an effect in the U.S. was that they broke the embargo that the Bush administration, with the cooperation of the major American news media, had put on images that show the daily carnage in Iraq, an embargo extending even to images of the coffins of dead U.S. soldiers being returned to their families. No such censorship applies to the major media seen in Iraq, which regularly show the broken bodies of some of the 17,000 Iraqi men, women, and children killed in the war. The notion of a “clean” war, a war without carnage, is only saleable to a population that has been kept from seeing images of corpses.

But the effect of the Falluja images was limited by Americans' ability to distance themselves from them. The *New York Post* ran the image of body parts festooning the bridge under the headline "SAVAGES," and Canada's *Globe and Mail* quoted an American woman as saying: "I'm sorry, but we don't do that here. We don't jump up and down on cars to celebrate the burning of human beings." When I read that, I immediately thought of the recent book *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photographs in America*, examining in nauseating detail the widespread murder of African-Americans in this country not so very long ago, the mutilation of their corpses, and the gleeful celebrations of the perpetrators being photographed beside their handiwork. As the executive editor of the *New York Times* said about the Falluja images, "The story was in the desecration and in the jubilation."

Another effect of the Falluja images was to reveal to the American public the prominence of hired, private military contractors in the Iraqi conflict; there are currently at least 20,000 of them in Iraq, and the number increases daily. The four men killed and mutilated by the mob in Falluja were all former U.S. military Special Forces personnel turned private contractors, working under a Blackwater USA contract with the Pentagon to provide force protection and personal security for the top U.S. administrator in Iraq, Paul Bremer, among others. They were armed with assault rifles and automatic pistols. The Bush administration does not include the deaths of private military contractors in its death toll for the war, and uses these contractors to mask the real costs of the occupation.

Less than a month after the Falluja images appeared, the release of a few amateur digital snapshots taken by soldiers changed everything in the image wars. These images showed American MPs "softening up" Iraqi detainees in the Sadean cells of Saddam Hussein's Abu Ghraib prison just outside Baghdad. The first batch, broadcast on CBS-TV's 60 Minutes II on April 28, 2004, showed a dead, battered body—not burned, but packed in ice to escape detection—and the naked, hooded bodies of prisoners being tortured by grinning, gesticulating U.S. soldiers. The reality of these images was grasped immediately by all Iraqis under occupation, and then began to break on the American consciousness in successive waves of recognition and revulsion.

Unlike the Brits, who immediately questioned the veracity of the *Daily Mirror* images of prisoner abuse, we believed the Abu Ghraib images without question, because they only confirmed what

we already knew but didn't want to accept; that behind all the pretty talk about wanting freedom for the good people of Iraq lurked naked aggression, deep-seated cultural contempt, and the arrogant smirk of unilateralism; and the realization that we are now mired in a hellish conflict with no end in sight. The looks on the faces of those reservists, and their easy, hamming body postures, were intended to show that they, unlike the Iraqis, were not subject to the depredations of Abu Ghraib; that they were actually not there at all, but back home, mugging for the camera. The anonymous, hooded Iraqis (guilty or innocent, it hardly mattered) were demonstrably there, and were ridiculous for being there. Stripped and hooded, they'd become impotent and weak. Let's stack them up like cheerleaders. Let's make them jack-off in front of American women and make it look like they're giving each other head.

The most striking thing about the images from Abu Ghraib, and what marks them as unmistakably American, is that peculiar mixture of cold-blooded brutality and adolescent frivolity; of hazing or fooling around, and actual deadly torture—reality and fantasy conjoined. So you have Graner and England mugging and posing and grinning for the camera as if they're frolicking at Disneyland, and in the same picture you have the corpse of a prisoner who's been tortured to death. Most Americans didn't know what they were looking at when they first saw the images, because they'd never seen torture images before, and the incongruity of the actions of the U.S. soldiers was confusing. It was intended to be confusing. The MPs in the pictures wanted to show their friends and family back home that they were not affected by the ghastly acts they performed in Iraq; that they were not *above* these actions, but *below* them, just like their Commander-in-Chief, whose aw-shucks obliviousness to the grave consequences of his policy decisions is reassuring to some Americans. What we don't know can't hurt us. We're not responsible. They just hate us because we're free. Shit happens. And besides, it's God's will.

The Falluja images arose from a public explosion of rage that was performed for and recorded by professional photojournalists, but the amateur images from Abu Ghraib seemed to have erupted from deep within the American public image unconscious. They seem not to have been taken by anyone, and at the same time, by us all. As Susan Sontag's cover of the *New York Times Magazine* spelled it out, "The Photographs Are Us." And they put a face on the U.S. occupation of Iraq that will never be forgotten.

For an administration that had manipulated and controlled public images so skillfully during the first year of the war—from Saving Private Lynch to the Falling Saddam to the Top Gun speech to

Saddam's capture—President Bush's closest advisors were blindsided by the effects of the Abu Ghraib images. Principal Bush political strategist Karl Rove suggested that the consequences of these images were so great that it would take decades for the U.S. to recover from them. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's frustration was palpable as he testified before Congress: "We're functioning with peacetime constraints, with legal requirements, in a wartime situation in the Information Age, where people are running around with digital cameras and taking these unbelievable photographs and then passing them off, against the law, to the media, to our surprise." That is, we don't have a problem with how we are prosecuting this war, we have a problem with controlling images of the war. Paul Virilio's *Big Optics* (if you can *see* the entire battlefield, you've already won the battle) has gone public, and that creates a tremendous problem for the Pentagon. With the ubiquity of small, cheap digital cameras, this problem is probably now insoluble. What was once a tremendous military advantage has now become a political catastrophe. Conservative commentator David Brooks asked "How are we going to wage war anymore, with everyone watching?" Could this be the apotheosis of Total Surveillance, the saving grace of the Pandaemonium?

As I said before, the Abu Ghraib images seemed to have welled up from the American public image unconscious. But why did these images have such an immediate and profound effect? Why were they so immediately legible?

Looking at the faces of these MPs from Maryland, I tried to find some comparable images, and a student of mine, Eric Gottesman, found a collection of images online that is certainly relevant. These images show revelers at "Blackface Parties" held at fraternity houses in Southern colleges and universities in the last few years. All of these images ignited public relations firestorms only after they were discovered on the Internet. These images come from Auburn University, the University of Virginia, University of Tennessee, Oklahoma State University, and the University of Mississippi, where an image of a man in blackface and straw hat kneeling on the floor picking cotton while a guard holds a gun to his head came out of the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity, which bills itself as "America's leadership development fraternity." The first fraternity founded after the Civil War, ATO's mission was "to heal the wounds created by the devastating war and help reunite the North and South."

Another direct reference for the Abu Ghraib images is Do-It-Yourself Internet porn. A very high percentage of all traffic on the Internet is related to pornography. It's the sticky Web of Onan.

And when members of Congress went into that dark, sweaty little room to view the whole cache of 1800 images from Abu Ghraib, most of which *we* haven't yet seen, they said the torture images were all interspersed with pornographic images of the MPs themselves. So this is certainly a big part of what was going on there. Rush Limbaugh called it "Standard good old American pornography." Just a few good ol' boys and girls behaving badly.

Bush and Rumsfeld refuse to call what happened at Abu Ghraib torture, because torture is what other states do, not the U.S. If we're doing it, it must not be torture. Just as the tens of thousands of mercenaries now employed in Iraq must not be mercenaries, but "private military contractors," and setting up a satellite government to take the heat off the Occupation is "turning over sovereignty" to Iraqis. After Mogadishu, what we all saw happening in Rwanda was not "genocide," because we would have had to *do* something about genocide. This torturing (twisting) of language has become very effective of late, and has mostly managed to deflect language coming through to counter it. Image rhetorics have also been employed with great facility and effectiveness. So why and how did the Abu Ghraib images threaten this hegemony?

Like the earlier images of the Falling Saddam, these images draw on old image rhetorics, striking similar chords. But unlike those planned images, the Abu Ghraib images were *unconsciously* made, and this gave them a special power. As I said, these images seemed to have welled up out of our own unconscious, showing us what we knew, but didn't know that we knew.

The iconography of the hooded-figure-on-a-box image is especially, rampantly polysemous. It was legible to us because we immediately, unconsciously, recognized its symbolism. The pointed hat or hood carries the sense of derision and ridicule, as in the dunce cap, and also of judgment and punishment—the interrogators of the Spanish Inquisition wore pointed hats, as do KKK knights. The dunce cap was invented (by John Duns Scotus) as a device to aid cogitation, to "focus the mind," and the actions at Abu Ghraib were ostensibly designed to extract intelligence.

The pointed hood or hat is an ancient symbol and shamanic trope eliciting fear and respect that has inspired numerous artists, from Hugo Ball at the Cabaret Voltaire, to Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi, to Joseph Beuys in his Coyote action, to Joel-Peter Witkin's early "Anonymous Atrocities" series.

On another level, to hood or shroud the head is a feminizing or emasculating gesture for Muslim men, and for Americans, the gesture of the hands held out in weakness and supplication in the Abu Ghraib figure echoes an earlier image of the victims of war: Nick Ut's image of the naked Vietnamese girl fleeing a napalm attack, with arms held out from her body like wings.

This one image of the hooded-figure-on-a-box has already become an icon, the image of the American Occupation of Iraq. There is certainly an element of initiation or hazing here (trying to get the pledges to break), but what are these Iraqis being initiated into? Our way—the perversion of the significance of events. Hazing is a devolution of initiation rituals, and both hazing and torture are endemic to illegitimate power. Elaine Scarry, in her book *The Body in Pain*, wrote, “In torture, it is in part the obsessive display of agency that permits one person's body to be translated into another person's voice, that allows real human pain to be converted into a regime's fiction of power.” Torture occurs when power is uncertain and illegitimate, when a regime is unstable and weak. Here is one possible narrative for this emblem of the Occupation:

The Iraqi people are the exotic, mysterious Other, but also ridiculous figures of fun. We came to liberate them from their primitive state, to modernize and electrify them. But they don't understand, so we must keep them in the dark until the process is complete. We've put them up on a pedestal (the same pedestal we pulled Saddam off of), but this pedestal is made of cardboard, and if they fall off and get modernized (electrified) too soon, they will be killed. They just don't understand. Can't they see that we've occupied them in order to make them free, and that we may have to destroy them in order to save them?

Note: Top military officials now say that the interrogations at Abu Ghraib yielded almost no new intelligence, and that most of the prisoners tortured by the Americans at Abu Ghraib were not linked to the insurgency. Another report said 70-80% of the Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib were innocents swept up in raids. Techniques and procedures designed for “high value terrorist targets” (in Afghanistan and Guantanamo) ended up being used on “cabdrivers, brothers-in-law, and people pulled off the streets.” The hooded prisoner being forced to masturbate in front of Lynndie England is named Hayder Sabbar Abd, and he was picked up for “getting out of a cab in a suspicious manner.”

David Levi Strauss is a writer and critic in New York, where his essays and reviews appear regularly in *Artforum* and *Aperture*. His collection of essays on photography and politics, *Between the Eyes*, with an introduction by John Berger, was published by Aperture in 2003. *The Book of 101 Books: Seminal Photography Books of the Twentieth Century*, with catalogue essays by Strauss, was published by P.P.P. Editions/D.A.P. in 2001. *Between Dog & Wolf: Essays on Art & Politics* was published in 1999 by Autonomedia/ Semiotext(e), and *Broken Wings: The Legacy of Landmines* (with photographer Bobby Neel Adams) was published in 1998. He received a Guggenheim fellowship for 2003-04, to write his next book, *Photography & Belief*. Strauss currently teaches in the Graduate School of the Arts and at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College.