

# IRAQ'S WAR PORN



FRANCISCO GOYA, FROM 'THE DISASTERS OF WAR'

BY DAVID SWANSON

An artist should keep a human skull on the desk as a constant reminder of death, of the need to — in the words of a currently popular country tune — live like you were dying. A peace activist should keep a photo in his or her wallet of a small Iraqi child torn to pieces — a constant reminder to live like others are dying.

The trouble is that we find it almost unbearable to look at such images. We believe the war would end if the corporate media showed such images, yet we turn our faces away if they're placed in front of us; even more so, if they happen to be images of torture or of soldiers humiliating Iraqis. Worst of all are the gruesome images that soldiers have created themselves in this new digital age as war trophies.

If such images were in our wallets, we wouldn't want them to give anyone the impression that we took some sick pleasure in seeing Iraqis blown apart. Yet some of those images have come to us over the Internet from U.S. soldiers who evidently found exactly that pleasure in taking and posting them. As hard as we find it to look at the images, we find it a hundred times harder to try to think our way inside the minds that could do such a thing. We're afraid that, once there, we couldn't freely leave.

We know, of course, that parents of a murdered child will never be free of the horror, that the soldiers who did it will never forget, and that the people those soldiers live with when they come back home will not be unaffected. To properly address claims that some wars are good wars and that the worst deeds of war are performed by "bad apples," we have to have a clear picture of what war is, including the worst of it. If we leave out an understanding of the worst of war, all of our thinking must be distorted.

Therefore, look at *this picture*.

Did you look? Those are children who, as likely as not, were running and playing in the months before our government launched a war on the basis of lies. I don't know how those particular children died, but most of the deaths in this war, like all modern wars, are civilian ones, many the result of bombing. This is what "collateral damage" looks like.

Now look at *this image*.

These are mild images. I'm going very easy on you. This child is alive, but wounded — quite probably wounded psychologically as well. Does the woman holding this child look grateful and liberated? Does she look like she will have an easy time

forgiving the people who did this? Why do I write "the people who did this"? Why can't I be honest and write "us"? The United States government launched this war, making us responsible for everything that happens in it.

*This image is far more powerful than Edvard Munch's "The Scream."*

I don't know what happened, but I know that this is a picture of unbearable rage. I've looked at many images like this one in which, even if I have no way of learning the details, war is presented far more powerfully than could be done in words.

*Here's someone with enough years ahead of him to forget and forgive.*

But think how hard it will be for him to do so. Then think how easily we will forgive ourselves for not having done more to prevent this war or end it sooner. Who will have the easier time, and should it be that way?

There are stories in our media now about U.S. troops killing civilians — men, women and children in cold blood. Sometimes these killings are described as motivated by revenge for Iraqi hostility and ingratitude. But who told our soldiers that the Iraqis would be grateful for being invaded, shock-and-awed, and occupied? Who spread that lie? Not the Iraqis.

And who told our soldiers that it was acceptable to kill the "hadji" (the term they appropriated in a racist way for Iraqis)? Who taught our young men and women to place *bags over their heads*?

These people have faces. The bags take away the stories those faces might tell.

To defend the United States, our soldiers have been sent by the Bush administration to "handle" people who never threatened us and who live in a nation that never threatened us by:

*pinning them to the ground;*

*holding guns to their heads;*

*parading them naked;*

*leaving them handcuffed in the dirt, creating scenes that concentration camp guards from Nazi Germany would have flinched at far less than the rest of us;*

*surely the "hadjis" are not human if we can treat them this way, if their limbs can be found lying about in the street like fruit off a tree;*

*if piles of their corpses present logistical rather than legal problems.*

But to say that our soldiers, or some of our soldiers anyway, do not see the Iraqis as humans is not to suggest that they see them simply as objects. Rather, they surely see them as enemies, as "evildoers," as "insurgents," as "terrorists." Such creatures are almost by definition, beyond sympathy, entirely alien, and not just to be randomly harmed, but abused.

Here is a U.S. soldier posing with two Iraqi boys. They are all giving a thumbs-up signal, and one of the boys is holding a sign he is surely incapable of understanding that says: "Lcpl Boudreaux killed my dad then he knocked up my sister." With some images from this war, we cannot know if, or to what extent, they were posed. This one, however, is clearly a performance and we are the audience. We are supposed to laugh.

And, in a sense, the sign in this photo is certainly true. At least some U.S. soldiers have evidently become so accustomed to killing and torturing that it dominates their thinking. What dominates your thinking, what concerns you, often comes out in humor. It is quite likely that the soldier (Marine, actually) in this photo has not murdered or raped anyone, but perhaps he has seen such things done by others. Given the nature of our war in Iraq, though, it is entirely possible that he has committed such acts.

Think about the images from Abu Graib. Here's *one to remind you*, one you may not have seen before.

The question we should ask ourselves is not just why our soldiers tortured this man, but why someone took a photo of it. How had such bad acts become behavior to take pride in, to record as keepsakes? And are a few bad apples really capable of creating such conditions?

A photograph presupposes an audience, someone to enjoy or appreciate it. Here's *an image of a young female prisoner in Abu Graib raising her shirt as she was certainly forced to do*.

Someone expects us to enjoy that as pornography. Instead, it offers a glimpse of a world of unfathomable humiliation and abuse, the very same world that produced the image above of the bleeding man.

If you go to *this collection of image galleries* and scroll down to the very bottom, you will see a couple of folders labeled "War Trophy Photos." I must leave it to your judgment whether you want to see them or not. I trust you to want to see them for the right reasons. These are images of corpses and body parts mutilated and displayed, in close-up, laid out on a platter for cannibals. These are images that no one should find it easy to view, not even surgeons. But they are part of the true story of what this war is about and what all wars are about.

Many of these images were sent by American soldiers to a website that marketed pornography. Presumably, these were viewed as war pornography. Presumably they were created by people who have come to love war. And I don't mean people who avoid going to wars and then send other people's children to fight and die or be turned into people who could do this. I don't think Dick Cheney and George Bush flip through these photos in the evening, but I think they have a duty to do so until they can't stand it any more and bring our troops home.

By "people who have come to love war," I mean soldiers who signed up for college money or adventure and were trained as sociopathic killers.

Recently, in *Newsweek*, I read a comment from an American soldier in Iraq who mentioned that one of his buddies had run over a family with his tank. Personally, I don't want to live in a society with that in our magazines, but as long as it's happening, I want it printed on the front page, and I want photos of it.

(Update: On June 9, soon after I wrote that, I got my wish. The U.S. military killed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, took a photo of his dead head, *blew it up to enormous proportions*, and displayed it in a frame at a press conference. From the way it was framed, the head could have been connected to a body or not. Presumably this was meant to be not only proof of his death, but a kind of revenge for al-Zarqawi's beheading of Americans. The image would fit perfectly in a collection of war trophy photos. Is there any mystery about where rank and file soldiers learn to behave this way?)

David Swanson is Washington Director of Democrats.com, and co-founder of AfterDowningStreet.org coalition as well as a board member of Progressive Democrats of America. A former newspaper reporter, he was press secretary for Dennis Kucinich's 2004 Presidential campaign. He wrote this article for Tomdispatch.com and AlterNet.

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