

# International outcry over release of Hussein sons' photos and video

Chris Marsden, David Walsh  
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The decision by the Bush administration to publish photos and allow the videotaping of the dead bodies of Saddam Hussein's two sons has provoked an international outcry.

The photographs of the bullet-riddled bodies were released July 24 and reproduced in publications worldwide. On July 25 US officials permitted television cameras to film the corpses of Uday and Qusay Hussein lying on metal trolleys in a tented military morgue. Morticians had touched up their faces, mutilated by US weaponry in a gun-battle July 22 in Mosul, so that they now resembled wax figures. A wound in Uday's face had been repaired, but journalists could still see a hole in the top of his head.

The barbarism of the US display of the corpses was heightened by the condition of the bodies themselves. *Agence France Presse* noted, "In a gruesome twist, Uday's lower left leg bones, along with the metallic rod and pins which had been attached to them after a 1996 assassination attempt left him with severe injuries, had been removed and placed in a plastic bag. Extensive dental records including X-rays were also provided and explained." US officials indicated that they had matched the serial number on a plate implanted in Uday's leg after the assassination attempt.

American cable television networks aired the videotape of the nearly-naked corpses on Friday. Rupert Murdoch's *Fox News Channel* was the fastest to broadcast the grisly images, including a written "unedited video" message on the screen. CNN was a little more cautious, showing images of the brothers' upper bodies. "We are selecting certain photos that, for lack of a better phrase, are less revealing than others," asserted news anchorman Bill Hemmer. MSNBC waited several minutes after announcing the videotape existed before airing the images. One of its anchorwomen expressed open distaste for the videotape.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld declared Thursday he was "glad" he made the decision to release the gruesome photos of the Hussein brothers. "It's not the first time that people who are dead have been shown, [but] it's not a practice the United States usually engages in on a normal basis." He defended the action on the basis that the deceased were "two particularly bad characters, and that it's important for the Iraqi people to see them, to know they're gone, to know they're dead."

US officials raised a hue and cry when Arab television broadcast pictures of American soldiers captured and killed by Iraqi forces during the invasion. At the time Rumsfeld asserted the action violated the Geneva Conventions.

White House press secretary Scott McClellan defended the decision to publish the photos of the Husseins, insisting that there was a "huge difference" between that and the display of soldiers' bodies for propaganda purposes, which is barred by the Geneva Conventions.

Bert Hall, a professor of military history at the University of Toronto, told the *Toronto Star* that the publication of the photos might well, in fact, violate the Conventions, which forbid subjecting enemy prisoners or fatalities to humiliation or ridicule. "Having your enemy's head on a pike is one way of showing you have won and your enemy has lost.... It's a ritual humiliation," he commented.

Kamal Samari of Amnesty International asserted, "It is true that there is no explicit prohibition in the laws of war to show pictures of dead bodies. However, the spirit of the rules is that the dignity of everyone—dead or alive, be they Iraqis, United States nationals, British or others—must be respected."

Several factors played a part in the provocative decision by the US government, apparently over the objections of military officials, to release the ghastly photos and video footage. In the first place, it reflects the primitive and savage mentality of Bush, Rumsfeld and company. These are people to whom placing the head of an enemy on a pike on the gates of a city is not an unthinkable act. Moreover, there is the question of the social element within the US to whom they are appealing: the most backward, degraded and inhumane layer of the population. The administration feels the need to throw this layer some "red meat" from time to time to maintain its political credibility.

There are no doubt as well more immediate political calculations in the continuing release of gory images. The US news media in particular has been more than happy to "change the subject," from the revelations that the Bush administration lied about evidence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction to the "good news" of the Husseins' extermination. Moreover, the congressional probe into the September 11 attacks released July 24, although essentially a whitewash, raises troubling questions about long-standing relations between Islamic terrorists and US intelligence operatives that the government would like to bury.

While the American media generally transmitted the images of the dead Hussein brothers without criticism, numerous condemnations appeared in the world press.

The *Daily Mail*, a conservative British newspaper, denounced the decision to publish photographs of the corpses. The *Mail*, a strong supporter of the US-British war against Iraq, headlined its comment: "Is US sinking to Saddam's level?"

The paper wrote: "No one will weep for Uday and Qusay Hussein. They were criminal savages who terrorised their own people without mercy. The world and Iraq are cleaner and better without them. That said, should America have published these horrific pictures? The fact is, the display of these badly-disfigured faces will not prove one way or another whether they are Uday and Qusay. But it is bound to enrage militant Muslims round the world—and as yesterday's murder of three American soldiers demonstrates, has done nothing to placate anti-Western Iraqis. But more pertinently, is this the way a civilised nation should behave? Isn't there a hint of distasteful triumphalism in exhibiting vanquished enemies as trophies, in a way reminiscent of medieval barbarism?"

The *Mail* also carried substantial reports on the adverse reaction to the publication of the photos. No other British paper made such a strident criticism, but the *Independent* and the *Guardian* were forced to acknowledge the unprecedented character of the decision to publish the bloody shots of the head and torso of the Hussein brothers.

The *Independent* went through verbal gyrations in defending its decision

to publish the photos, while attempting to placate the disgust this has aroused in the public and amongst its own readers. It sought to square the circle by calling for restraint—on the part of the media!

The *Independent* headlined its comment, “Even these corpses should be treated with some respect,” and argues: “The public display of corpses for propaganda purposes is of course obnoxious, and the parading of the enemy dead by the victors uncivilised, yet the case of Saddam Hussein’s sons is a special one.”

With its usual cowardice the *Guardian* made no editorial comment on the publication of the photos, but its report acknowledged that the decision to do so had been taken by Rumsfeld and then noted: “However, there were clear signs that the decision to release the photographs cut against the grain of US military culture. Serving officers did not comment, but Colonel Dan Smith, a retired military intelligence officer, said; ‘We have a tradition of respecting the dead.... We objected to the showing of bodies of American servicemen. It’s kind of ironic that we turn round and display dead folks now.’” (BBC Washington correspondent Nick Bryant also reported that some Pentagon generals found the release “repugnant.”)

Only then does the *Guardian* add its own critical comment: “The Bush administration pointed out that publishing the photographs did not contravene the Geneva conventions. But in March, when dead US soldiers were shown by Iraqi television and Arab networks, Washington condemned the broadcasts. General John Abizaid, now commander of US troops across the Middle East, described them as ‘disgusting.’”

The German *Frankfurter Rundschau* criticized the publication of the photos: “It is an issue of human dignity. Independent of the heinous deeds of which Uday and Qusay were accused and which have been extensively proven true, the publication of the photos is a violation of basic principles adopted by the civilized world, partly on the basis of the American Constitution and also by drawing on a general knowledge of history. This principle applied at a time when pictures were distributed of the executed Nicolae Ceausescu; the principle was also loudly raised by the American government for the lesser incident when Iraqi television showed pictures of captured US war prisoners. The same has to apply in this case because the principle is indivisible and universally applicable.”

“To adapt to the morals and habits of antidemocratic forces,” wrote *Die Zeit* in its online commentary, “contains the risk that in the long-term one would no longer be distinguished from them in the eyes of the people and would then just be regarded as another form of brutal rule to which one bows only because it is stronger than the others. This leads however to a fatal logic of domination: every hesitation to employ the most extreme measures would be regarded in future as a sign of weakness.”

*La Repubblica* in Rome commented, “We simply cannot explain why above all in America which holds high the principle of the protection of the individual and ‘Western values,’ the authorities decided to use the mutilated bodies for such a spectacle—entirely in the manner of the hunter who displays the bodies of the animals he has shot on the roof of his car. The pictures of the massacred sons of Saddam will not end a chapter in Iraq. Quite the opposite. The Iraqi resistance lives. It could not have been led by these two men on the run who had already barricaded themselves into the house of relatives for weeks.”

The Swiss daily *Le Temps* observed, “The message that these photos are intended to convey is that the American forces will not withdraw before the guerrillas defying them for three months now.... But did it not occur to the military photographers that ... the picture of the bearded Qusay, vaguely reminiscent of the dead Che Guevara, might risk becoming a similar kind of icon for Arab youth?” Journalist Robert Fisk reasoned along the same lines: “The occupation authorities are pondering the idea of plastering the pictures around Baghdad. Be sure, they will soon be used as martyrs’ photographs on posters with a somewhat different message. The work of the Americans. The work of the occupiers.”

Doug Saunders writing in Canada’s *Globe and Mail* asked about the

“grisly” Hussein photos, “Are they proof, or pornography?... While U.S. President George W. Bush and other Washington officials defended the release of the photos yesterday as a necessary proof of success and resolve, others saw it as distasteful gloating, and some pointed out that it was exactly the sort of lurid display that the White House had condemned in the recent past.”

In contrast, Murdoch’s *Australian* splashed large photos of Hussein’s dead sons on its front page on Thursday. Asked about the release of the pictures, Australian Prime Minister John Howard declared that it was “very understandable,” even if the action breached the Geneva Conventions. Despite a number of outraged letters to the editor, none of the Australian media has even commented on the Bush administration’s release of the photos, let alone criticized it.

A variety of Arab television stations and newspapers criticized the US for its double standard. *Al-Arabiya* television in Dubai, for example, commented, “The world has not forgotten the campaign launched by the US when Iraqi TV showed pictures of US and British prisoners and bodies of their soldiers killed in Iraq; the world has not forgotten the angry statements made by US and British officials referring exhaustively to the provisions of the Geneva Conventions to stress what they saw as an inhumane action.... But all these humanitarian principles seem to have been overlooked or dropped with the US administration’s release of the pictures.”

And *Al-Watan* in Saudi Arabia: “Everyone remembers how the US and Britain protested against the broadcasting of pictures of US POWs and those killed when the two began their war against Iraq.... But now, Washington has given itself the right to publish pictures, and no one is commenting on the violation of international conventions.... This is a new world order based on the confiscation of human rights.”

Ordinary Arabs interviewed by various news agencies echoed these criticisms. *Reuters* cited the comment of Saad Brikan, a Saudi civil servant in Riyadh: “Although Uday and Qusay are criminals, displaying their corpses like this is disgusting and repulsive. America claims it is civilized but is behaving like a thug.” Another civil servant, Hasan Hammoud, told the wire service, “America always spoils its own image by doing something like this. What is the advantage of showing these bodies? Didn’t they think about the humanitarian aspect? About their mother and the rest of their family when they see these images?”

Mohammed Emara, an Egyptian Islamist scholar, told *Al Jazeera* television that displaying the bodies violated Islamic Sharia law. “Under Islamic law this is rejected,” Emara said. “America wanted to boost the morale of its soldiers so it resorted to this illegal act which is denounced by all religions. America said during its war on Iraq that displaying pictures of its soldiers who were alive was against the Geneva Convention, so what about pictures showing disfigured bodies?”

Many Iraqis quoted in the media generally expressed satisfaction with the deaths of Uday and Qusay Hussein, but questioned the propriety of the public release of the degrading photographs. They also challenged the logic of the Bush-Rumsfeld line that only supporters of the old regime were resisting the American occupation.

A *Reuters* correspondent described the situation in Fallujah, a hotbed of opposition: “Fallujah residents dismissed suggestions that their deaths [Hussein’s sons] in a gun battle in Mosul will ease the AK-47 and rocket-propelled grenade attacks on U.S. occupation troops. In shops, street corners and cafes in this anti-American town, Iraqis said only an end to the occupation will stop the violence. ‘I don’t understand why the Americans say it is the former Baath Party people who are killing their soldiers. All Iraqis want to kill the Americans because of the way they act,’ said Muhammad Abbas, who owns a shop that sells natural honey.”

Tens of thousands of Shiite Muslims flocked to the Iraqi city of Najaf on Friday to hear Islamic cleric Moqtada Sadr denounce the US occupation as a “terrorist” act. On a video broadcast Thursday a group of hooded

gunmen, describing themselves as Saddam's Fedayeen militia, vowed to avenge the deaths of the Hussein brothers. Five US soldiers have been killed since the raid on Mosul July 22, and numerous attacks have occurred not resulting in casualties.



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