

Military censorship of the war in Iraq

Naomi Spencer
31 July 2008

Five years of bloody US occupation have seen numerous crimes against humanity unfold in Iraq. Millions of Iraqi civilians have been killed and wounded, with millions more made into refugees. Ancient, once-vibrant cities have been destroyed by air raids and chemical weapons. Thousands of Iraqis have been imprisoned by the US military in barbaric conditions, and in many cases tortured. In carrying out the occupation, more than 4,400 military personnel—most of them American—have died and tens of thousands have been wounded.

Little reflection of these realities is to be found, however, in the US media, particularly in visual form. Censorship by the military—and self-censorship by media outlets—is part of an effort by the ruling elite to sanitize the war and keep the American public in the dark about its real nature.

As highlighted in a July 26 piece in the *New York Times*, titled “4,000 U.S. Deaths, and a Handful of Images,” very few photographs of the occupation have trickled out from the military-embedded journalists and been released by the American media. The military and Bush administration have imposed rules barring photos of flag-draped caskets, as well as documentation of battlefield casualties in which faces, ranks, or other identifiers are visible.

The *Times* notes, “Even memorial services for killed soldiers, once routinely open, are increasingly off limits. Detainees were widely photographed in the early years of the war, but the Department of Defense, citing prisoners’ rights, has recently stopped that practice as well.” Journalists have also been forbidden from releasing images showing what the military deems to be sensitive information—anything from an image of American weaponry to the aftermath of an insurgent strike.

Journalists interviewed by the *Times* said that even tighter rules imposed last year, requiring written permission from wounded soldiers before their images could be used, were nearly impossible to satisfy in the case of seriously wounded and dying soldiers.

“While embed restrictions do permit photographs of dead soldiers to be published once family members have been notified,” the *Times* commented, “in practice, the military has exacted retribution on the rare occasions that such

images have appeared.”

Clearly, none of these restrictions have anything to do with “prisoners’ rights” or respect for the families of fallen soldiers. To the contrary, the military’s intent is to obscure from the American people the hellish reality in which prisoners and US soldiers alike have found themselves. Indeed, while employing typical military jargon and doublespeak, Defense Department officials make no secret of the subject: free and easy access to photographs, print journalism, and first-hand accounts of the war are a “vulnerability” for US imperialism because it fuels antiwar sentiment in the population and within the military.

The *Times* article invites a comparison of Vietnam war-era photojournalism and coverage of the present occupation in Iraq: “If the conflict in Vietnam was notable for open access given to journalists—too much, many critics said, as the war played out nightly in bloody newscasts—the Iraq war may mark an opposite extreme: after five years and more than 4,000 American combat deaths, searches and interviews turned up fewer than a half-dozen graphic photographs of dead American soldiers.”

Significantly, the *Times* was able to document only five published images of war dead that had been released by embedded journalists. In four of those cases, the paper notes, “the photographer was immediately kicked out of his or her embed following publication of such photos.”

The number of embedded journalists has been cut drastically in the last five years. At the time of the invasion in 2003, 770 journalists accompanied US forces. Currently, according to the newspaper industry journal *Editor & Publisher*, only a dozen embedded journalists remain, about half of whom are photographers. Even if they were granted complete liberty to witness and document the occupation, the idea that 12 journalists could adequately cover the operations of 150,000 troops around the country is absurd.

The first “disembedded” photojournalist documented by the *Times* was Stefan Zaklin, then of the European Pressphoto Agency, who was barred from working with the US Army after publishing a photo of a dead US officer in Fallujah in 2004. In 2005, Chris Hondros of Getty Images was “kicked out of his embed” with an Army unit after

photographing a young girl, screaming and covered in blood, after US soldiers killed her parents.

Two *Times* journalists were barred in January 2007 after the paper printed a photo of a fatally wounded soldier. The soldier died within hours of being wounded, but the military insisted that the *Times* reporters violated rules by not getting his written permission to use his image.

The most recent barring of a photojournalist followed a devastating suicide bombing June 26 in Anbar province. The bombing killed 20 people, including three Marines.

The photographer, Zoriah Miller, who goes by his first name, was among the first on the scene after the blast. He documented scattered body parts, pools of blood and debris, and wounded and shocked survivors.

According to a July 17 piece in *Photo District News*, a photography industry magazine, Zoriah was told to “stop photographing, delete his memory cards, [and] surrender his cameras”.

Three days after family members had been notified of the Marine deaths, Zoriah published the images on his independent website. The next morning, the *Times* reported, “high-ranking Marine public affairs officers demanded that Mr. Miller remove the photos. When he refused, his embed was terminated.”

Zoriah wrote on his blog that officers claimed the military “would not allow even the pants or shoes of an injured or killed Marine to be depicted in images.” On July 3, the photographer was handed a letter claiming he had violated embed rules by publishing photos that revealed “tactics, techniques and procedures witnessed during operations,” and provided “information on the effectiveness of enemy techniques.”

“Specifically, Mr. Miller provided our enemy with an after-action report on the effectiveness of their attack and on the response procedures of U.S. and Iraqi forces,” Marine spokesman Lt. Col. Chris Hughes told the *Times*. Another Marine officer, Captain Esteban Vickers, waxed indignant to the paper: “Mr. Miller’s complete lack of respect to these marines, their friends, and families is shameful... How do we explain to their children or families these disturbing pictures just days after it happened?”

Zoriah countered: “The fact that the images I took of the suicide bombing—which are just photographs of something that happens every day all across the country—the fact that these photos have been so incredibly shocking to people, says that whatever they are doing to limit this type of photo getting out, it is working.”

“It is absolutely censorship,” the photographer told the *Times*. “I took pictures of something they didn’t like, and they removed me. Deciding what I can and cannot document, I don’t see a clearer definition of censorship.” In

an earlier interview with *PDN* magazine, Zoriah commented: “They embedded a war photographer, and when I took a photo of war, they disembedded me. It’s as if it’s okay to take pictures of them handing lollipops to kids on the street and providing medical care, but photographing the actual war is unacceptable.”

Indeed, the claim that documenting casualties aids the enemy is crafted to stifle information about almost any situation. It has also been used to justify the military targeting of independent journalists and media outlets that document American atrocities. The US bombings of independent Arab media Al-Jazeera offices in Kabul, Afghanistan, and in Baghdad served to quash critical coverage of the wars.

Photographers have been increasingly held back from combat zones. James Lee, a photojournalist embedded with a Marine unit, told the *Times* that he was thwarted by commanders from entering Basra during the massive air assault and raid offensive in April. He was told the military brass “did not want any Western eyes down there.”

As with Fallujah in 2004, the sieges on Basra and Sadr City constituted major war crimes. Over the course of a few days, hundreds of civilians and militiamen were slaughtered. During the siege in Basra, hospital and health officials were prohibited from speaking to independent journalists. American media dutifully reported Pentagon talking points, referring to killed civilians—even when children were counted among the dead—as “terrorists,” or at best “collateral damage.”

Such suppression of the truth is an expression of the larger crime of the war. More fundamentally, however, military censorship and the self-censoring of the media reflect the immense and growing militarization of American political life.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact