

The Importance of Images to America's Fight Against Violent Jihadism

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Americans were surely equally dismayed about a video circulating at viral speed whether they found out about the story via email, discovered it on YouTube, on Twitter, on Facebook, or simply heard about it the old fashioned way; when a network news anchor reported it. The video appeared to show a group of U.S. Marine Corps snipers standing over the bodies of several dead Afghan nationals and urinating on them — laughing while they did so.

On Thursday, January 12, this was the lead story on NBC's *The Today Show*, and on CBS's evening news show. Did the video, and the act shown on it, warrant such media attention? On CBS, anchor Scott Pelley intoned ominously that “the 39 second video undermines 10 years of sacrifice.”

The inevitable comparisons to Abu Ghraib were made worse by the fact that there was no way to argue that this was a bunch of poorly trained Marines. These men appeared to be from a Marine sniper team, particularly well-trained military specialists, members of teams designed to operate without direct supervision for long periods of time.

Still, was Pelley right? Did the Marine story really matter that much, or was it all just media hype?

It matters, and it matters a great deal.

In fact, the impact of these particular images is likely to be devastating. Respectful treatment of the dead doesn't only matter in Muslim cultures but in just about every culture. Think about the Herculean effort made to find and identify every single last body part so that, when bodies could not be found whole at the World Trade Center site, at least something could be returned to families for a “decent burial.” This video sends the exact opposite message from the one we want regarding our attitudes, not only toward Islamic rituals and traditions, but toward Islamic populations.

It has been argued that so far the impact of these images in Afghanistan appears to be negligible. Taliban “spokesmen” are saying the video won't interfere with any possible peace talks, and so far there have been no mass demonstrations or upheavals. That is very good news, indeed. But it also very much misses the point. These images have a great deal of potential to be damaging, but that damage, if and when it comes, could spark off anytime from now until well into the future, and it will not be confined to Afghanistan.

These images will almost certainly appear in jihadist videos used for a variety of purposes: for fundraising, to rally the already committed, to demoralize the West, and most importantly, to radicalize and recruit. Videos of this type are widely viewed throughout the Islamic world. They are used by the Taliban and similar groups, but it is a mistake to limit the measure of their impact in terms of how they will *influence* the Taliban. Members of the Taliban in all likelihood *do not need to be persuaded one way or the other* about what kind of people we are, or how we think about, or are likely to behave toward Muslim populations. They are already pretty sure they know, and this video will likely merely confirm what they already believe.

The issue is how it will impact those Muslims still on the fence about us, about their relationship to the jihad, and their beliefs about democracy. It is the fence-sitting group that the jihadists are attempting to recruit, and it is also that group whose support allied nations' require. The question might be raised whether such videos can really make more than a negligible difference: after all, in large parts of the Islamic world, rates of connectivity are still quite low. First, it is important today, well into the second decade of the 21st century, not to confuse access to *computers* with access to the *web*. Many people who do not have their own computer have access to Internet cafes. And many more people that do not have access to any kind of computer at all have access to a cell phone — this is the way a great deal of the world connects to the web, and increasingly it will be the platform of choice for very poor communities.

Second, the fact that their materials may only reach small numbers is not necessarily relevant to the groups producing these videos. It is those people who do have access who make up precisely the target demographic for these groups: middle to upper middle class, better educated, and more than likely having some technical and language skills. That is, and has consistently been, their prime demographic. The boys from the Madrassas may make good cannon fodder, but that's all they are good for.

Third, for some time now, there has been an emphasis on a different strategy: recruiting Muslims inside Western countries. By doing so, there is no need to worry about the difficulties of inserting a team past customs and security if they are already in place, after all. All that is necessary is to look at the number of videos in (or subtitled in) the languages of the Western democracies to see the importance being placed on this approach.

There are disputes back and forth over whether materials available on the Internet can actually radicalize anyone, whether there is a direct causal connection from watching these materials to being radicalized to the point of violence. In point of fact, there probably is no such direct line, but that doesn't mean that viewing these materials doesn't play a key role, indeed a necessary role, at some point in the radicalization process, even if we do not yet understand the complexities of that process well enough to pinpoint it precisely. Indeed, it seems hard to argue that these videos play no part in the process, that they are irrelevant or meaningless, simply by looking at the cases where individuals in the West were radicalized to the point of attempting violent action (successfully or not) and where videos played some role.

We know that Internet materials of this type were watched by the four London bombers, the participants in the “planes plot” to blow up a number of commercial airliners in flight between London and the U.S., the Ft. Dix 6, the Times Square bomber, the murderer of Theo van Geogh in Amsterdam, the Toronto 18, the UK college student who stabbed her MP and, finally, by the Kosovar German who shot American airmen at the Frankfurt airport, among others. At the end of the day, if these videos are so irrelevant, why do these groups put so much time and energy into their production? And why have those who were moved to violence spent so much time watching them?

In fact, this is not surprising given what we know about the power of images in general from a vast literature developed over years in the fields of Communication Studies, Mass Communication and Journalism, Film Studies, Psychology, and even in Business (in the academic study of Advertising and PR.) Based on that literature, we know that images are in many ways more powerful than words. (And much of what we know about images will not be culture bound, as it is based on universal physical processes — visual neural physiology¹ — or universal psychological processes.) Images have an impact that is simply more visceral and more emotional than that of words. This is partially a function of the fact that they are processed much more quickly, and partially a function of the fact that they are not processed in the same way. Words, by their very nature, are received in a linear fashion, one word after another, building to sentences, sentences building to paragraphs. Images are received all at once, in their entirety.

One indicator of their power is the fact that studies have repeatedly shown a greater capacity to retain images than words; in fact, news stories presented with images are more likely to be remembered than news stories presented in text-only format². Because they are a result of a mechanical recording process, we tend to regard images (at least outside the advertising context) as *evidence* in a way we never treat words³. Despite growing skepticism about digital manipulation, and — at least in some audiences — growing savviness about the various ways the meanings of photographs can be manipulated by being digitally altered, that skepticism simply doesn't seem to translate into wide-scale distrust of photographic images. That is likely even more pronounced in the Mid-East/North Africa region where not only are large percentages of the population illiterate, but the educational system is still based on an oral culture in many ways — in other words, there is little, if any, education in what would be called, in the United States, “media literacy,” or “visual literacy.”

There are, of course, many ways that the meaning of photographs can be altered that do not involve digital alteration. They can be cropped (or edited) in a misleading way. Several years ago, there was footage making the rounds of the American news networks that showed two American soldiers instinctively duck as a roadside bomb went off, apparently right next to them, then disappear in a cloud of ominous smoke. Seconds later the smoke clears, and the two men walk away, apparently dazed but uninjured. That same footage has appeared in jihadi videos — cut at the instant the smoke is thickest, the viewer is left with the clear impression that the soldiers were killed at the instant of detonation. Framing, too, can alter the meaning of an image. The online journalist Michael Yon has had to repeatedly threaten to sue over copyright violation to protect a photograph he took of an American soldier providing aid to a young Iraqi girl injured when a suicide bomber detonated.⁴

As important as visuals are, there has been surprisingly little work done on their role in radicalization. (One key exception being a study published by West Point's Combating Terrorism Center several years ago⁵) Georgia State University, in conjunction with the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute will be sponsoring a 1-day conference on March 16, 2012, which will focus on this issue and feature some of the most important scholars working in the area. In order to accommodate those who may not be able to travel to Atlanta, the entire conference will be live streamed, and those participating via the web will be able to

participate in question and answer sessions using Twitter. The website for the conference (which will go live on February 15, 2012) will be www.gsu.edu/visualpropaganda.

Images, in short, matter, and in a digital world where stories — and more important pictures — can go viral and travel around the world instantaneously, speed counts. In this particular instance, the U.S. Government had to respond, but simply responding was not enough. They had to respond quickly.

The first thing they did right, in this particular case, was respond rapidly and publicly. The problem the DoD faces now is this: everyone and anyone has said everything that could be said about how awful this act was, how nonrepresentative of the force, how these particular Marines will be punished. But this was *avisual argument*. It is well understood in Communication that visuals make arguments, even if they do so implicitly. Because these arguments are incomplete, requiring the viewer to do some of the work themselves, they are actually more powerful.⁸

However, for a visual argument to be answered effectively, it has to be answered with another visual. Talking heads (even talking heads in uniform) will not work. It may be a necessary component of a successful strategy, but it is not sufficient. Ultimately, it is just more words. And, of course, in this case there is the further problem that there is no way of knowing whether the words will translate properly.

The appropriate visual would be the one made famous by New York City prosecutors — there has to be a perp walk (four, actually). There is a reason prosecutors have insisted on these for so long (and made sure the press is always given appropriate notice). The images that would result would in essence be a form of ritual humiliation in response to the initial humiliation performed on the offending video.

Others have raised the concern that all this uproar is somewhat out of balance, given how rarely we publicly discuss the practices of the Taliban and other jihadist groups, and is therefore unfair. No doubt. Videos produced by the other side involve repetitive acts of brutal and degrading violence, and show their fighters (and leaders) reveling in these acts, which include desecration of the dead (both Western and indigenous) and worse, and have for years. There is, to be sure, a difference between urinating on a body and posing it with the head you have recently detached from it, and it is worth taking note of that difference.

Our acknowledgment of the gap between videotaping a hostage being decapitated and videotaping bodies being urinated on does not change the fact that, from a purely practical point of view, they use any failure on our part to live up to our own standards to rally both their populations and their fighters against us. In fact, sometimes they do so in the same videos, where actions such as those in this video are portrayed as the justification for their own acts of violence and terror. Further, it strikes me at least that, morally speaking, “but they do worse” is not the most persuasive position, given how evil, degenerate, and illegitimate their practices are.

The responses from various pundits and commentators downplaying what these Marines did, critiquing senior leadership for how harsh their language has been — even on the left, where Bill Maher said, “if they were real Taliban, if they were people who burn down people’s schools, . . . and do honor rapes, throw acid in people’s faces, I’m not that upset about pissing on them, dead or alive.”⁹ is astonishing to me. We are not talking about Marines making an understandable mistake in the heat of battle, as happened, for example, in Fallujah, where a Marine tragically shot a wounded insurgent who was still alive — a few days after a booby-trapped body had killed several members of his squad — all caught on tape by an NBC freelancer.¹⁰ These Marines certainly were not under fire, and they seem to be engaged in an act that was fairly well thought out.

Could anyone really believe, in this day and age, that something like this, once taped, wouldn’t end up on YouTube? Can well-trained Marines, in a post-Abu Ghraib world, really be unaware of the consequences, for themselves, other coalition forces, or for the United States?

This is illegal, and it is illegal for a reason. This was purely an act of ritual humiliation, and that is the only way it will be interpreted. I just do not see the basis for defending this. The Taliban should be fought aggressively, and we should rally the Afghan people against them. Part of the way we do that, however, is by drawing the sharpest possible contrast between them and us. And remember, it is not entirely clear in the video that these are Taliban bodies, only that they are indigenous Afghans. This video can only make the effort to win over Muslim populations more difficult, and for no good reason.

The other important move that the DoD made was to start by devoting the resources necessary to authenticate the video, which demonstrated publicly that they were taking it seriously, while simultaneously checking to see if there was any chance it might be yet another case of “photoshop propaganda.” That mattered, because there has been one example after another of that over the last few years, and the U.S. has not been fast enough or aggressive enough in dealing with those cases. If the response is not within that initial time period when the story is still being discussed, then people will tend to remember the original story — because the pushback came after the story faded. After that, if it receives any coverage at all, it never receives equal coverage (certainly not equal prominence) to the original story. Playing defense is never optimal. In this context, it means there will always be people who will doubt whether the fake claim is truly fake, but an unanswered claim will always be presumed true.

Consider these fakes that made their way into the public domain. The *Boston Globe* had to apologize for publishing images from a city councilor that the councilor claimed showed American soldiers raping female Iraqi detainees. They more than likely came from a pornographic website out of Hungary.¹¹ While not an American case, few remember the reason CNN host Piers Morgan was originally sacked from his position as editor of a British tabloid paper: on the front page, the paper published photographs of British soldiers abusing Iraqi prisoners, but they had been completely staged, acted out by individuals in Britain, wearing costumes. That was an instance where pushback came while the story was still getting sufficient play, and was aggressive enough, that — at least at home — the initial story gained no traction.¹² That Kosovar-German who shot the Airmen at the Frankfurt airport later told police he did so because of a video he watched of American soldiers in Iraq, not realizing he was watching a repost of footage from the Brian DePalma film, *Redacted*, designed to look “authentic.”¹³ The most famous of all of these was perpetrated against the Israelis, the infamous footage of Mohammed al-Dura, supposedly trapped in a crossfire and killed by Israeli bullets. But it took so long to establish it definitively as a fake that there was no way to pull it back (admittedly, it is doubtful in that case that many of those who believed the original story would ever have been dissuaded, at least in the region) and now al-Dura is a hero and the images of his “death” are iconic.¹⁴

It is difficult to overstate the importance of images, particularly in a war waged against an enemy so focused on violence employed for its use in propaganda. It is disappointing that, a decade since 9/11, we seem to need to constantly relearn the lesson of how deep a self-inflicted wound can cut.

1. The increasing role of cell phones as a web platform is discussed in Garret Jones, “The Revolution Will Be Brought to You By Text Messaging,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Notes*, March, 2008, available from www.fpri.org/enotes/200803_jones_revolutiontextmessaging.html, a piece that in many ways turned out to be prophetic. A Marine who fought in the area that the Marines in the present video are probably close to, noted that he and his Marines had spent a good bit of time ensuring cell towers would be brought into their area — consequently the Taliban would now be able to show the locals the video on cell phones, undoing all the work they did. See Timothy Kudo, “How the Marines Video Made the Afghan War Even Tougher,” *Washington Post*, January 13, 2012, available from www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/as-a-marine-and-afghan-war-vet-im-insulted-by-the-desecration-video/2012/01/12/gIQA5wlrwP_story_1.html.
2. Peter Bergen and Swati Pandey, “The Madrassa Myth,” *The New York Times*, June 14, 2005, available from www.nytimes.com/2005/06/14/opinion/14bergen.html.
3. For an excellent introduction to visual neural physiology and the way it impacts perception, see Richard L. Gregory, *Eye and Brain: The Psychology of Seeing*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 5th Ed., 1997.
4. For a review of the role that images have played in responses to foreign policy stories, specifically see David Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy: Icons of Outrage in International Crisis*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998.
5. Although in the context of advertising, there is a very useful discussion in Paul Messaris, “Chapter 2: Visual Truth, Visual Lies,” *Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images in Advertising*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997, pp. 129-162.
6. See Michael Yon, “Michael Moore’s Crime,” n.d., *Michael Yon Online Magazine*, available from www.michaelyon-online.com/michael-moores-crime.htm.
7. The Islamic Imagery Project, West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, March 1, 2006, available from www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-islamic-imagery-project.
8. See Paul Messaris, “Chapter 5: Editing and Montage,” *Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images in Advertising*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997, pp. 163-218.
9. Jeff Poor, “Maher ‘Not That Upset’ If People Urinate on Taliban Fighters ‘Dead or Alive,’” *The Daily Caller*, January 14, 2012, available from dailycaller.com/2012/01/14/maher-not-that-upset-if-people-urinate-on-taliban-fighters-dead-or-alive/.
10. “US Probes Shooting at Fallujah Mosque,” November 16, 2004, *msnbc.com*, available from www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6496898/ns/world_news-mideast_n_africa/t/us-probes-shooting-fallujah-mosque/#.TxSRmDstWMI.

11. The *Globe's* apologies to their readers, however, focused more on the fact that the sexually explicit images may have been inappropriate, and less on the fact that they were completely unverified. See Christine Chinlund, "A Series of Errors on Lewd Images," *Boston Globe*, May 14, 2004, available from www.boston.com/news/globe/.../a_series_of_errors_on_lewd_images/

12. Patrick E. Tyler, "Britain Says Photos Showing Abuse Are Fake," *New York Times*, May 14, 2004, available from www.boston.com/news/globe/.../a_series_of_errors_on_lewd_images/.

13. BBC News Europe, "Kosovan Admits Shooting US Airmen at Frankfurt Airport," August 31, 2011, available from www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-14727975.

14. When a private citizen, Phiiippe Karsenty, claimed that France 2's footage of al-Dura's death was doctored and the story a hoax, the station's reporter, Charles Enderlin, sued him for defamation. In the course of the various trials and appeals, the court forced France 2 to produce their outtake footage, and it was made clear that the child was not killed by Israeli bullets.

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