

WAR CRIMES AT ABU GHRAIB – SHOWING PHOTOS?

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will learn about the war crimes committed by U.S. forces at Abu Ghraib.
- Students will discuss reasons for limiting public access to certain images and information.
- Students will recognize the power of images to influence public opinion.

VOCABULARY & CONCEPTS

Abu Ghraib	human rights	torture	war on terror
Geneva Convention			

MEDIUM

Slideshow with a series of ten photographs of torture at Abu Ghraib



MATERIALS NEEDED

- Unit 3, Lesson 8 slideshow from CD or Web site
- *Student Worksheet* (pg. 7) - one per student

TIME

30 minutes

LESSON STEPS

1. Present the *Introduction to the Lesson* (pg. 2) to the class.
2. Distribute the *Student Worksheet* to students and give them time to answer the first question about viewing the photos.
3. Lead a discussion about the decision to view the photos.
4. Project the slideshow, and view the photos in silence. Encourage students to write about their reactions to the photos on their worksheets.
5. Discuss the photos using the *Questions* (pg. 4).
6. Lead a discussion about media coverage of war and war crimes using *Further Questions* (pg. 4) and *Additional Information* (pg. 5).

INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSON

In 1949, after the devastation of World War II, the U.S. and most other nations agreed to the Geneva Conventions, which set human rights standards for treatment of prisoners, including banning physical or mental torture and cruel or degrading punishment. In 2002, following the September 11 attacks, President George W. Bush decided to withhold the Geneva protections from al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters in Afghanistan. The decision was based on the argument that “the war against terrorism is a new kind of war” that made “obsolete Geneva’s strict limitations on questioning of enemy prisoners” (Danner 42). At the time, State Department lawyers questioned the decision, arguing that it “would undermine the United States military culture, which is based on a strict adherence to the law of war” (42).

Abu Ghraib is a prison, 20 miles west of Baghdad, at which Saddam Hussein’s security forces tortured and executed his enemies. After the fall of Saddam Hussein, the U.S. used Abu Ghraib as a military prison. By October 2003, there were 7,000 prisoners within the prison and only 92 military police guards to control them (Strasser XIV). On April 28, 2004, the CBS news program 60 Minutes aired a report on what some called “prisoner abuse” and others called “torture” under the U.S. command at Abu Ghraib. The photos, taken by soldiers at the prison, showed naked Iraqi prisoners being forced into humiliating poses while U.S. guards looked on, grinning. Soon, the photos appeared in news outlets around the world.

The effects of these photos on U.S. and global opinion were immediate and profound. President Bush declared that the photos were examples of “disgraceful conduct by a few American troops, who dishonored our country and disregarded our values” (Danner 27). An Independent Panel, chaired by former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger began its report: “The events of October through December 2003 on the night shift of Tier 1 at Abu Ghraib prison were acts of brutality and purposeless sadism” (Strasser 1). The panel concluded that “there were five cases of detainee deaths as a result of abuse by personnel during interrogations” (Danner 48). Throughout the world, people were shocked and outraged at the images of defenseless prisoners being treated in such an abusive manner by U.S. troops, in the very prison where Saddam Hussein had tortured and killed his opponents. Senator Jack Reed of the Senate Armed Services Committee offered this reflection: “For the next fifty years, in the Islamic world and many other parts of the world, the image of the United States will be that of an American dragging a prostrate, naked Iraqi across the floor on a leash” (qtd. in Martin 10).

Within the media, there were differing opinions about the question of whether the photos should be released to the public. CBS News initially agreed to postpone showing the photos when General Richard Meyers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called anchorman Dan Rather to say that the pictures could cause violence to be directed against U.S. troops (Martin 50). Bill O’Reilly of Fox News refused to show them at all. Those arguing against airing the photos said that they could give support to the enemy, damage morale of U.S. troops and focus undue attention on “a few bad apples.” Others argued for full disclosure of the photos, arguing for freedom of speech and for accountability based on the open airing of problems within a democracy.

Take a few minutes now to reflect for yourself on this question. Should we view some of the photographs from Abu Ghraib here in class? Why or why not? Please write your own thoughts on this question before we discuss together whether or not to see these photos.

- **Give** the class five minutes to write individually on the question of whether or not to view the photos.
- **Lead** a discussion on this question thereafter, asking students to pay particular attention to respecting the humanity of everyone involved – their fellow classmates, the Iraqi prisoners, even the guards. You might solicit ideas for guidelines in your decision-making process (e.g., no name-calling or stereotyping, respect different perspectives arising from diverse political and religious views, be willing to learn from minority opinion viewpoints). It may be that some students do not wish to view the photos, in which case they should be excused from the viewing.
- (If the class decides to view the photos,) **allow** students to view the photos in silence and give them the opportunity to write in continued silence following the viewing. For those not wishing to write, a few minutes of stillness following the viewing will be helpful to gather one’s thoughts and emotions. Encourage everyone who wants to speak and respect those who choose to remain silent.
- **Use** the *Questions* to guide a discussion on the photos.
- **Conclude** with *Further Questions* about the media’s influence on public opinion and *Additional Information* about the government’s role in controlling images being released to the public.

QUESTION | **What were your emotions as you saw these images – sad, mad, glad, scared, hurt?**

QUESTION | **Do these photos depict torture? War crimes? Why or why not?**

QUESTION | **If there had not been photos taken at Abu Ghraib, only oral testimony, do you think that the abuse would have gotten the attention that it did? Why or why not?**

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Discuss President Bush's decision to withhold the Geneva protections from al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters. Should such a decision apply to Iraqi's fighting against the U.S. occupation as well?

Can you think of other images that have shaken the public to the same degree? Should they have been shown? Why or why not?

The news media are often criticized for focusing only on the negative and the sensational. Does the media inappropriately influence public opinion by emphasizing negative aspects of the U.S. role in Iraq, such as the prison scandal at Abu Ghraib, while ignoring positive accomplishments, such as economic development and elections?

If you opposed showing the photos, how else might one accurately report the realities of war, which by definition includes atrocities? Might your opinion about showing the photos change once the war is over? Why?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

General Antonio Taguba chaired the first official inquiry into the abuses at Abu Ghraib. Finding numerous examples of “sadistic, blatant and wanton criminal abuses” (Danner 292), Taguba criticized failures of leadership by military intelligence officials and recommended disciplinary action and further investigation (Strasser xiii). General Janis Karpinski, commander of the 800th Military Police Brigade, was subsequently removed from duty. Seven military police soldiers of enlisted rank were court-martialed for violating the laws of war for assault, mistreatment and sexual abuse of prisoners.

Not everyone at Abu Ghraib was complicit in participating in or covering up the actions there. Military police Specialist Joseph Darby first confronted Specialist Charles Graner after Graner gave him a CD with photos showing abuse. Darby’s submission of the CD to his superiors and his subsequent willingness to testify began the investigation that brought the abuse to light. Specialist Matthew Wilson was similarly appalled by the actions at Abu Ghraib and reported the abuse to his superiors. Master-at-Arms William Kimbro, a Navy dog handler, according to the Taguba report, “knew his duties and refused to participate in improper interrogations despite significant pressure from the Military Intelligence” (Hirsch “Chain of Command”).

During the Vietnam War, it was an incident in the Vietnamese hamlet of My Lai that brought intense focus on the war crimes of U.S. troops. Lt. William Calley was subsequently tried and found guilty of the murder of 22 unarmed citizens in that incident. Like at Abu Ghraib, it was U.S. troops who first reported the violence. Ironically, the reporter who broke the My Lai story was Seymour Hersh, the same reporter who, 35 years later, wrote the first published review of the Taguba report.

In the age of satellite TV and the Internet, it is more difficult for the U.S. government to control images than in the past. As Frank Rich reported in an article in The New York Times in January 2005: “If a story is reported on al-Jazeera or the BBC – both available in the U.S. via cable, satellite and the Internet – it can’t easily be ignored. Similarly, private citizens operating Web sites that release information against government wishes put pressure on the mainstream press to follow the stories.” In the same month the Abu Ghraib abuses were televised, The Seattle Times published a photo of 20 flag-draped coffins holding the remains of U.S. troops aboard a transport plane headed from Kuwait to Washington. The Department of Defense had earlier banned such images. Shortly thereafter, ABC News’ Nightline broadcast a special program titled “The Fallen,” consisting of the names and photos of the 721 U.S. soldiers who had thus far died during the war in Iraq. Two broadcasting companies refused to air the special, one issuing a statement suggesting that the program was “motivated by a political agenda designed to undermine the efforts of the United States in Iraq” (Houpt).

CONNECTIONS

Compare the photos from Abu Ghraib with those from My Lai in Project Look Sharp’s Media Construction of War: “The Calley Verdict: Who Else is Guilty?”

REFERENCES

- Danner, Mark, Torture and Truth, New York: New York Review of Books, 2004.
- Hersh, Seymour. “Chain of Command.” The New Yorker, May 17, 2004.
- . “Torture at Abu Ghraib.” The New Yorker, May 10, 2004.
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- Martin, Michael. The Iraqi Prisoner Abuse Scandal, Detroit: Lucent, 2005.
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- Strasser, Steven, ed. The Abu Ghraib Investigations, New York: Public Affairs, 2004.
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Photos:

- Slide 1. <www.thememoryhole.org/war/iraqis_tortured/iraqis_tortured_wp-d.jpg>
- Slide 2. <www.thememoryhole.org/war/iraqis_tortured/iraqis_tortured_newyorker-f.jpg>
- Slide 3. <www.thememoryhole.org/war/iraqis_tortured/iraqis_tortured_newyorker-b.jpg>
- Slide 4. <www.antiwar.com/photos/perm/new-toture5.jpg>
- Slide 5. <www.antiwar.com/photos/perm/new-toture6.jpg>
- Slide 6. <www.antiwar.com/photos/perm/new-toture2.jpg>
- Slide 7. <www.antiwar.com/photos/perm/new-toture1.jpg>
- Slide 8. <www.antiwar.com/photos/perm/nabuse2.jpg>
- Slide 9. <www.newyorker.com/images/fact/040517fa_r13198_p295.jpg>
- Slide 10. <http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prigione_di_Abu_Ghraib>

NAME

DATE

DIRECTIONS

Answer the questions below.

Think about the reasons you would choose to view the photos of torture at Abu Ghraib and the reasons you would choose to not view them. Which reasons are most important to you? Do you choose to view the photos? Why or why not?

During or after viewing the photos, you can use the space below to write about your feelings, thoughts and other reactions.