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Marines urinating on Taliban corpses: Putting words to the picture

by Jerry Lembcke

COMMENTARY

A video showing U.S. Marines urinating on the corpses of Taliban fighters has been circulating since last week. The story led the Jan. 12 edition of the PBS NewsHour, a normally cautious, even staid, news outlet. Moderated by NewsHour regular Judy Woodruff, the segment featured Andrew Exum, a former Army captain and now a fellow with the Center for a New American Security, and *Washington Post* reporter David Ignatius as guest commentators.

Watch How Will Marines Video Affect Relations Between U.S., Afghanistan, Taliban? on PBS. See more from PBS NewsHour.

Exum denounced the acts, referring to the accused Marines as 18- and 19-year-olds who had been dehumanized by the war. Ignatius followed with similar remarks, calling the Marines "young men at war ... dehumanized." Ignatius added that things like this have always occurred in war, but the Internet makes such acts more visible today.

The problem: Almost nothing of what Exum and Ignatius said made sense. To begin with, Woodruff herself had introduced the segment identifying the Marines as "elite" and "highly trained," descriptions that, whatever their actual ages, are hard to reconcile with the images of American kids shaken up by war.

Even at the time of the PBS broadcast, news sources were identifying at least some of the Marines as snipers -- a specialty where the design to *take* human life could hardly be recalibrated to make them into victims.

Moreover, Exum and Ignatius evidently went on the air not knowing the actual ages of the perpetrators.

Six days later, there was still no public release of names and ages. The PBS guests had created the "kids" ages of 18 and 19 out of their own imaginations.

The idea that Americans send their kids off to fight grew out of the Vietnam War experience. It began with claims that the average age of combat fatalities there was 18; generalizations from that grew into the belief that the average age of all soldiers in Vietnam had been under 20.

In fact, neither was true. Nor is it true today. We only have the ages of the dead in Iraq and Afghanistan to go by, but the mean of those numbers is about 26; the median, about 25.

The most telling story within the PBS report, however, was Ignatius' remark that the Marines' behavior is the kind of thing that happens in war. Although not quite a boys-will-be boys quip, his comment nevertheless misses a disturbing underside of American society.

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Atrocities in war happen, sure. But their staging by troops for the purpose of photographic documentation is behavior that makes no sense outside a cultural context in which the commitment of atrocities is conflated with martial accomplishment.

That cultural twist is also a legacy of Vietnam. The fact that the war there was unpopular and resulted in what amounts to American defeat left some men -- even some who were never in Vietnam -- feeling diminished by the experience.

Renderings of the war through popular culture displaced its political and economic realities with images of veterans who brought the trauma of the war home with them -- their trauma a stand-in for the supposed horror perpetrated on them by the Vietnamese, and the unspeakable atrocities they were led to retaliate with.

By the 1980s, the atrocity-trauma narrative was so dominating that veterans' combat bona fides all but required some association with it.

In short, a credible claim to participation in an atrocity left no doubt: The claimant is the real deal, a *combat* veteran, his claim to trauma both credential and inoculation against skeptics' questions.

The generation of fighters going off to wars in the Middle East had grown up with representations of war and veterans derived from the Vietnam experience. The carnage portrayed in films like "Apocalypse Now" and "Platoon" -- bereft of meaning, much less anything redeeming -- emptied the image of military service of everything but gratuitous violence. Only the broken bodies and psyches of war's victims were left in the aftermath.

By the turn of the 21st century, the World War II trope "What did you do in the war, Daddy?" had twisted into "What *happened* to you in the war, Daddy?", with the absence of damage or derangement an indictment of Daddy's masculinity.

The photographs that documented the pride of men liberating Dachau were supplanted by self-posed shots documenting the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and the desecration of dead Taliban soldiers.

It is said that pictures can be worth a thousand words, but it will take many thousands of words to write the back-story of the pictures coming home from the new American wars of the 21st century.

When the clouds of denial, confusion and excuse-making generated by the photographs are parted, we'll see beyond the insensitivity and narcissism of the posing poseurs and see the still-uglier sight of a country that lost its sense of place in history, its people supporting wars only because the troops have been sent to fight them, its troops displaying their own degradation as a badge of honor.

[Jerry Lembcke is associate professor of sociology at Holy Cross College in Worcester, Mass. He is the author of *Hanoi Jane: War, Sex, and Fantasies of Betrayal* and *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*.]

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