

# **Intelligence, Redactions and Censorship - The Reasons Behind Classifying and Declassifying a Photograph**

Scott Li

Institute of Art, Design & Technology – Dún Laoghaire

Faculty of Film, Art and Creative Technologies

# **Intelligence, Redactions and Censorship - The Reasons Behind Classifying and Declassifying a Photograph**

By Scott Li

N00190527

Supervisor: Adrian Reilly

Submitted to the Faculty of Film, Art & Creative Technologies in  
Candidacy for the Bachelor of Arts Honours Degree in Photography, 2023

## **Declaration of Originality**

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art, Design & and Technology, Dún Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (hons) in Photography. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed:

Scott Li

Student Number: N00190527

## **Abstract**

*Classification, Declassification, Intelligence, Military, OPSEC, Archive, Censorship, State, Media*

Intelligence is the gathering and compiling of information, it's a discipline that uses information collection and analysis approaches to provide guidance and direction to assist commanders or leaders in their decision making. Throughout the 20th and 21st century countries around the globe have fought wars based on intelligence gathering. Intelligence is also central to state security. Information in these cases is often more than not extremely sensitive for a number of reasons and usually results in the classification and censoring of documents. In this paper I wish to explore several aspects: the classification, the declassification and intelligence, censorship by the state regarding the photograph.

I will be looking at declassified photographs and accompanying documents, the idea of OPSEC (Operational Security, the act of restricting or safeguarding information for security), the process of declassification, and respective constitutional law where relevant regarding the cases of respective countries such as the United States. I will also be looking at both the process of classifying and declassifying and the possible whys behind the decision of declassifying certain documents especially in the post 9/11 era of information. This will be done through accessing government archives such as the CIA digital reading rooms, FOIA (Freedom of information act) archives, I will also be examining constitutional laws in regard to that area to support or give context to the material both in the American context. I will be looking at photographs from the Vietnam War, the War on Terror, Iraq and the idea of OPSEC censorship of photographs.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge and thank all the past and present IADT staff, in particular the BA (Hons) Photography staff for everything in the last four years. Their individual and combined knowledge and experience have been a wonder to be a student under. I would like to thank Dr. Mark Curran, Dr. Justin Carville, Daniel De Chenu, Martin Healy, Kate Nolan, Aoife Herrity, Aoife Giles, David Farrell and Adrian Reilly who put up with my struggle in academic writing, I would like to also thank my family and my partner but also Seán Kelly, it is safe to say that without your friendship and camaraderie I don't think this thesis would have been possible for me to finish. Thank you to the BA (Hons) Class of 2023 for a wonderful 4 years.

## **Contents**

Lists of Illustrations.....	i
Introduction.....	ii
Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	14
Chapter 3.....	25
Conclusion.....	37
Bibliography.....	39

## List of Illustrations

**Fig. 1.** Ronald L. Haeberle, *The bodies of Vietnamese civilians who were killed by U.S. soldiers rest on a road in My Lai, Vietnam*, on March 16, 1968.

**Fig. 2.** Nick Ute, *Napalm Girl*, 1972

**Fig. 3.** Eddie Adams, *Saigon Execution*, 01 February 1968

**Fig. 4.** A. Hill/National Archives, *Prisoners eat a meal in their cell at Con Son Prison*, July 1970.

**Fig. 5.** Unknown, *Osama Bin Laden*, 24 December 1998

**Fig. 6.** CIA, Department of Defense, Pentagon, *CIA aerial view Osama bin Laden compound Abbottabad 2005*

**Fig. 7.** U.S., *Declassified satellite image of the Al Furat site*, 1998

## **Introduction**

Since the birth of photography, it has a medium that has historically struggled with its relationship with truth, both theoretically and physically. In the world of intelligence gathering and censorship, this is evidently so. In this thesis I will be attempting to explore why photographs are censored or classified in relation to intelligence, relevant areas and the importance of photography in an ever-increasing digital world. I will also be exploring the use of censorship by the U.S government.

This thesis stems from my own interest in history, military history, intel analyses and from my own experience of joining the Irish Defence Forces as an Army Reservist. This is also in line with my own photography practice as a documentary photographer interested in war photography and my love of sifting through declassified photographs and material.

In chapter one, I will be discussing the Vietnam War and photography's relationship with the media and explore the concept of Operational Security (OPSEC) alongside how the U. S's material censorship system is used in relation to all of that. I will be looking at the controversial photographic work of American combat photographer, Ron Haeberle, and the work of Vietnamese American photographer Nick Ut. Alongside those works, I will be using Eddie Adam's *Saigon Execution* to further dive into the relationship of war photography in the media and the importance of public opinion. I will be referring to the laws around censorship and will be looking at the context of society at the time of Ron Haeberle's photos from the My Lai Massacre and Nick Ut's work *Napalm Girl*.

In chapter two I will be looking at the key role of photography in intelligence gathering and the problem of photography's "truth" within the intelligence community. I will dive into the peculiar case of how the lack of photographs of Osama Bin Laden ironically



supported the evidence of his location leading to raid that killed Osama Bin Laden. Alongside that I will be looking at why photographs confirming Osama Bin Laden's death are still censored and classified to this day and the Freedom of Information requests around that. I will be referring John Tagg's text *The Burden of Representation* within the chapter.

Chapter three will be primarily focusing on the build up to the Iraq War and the problem of the idea of truth within photography and the consequences of confirmation biases when dealing with intelligence. I will be dealing with a declassified photo release by the White House prior to the war and the part it played. I will be referring to Tom Gunning's *Truth Claim* and Susan Sontag's counter arguments in her text *On Photography*. I will also be using Neil Postman's *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* and David Croteau and William Hoynes' *Media Society: Industries, Images and Audiences* to support and discuss the key issues the medium of photography has within intelligence gathering.

Please note that while I use the British spelling, where context applies, the American spelling will be used.

**Chapter One: The Vietnam War, Classifying Documents, OPSEC and  
the Media**

## Chapter One

Governments often will censor documents or photographs for a few reasons. One of the biggest reasons why that governments will use is for what the United States coined as ‘OPSEC’ - meaning ‘operational security’ to protect sensitive material that could jeopardise war time sensitive operations or national security. The term operations security was coined by the United States military during the Vietnam War. The U.S noticed that its adversaries were able to anticipate their strategies and tactics despite the Viet Cong's inability to decrypt U.S. communications traffic with the lack in capability to do so and no real intelligence collection done by the Viet Cong forces. The conclusion was that the U.S. was inadvertently revealing information to the enemy and subsequently exploited<sup>1</sup>. From its inception and throughout the Vietnam War OPSEC became mandatory for all U.S. commands throughout the world. For more on the history of OPSEC, please refer to Kristi Britt’s OPSEC: The History of the Purple Dragon in the footnote below<sup>2</sup>. President Ronald Reagan would issue the National Security Decision Directive 298 (NSDD-298) in 1988 which established the national OPSEC policy, outlining the OPSEC five step process that U.S still follows today: identify critical information; analyse the threat; analyse vulnerabilities; assess the risk and apply countermeasures. For example, any planning for a major military offensive during wartime before the operation has been executed or carried out would be classified as OPSEC, as the leaking of any details from the planning would be detrimental to the plan. However, material during wartime could be censored for another reason - public opinion.

---

<sup>1</sup> BRITT, KRISTI. 2020. “OPSEC: The History of the Purple Dragon.” Issuu. Accessed February 24, 2022. [https://issuu.com/nnsy/docs/sept\\_2020\\_sttf\\_-\\_online\\_edition/s/10941408](https://issuu.com/nnsy/docs/sept_2020_sttf_-_online_edition/s/10941408).

<sup>2</sup> BRITT, KRISTI. 2020. “OPSEC: The History of the Purple Dragon.” Issuu. Accessed February 24, 2022. [https://issuu.com/nnsy/docs/sept\\_2020\\_sttf\\_-\\_online\\_edition/s/10941408](https://issuu.com/nnsy/docs/sept_2020_sttf_-_online_edition/s/10941408).

The Vietnam War opened up initially with relatively good support from the majority of the American people primarily because of the public's fear of the rapid Communist expansion in Asia, eastern Europe that was happening. Fear mongering through the 'Red on your doorstep' propaganda campaigns from western governments primarily the United States played a major role in support for the hotter aspects of the Cold War. However, with the already unpopular 1969 draft lottery which only encouraged resentment of the Vietnam War and the draft. It strengthened the anti-war movement stateside and with the United States committing around half a million troops on the ground by 1967 and almost twice that number of allied forces in the coalition including the UK, Australia, France. Public morale and support for the war was on the decline.

...the year was to see the largest-scale battles in the conflict so far. Several massive efforts to destroy North Vietnamese forces in the area dubbed the "Iron Triangle" were tactical successes but did little to change the overall strategic picture of the war. While US commanders hoped to seize the initiative in the struggle with the various operations, events of the following year such as the Tet Offensive and the Battle of Khe Sanh would show that the enemy was far from on their heels. Despite typical reported casualty ratios of 10-1 in American favour, as the year wore on the rising casualties and lack of demonstrable victories began to erode the public's support for both the war and the president.<sup>3</sup>

Overall media coverage of the war was less than positive than what the U.S government and army command had hoped for. The war became a war of public image and as well that of an armed conflict. Photographs and media coverage of the war were rapidly turning the tide of public opinion back home stateside with the exponential rise of the anti-war sentiment.

---

<sup>3</sup> Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2017. "A Creeping Doubt: Public Support for Vietnam in 1967," A Creeping Doubt: Public Support for Vietnam in 1967 | Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Accessed April 26, 2022, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/blog/creeping-doubt-public-support-vietnam-1967>.

Ron Haeberle was a combat photographer in Vietnam. Ron Haeberle was drafted in 1966, after attending Ohio State University. He ended up in Hawaii with the Army's Public Information Office. He commented in an interview with Evelyn Theiss who was doing a piece for *FOTO* to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the My Lai Massacre in 2018 "As a photographer, I wanted to see what was happening in Vietnam for myself."<sup>4</sup>. He requested a transfer and was subsequently sent to Vietnam. When he and the 20th Infantry Regiment, 1st Battalion, Charlie Company, the Army unit he was riding with landed near the small village of My Lai on the morning of March 16, 1968. Locals did not pay them much attention initially as they entered the village; American soldiers had visited the region near the central Vietnamese coast throughout the years prior clearing the area of Vietcong before, without any prior incidents. However, an official Army investigation report would later find that within minutes of troops entering the village of My Lai, the troops opened fire on civilians. According to the report, in the hours that followed, American forces killed hundreds of old men, women and children. Investigations found that American forces had raped and tortured the village.

---

<sup>4</sup> Theiss, Evelyn. 2018. "The Photos That Caused Americans To Ask 'What Are We Doing In Vietnam?'" HuffPost. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/my-lai-massacre-ron-haeberle\\_b\\_5aa9938be4b078f94f344f8c](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/my-lai-massacre-ron-haeberle_b_5aa9938be4b078f94f344f8c).



**Fig.1** Ronald L. Haeberle, *The bodies of Vietnamese civilians who were killed by U.S. soldiers rest on a road in My Lai, Vietnam, on March 16, 1968.*

Haeberle photographed the war with two cameras; one was his army issued black and white camera and the other was his own camera which he used to produce coloured photographs. The photos taken on his Army-issued Leica camera, were more than likely subject to censorship and classification and had to pass OPSEC as none of the photographs that were taken by Ronald Haeberle that were published in the Army's newspaper depict any south Vietnamese casualties or anything that ruined the 'image' of the momentum of the war.

During the massacre Ronald Haeberle captured the atrocity with his own camera, a Nikon which he had on him that day; this meant they were not subject to the same oversight as that of which were taken on his Army issued Leica. This camera was probably not even known to the U.S Army and U.S government as it wasn't army property. He held onto

these photographs of the massacre on his personal Nikon camera which he managed to keep away from the Army and sold the photos to the media after his honourable discharge where he returned to his hometown in Ohio, to the major newspaper of Cleveland - The Plain Dealer. The Newspaper published the damning images of the atrocity from a year prior on the 20th of November of 1969. When Haeberle's shocking photographs of their atrocities were published more than a year later the pictures laid bare an appalling truth: American boys were as capable of unbridled savagery as any soldiers, anywhere. The public outcry which ensued was immense. The photographs Ronald Haeberle shot on his Nikon camera were all colour which is very interesting when you juxtapose them with the fact any photo that was shot on the Army issued Leica is in black and white, almost like the Army wanted to say this was very much figuratively 'black and white': U.S forces were the good guys fighting communism in Asia. The coloured photographs Ronald Haeberle took showing the full ugliness of the ever-growing unpopular land war in Asia. The faraway feeling of the war quickly disappeared once images of the horror of the land war in Vietnam once they reached back state side. The initial shock of the horrors did not stay however as the regularity of such photos began to desensitise the public. The general sentiment of the people about the war shifted from initial overwhelming support to calls for the government to bring the troops home.

The government and Army wanted to censor and oversee any photographs that were taken of the war for this exact reason: to avoid the publication of any photograph or media that would change the already declining public opinion of the war. Anti-war protests against the United States' involvement in the war began to increase in size and frequency drastically during 1967 a year prior to the atrocity which occurred in My Lai, culminating

in 100,000 people gathering in Washington DC in October<sup>5</sup>. By 1969 after the culmination of multiple publications of horrifying images.

Executive Order No. 12356, which was issued and signed in 1982 - is an order which prescribes a uniform system federally for classifying, safeguarding, and declassifying national security information. The war in Vietnam and incidents of which like that of Ronald Haerberle an ex-service member of the army, led to change in the United States Constitution and how the United States Army and government clamped down with material produced that would affect the momentum of operations, public morale or 'national security' with Executive Order 12958 which supersedes Executive Order No. 12356, changed United States federal law regarding classification or the censoring of material.

**Sec. 1.1. Classification Standards.**

(a) Information may be originally classified under the terms of this order only if all of the following conditions are met:

- (2) the information is owned by, produced by or for, or is under the control of the United States Government;<sup>6</sup>

The war had so many atrocities committed by US soldiers that it led to the Army forming the United States Army Criminal Investigation Division (USACID) in September of 1971, previously known as the United States Army Criminal Investigation Command (USACIDC) and is to this day the primary federal law enforcement agency of the United

---

<sup>5</sup> Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2017. "A Creeping Doubt: Public Support for Vietnam in 1967," A Creeping Doubt: Public Support for Vietnam in 1967 | Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Accessed April 26, 2022, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/blog/creeping-doubt-public-support-vietnam-1967>.

<sup>6</sup> National Archives. 2009. "The President Executive Order 13526 | National Archives." National Archives |. Accessed September 29, 2022. <https://www.archives.gov/isoo/policy-documents/cnsi-eo.html>.



States Army for investigating violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, war crimes etc.

However, the Vietnam War was not just covered by Army, military or personnel working for the D.o.D (Department of Defense). The war saw many civilian combat photographers cover the war. Nick Ut, a Vietnamese American photographer who was working for the Associated Press at that time. Nick joined AP in 1966 after his brother was killed in combat as a combat photographer in 1965. He worked in the darkroom initially, and later became a combat photographer just like his brother. Nick Ut was in Trảng Bàng in 1972 on June 7th where he captured 'Napalm Girl', a photograph now synonymous with the horrors and atrocities of the Vietnam War.



**Fig.2** Nick Ut, *Napalm Girl*, 1972

Nick later in his life recalled “I wanted to stop this war. I hated war. My brother told me “I hope one day you have a picture to stop the war””<sup>7</sup>. June 8, 1972, Nick Ut ended up taking such an image that - in his words, stopped the war. Civilian combat photographers were essentially a nightmare for the Army’s top brass and Department of Defense. Civilian journalists and photographers are not personnel of the army or government or are under the jurisdiction of the UCMJ or Uniformed Code of Military Justice which are the laws that all United States military personnel fall under and therefore do not get the same oversight nor can they be controlled by the United States military’s censors at OPSEC.

Incidentally it wasn't the government or the military that initially made it difficult for him to publish the photo and attempt to censor the photograph. Ironically it was the media that tried to censor the image. When Nick Ut sent his picture to the Associated Press’ office, the photo was rejected initially because the rules for publishing nudity in any American media were very strict at the time which still to this day has not changed much in the 21st century. In the end the editors agreed that the value of the picture and the news was higher than the reservations about nudity. The photograph caused such an issue and controversy in the United States that then President Richard Nixon doubted the image and publicly addressed the image as fake. Nick Ut later in response to a leak audio tape of President Richard Nixon who speculated whether the photograph was “fixed”, said: "The picture for me, and unquestionably for many others, could not have been more real. The photo was as authentic as the Vietnam war itself.”<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> GALE. 2016. “Associated Press Collections Online | Napalm Girl.” Gale. Accessed April 24, 2022. <https://www.gale.com/intl/v/associated-press-napalm-girl-nick-ut>.

<sup>8</sup> Wang, Yanan. 2015. “Forty-three years after the burns that made her the 'Napalm Girl', Kim Phuc gets treatment for scars.” The Washington Post. Accessed April 26, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/10/26/forty-three-years-after-the-burns-that-made-her-the-napalm-girl-kim-phuc-gets-treatment-for-scars/>.

The United States government can not easily control what the media releases to the public and the process to put a ‘gag order’ on any media or sensitive material to the public is almost impossible unless it directly impacts national security which even in that case is hard. The Vietnam War and the way it was covered the media soured the United States military’s relationship with the media and fundamentally changed how the United States military releases information to the public and its public relations tactics. It also changed the what and how service members or personnel can release media produced or obtained during their service or taken with Army issued equipment. Service members or personnel like photographers working for the Army or Department of Defense do not own the images they took. This was to help the military's approach to controlling their global and public image, and outcome of wars and future conflict. The Vietnam War is often said to be lost because the United States lost the intelligence and public image war before the war was even over.



**Fig.3** Eddie Adams, *Saigon Execution*, February 1st, 1968

Eddie Adams was in Saigon 1968 where he captured another image synonymous with the war, the execution of Nguyễn Văn Lém, a member of the Viet Cong captured during the Tet Offensive of the war by Brigadier General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, Chief of the Republic of Vietnam's National Police force. However, the initial publication of this photo caused outrage and was not understood as many people thought at first when it was published that it was the execution of a civilian or unarmed prisoner. This was another reason why the army and government wanted to scrutinise any media they took and carefully released as they did not want the wrong or unfavourable message to get out. You can release something with an intended message, but once it gets out, you cannot control what or how the public or anyone who digests it, interprets it.

One of the biggest reasons why a state or government would want to censor, classify, or delay the release or publication of media or photos has already been mentioned previously and that is timing. Governments sometimes choose to declassify or release material years after an event because the people have long since moved on about it and times and the public's reaction would have changed. In the United States classifying or censoring of a document or material works like this: the originating agency or department assigns a declassification date, by default 10 years. After 25 years, declassification review is automatic with nine narrow exceptions that allow information to remain as classified.

Decades later in 2017 the United States Army declassified 44 more photographs taken by army photographers and turned over the physical copies to the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. It is estimated that less than a quarter of military images from Vietnam were ever made available to the press. In the rare cases where they were published or broadcast, the photographers were rarely credited.



**Fig.4 A.** Hill/National Archives, *Prisoners eat a meal in their cell at Con Son Prison*, July 1970.

This photograph taken by an uncredited Army Photographer which was subsequently classified until 2017 shows Prisoners eating a meal in their cell at Con Son Prison, which would later become the site of the infamous "Tiger Cages" photographs. However, the majority of the photographs released with these were just combat photos and showed soldiers on down time or on operations. The fact that these Vietnam War photos were not originally intended for publication or for public viewing in general may be evident that the Army's photographers, units, and their commanders perhaps had less incentive to misrepresent or sanitise American military actions in theatre.

However military photography is often misunderstood and the reason why the military has photographers is also very much misunderstood. The first recorded case of war photography dates back to 1854 with Roger Fenton who was commissioned by the British government during the Crimean War<sup>9</sup>. The United States military has had designated photographic units since the United States Army's Signal Corps began taking photographs in the 1880s during the American Civil War. These units were formed and utilised to document operations, equipment, and people, as well as to create a visual record of the conflict and these 44 photos that were released and practically all the images that have been declassified from the Vietnam War are evident of this. In the 21st century and even for the latter half of the 20th century, military photography is often misunderstood as a public relations tool for the United States military and government.

The classification or censoring of material is a layered issue. Governments or relevant agencies do it for a multitude of reasons such as security purposes and also as a tactical decision to combat low morale or the change in public support or opinion on the war. However, it was also used to cover up things to attempt to stop the change of the public's opinion of the war. Vietnam was not a conflict the U.S lost due to technological or tactical failures, it was a war they lost in public opinion, a lesson the U. S would never really learn from even decades later. War can only go as far as the support for it.

---

<sup>9</sup> Library of Congress and Woody Woodis. n.d. "Fenton Crimean War Photographs." Library of Congress. Accessed April 26, 2022. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/ftncnw/background.html>.

**Chapter Two: Photography's Role in Intelligence Gathering and its  
Use in the Hunt for Osama Bin Laden.**

## Chapter Two

In this chapter I will be exploring the use of photographs in intelligence gathering and its importance. In particular, the use of photographs in the intelligence sphere that lead to Operation Neptune Spear - the raid that killed Osama Bin Laden in 2011 and the peculiar case which the lack of photographic evidence of Osama Bin Laden proved his whereabouts. I will be also looking into what accompanied by other intelligence proved his location and the subsequent steps the United States took with classifying the information and photographs post Operation Neptune Spear. The near decade long search for Osama Bin Laden revealed a lot about the capabilities and limitations of the American Intelligence community. However, unlike the failures in intelligence to correctly assess Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) which was a complete disaster which led to the death of (according to the U.S Department of Defense casualty website) 4431 American service members in the 2003 invasion of Iraq<sup>10</sup>, the hunt for Osama Bin Laden has been remembered as "a critical case in which American intelligence operations have been exposed for public discussion"<sup>11</sup>.

Immediately after September 11, 2001, the manhunt for the man responsible for the death of 2996 people began almost instantaneously. Six days later September 17, 2001, U.S President George W. Bush authorised the CIA to commence and plan operations in Afghanistan against al-Qaeda and its ally, the ruling Taliban government. Nine days later, a small unit of CIA personnel which involved intelligence officers and operators arrived to strengthen alliances with Afghan militias and gather intelligence which progressed to the

---

<sup>10</sup> U.S Department of Defense. 22. "U.S DoD Casualty Report - Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)." Defense. Accessed April 26, 2022. <https://www.defense.gov/casualty.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Dahl, Erik J. 2014. Finding Bin Laden: Lessons for a New American Way of Intelligence. Vol. No. 2. Vol. 129 vols. N.p.: The Academy of Political Science. Accessed April 26, 2022. [https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.iadt.ie/stable/43828649?searchText=the+hunt+for+bin+laden&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dthe%2Bhunt%2Bfor%2Bbin%2Bladen&ab\\_segments=0%2FSYC-6646\\_basic\\_search%2Fltr&refreqid=fastly-default%3A4d82b406eb7d64de459d9](https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.iadt.ie/stable/43828649?searchText=the+hunt+for+bin+laden&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dthe%2Bhunt%2Bfor%2Bbin%2Bladen&ab_segments=0%2FSYC-6646_basic_search%2Fltr&refreqid=fastly-default%3A4d82b406eb7d64de459d9).



U.S. military beginning operations in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, kicking off Operation Enduring Freedom. By early November, approximately 100 CIA officers and 300 U.S. Special Forces were on the ground in the country<sup>12</sup>.

By December 2001, intelligence and special operations forces had tracked Osama Bin Laden to a cave complex in Afghanistan's Spīn Ghar mountain range - Tora Bora which ensued into a weeks-long battle with al-Qaeda, where Osama Bin Laden escaped.<sup>13</sup>

In the world of intelligence gathering, the power of the photograph as evidence is almost absolute. For something to be done, actionable intelligence (intelligence which one can pursue further actions on) must be gathered to be presented as evidence for the decision-making authorities to approve or make decisions on operations like the hunt for Osama Bin Laden. However, it's often a battle in the intelligence sphere whether to take a photograph as the absolute truth or confirmation bias which leads to heavy consequences. Much like John Tagg's example of "*Quarry Hill Unhealthy Area*" in his text *The Burden of Representation* which he used to illustrate the emerging utility of photographs as evidence in the service of power - talks about how the photographs which were taken by a local medical officer of the Quarry Hill area were used by the Leeds City Council to secure appropriations from Parliament -

The Photographs became the basis for a decision by members of Parliament, many whom presumably had never actually seen the scenes depicted to knock down whole neighbourhoods and displace thousands of people from their homes.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> "*Digital Exhibition: Revealed: The Hunt for Bin Laden.*" n.d. National September 11 Memorial & Museum. Accessed November 28, 2022, <https://www.911memorial.org/learn/resources/digital-exhibitions/digital-exhibition-revealed-hunt-bin-laden>.

<sup>13</sup> *911 Memorial. n.d. "Digital Exhibition: Revealed: The Hunt for Bin Laden | National September 11 Memorial & Museum."* 911 Memorial. Accessed November 26, 2022. <https://www.911memorial.org/learn/resources/digital-exhibitions/digital-exhibition-revealed-hunt-bin-lade>

<sup>14</sup> "Home." n.d. Jstor. Accessed November 28, 2022, [https://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.iadt.ie/stable/2074223?searchText=John+tagg+the+burden+of+representation&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DJohn%2Btagg%2Bthe%2Bburden%2Bof%2Brepresentation&ab\\_segments=0%2FSYC-6646\\_basic\\_search%2Filtr&refreqid=fastl](https://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.iadt.ie/stable/2074223?searchText=John+tagg+the+burden+of+representation&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DJohn%2Btagg%2Bthe%2Bburden%2Bof%2Brepresentation&ab_segments=0%2FSYC-6646_basic_search%2Filtr&refreqid=fastl).

The debate of the photograph as being representative of the absolute truth is not just important for the philosophical argument but in the post September 11, 2001, era with its importance in intelligence gathering, has gained significance due to implications to security or geopolitical matters, which the intelligence community started to realise ever since the cold war. Photographs in the intelligence gathering community constantly fall into the debate of the notion that “the camera never lies” fallacy. On one hand you had photographs that could prove to be a once off opportunity to be proof for something actionable or evidence for case officers to prove to higher ups to green light further action, on another it could be confirmation bias from months or extended periods of searching for something in nothing. The following is a quote from an article by the NCBI (National Center for Biotechnology Information) which talks about correcting judgment in national security intelligence and the importance of recognising bias and the importance of accuracy in intel.

Intelligence organisations in government play a vital role in informing the upper echelons of policymaking, the leaders of nations and their staff who are vested with the responsibility of protecting national security and promoting national interests. Within a given nation, the collective of intelligence organisations – euphemistically known as the intelligence community or, simply, the IC – therefore has an epistemic mandate to deliver timely, relevant, and accurate information to decision makers who operate under time and accountability pressures, the fog of uncertainty, and with foreknowledge that their decisions may alter the course of history.<sup>15</sup>

The CIA utilised a process called "red teaming" on the collected intelligence to independently review the circumstantial evidence and available facts of their case that bin Laden was living at the suspected Abbottabad compound. Red teaming is the practice in which one rigorously challenges a plan, system or in this case – intelligence by adopting an adversarial method of approach. This is often done by a separate group whose sole

---

<sup>15</sup> “Correcting Judgment Correctives in National Security Intelligence.” 2018. NCBI. Accessed November 26, 2022. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6309046/>.

task is to find or poke holes in any possible way in the intelligence gathered by intelligence officers. An administration official spokesperson said, "We conducted red-team exercises and other forms of alternative analysis to check our work. No other candidate fit the bill as well as bin Laden did."<sup>16</sup>.

Ironically however, what led to the confirmation of Osama Bin Laden's location in 2011 wasn't the existence of a photograph which proved his location, it was the lack of a photo of him in a mountain of supporting evidence that did.

U.S national security officials poured over thousands of clues before zeroing in on a courier known as "the Kuwaiti" who unwittingly led them to the compound in Abbottabad where bin Laden and his family members were living.<sup>17</sup> For months, U.S CIA intelligence officers used satellite images and intelligence reports supported by photographs from the ground and drones to try and positively identify the inhabitants of the compound. The CIA concluded in September 2010, that the compound was "custom built to hide someone of significance" and that bin Laden's residence there was very likely.<sup>18</sup>

The irony of it all was the fact that the amount of gathered photographic intelligence, none of which has even a shadow of Osama Bin Laden - The very act of him trying (and succeeding multiple times) incredibly hard to avoid being detected by the camera and being surveyed - confirmed his location. Despite the fact for almost a decade, case and intelligence officers and agents tried to positively identify possible targets that they suspected to be Osama Bin Laden across the globe based on limited pictures they had of him

---

<sup>16</sup> Calabresi, Massimo. 2011. "'The CIA Gets a Rare Public Victory.'" Time. Archived from the original on May 7, 2011. Accessed November 28, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> NBC, 2011. "How the US tracked couriers to elaborate bin Laden compound." 2011. NBC News. Accessed November 27, 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna42853221>.

<sup>18</sup> Cooper, Helene. 2011. "Bin Laden Captured Through Detective Work." The New York Times. Accessed November 28, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/02/world/asia/02reconstruct-capture-osama-bin-laden.html>.

and whatever video messages Al Qaeda released of him. Even despite what U.S officials described as an extraordinarily concentrated collection effort leading up to the operation, no U.S spy agency was ever able to capture a photograph of Osama Bin Laden at the compound in Abbottabad before the raid or even a recording of the voice of the most wanted terrorist from the Abbottabad compound.



**Fig.5** Unknown, *Osama Bin Laden*, 24 December 1998

In the end the images of Osama Bin Laden were not what confirmed his hideout but it was what helped Seal Team Six operators from The Naval Special Warfare Development Group (NSWDG) confirmed live to the White House and Tactical Operations Centre that they had indeed shot and killed the most wanted terrorist in the world at the time. His own

face in a photograph used against him. The SEAL team leader radioed, "For God and country—Geronimo, Geronimo, Geronimo" and then, after being prompted by Admiral William McRaven who was operations commander sitting in the White House with the President for confirmation - "Geronimo EKIA" (enemy killed in action).<sup>19</sup> Eight hours after the raid, according to the documents released during the NSA leak to the Washington Post by Edward Snowden, a forensic intelligence laboratory run by the D.I.A - Defense Intelligence Agency, in Afghanistan had analysed DNA from Osama Bin Laden's corpse and "provided a conclusive match" confirming his identity. Within the leaked document it reveals the budget further reveals that satellites operated by the National Reconnaissance Office performed more than 387 of what it referred to as "collects" of high-resolution and infrared satellite images of the suspected compound in Abbottabad<sup>20</sup>, the month before the raid which as mentioned prior was intelligence that was "critical to prepare for the mission and contributed to the decision to approve execution."

---

<sup>19</sup> Bowden, Mark. 2012. "'The Hunt For 'Geronimo'"." Vanity Fair. Accessed 26 November 2022. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/politics/2012/11/inside-osama-bin-laden-assassination-plot>.

<sup>20</sup> Whitlock, Craig, and Barton Gellman. 2013. "To hunt Osama bin Laden, satellites watched over Abbottabad, Pakistan, and Navy SEALs." The Washington Post. Accessed 27 November 2022. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/to-hunt-osama-bin-laden-satellites-watched-over-abbottabad-pakistan-and-navy-seals/2013/08/29/8d32c1d6-10d5-11e3-b4cb-fd7ce041d814\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/to-hunt-osama-bin-laden-satellites-watched-over-abbottabad-pakistan-and-navy-seals/2013/08/29/8d32c1d6-10d5-11e3-b4cb-fd7ce041d814_story.html).



**Fig.6** CIA, Department of Defense, Pentagon, *CIA aerial view Osama bin Laden compound Abbottabad, 2005*

Prior to the raid all SEAL team six members were briefed on what Osama Bin Laden looked like from existing available photographs of the man. After the compound was cleared of hostile threats, a photograph of the man that they shot who was recognised by operators to be their target Osama Bin Laden was transmitted by the SEALs to CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, for facial recognition analysis through facial recognitions software which yielded a 90 to 95 percent likely match to pre existing photographs and data on Bin Laden<sup>21</sup>. In a way this much echoes Susan Sontag’s theory ‘to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed’<sup>22</sup> highlighted in her classic book, *On Photography* in which Susan Sontag referred to several aspects of 'photographic seeing' which remains relevant in the current context. They had to appropriate Osama Bin

---

<sup>21</sup> Zakaria, Tabassum, and Will Dunham. 2011. “U.S. tests bin Laden's DNA, used facial ID: official.”. Accessed 26 November 2022. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-binladen-dna-idUSTRE7411HJ20110502>.

<sup>22</sup> Sontag, Susan. 1979. *On Photography*. Accessed 28 January 2023. N.p.: Penguin UK.

Laden's face to confirm his identity from pre-existing photos. The use of old photographs of Osama Bin Laden to compare with the corpse which lay on the floor in a way shows evidence to the 'burden of the image'. Photographic identification taken of a person from a past moment in time to identify someone who could look slightly different is very much of importance to place upon a photograph.

Immediately after all operations related to Osama Bin Laden had concluded all the images, documents and materials from the raid have remained heavily classified. Even though the raid on the Abbottabad compound has been described in great detail by U.S. officials, no physical evidence constituting "proof of death" such as the photo sent to CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, for facial recognition analysis - has been offered to the public, neither to journalists nor to independent third parties who have relentlessly requested this information through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

...AP (Associated Press) filed a Freedom of Information Act request for the photographic and video evidence taken during the raid on bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The organisation's FOIA request included a reminder of the president's campaign pledge and a plea to be more transparent than his predecessor. "The Obama White House 'pledged to be the most transparent government in U.S. history,'" wrote the AP, "and to comply much more closely with the Freedom of Information Act than the Bush administration did."<sup>23</sup>

The photographs of the raid and in particular of Osama Bin Laden's body are possibly to be heavily classified to avoid remaining pocket members of Al Qaeda to use as martyr material or inspire more anger to inspire more radicals to follow in the footsteps of Osama Bin Laden. The President was adamant that he would not release any of the footage

---

<sup>23</sup> Hudson, John. 2011. "The Associated Press's Case for Releasing the Bin Laden Photo." The Wire. Accessed November 26, 2022. <https://web.archive.org/web/20150518154323/http://www.thewire.com/politics/2011/05/associated-press-case-releasing-bin-laden-photo/37510/>.

related to the raid, including video of Osama Bin Laden's deep sea burial and photographs of his slain corpse used to positively identify him. When President Barack Obama was asked by Steve Kroft on 60 Minutes he replied: "We don't trot out this stuff as trophies, I think that given the graphic nature of these photos, it would create some national security risk."<sup>24</sup>. President Obama insisted that releasing bin Laden's photograph violates common decency and puts U.S troops in harm's way.

What is interesting in this case is that once again the lack of photographic proof of Osama Bin Laden - this time ones confirming his death. This sparked some kind of response however, this time negatively for the U.S government as it resulted in the unforeseen outcome of the rise conspiracy theories, which began with September 11th, 2001, itself amongst fringe groups with severe distrust of the U.S government. Photographs and documents of Operation Neptune Spear have also been heavily classified. According to a draft report by the Pentagon's inspector general, the previously mentioned Admiral William McRaven, the top special operations commander, ordered the Department of Defense to first send all files on the operations to the CIA before purging and expunging all files on the Bin Laden raid from its computer systems.<sup>25</sup> According to the Pentagon, this was done to protect the identities of the Navy SEALs involved in the raid for future operations and to prevent retaliatory attacks<sup>26</sup>.

---

<sup>24</sup> Hudson, John. 2011. "The Associated Press's Case for Releasing the Bin Laden Photo." The Wire. Accessed 24 November 2022. <https://web.archive.org/web/20150518154323/http://www.thewire.com/politics/2011/05/associated-press-case-releasing-bin-laden-photo/37510/>.

<sup>25</sup> Lardner, Richard. 2013. "Bin Laden Raid Records Shielded From Public In Secret Move." TPM. Accessed 26 November 2022. <https://archive.ph/2013.07.17-081757/http://talkingpointsmemo.com/news/bin-laden-raid-records-shielded-from-public-in-secret-move.php?ref=fpb>.

<sup>26</sup> Harper, Lauren. 2013. "The Shell Game" and the Osama bin Laden Documents." UNREDACTED. Accessed 26 November 2022. <https://unredacted.com/2013/07/08/the-shell-game-and-the-osama-bin-laden-documents/>.



However, many dispute the fact this reason released by the Pentagon is simply not the case as the DOD redacts all current soldier names and information from the records it processes and releases under Freedom of Information Act. What the transfer of these files prior to purging from the DOD to the CIA did was ensure that the files would be placed in the CIA's operational records, a records system that due to the 1984 CIA Operational Files exemption is not subject to the FOIA and is a black hole for anyone trying to access the files. The move in turn prevents the public from accessing the official full detailed record about the raid and bypasses several federal level records keeping procedures. The CIA denies this being the case noting that the Bin Laden mission was overseen by CIA Director Leon Panetta, the SEALs were effectively assigned to work temporarily for the CIA, which has presidential authority to conduct covert operations outside of the borders of the United States. An agency spokesman Preston Golson said in an emailed statement.

Documents related to the raid were handled in a manner consistent with the fact that the operation was conducted under the direction of the CIA director, records of a CIA operation such as the (Bin Laden) raid, which were created during the conduct of the operation by persons acting under the authority of the CIA Director, are CIA records.<sup>27</sup>

The photographs and documents relating to Operation Neptune Spear and all information of all intelligence gathered leading the CIA led SEAL Team Six operation which killed Osama Bin Laden currently to date remain in that Freedom of Information Act blackhole within the CIA's operations files record.

---

<sup>27</sup> Lardner, Richard. 2013. "Bin Laden Raid Records Shielded From Public In Secret Move." TPM. Accessed November 26, 2022. <https://archive.ph/2013.07.17-081757/http://talkingpointsmemo.com/news/bin-laden-raid-records-shielded-from-public-in-secret-move.php?ref=fpb>.

**Chapter Three: The Truth Claim of Photography and the Problem it  
Posed in Intelligence Gathering Leading up to the Iraq War.**

## Chapter Three

In this chapter I will further examine the relation of the idea of truth in photography and intelligence gathering and declassification.

The term “Truth Claim” in theoretical terms, is a formally known proposition or statement that a particular person or belief system holds to be true. Within photography, this term is used by Tom Gunning to describe and challenge the prevalent belief that traditional photographs accurately depict reality. Tom Gunning states that “the truth claim relies on both the indexicality, or the physical relationship between the object photographed and the resulting image, and the visual accuracy of photographs”<sup>28</sup>. In semiotics, anthropology, linguistics, and philosophy of language, the term indexicality is the phenomenon of a sign pointing to some object in the context in which it occurs. For example, Roland Barthes refers to the index as a sign that bears physical connection to the thing that it represents, like smoke to fire<sup>29</sup>. Signs had both a signifier, the physical form of the sign as we perceive it and the signified, which is the meaning that is interpreted. This is an important point to consider when authorities declassify photographs as one may and should question the reasoning or motive behind declassifying a photograph and the usage of photos for intelligence gathering.

In chapter two I briefly mentioned the failures in intelligence to correctly assess Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction which resulted in a complete disaster that was the 2003

---

<sup>28</sup> Gunning, Tom. n.d. “What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs.” Nordicom. Accessed January 17, 2023. [https://www.nordicom.gu.se/sites/default/files/kapitel-pdf/157\\_039-050.pdf](https://www.nordicom.gu.se/sites/default/files/kapitel-pdf/157_039-050.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> Orlando, Tony. n.d. “A First Look at Communication Theory.” Dawson College. Accessed January 17, 2023. <https://www.dawsoncollege.qc.ca/ai/wp-content/uploads/sites/180/22-Barthes-Semiotics.pdf>.

invasion and war of Iraq which would subsequently and unintentionally change the geopolitical landscape of the region to this day. In this chapter I will examine the lead up to the war and said intelligence failure mentioned before.

In 2002, October 7th for example, the White House declassified two photos showing the site where prior to 1991, Iraq was building the Al Furat gas centrifuge manufacturing facility<sup>30</sup>. This facility, which was under construction at the time of the Persian Gulf War, would have been Iraq's main site for making gas centrifuges in the 1990s.

---

<sup>30</sup> Albright, David. 2002. "Background on the Iraqi Facility Shown in White House Photos Released October 7, 2002." Institute for Science and International Security. Accessed 16th January 2023.



**Fig. 7** U.S, *Declassified satellite image of the Al Furat site, 1998*

American and the western intelligence communities were unaware of this site prior to the Gulf War, and the site was not bombed. It was only discovered in the fall of 1991 by the inspection process western countries had demanded Iraq to let in. This site was inspected many times between 1991 and 1998. During this period the site was involved in repairing military equipment.

The White House stated that the first photo is from 1998 and shows Al Furat with a key unfinished building, previously designated as B01 by the Iraqis. This building was largely a shell in 1998 through what could be seen. The second photo of declassified release

shows a more finished looking B01 dated in 2002 but with no more indication of the specific purpose of the building. The White House release claimed that this was further evidence that Iraq has reinitiated its gas centrifuge program. The photos were rather symbolic after the fact as while they were black and white due to the technology used (which in this case is likely an infrared camera), paired with the context and claim by the U.S government, the black and white was rather representative of the “truth” they claimed being plain and simple. This was an attempt to utilize photographs to justify the U.S narrative of Iraq’s continued development of weapons of mass destruction. David Croteau and William Hoynes suggest that the prevalence of photographic images has blurred the distinction between image and reality, referring to pseudo-events, or as Daniel Boorstin put it – such as events like press conferences, televised political debates, or 'photo opportunities'<sup>31</sup> - only exist to create images or in this case, narratives through the use of declassification. Neil Postman also argues that the photograph has redefined society's understanding of information and truth: "Truth is in the seeing, not in the thinking."<sup>32</sup>. Neil Postman suggests within his book, *Technopoly: the surrender of culture to technology* that the proliferation of the use and consumption of photography led to the replacement of language with images as "our dominant means for constructing, understanding, and testing reality"<sup>33</sup>.

The move to declassify these two photos at the time were politically motivated albeit not truly understood whether it was purely to justify accusing Saddam Hussein's regime of developing weapons of mass destruction, act as a precursing justification of the invasion

---

<sup>31</sup> Croteau, David, and William Hoynes. 2003. *Media Society: Industries, Images and Audiences*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press. Pp. 309 - 310, Accessed 17th January 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Croteau, David, and William Hoynes. 2003. *Media Society: Industries, Images and Audiences*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press. pp 309, Accessed 17th January 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Postman, Neil. 1993. *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. Page 68, N.p. : Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Accessed 12th January 2023.

of Iraq the following year in March or it was simply a move on the political chess board to tell Saddam Hussein, his regime and his ambitions for weapons of mass destruction that the Americans were watching at all times. The building of the Al Furat facility and the centrifuges were vital step to Saddam Hussein's ambitions for being able to develop nuclear weapons. For more regarding the significance of the Al Furat site and the centrifuges refer to "*Background on Al Furat as Envisioned by Iraq in the 1980s*" By David Albright in the footnote below <sup>34</sup>. The problem with the first one is that none of the photos were strong enough to provide justification for the invasion that would ensue 6 months later as the photos and the White House narrative provide weak support for any military action against Iraq outside the already existing UN Security Council track. In the end, the photos provided dramatic confirmation for the need to implement re-invigorated and strengthened foreign third party inspections within Iraq. Inspectors could subsequently relatively rapidly investigate any activities at Al Furat.

In regard to the point of declassifying these photos so that the Iraqis and the Saddam Hussein regime that the U.S was watching, Iraq knew that intelligence agencies would recognize immediately the potential significance of any resumed construction of this building. Any resumed inspection regime or military campaign such as (at the time) potential strategic strikes against important key targets would focus promptly on adding building B01 to a target list. Saddam Hussein was relatively cautious about preventing something like the airstrike in 1981 conducted by the Israeli Air Force on the 7th of June. The Israelis targeted and destroyed an unfinished Iraqi nuclear reactor located 17 kilometres southeast of Baghdad, Iraq<sup>35</sup> which set back Iraq's nuclear ambitions by a

---

<sup>34</sup> Albright, David. 2002. "Background on Al Furat as Envisioned by Iraq in the 1980s." Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS). Accessed 17th January 2023. <https://isis-online.org/publications/iraq/alfurat.html>.

<sup>35</sup> BBC, 1981. "1981: Israel bombs Baghdad nuclear reactor." 1981. BBC. Accessed 17th January 2023. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/june/7/newsid\\_3014000/3014623.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/june/7/newsid_3014000/3014623.stm).

decade. This strike occurred a year after Iran's partially successful attempt prior to the Israeli operation, which had caused minor damage, with the damage having been subsequently repaired by French technicians. The decision to strike was supported by reconnaissance photos supplied by the United States' Central Intelligence and Military Intelligence along with other branch agencies, specifically using the KH-11 KENNEN satellite. So, by this point Saddam Hussein was more than aware of western eyes keeping an eye on the facility.

But the White House declassification of those two photos to support upcoming military action against Iraq the following year, we go back to Neil Postman's argument that the photograph has redefined society's understanding of information and truth especially within the realm of intelligence gathering or classifying of photographs. One should not draw assumptions from the photograph with the idea of the photograph claiming truth. Sontag claims that photography's perceived ability to give information results in the bureaucratic organization of modern states<sup>36</sup>. Within this context, it's hard to claim further progress and the use of the site, such as the B01 building and what was happening under the roofs with just aerial photographs. Once again, the photograph does not state the truth or represent accurately as the "truth" within the photograph is what context we assign it, in this case the American intelligence community and U.S White House assigned the context of the Iraqis building a facility that will be intended to further development of Iraq's nuclear weapon ambitions. The "truth" claim of a photograph in this context is rather ironic as these two pictures by themselves and the indexicality assigned to the photographs alone seem to be on shaky ground. The photograph has an 'inability' as

---

<sup>36</sup> Sontag, Susan. 1977. *On photography*. Pp. 5-21. Accessed January 27, 2023, N.p.: Penguin UK.



Sontag describes, to capture enough information about its subject to be considered a representation of reality. She states, "The camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses...only what which narrates can make us understand."<sup>37</sup>.

Yet what would ironically verify the veracity of the claims by the U.S White House would be more photographs, specifically from the inside. These photographs which one should and must assume are among many taken by U.S intelligence. In a way this release by the White House shows the U.S' intent to control a narrative, you can't help but wonder 'why specifically these two photos'. One reason photos may be selectively chosen to be declassified ties in with the national security aspect talked about in previous chapters. According to the United States Naval War College (USNWC)<sup>38</sup> there are five main ways of collecting intelligence that are often referred to as "intelligence collection disciplines" or the "INTs." which in this case is specific to five main agencies in the United States: Director of National Intelligence - Open Source Center (DNI/OSC), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), National Security Agency (NSA) and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA). These make up for the most part what is referred to as the U.S intelligence community (with exception to some U.S agencies that deal with domestic affairs in intel such as the FBI).

Each individual agency deals with more or less a specific discipline in intelligence gathering but the one that is relevant to the point of the possibility of why more photographs weren't released in support of the two aerial photos released is what the Central Intelligence Agency primarily deals with. The intelligence community refers to this discipline as Human Intelligence (HUMINT) which is the collection of information

---

<sup>37</sup> Sontag, Susan. 1977. *On photography*. P. 23. Accessed January 27, 2023, N.p.: Penguin UK.

<sup>38</sup> United States Naval War College. n.d. "Types of Intelligence Collection - Intelligence Studies." LibGuides. Accessed January 27, 2023. <https://usnwc.libguides.com/c.php?g=494120&p=3381426>.

from human sources. The collection may be done openly, or it may be done through clandestine or covert means (espionage). Within the United States, HUMINT collection is the FBI's responsibility. Beyond U.S. borders, HUMINT is generally collected by the CIA, but also by other U.S. components abroad. Human Intelligence can be collected generally by two methods, agents sent to collect intelligence via infiltration or other means through short or long term or a foreign asset/ informant that is already there. One of the reasons the United States government may not want to release any other supporting photographs (on the basis that such photographs exist) is to protect foreign assets or agents as those photographs would confirm to the Iraqis that U.S intelligence got inside their facility or that the Iraqis had a mole problem which would lead to the U.S losing a valuable intel asset. This however is based on the assumption that such photographs existed to support the truth or proof which the White House proclaimed in 2002. Governments or relevant agencies don't just declassify things for no reason. And vice versa as highlighted above, many reasons why something may remain classified like security purposes mentioned previously or also as a tactical decision to change or persuade public support or opinion prior to things like upcoming actions such as invasion the following year.

The primary rationalization for the Iraq War was articulated by a joint resolution of the United States Congress known as the Iraq Resolution. The U.S claimed the intent was to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, to end Saddam Hussein's support for terrorism in the region, and to free the Iraqi people.

What falls as terribly ironic and unfortunate at the cost of roughly 300,000 civilians<sup>39</sup> and 4,809 coalition service members (thereafter which led to the war in Afghanistan and its subsequent deaths) is after all the claims from the United States and George W. Bush's administration claimed Saddam Hussein's regime had weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) which was one of the two main reasons for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Unlike the photographs that were released in October prior to the invasion, the matter seemed to be not as black and white and the White House's truth claim from the year before and the veracity of photography and truth within the United States' intelligence community at large lost credibility. In January 2004, the former top U.S weapons inspector David Kay, told Congress: "We were almost all wrong."<sup>40</sup> and the following year a presidential commission concluded in March of 2005 that "not one bit"<sup>41</sup> of pre-war intelligence on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction panned out. While Iraq under Saddam Hussein's regime had attempted several weapons of mass destruction projects (such as the previous in progress nuclear facility taken out by the Israelis in 1981 mentioned before), the Bush administration would end up conceding its pre-war arguments about extensive stockpiles of chemical, biological, and even nuclear weaponry in Saddam's Iraq appear to have been mistaken. Other than proving the fact these buildings existed, the aerial photos the White House released proved nothing further as not much action was taken in direct relation to the claim internationally. The entire war and invasion were built on confirmation bias, or possibly it was just based on a need to do something post September 11th. Perhaps it was true that Iraq wanted to use the site to make centrifuges and further nuclear development,

---

<sup>39</sup> WATSON INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS. n.d. "Iraqi Civilians | Costs of War." The Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs. Accessed January 26, 2023. <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/civilians/iraqi>.

<sup>40</sup> CNN. 2022. "Transcript: David Kay at Senate hearing." CNN. Accessed January 26, 2023. <http://edition.cnn.com/2004/US/01/28/kay.transcript/>.

<sup>41</sup> CNN. 2022. "Transcript: David Kay at Senate hearing." CNN. Accessed January 26, 2023. <http://edition.cnn.com/2004/US/01/28/kay.transcript/>.

only removing equipment and evacuating the site in the event of resumed inspections or military activities. However, attempting to hide past centrifuge activities at the site from inspectors is far too much risk for the reward.

This wasn't the only blunder related to photographic evidence the Bush administration would face relating to the Iraq war, however. In another rather ironic manner where the Bush administration and U.S intelligence agencies tried to use the photograph as proof of truth and failed, April 28th, 2004, saw the U.S - run Abu Ghraib prison comes into the spotlight as evidence of prisoner abuse inside Abu Ghraib backed by photographic evidence becomes public<sup>42</sup>. The pictures were leaked by a U.S reservist, Joe Darby<sup>43</sup>. The Abu Ghraib scandal broke on 28 April 2004 when the photos were revealed on CBS News. The pictures showed naked prisoners heaped into a pyramid, forced to simulate sexual acts and adopt humiliating poses. This scandal among many during the war, supported by the photos added to the already dwindling public support for the war and Bush administration once again proving that the United States government can not easily control what the media releases to the public or put a 'gag order' on any media or sensitive material to the public just like incidents discussed in chapter one, repeating what happened in Vietnam. This was one of many incidents where photography as a tool can benefit someone but in the very same stroke "backfire" against them.

The Abu Ghraib photos were shocking to the public but over time outrage faded. Despite widespread and rather short rejection and disgust of those images from the wider public, a disturbing number of voters later said yes when asked if torture was ever justified from

---

<sup>42</sup> Haghightajoo, Fatemeh, and Mohammad Ayatollahi. n.d. "Timeline: The Iraq War." Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed January 28, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/iraq-war>.

<sup>43</sup> Mullen, Sophie. 2018. "Blowing The Whistle: Abu Ghraib and Joe Darby: Leeds Human Rights Journal." Leeds Human Rights Journal. Accessed 28 January 2023. <https://hrj.leeds.ac.uk/2018/12/16/blowing-the-whistle-abu-ghraib-and-joe-darby/>.

findings by Project on Government Oversight<sup>44</sup> after the 2009 ban on torture in military interrogations by Barack Obama. One poll in 2018 suggested two-thirds of Americans think torture can be justified. The American and to an extent people of the 'west' saw shocking photos too often relating to the war. As Sontag argues, that through repeated capturing and viewing reality through photographs, their subjects can become less real<sup>45</sup>. Distance seems built into the very experience of looking at photographs. The sheer volume and frequency of horrific images throughout the world in the media has produced an, as Susan Sontag writes in her text *On Photography*, "familiarity with atrocity, making the horrible seem more ordinary – making it appear familiar, remote ... inevitable"<sup>46</sup>. This in a way sometimes, may dampen the repercussions but governments or agencies are more likely to retain 'sensitive' photographs and documents under classification until deemed appropriate to release or people will fight to keep it under lock and key whether for legitimate purposes such as protecting assets and national security or to attempt to cover up things that may lead to repercussions such as public outcry. The reasonings vary and are multi-layered. However, whether for control of the narrative or protecting national security and resources or assets, the classification and declassification of material is a double-edged blade that isn't as simple as 'black' and 'white'.

---

<sup>44</sup> McKelvey, Tara. 2018. "I hated myself for Abu Ghraib abuse." BBC. Accessed 29 January, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/44031774>.

<sup>45</sup> Sontag, Susan. 1977. *On photography*. Pp. 20–21. Accessed 28 January 2023. N.p.: Penguin UK.

<sup>46</sup> Sontag, Susan. 1979. *On photography*. Pp.20-21. Accessed 28 January 2023. N.p.: Penguin UK.

## Conclusion

The idea of photograph's truth is something that constantly is debated still in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The debate remains relevant more than ever today in the digital age especially as the battlefield has shifted from traditional domains like land, sea, and air to new domains as space and cyber<sup>47</sup>. The advances and prevalence of the ability to doctor digital media has also shifted the debated about photography's so-called truth to a new frontier with more considerations than even just a decade prior.

Photography's perceived "truth" is powerful but blindly so, to use the analogy again – it is a double-edged sword. From exposing the horrors of the war in Vietnam and changing the tide of the war for the Americans, the horrific failures in intelligence leading up to the Iraq war to the use of photography and it's theoretical debate to find and confirm Osama Bin Laden's location. Photography has proved that it is a tool in intelligence gathering that should be used in conjunction with other means but not mainly relied on solely to prove something without better context and rigorous examination. Without methods like red teaming, or similar examination of what we take for granted as truth, it leads to disasters like the Iraq War which, decades on still has unmeasurable consequence on the region and by in large the rest of the world.

Governments and organisations know and recognise the weight of the perceived truth of a photograph or piece of media in general but do not truly seem to understand it as history tends to repeat itself regarding how the likes of the U.S government censors or declassifies documents. But the use of the system censorship in this context can benefit or backfire on a government. It is important to recognise that the word censorship has a very negative

---

<sup>47</sup> Springer, Paul. n.d. "The 5th Dimension of Operations: A Case for Acknowledgement of a Separate Cyber Domain." Canadian Forces College. Accessed February 26, 2023. <https://www.cfc.forces.gc.ca/259/290/317/305/busbridge.pdf>.

connotation in today's world. For better or for worse censorship through the classification system is important and vital especially in today's landscape where information is readily and easily accessible but only when for the right reasons. One should recognise its importance for certain cases, like security or retaliation prevention like seen in the case of photos surrounding the death of Osama Bin Laden. One's definition of a "right reason" changes from person to person and that's why Like anything, it can be misused or abused and there will always be people who will misuse and abuse something originally designed with good intent. Photography also has this with itself.

In terms of photography's role within the structure of intelligence, it has proved to be a medium which can speak volumes but just as quickly lose its voice when the idea of truth within a photograph is still something intelligence communities around the globe continue to struggle with, understand and endlessly debate. But it seems that the concept of context and supporting mediums in conjunction to primarily paint a larger picture and removing confirmation biases from the process as much as possible is vital when discussing the use of photography as evidence or proof. Photography is here to stay in the intelligence gathering sphere and will always be key in the age of information. But the validity and weight of it must always and continued to be debated on a case-by-case basis in order to utilise effectively and correctly.

## **Bibliography**

Albright, David. 2002. "Background on Al Furat as Envisioned by Iraq in the 1980s." Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS). Accessed 17th January 2023. <https://isis-online.org/publications/iraq/alfurat.html>.

Bowden, Mark. 2012. "'The Hunt For 'Geronimo'" Vanity Fair. Accessed 26 November 2022. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/politics/2012/11/inside-osama-bin-laden-assassination-plot>.

BRITT, KRISTI. 2020. "OPSEC: The History of the Purple Dragon." Issuu. Accessed February 24, 2022. [https://issuu.com/nnsy/docs/sept\\_2020\\_sttf\\_-\\_online\\_edition/s/10941408](https://issuu.com/nnsy/docs/sept_2020_sttf_-_online_edition/s/10941408).

Calabresi, Massimo. 2011. "'The CIA Gets a Rare Public Victory.'" Time. Archived from the original on May 7, 2011. Accessed November 28, 2022.

CNN. 2022. "Transcript: David Kay at Senate hearing." CNN. Accessed January 26, 2023. <http://edition.cnn.com/2004/US/01/28/kay.transcript/>.



Cooper, Helene. 2011. "Bin Laden Captured Through Detective Work." *The New York Times*. Accessed November 28, 2022.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/02/world/asia/02reconstruct-capture-osama-bin-laden.html>

NCBI, 2018. "Correcting Judgment Correctives in National Security Intelligence." Accessed November 26, 2022.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6309046/>.

Croteau, David, and William Hoynes. 2003. *Media Society: Industries, Images and Audiences*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press. Pp. 309 - 310, Accessed 17th January 2023.

Dahl, Erik J. 2014. *Finding Bin Laden: Lessons for a New American Way of Intelligence*. Vol. No. 2. Vol. 129 vols. N.p.: The Academy of Political Science.

Accessed April 26, 2022. [https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.iadt.ie/stable/43828649?searchText=the+hunt+for+bin+laden&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dthe%2Bhunt%2Bfor%2Bbin%2Bladen&ab\\_segments=0%2FSYC-6646\\_basic\\_search%2Fltr&refreqid=fastly-default%3A4d82b406eb7d64de459d9](https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.iadt.ie/stable/43828649?searchText=the+hunt+for+bin+laden&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dthe%2Bhunt%2Bfor%2Bbin%2Bladen&ab_segments=0%2FSYC-6646_basic_search%2Fltr&refreqid=fastly-default%3A4d82b406eb7d64de459d9).

GALE. 2016. "Associated Press Collections Online | Napalm Girl." Gale. Accessed April 24, 2022. <https://www.gale.com/intl/v/associated-press-napalm-girl-nick-ut>.

Gunning, Tom. n.d. "What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs." Nordicom. Accessed January 17, 2023. [https://www.nordicom.gu.se/sites/default/files/kapitel-pdf/157\\_039-050.pdf](https://www.nordicom.gu.se/sites/default/files/kapitel-pdf/157_039-050.pdf).

Haghighatjoo, Fatemeh, and Mohammad Ayatollahi. n.d. "Timeline: The Iraq War." Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed January 28, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/iraq-war>.

Harper, Lauren. 2013. "'The Shell Game' and the Osama bin Laden Documents." UNREDACTED. Accessed 26 November 2022. <https://unredacted.com/2013/07/08/the-shell-game-and-the-osama-bin-laden-documents/>.

"Home." n.d. Jstor. Accessed November 28, 2022, [https://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.iadt.ie/stable/2074223?searchText=John+tagg+the+burden+of+representation&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DJohn%2Btagg%2Bthe%2Bburden%2Bof%2Brepresentation&ab\\_segments=0%2F5YC-6646\\_basic\\_search%2Ffltr&refreqid=fastl](https://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.iadt.ie/stable/2074223?searchText=John+tagg+the+burden+of+representation&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DJohn%2Btagg%2Bthe%2Bburden%2Bof%2Brepresentation&ab_segments=0%2F5YC-6646_basic_search%2Ffltr&refreqid=fastl).

Hudson, John. 2011. "The Associated Press's Case for Releasing the Bin Laden Photo." The Wire. Accessed 24 November 2022.  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20150518154323/http://www.thewire.com/politics/2011/05/associated-press-case-releasing-bin-laden-photo/37510/>.

BBC. 1981. "1981: Israel bombs Baghdad nuclear reactor." Accessed 17th January 2023.  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/june/7/newsid\\_3014000/3014623.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/june/7/newsid_3014000/3014623.stm).

Lardner, Richard. 2013. "Bin Laden Raid Records Shielded From Public In Secret Move." TPM. Accessed November 26, 2022. <https://archive.ph/2013.07.17-081757/http://talkingpointsmemo.com/news/bin-laden-raid-records-shielded-from-public-in-secret-move.php?ref=fpb>.

Library of Congress and Woody Woodis. n.d. "Fenton Crimean War Photographs." Library of Congress. Accessed April 26, 2022.  
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/ftncnw/background.html>.

McKelvey, Tara. 2018. "I hated myself for Abu Ghraib abuse." BBC. Accessed 29 January ,2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/44031774>.

911 Memorial. n.d. “*Digital Exhibition: Revealed: The Hunt for Bin Laden* | National September 11 Memorial & Museum.” 911 Memorial. Accessed November 26, 2022.  
<https://www.911memorial.org/learn/resources/digital-exhibitions/digital-exhibition-revealed-hunt-bin-lade>

Mullen, Sophie. 2018. “Blowing The Whistle: Abu Ghraib and Joe Darby: Leeds Human Rights Journal.” Leeds Human Rights Journal. Accessed 28 January 2023.  
<https://hrj.leeds.ac.uk/2018/12/16/blowing-the-whistle-abu-ghraib-and-joe-darby/>.

National Archives. 2009. “The President Executive Order 13526 | National Archives.” National Archives |. Accessed September 29, 2022.  
<https://www.archives.gov/isoo/policy-documents/cnsi-eo.html>.

National September 11 Memorial & Museum. “*Digital Exhibition: Revealed: The Hunt for Bin Laden*.” n.d. Accessed November 28, 2022,  
<https://www.911memorial.org/learn/resources/digital-exhibitions/digital-exhibition-revealed-hunt-bin-laden>.

NBC, 2011. “How the US tracked couriers to elaborate Bin Laden compound.” 2011. NBC News. Accessed November 27, 2022.  
<https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna42853221>.

Orlando, Tony. n.d. "A First Look at Communication Theory." Dawson College. Accessed January 17, 2023. <https://www.dawsoncollege.qc.ca/ai/wp-content/uploads/sites/180/22-Barthes-Semiotics.pdf>.

Postman, Neil. 1993. *Technopoly : The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. Page 68, N.p. : Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Accessed 12th January 2023.

Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2017. "A Creeping Doubt: Public Support for Vietnam in 1967," A Creeping Doubt: Public Support for Vietnam in 1967 | Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Accessed April 26, 2022, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/blog/creeping-doubt-public-support-vietnam-1967>.

Sontag, Susan. 1979. On photography. Pp.20-21. Accessed 28 January 2023. N.p.: Penguin UK.

Springer, Paul. n.d. "The 5th Dimension of Operations: A Case for Acknowledgement of a Separate Cyber Domain." Canadian Forces College. Accessed February 26, 2023. <https://www.cfc.forces.gc.ca/259/290/317/305/busbridge.pdf>

Theiss, Evelyn. 2018. "The Photos That Caused Americans To Ask 'What Are We Doing In Vietnam?'" HuffPost. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/my-lai-massacre-ron-haeberle\\_b\\_5aa9938be4b078f94f344f8c](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/my-lai-massacre-ron-haeberle_b_5aa9938be4b078f94f344f8c).

United States Naval War College. n.d. "Types of Intelligence Collection - Intelligence Studies." LibGuides. Accessed January 27, 2023.

<https://usnwc.libguides.com/c.php?g=494120&p=3381426>.

U.S Department of Defense. 22. "U.S DoD Casualty Report - Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)." Defense. Accessed April 26, 2022. <https://www.defense.gov/casualty.pdf>.

WATSON INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS. n.d. "Iraqi Civilians | Costs of War." The Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs.

Accessed January 26, 2023.

<https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/civilians/iraqi>.

Wang, Yanan. 2015. "Forty-three years after the burns that made her the 'Napalm Girl', Kim Phuc gets treatment for scars." The Washington Post. Accessed April 26, 2022.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/10/26/forty-three-years-after-the-burns-that-made-her-the-napalm-girl-kim-phuc-gets-treatment-for-scars/>.

Whitlock, Craig, and Barton Gellman. 2013. "To hunt Osama bin Laden, satellites watched over Abbottabad, Pakistan, and Navy SEALs." *The Washington Post*. Accessed 27 November, 2022. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/to-hunt-osama-bin-laden-satellites-watched-over-abbottabad-pakistan-and-navy-seals/2013/08/29/8d32c1d6-10d5-11e3-b4cb-fd7ce041d814\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/to-hunt-osama-bin-laden-satellites-watched-over-abbottabad-pakistan-and-navy-seals/2013/08/29/8d32c1d6-10d5-11e3-b4cb-fd7ce041d814_story.html).

Zakaria, Tabassum, and Will Dunham. 2011. "U.S. tests bin Laden's DNA, used facial ID: official." Accessed 26 November 2022. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-binladen-dna-idUSTRE7411HJ20110502>