

PHOTOGRAPHS AND CULTURAL CHANGE

On September 20, 1943, *LIFE* magazine published a photograph by George Strock of three American soldiers lying dead on a beach in Papua, New Guinea. Along with the photograph ran a commentary which included the following: “Why print this picture, anyway, of three American boys dead upon an alien shore? . . . words are never enough . . . words do not exist to make us see, or know, or feel what it is like, what actually happens.” Prior to this, photographs of American war casualties were not shown, but *LIFE*’s publication of this photo came from the top down. In the book, *100 Photographs that Changed the World*, from the publishers of *LIFE*, we read:

Franklin D. Roosevelt was convinced that Americans had grown too complacent about the war, so he lifted the ban on images depicting U.S. casualties. Strock’s picture and others that followed in *LIFE* and elsewhere had the desired effect. The public, shocked by combat’s grim realities, was instilled with yet greater resolve to win the war.

Photographs are powerful, and for the last 100 years and more, photography has shaped and informed public opinion like almost nothing else. More specifically, photographs have been instrumental in the exposure and elimination of some of modern history’s most notorious injustices.

Here are a few examples.

In 1908, the National Child Labor Committee hired Lewis Hine to capture photographs of some of the nation’s two million children working in mines, mills and on the streets. His 1910 “Breaker Boys” photograph from South Pittston, PA, is one of the pictures that helped “[sway] the public in a way cold statistics had not,” and led to the enactment of laws banning child labor.

In 1930, one of the most famous lynching photos was taken in Marion, IN. *LIFE*’s *100 Photographs that Changed the World* tells us that “lynching photos were made into postcards designed to boost white supremacy, but the tortured bodies and grotesquely happy crowds ended up revolting as many as they scared.”

In 1955, a fourteen-year-old black boy named Emmett Till, visiting a cousin in Money, MS, was dragged from his bed, brutally beaten and murdered by two white men. His killers were both acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury. Emmett’s mother Mamie Till Bradley’s decision to have an open-casket funeral for her son, and the resulting photograph published by *Jet* magazine “was a spark that helped mobilize the civil rights movement”. Robin Kelley, chair of the history department at New York University, reflects on the events this way.

Mamie Till Bradley’s decision to have an open-casket funeral was incredibly courageous and, in fact, it was the thing that was -- even more than his murder -- an emotional catalyst for many people who were drawn to this incident, largely because she made the decision to allow the world to see what these white supremacists did to her son, and it became an international event, and that image of his face was marked on just about every single black person, of that generation, let alone people in Europe and Africa and Asia who saw the same images. I know for me personally, when I first saw those images, years later, it was shocking to me. It was one of those unforgettable images that I think that every generation, years afterwards, will never

forget.

Three months after Emmett's murder, the Montgomery bus boycott began, and photographs continued to play a large role in documenting the injustices visited upon African-Americans. Charles Moore's 1963 Birmingham photo "of people being pummeled by a liquid battering ram rallied support for the plight of the blacks". Photographs of attacking police dogs had the same effect.

The brutal photographs that came to the U.S. from the conflict in Vietnam did as much as anything to turn public opinion against the war, and Don McCullin's photography of starving children in Nigeria helped spur, "the world community (to) intervened to help Biafra, and learned key lessons about dealing with massive hunger exacerbated by war-a problem that still defies simple solutions.

Most recently we have seen the dramatic influence of photography in regard to the Abu Gharib prison scandal. In a May 13, 2004, piece from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette we read, "(While) Central Command announced in January that abuses at Abu Ghraib were under investigation...it was the release of the photographs that set off a whirlwind of controversy". Later in the article the Director of Documentary Studies at Duke University notes, "The way the photo makes us deal with these harsh realities is something that has been with us a while and helps explain why this is on the country's front-burner now. If it wasn't for the photographs, we wouldn't be talking about it widely."

Similar sentiment is found in a May 13, 2004, article on the BBC News website. Award-winning British photographer and documentary filmmaker David Model comments that:

There is no form of words - even if describing the horror these pictures reveal - that could have elicited the kind of response felt when looking at them and the political shift that will follow.

A photograph speaks to all of us regardless of culture or spoken language. There is a synchronicity between the nature of a still image and the way in which we remember events. There is something unique about the language of photography that contributes to the horror of these pictures. Memory itself is constructed through frozen moments in time and so a photograph slips serenely into our minds and is retained. Moving images can never be this potent. We cannot retain and carry with us a video-clip in the same way. We cannot have a two-minute news report always available in the top drawer of our minds ready to be glanced at, at any moment.

Photojournalists, and the media outlets who buy their work, have historically been the frontrunners in documenting and exposing acts of injustice. These champions of the oppressed, however, have done nothing but cover-up the atrocities that are daily visited upon unborn children right here in the U.S. If abortion images showed up in *LIFE* and *Time* and *Newsweek* the way that pictures of other forms of human suffering do, abortion would absolutely go away. If abortion was shown in the classroom and in the newspaper and on the television, the abortion industry would crumble. The nation wouldn't stand for it. But as long as the photographic evidence is kept under wraps and out of the public eye, America is content to ignore abortion. It is high time the American conscience was pricked, and almost nothing pricks the conscience like the photographic evidence that abortion is an act of violence that kills a baby.