Re-Envisioning the United States' Search for Re-Empowerment after 9/11: Vulnerability, Visual Framing, and Violence

Elizabeth A. Mennitt

Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
Political Science

François Debrix, Committee Chair
Priya Dixit, Committee Member
Mauro J. Caraccioli, Committee Member

May 6, 2025
Blacksburg, VA

Keywords: war on terror, vulnerability, violence, visual framing, gender

Re-Envisioning the United States' Search for Re-Empowerment after 9/11: Vulnerability, Visual Framing, and Violence

Elizabeth A. Mennitt

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the relationship among vulnerability, violence, and the framing of images right after the 9/11 attacks and throughout the subsequent war on terror. It examines eight prominent images circulated in the United States at that time. The thesis argues that the revelation of US vulnerability on 9/11 was not merely suppressed or denied by the US state, but instead was strategically mobilized to (re)construct a dominant framing that could justify the US violent conduct of its operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. In part, this was done to reassert the United States' identity as a hyper-powerful and masculine power. Drawing from the work of critical political and international relations theorists like Judith Butler, Giorgio Agamben, Cynthia Weber, Tim Luke, and others, I show how the visual framing of the eight images selected in this study helped to produce, but also sometimes to destabilize, the social and political conditions that enabled certain, often "othered," bodies to be relegated to what I call "zones of endemic precarity"—that is to say, spaces where suffering was permissible and ongoing, yet often unaddressed or unrecognized by the US public and the US government. I emphasize the differential experience and representation vis-à-vis vulnerability as the United States and "othered" bodies during the war on terror generally do not experience violence and vulnerability in the same way. This study ultimately finds that the violence undertaken by the US during the war on terror—in part, as a response to the violence the US experienced on 9/11—does not manage to fully re-empower (or re-masculinize) the US and does not remove the vulnerability that was first represented in images right after the 9/11 attacks. I conclude the study by calling for a more critical approach to viewing violent images so that we may be better able to resist the power-infused visual frames through which such images (and their meanings) are often understood. This thesis contributes to critical IR scholarship on visual politics and contemporary violence by demonstrating how visual media frame, construct, reproduce, or render invisible many of the vulnerable subjects of global politics.

Re-Envisioning the United States' Search for Re-Empowerment after 9/11: Vulnerability, Visual Framing, and Violence

Elizabeth A. Mennitt

GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the relationship among vulnerability, violence, and the framing of images right after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and throughout the subsequent war on terror by examining eight prominent images circulated in the United States during that time. I argue that the United States did not just hide or deny its vulnerability after 9/11. Instead, I show that this US sense of vulnerability, framed in images of the 9/11 attacks, was strategically mobilized by the United States' government, and often by US media too, in order to justify often violent U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq during the war on terror. Drawing on the work of political and international relations theorists such as Judith Butler, Giorgio Agamben, Cynthia Weber, Tim Luke, and others, I introduce the concept of "zones of endemic precarity" to describe spaces where human suffering was allowed to take place even if such suffering was often unaddressed or unrecognized by the United States' public and the US government during the war on terror. Individuals and populations, I find, were relegated to these zones of endemic precarity with the assistance of a certain way of framing the issue of vulnerability in some key images from the war on terror. In this study, I emphasize how the United States experienced vulnerability differently from the non-American populations who also endured vulnerability and violence (although differently from the United States, once again) during the war on terror. Ultimately, I argue that the violence performed by the United States during the war on terror, and perpetrated in part to reestablish the United States' identity as a hyper-powerful and hyper-masculine state, did not fully remove the sense of vulnerability initially felt by the United States on 9/11. This study concludes by calling for a more critical approach to viewing images of violence so that we may be better able to resist the power-infused frames through which these images (and their meanings) are often presented.

Acknowledgements

I am incredibly grateful to the individuals below, without whom this thesis would not have been possible.

To Professor Francois Debrix, thank you for being both my professor and my chair. I am grateful for your support and generosity through each step of this process, whether I was in Darmstadt or in Blacksburg. Your unwavering commitment to providing valuable feedback and guidance has been invaluable to this project. You have pushed me to be more precise, write better (and less verbosely), and think creatively. I am a better individual, student, and writer thanks to your mentorship.

I also thank Professor Priya Dixit, whom I have known since sophomore year of my undergraduate degree at Virginia Tech. You have always provided valuable contributions to my work. Your own work inspires me, and I thank you for sparking my curiosity about gender and feminist approaches to IR.

I am exceptionally grateful to Professor Mauro Caraccioli, who was willing to join this committee somewhat later than usual. Your support and willingness to work with me made me feel closer and more connected to Virginia Tech when I was missing it the most. Thank you for sharing your own experiences. You have helped me understand everything works out just fine if we lean on our friends.

I do not have the words to convey how grateful I am to my mom, Lori Mennitt. Thank you for always being willing to pick up the phone and remind me that you love me and believe in me. Thank you for reading my work, even if you don't always agree with it or understand it. You inspire me every single day, and I would not have survived the past two years without you. I love you so, so, so much. Same goes to Noir, Roland, and Winnie.

Dad and Ben, thank you for helping to improve my argumentative skills. Your relentless questioning of this project has helped me become better at explaining (and defending) my positions. I love you both.

To Elena, my closest friend, I thank you for inspiring me every day. Your feedback and support made this project better. I will forever cherish our trips to Starbucks, 7Brew, Sugar Magnolia, and Target. I am so glad this program brought us together, and I can't wait to keep growing with you.

I would like to thank Professor Karin Kitchens and Professor Andy Scerri. Your continued guidance has been greatly appreciated throughout this program. Thank you both for being kind, and for offering valuable advice, both personal and professional.

Lastly, thank you to Sarah Harvey and Patrick Salmons, who have kept me organized and on top of things. You make this program possible, and my cohort is indebted to you both.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction 1

Situating the Study: Perceptions on Violence and Vulnerability 4
Research Questions and Argument 5
Approach to the Study 8
Outline of the Study 10

Chapter 2: Images, Vulnerability, and Zones of Endemic Precarity 13

Introduction 13
The Role of the Visual: Critical Visuality Studies 14
Images as Reality 17
Visual Framing 23
Conceptualizing Vulnerability 26
State Vulnerability 30
Zones of Endemic Precarity and Selected Post-9/11 Images 36
Conclusion and Next Chapter 50

Chapter 3: September 11 and the Vulnerability of the United States' Sense of Masculine First-Worldism 52

Introduction 52
President George W. Bush's Experience on September 11, 2001 54
The Destruction in New York City and Arlington, Virginia 64
A (Re)Masculinization of the United States 76
Conclusion and Next Chapter 85

Chapter 4: Sexual Torture at Abu Ghraib: The United States' Attempt at (Re)Masculinization 88

Introduction 88
The Invasion of Afghanistan and the War in Iraq 90
Torture at Abu Ghraib 93
After Abu Ghraib Became Visible 109
Conclusion and Next Chapter 120

Chapter 5: The Symbolic End of the War on and Terror the Differential Experience of Vulnerability 123

Introduction 123
From Abu Ghraib to the August 2021 U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan 126
Sergeant Nicole Gee and the (still) Vulnerable Subject(s) 130

The U.S. Flight from Afghanistan and the Continued Presence of Vulnerabilities 147
Conclusion 161

Epilogue: Rereading Images of 9/11 and the War on Terror 164

Why Rereading/Reviewing? 164
What Is Told in this Retelling? A Brief Reflection on the Study's Central Themes 169
What Does This Study Reveal About Viewing Images More Critically? 173

Bibliography 178

Fair Use Rationales 191

List of Figures

Figure 1: White House chief of staff Andrew Card interrupts President George W. Bush as he reads to children to inform him that a second plane flew into the World Trade Center, during a visit to the Emma E. Booker Elementary School in Sarasota (Photograph by Doug Mills, September 11, 2001, AP, Fair Use determination attached). 55
Figure 2: A man stands in the rubble after the collapse of the first tower of the World Trade Center, calling out for any living victims on September 11, 2001. (Photograph by Doug Kanter, Getty Images, Fair Use determination attached). 66
Figure 3: The side of the Pentagon building that was severely damaged when it was struck by American Airlines Flight 77 on September 11, 2001. The Pentagon building is pictured at sunrise on September 16, 2001, with the United States Capitol in the background. (Photograph by Larry Downing, September 16, 2001, Reuters, Fair Use determination attached). 66
Figure 4: President Bush, standing on top of the rubble of the World Trade Center in New York City next to retired firefighter Bob Beckwith, addresses a large crowd of police, firemen, and rescue workers. (Photograph by Eric Draper, September 14, 2001, National Archives Catalog, ID 213246384, Public Domain) 78
Figure 5: US Army Private First-Class Lynndie England holding a leash around the neck of a naked male prisoner at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. (The Washington Post via NBC News, Public Domain) 95
Figure 6: A group of Iraqi prisoners wait to be released from Abu Ghraib prison during its transition from United States' control to Iraqi control on June 23, 2006. (Photograph by Whathiq Khuzaie, Getty Images, Fair Use determination attached) 111
Figure 7: United States Marine Corps Sgt. Nicole Gee is pictured cradling an Afghan infant at Kabul Airport on August 20, 2021, six days before she was killed in a bombing by ISKP militants in Kabul. (Photograph by Sgt. Isaiah Campbell/U.S. Marine Corps, Public Domain) 132
Figure 8: Hundreds of Afghan civilians run alongside a U.S. Air Force transport plane as it takes off from the Hamid Kharazi international airport, desperate to escape from their country amid U.S.-led evacuation of people and supplies in Kabul, Afghanistan on August 16, 2021 (Unknown Source, Fair Use determination attached). 149

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the onset of the global war on terror, a significant amount of international relations scholarship shifted towards investigating the contributing factors, legitimacy, and effects of terrorist attacks and the efforts made to counter and prevent them.[1] Much of the scholarship focused and continues to focus on deciphering the ambiguous concept of terrorism, and explaining how it is or is not morally or substantively distinct from state-sponsored acts of violence or war. Many scholars have sought to examine how official discourse and media representations—including images—shape public understanding of the 9/11 attacks and the legitimacy of violence in the aftermath.[2] Some scholars have even gone as far as to argue that the events of 9/11 marked a paradigm shift in the study of international relations, primarily due to a turn towards the study of new international actors.[3] What appears to have been of crucial significance about 9/11 for many scholars studying the effects of the attacks and the subsequent war against terror is that the attacks in many ways revealed that America and American bodies, both the state body and individual bodies in the

---

[1] Some studies on these topics include but are not limited to: *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (2005), by Robert A. Pape, *Inside Terrorism* (2006), by Bruce Hoffman. *Terror in the Name of God: Why religious militants kill* (2009), by Jessica Stern, and *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the diffusion of suicide attacks* (2008), by Assaf Moghadam.

[2] Several studies that analyze the perception of images or visual representation to critically engage with acts of contemporary violence includes *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) by Susan Sontag, "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?" (2013) by Lila Abu-Lughod, *Death's Showcase: The Power of Image in Contemporary Democracy* (2001) and *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008) by Ariella Azoulay, *Global Corpse Politics: The Obscenity Taboo* (2021) by Jessica Auchter, and *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (2011) by W.J.T. Mitchell.

[3] Cox, Michael. "Paradigm Shifts and 9/11: International Relations After the Twin Towers." Security Dialogue 33, no. 2 (2002): 247–51.

United States, were no longer invulnerable to physical and ideological harm from non-western outsiders.[4] The shift represented by 9/11, I suggest, was the result of the revelation that the United States' body, and the individual bodies of its citizens, were now vulnerable to attacks from outside forces. The 9/11 attacks marked the realization of this vulnerability. Crucially, this realization was shaped by the visual representations of vulnerability and violence in widely circulated images displaying the damage, deaths, and moments of extreme vulnerability occurring within the United States from the day of and following the terrorist attacks.

This apparent revelation of American vulnerability, as a result of the 9/11 attacks and with the aid of widespread images depicting the attacks, was followed almost immediately by the announcement by President Bush that the United States was to begin an all-out global war against terror. Bush, in a famous speech on September 22, 2001, sought to explain the 9/11 attacks on the United States, blamed Taliban-ruled Afghanistan for the attacks, demanded that the Taliban deliver the leaders of Al Qaeda to U.S. authorities, and laid out his plans for the proposed war on terror.[5] Bush made clear what he imagined a global war on terror would achieve: "Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated."[6] The attack on the United States was to be avenged through a U.S.-led assault on terror worldwide, seemingly without restriction. As Bush explained, the rendering vulnerable of the body of the United States

---

[4] See for example Judith Butler, *Precarious Life (2003)* and *Frames of War (2009),* David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (2003), Kennedy, Liam. "Remembering September 11: Photography as Cultural Diplomacy." *International Affairs (London)* 79, no. 2 (2003): 315–26. doi:10.1111/1468-2346.00310. Reflection of measures to protect the United States in a post 9/11 setting see Brown, Wendy. *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*. 1st ed. United States: Princeton University Press, 2010. doi:10.2307/j.ctv14gpj55. See also Longo, Matthew. *The Politics of Borders : Sovereignty, Security, and the Citizen after 9/11*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

[5] George W. Bush, "September 22, 2001: Address on the U.S. Response to the Attacks of September 11," UVA Miller Center, October 20, 2016, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/september-22-2001-address-us-response-attacks-september-11.

[6] Bush, "Address on the U.S. Response."

was to be met with an unrestricted war against the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks, any terrorist group, or any entity that was not on the side of the United States and would thus be regarded as a "hostile regime."[7]

After the symbolic end of the war on terror, marked by the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, it was reported that at least 940,000 people have died as a direct result of violence from the war on terror, including armed service members on all sides of the conflict, contractors, civilians, journalists, and aid workers.[8] An estimated 432,000 of these deaths have been civilians who have been killed by violence from all parties, with the vast majority of the victims residing in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Syria.[9] When observing specific aspects of life in Afghanistan after the 2021 withdrawal of United States' armed forces compared to before 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan, it is reported that 30% more Afghans are facing food insecurity, that the rate of children experiencing malnutrition has increased by over 40%, and that women's rights remain heavily restricted after the Taliban regained Kabul.[10] These statistics reveal an important development as a result of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent global war on terror: the response of the United States and its allies, incredibly costly both in lives and in dollars, appears to have left many of those who, according to Bush, it aimed to protect and liberate, in more vulnerable, less secure conditions than prior to the war on terror. Violence appears to have increased vulnerability, both in the short term and through the duration of the war. The enactment of the global war on terror, starting with the invasion of Afghanistan in October-November 2001, was a response to the revealed vulnerability of the United States and

---

[7] Bush, "Address on the U.S. Response."
[8] "Summary of Findings," The Costs of War, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/summary.
[9] "Summary of Findings."
[10] "BY THE NUMBERS: Afghanistan before and after 20 Years of War (2001-2021): Costs of War," The Costs of War, accessed July 8, 2024, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/Afghanistanbeforeandafter20yearsofwar.

of American bodies. But the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan two decades later, poorly received by the American public,[11] and leaving Afghan women and children more vulnerable to violent control than prior to the invasion, seems to have proliferated more vulnerability for all involved, following two decades of violence caused by the global war on terror. It is this interrelation between violence and vulnerability, in the context of post-9/11 violence, that this study seeks to examine.

Situating the Study: Perceptions on Violence and Vulnerability

In the months and first few years following the 9/11 attacks and the invasion of Afghanistan, Bush's approval ratings were high.[12] These public opinion polls suggest that many Americans had little reservations about the violence that the United States government proposed and began to carry out in the Middle East against those who seemingly supported terrorist regimes. The invasion of and subsequent war in Afghanistan was met initially with high support in the United States, reaching roughly 90% of approval, according to a poll conducted in November 2001.[13] In a 2007 poll on civilians in Afghanistan regarding their view on the war, 65% of Afghan civilians viewed the United States favorably, a number that was unheard of in primarily Muslim countries.[14] Based on public opinion alone, there appears to be a higher acceptance of violence,

---

[11] Katherine Schaeffer, "A Year Later, a Look Back at Public Opinion about the U.S. Military Exit from Afghanistan," Pew Research Center, August 17, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/08/17/a-year-later-a-look-back-at-public-opinion-about-the-u-s-military-exit-from-afghanistan/.
[12] "Bush and Public Opinion," Pew Research Center, December 18, 2008, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2008/12/18/bush-and-public-opinion/.
[13] "Bush Ratings Improve But He's Still Seen as Unilateralist: AMERICANS AND EUROPEANS DIFFER WIDELY ON FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES" (Pew Research Center, April 17, 2002), https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/pdf/Pew-Apr02-Bush-Euro-poll.pdf.
[14] Anthony H Cordesman, "AFGHAN PUBLIC OPINION AND THE AFGHAN WAR: SHIFTS BY REGION AND PROVINCE," 2009, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/094013_afghanpollbyregion.pdf.

or at least a higher tolerance for it, committed by or on behalf of the United States and its allies compared to violence against the United States, its allies, and the bodies of its citizens. This observation brings to the forefront questions regarding inconsistencies in the acceptance and the meaning of violence and vulnerability when expressed or conducted by either the United States and its allies, or by those the United States deems as terrorists, "hostile regimes," or perhaps cultural or ideological "others".

These differences in the perception of violence and vulnerability are crucial to the study of international conflict as they may play a key role in the acceptance or rejection of violence on an international scale. When it is widely accepted that one entity is permitted or has legitimate reasons to carry out violence against another, but that violence is unacceptable or evil when caused by another entity, it often becomes possible for long, costly wars, or even military occupations to endure with little outside interference from other members of the global community. Alternatively, expressions of vulnerability and of what violence means and does to individuals and states is crucial to the study of international conflict. Even if based only on Bush's well-known September 22, 2001 speech, it is evident that there is a connection between the vulnerability revealed about the United States during the 9/11 attacks and the decision to declare a global war on terror.[15] This linkage between vulnerability and the enactment of extreme violence is a key connection to examine closely as it has the potential to reveal that certain decisions to wage war or conduct violence are directly related to feelings of vulnerability.

Research Questions and Argument

---

[15] Toward the end of this speech, Bush spoke "Our nation has been put on notice: we are not immune from attack." Bush, "Address on the U.S. Response."

The previous section provided the context for this study. An exploration of the events and decisions that followed the 9/11 attacks begins to reveal that there is a close relation between violence and vulnerability. When the United States was rendered unprecedentedly vulnerable on 9/11, a global war on terror was declared. Yet, this war resulted in a proliferation of vulnerability in areas that were affected by the war, but perhaps in/for the United States, too. The questions that frame this study involve vulnerability, the vulnerability of individual bodies, but also the vulnerability or precarity of the state's collective body. Thus, the study seeks to provide a preliminary answer to the following questions: What is the relationship between vulnerability and violence? How is bodily vulnerability, potentially revealed through violence or the threat of violence, further projected onto other bodies? And who are or who become vulnerable subjects? These questions, while important, serve as the larger questions that frame the study in its entirety. Because the scope of these questions is far too broad for a master's thesis, the study seeks to start to provide preliminary answers to these questions by condensing them into the questions pertinent to the specific post-9/11 context of violence and vulnerability.

In its investigation of the relationship between vulnerability and violence, this study seeks to answer a more narrow set of questions specifically related to the post-9/11 context of violence and vulnerability. As noted above, crucial to the notion of vulnerability in international relations is the perception about the meaning and legitimacy of violence committed by one international actor compared to that perpetrated by another, which in turn may help to explain the proliferation of high-cost, drawn-out conflicts. Thus, my aim is to investigate the meaning and perception of vulnerability and violence caused by the United States during the post-9/11 period. This examination should provide some answers to questions about vulnerability and violence in the post-9/11 context. But it also should be able to offer early insights about the broader framing

questions and concerns mentioned above. For this study, more specific and pertinent questions include the following: During the Global War on Terror, who appears to be permitted to exercise offensive and violent security measures, and who by contrast is not permitted to do so, even as a response to a perceived vulnerability? And does it mean the same thing for one international entity or actor, such as the United States, to express vulnerability by way of violence as it does for another, such as a state or a group impacted or targeted by United States' actions, including those groups or states whose aim may be to target the United States through their own violent actions? These two questions are key to this study. Hopefully, they will also offer a beginning of understanding about the broader framing questions mentioned above (that, once again, are crucial to the overall critical and theoretical concerns of the study but are too extensive to be tackled in this thesis).

My central argument throughout this study is that the sense of vulnerability or perceived insecurity of the collective body of the state (in this case, the United States after 9/11) leads the state—its sovereign power, its political authorities, and perhaps some of its citizens too—to decide to make certain other or foreign collective and often individual bodies vulnerable too, and thus to subject them to violence, insecurity, precarity, ungrievability (a concept drawn from Judith Butler's work that I will detail in the following chapter), and bare life (a notion developed by Giorgio Agamben, also explained in the following chapter). Furthermore, I argue that this rendering vulnerable of other populations can be seen as the result of a projection of collective vulnerability onto other states or foreign entities' individual beings and bodies. Throughout the study, I make more specific and context-dependent arguments and observations that are pertinent to each of the images I select for my study, and these specific arguments and discussions

contribute to the broader theoretical argument regarding the relation between state vulnerability and that state's subsequent enactment of vulnerability-inducing violence.

Approach to the Study

The questions that guide my thesis require me to identify and analyze various representations of vulnerability (or invulnerability) and violence of individual bodies within and outside of the United States as part of what I call "zones of endemic precarity," a concept that will be outlined in detail in the following chapter. Crucial to this study is the role of images in and about these zones of endemic precarity, as well as the role of images in matters of violence and vulnerability in general. The violence and vulnerability occurring in the post-9/11 period was, often, made hyper-visible in the media (for example, the initial airstrikes in Afghanistan in early October 2001),[16] but also at times kept out of sight (for example, the over 200,000 Iraqi civilians killed in the Iraq war).[17]

Relying on an approach developed by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009), this study analyzes visual representations of vulnerability and violence either felt and perceived as such by or in the United States or, instead, that have been produced or exacerbated by the United States and its policies and military operations after 9/11. By focusing on visual representations of vulnerability and violence in these zones, I pay close attention to the "framing" of certain images (as Butler emphasizes too). Framing is, essentially, the power to regulate affect, which is structured by and at the same time structures the visual

---

[16] For an example of one of these images, see "US and Britain Begin Attacks on Taliban," The Guardian, October 7, 2001, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/07/afghanistan.terrorism18.
[17] Nicholas Anastacio and Mark Murray, "The Iraq War — by the Numbers," NBC News, March 20, 2023, https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meetthepressblog/iraq-war-numbers-rcna75762.

presentation of images.[18] Perspectives represented within images, or left outside of them in some cases, through the work of the frame, actively shape what Butler calls "apprehension," particularly when it comes to war images, and thus impact understandings of what is taken to be real or not during times of conflict.[19] Thus, these representational frames in and with images encourage or discourage the viewer to feel or think in a certain way about key events or issues. But, crucially, they also actively (re)produce the conditions that allow certain human beings to be perceived as recognizable subjects and others as unrecognizable, unimportant, or even non-existent. In this way, frames of representation as they are applied to images are crucial to producing and reproducing zones of endemic precarity where some bodies and populations are visible (and possibly made to matter) and others are rendered invisible, their lives inconsequential. A more thorough discussion of framing, and how I employ this concept, takes place in the following chapter.

To identify certain zones of endemic precarity, and to analyze how frames of representation operate within them, I rely on several images that became prevalent in the post-9/11 era in the United States and were connected to the notion of the United States' sense of vulnerability or insecurity after the terrorist attacks. Images, particularly photographic images, can be seen as pieces of visual and semiotic data that are indicative of operations of power that seek to frame representation (that is to say, to determine the ways in which images and the events, ideas, or issues they depict should be understood by the viewer).[20] Images are powerful

---

[18] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016), 72.
[19] Butler, *Frames of War,* 66.
[20] Several studies that analyze the perception of images or visual representation to critically engage with acts of contemporary violence include *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) by Susan Sontag, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013) by Lila Abu-Lughod*, Death's Showcase: The Power of Image in Contemporary Democracy* (2001) and *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008) by *Ariella Azoulay, Global Corpse Politics: The Obscenity Taboo* (2021) by Jessica Auchter, and *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present (2011)* by W.J.T. Mitchell.

media through which the frame (in Butler's sense) works, particularly as or when they offer vivid depictions of violence, harm, and vulnerability in the general context of war (including the war on terror). However, the idea of the frame extends beyond the image itself as it also encompasses the way certain images are contextualized, discussed, and circulated in the public sphere. Butler, for example, explores how some images of casualties during war are able to frame certain lives and bodies as grievable or as mere collateral damage, depending on how they are presented and interpreted in relation to how they appear or are made available to the general public. Thus, by analyzing the framing of selected images, with special attention to the efforts of framing and the manipulations of feelings related to the differentiation between bodies and subjects in the context of the post-9/11 war on terror, zones of endemic precarity and, importantly, how they work (as such and for the general public) can be identified.

Outline of the Study

As this introduction has noted, the central purpose of this study is to analyze a selection of prominent images in the period from the 9/11 attacks to the symbolic end of the war on terror in the summer of 2021 in order to investigate how these images served to represent and facilitate certain understandings of violence and vulnerability. The analysis in this study seeks to answer questions related to matters of violence and vulnerability, and the specific role that visuality has played in the perception of these concepts throughout the war on terror, both in terms of the vulnerability of the United States, but also of its enemies and of the civilians impacted by two decades of war. Chapter 2 provides an in-depth overview of the theoretical concepts discussed in this study, including the role and function of images and visuality in general, vulnerability and its various presentations, and my understanding of zones of endemic precarity. Chapter 2 makes the

connection between images and representations of violence and vulnerability, and it explains the role that images play in constructing certain perceptions of violence and vulnerability pictured in images, with these perceptions subsequently having the potential to affect how warfighting is thought of by the American public.

In Chapter 3, I begin to analyze selected images that depict vulnerability and violence. The images in Chapter 3 cover the 9/11 attacks in the United States, and the immediate aftermath of the attacks, displaying how the vulnerability and violence depicted in these images helped to facilitate and justify the United States' decision to begin the global war on terror, and how from the beginning, the United States's efforts to reassert itself as a what I call masculine hype(r)-power were always already entangled with its own sense of vulnerability (or feminization perhaps). The next chapter discusses a major zone of endemic precarity that was created by the United States during the war on terror: the Abu Ghraib war prison in Iraq. In Chapter 4, I analyze two images from Abu Ghraib, one from the perspective of the American soldier and representation of U.S. operations abroad, and the other from an "outsider's" perspective. These differential perspectives reveal how the (generally condemned) actions undertaken by the United States at Abu Ghraib, at least in part to remasculinize or re-empower itself after the 9/11 attacks, began to facilitate an increase in the United States' own vulnerability through the scandal's erosion of the dominant framing of the war on terror as morally justified. The final substantive chapter, Chapter 5, discusses two images from the August 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan that marked the end of the war on terror, at least symbolically. These two images reveal that, after two decades of fighting a war against terror, the United States, its enemies, and the civilians it promised to protect still remained vulnerable, although in fundamentally different ways. This chapter emphasizes how, seen through the images from the withdrawal, the violence

enacted by the United States throughout the war on terror did not erase the U.S. sense of vulnerability that the 9/11 attacks revealed. Finally, the Epilogue provides a discussion of the major themes featured in this study, and it discusses the value that comes with critically rereading (and reviewing) U.S. history through prominent images. This final chapter also offers a preliminary discussion of how we, as active participants in shaping the apprehensive conditions that sustain war and warfighting, might facilitate a resistance to operations of U.S. power that often take place through images.

The analysis carried out in the following chapters can provide new insights into the ways in which state power operates at the level of images and visual representation, and how it can facilitate perceptions of violence and vulnerability that may ultimately lead to changes in public tolerance for state-sponsored acts of extreme violence. The findings of this study may be valuable to guide further theoretical or empirical research in international relations that seeks to address various social and political methods by which contemporary operations of violence are sustained and legitimated. A rereading of the war on terror, through an analysis of various prominent images that were circulated throughout and of their framing, can help us to rethink how and why violence might be carried out, and how this violence can increase vulnerability, regardless of the attempts to frame violent conflict differently.

Chapter 2: Images, Vulnerability, and Zones of Endemic Precarity

Introduction

To begin to understand how the attacks on September 11, 2001 sparked a feeling of vulnerability on the part of the United States, both as a collective body and as a population (of individual bodies), and to make sense of how this vulnerability was used to legitimate the United States' effective rendering of other bodies (states or individuals) vulnerable in turn, it is useful to conceptually clarify the meanings and functions of various forms of vulnerability and to examine how both vulnerability and invulnerability can be represented by way of dominant images. This chapter will begin with an overview of the role of visual culture, particularly images, in representing violence and vulnerability. A discussion of the field of critical visuality studies and of relevant work of scholars studying visual culture and media will help to provide the theoretical foundation for a key theoretical assertion guiding this thesis: namely, that there exists an intimate connection between (the framing of) visual images in the post-9/11 context and the perceptions of vulnerability and violence depicted in these images. After providing a theoretical introduction to the field of critical visuality studies, as well as selected theories that discuss the role of images, I will continue to outline my theoretical and methodological approach to analyzing visual imagery and how I will explain I make use of other critical approaches to supplement my approach to visual studies.

Later in the chapter, I will explain what theoretically is meant by vulnerability, particularly what it represents, how it comes about, and how it is experienced by both individual bodies and the state body in the context of this study. Finally, I will conceptualize what I call zones of endemic precarity—places, both in a spatial and political sense, where individual bodies, through the framing of images, are rendered especially vulnerable as a result of United

States power. These zones of endemic precarity are central to my argument regarding the rendering of other bodies—individual or state bodies alike— insecure as a response to the United States' own vulnerability caused by the 9/11 attacks. I situate these zones not merely as a symptom of the war on terror, but as a fundamental part of its policies, which were achieved, at least in large part, thanks to the framing of images.

The Role of the Visual: Critical Visuality Studies

The war on terror and the violence that was enacted in it was, and continues to be, experienced by soldiers and civilians alike in a fundamentally visual way. Visual culture, in this case in terms of the photographic imagery of the war as images of violence, death, dead bodies, rubble, and bombings, had its place in daily reports describing the events of the war on terror in newspapers, online, or on television. Every year, the media become saturated again with images of the 9/11 attacks that both memorialize and keep alive the events of that day and the violence enacted as revenge for the attacks. What makes the war on terror particularly special, in terms of visuality, is the dual functioning of what was made visible and what was made invisible to the United States public, on behalf of the United States. The nature of the war on terror as a series of operations against terrorism, rather than a "just" or "old"[21] war between states or actors, enabled many of the developments of the war on terror to remain unseen by the public for a long time, often until long after the fact. Much of what has been found to have occurred during the war on terror— torture and enhanced interrogation at CIA black sites, mass surveillance of US citizens,

[21] Many international relations scholars discuss the war on terror as epitomizing a "new" type of warfare that relies on technologically advanced methods of killing and violence that limit the risk of fatalities in the traditional sense. See Grégoire Chamayou and Grégoire Chamayou, *Drone Theory*, A Penguin Special (London: Penguin Books, 2015). for discussion of new war technologies in contemporary warfare.

drone attacks against civilians, targeting of journalists—was necessarily, and intentionally, made less visible to the American public, or made to be irrelevant or of little significance.[22] A crucial facet of the visual culture during the war on terror was the deeming of certain instances of violence, points of view, and experiences outside of what the American public had a right to see or look at. Of the many things that remained out of sight for the duration of the war on terror, nothing was less clear, less visible, than the end to the conflict itself.[23] And so, over the course of the long war, the American public and the rest of the world were bombarded with constant visual imagery of the events of the war and, at the same time, left in the dark about many developments, including its end.

Discussions of what is seen, by whom, and for what purpose are central to the study of visual culture and media. Critical visuality studies is an interdisciplinary field of research that is concerned with matters of seeing and looking, working around and between issues such as the visibility or erasure of certain perspectives in discourse, matters of spectatorship and gendered gaze, the role of the visual in the production of knowledge and norms, and matters of surveillance. Introducing the broad and interdisciplinary field of critical visuality studies, Nicholas Mirzoeff writes that critical visuality studies seeks to reveal how visuality and visual representations, in terms of the history of images, the ways of seeing, and the practices of

---

[22] For information on the use of torture and interrogation by the CIA, see the 2014 Report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence committee Study on the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program, more commonly known as the "Torture Report." For information on heightened surveillance and the shortcomings associated with surveillance, see Kevin D. Haggerty and Amber Gazso, "Seeing beyond the Ruins: Surveillance as a Response to Terrorist Threats," The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie 30, no. 2 (2005): 169–87, https://doi.org/10.2307/4146129. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism has a database on drone strikes and other covert attacks in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia between 2010 and 2020 at https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war/

[23] In a 2001 interview with the Washington Post, Vice President Dick Cheney was quoted saying "It [The war on terror] is different than the Gulf War was, in the sense that it may never end. At least, not in our lifetime." From: https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2001/10/21/cia-told-to-do-whatever-necessary-to-kill-bin-laden/19d0e8f1-dbe5-4b07-9c47-44c5b4328f1f/

looking, are uniquely imperial and colonial practices "by which power visualizes History to itself."[24] This means that, through studying visuality in its various forms, scholars can reveal how images, practices of seeing, and ways of looking shape and are, in turn, shaped by broader, often colonial or imperial, systems of power. Critical visuality studies, crucially, attempts to make visible that which the authoritative state power would prefer to keep unseen for the sake of maintaining power and control.[25] Mirzoeff contends that visuality, as it is used to maintain authoritative power, has three main functions: classification, separation, and aesthetics.[26] Classification refers to the creation of distinctions that are subsequently enforced by culture and law. These distinctions appear historically as, for example, slave versus freeman, or, in the context of the war on terror, as soldier versus terrorist or civilian. Separation is the physical creation of distance between those who are separated. Aesthetics is the reinforcement of classification and separation as something natural and pleasing to look at, something "almost beautiful."[27] These three components, forming a "complex of visuality,"[28] and present in both historical and present-day visual culture, help to maintain authoritative power's monopoly on the visual and visuality. When one of these functions fails or is challenged, through literature or media discussing certain photographic images, for example, so too does visuality fail as a tool for state power. Thus, to effectively challenge or critique current authoritative structures of power, studies of visual culture must analyze and evaluate the dynamics of classification, separation, and aesthetics, specifically where they might not suffice or where they fall short, in

---

[24] Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader*, 3rd edition (London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), xxx.
[25] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Visual Culture Reader*, xxx.
[26] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Visual Culture Reader*, xxxi.
[27] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Visual Culture Reader*, xxxi.
[28] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Visual Culture Reader*, xxxi.

order to reveal the underlying operations of state power. Critical visuality studies takes back the right to be seen and the right to look, making visible that which the state would prefer to keep hidden, whether that be through matters of rendering people, things, or events visible to the public, or revealing facets of visual culture that might otherwise go unnoticed, such as how matters of the visual are discussed, framed, or portrayed, or perhaps revealing how visuality or visual culture classifies, separates, or aesthetically affirms the dynamics of power. Thus, critical visuality studies encourages us to question what we see and how we see things, but also to ask why we see and how our experience of seeing might serve or benefit a higher authority or power.

Images as Reality

As a foundational scholar in the field of visual culture and photography in particular, Susan Sontag, in her two works *On Photography* and *Regarding the Pain of Others,* discusses matters of photographic imagery and the different power structures present in the act of photography, specifically photography that depicts human suffering. For Sontag, the photographer exercises power over the photographed, taking control during the act of "shooting" a photograph to freeze and ultimately to construct a reality depicted within the image, ensuring that this will live on through space and time.[29] In this way, Sontag writes, photographic images are indicative of a captured moment of reality, "a neat slice of time."[30] To take a photograph is to capture a specific reality, a set of information that can be relayed and revisited over and over, a reality remade and returned to again and again.[31] Photography, in its capacity to record information, implies a transmission of a knowledge of the world as the camera captures it.

---

[29] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Pearson Always Learning (London: Penguin Books, 1979), and Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 13-15.
[30] Sontag, *On Photography,* 117.
[31] Sontag, *On Photography,* 23.

However, this is the opposite of real understanding for Sontag, which instead begins with a rejection of the world as it is presented in photographic images.[32] Photographic images, in their ability to capture and translate the reality of the moment of the photograph, simultaneously reveal and conceal the history that led to the moment in which the image was taken. Thus, images exist as depictions of moments of reality that fail to convey an entire history or alternate realities leading up to the point when the image (and what it shows) was captured. Because of this, the interpretation of images is a dangerously subjective process.[33] Paradoxically, the more authentic, "less doctored" a photographic image *appears* to be, "the more naive—the more authoritative" the photograph is likely to be in terms of its effective portrayal of a certain reality.[34]

Like Sontag, French critical theorist Jacques Rancière observes that, in seeming to be an objective portrayal of reality, the medium of photography masks the relation between the "opacity and transparency," the "presence and absence," contained within photographic images.[35] Rancière locates a tension within photographic images between the information contained inside the photograph and the information that is, often intentionally, left out of it.[36] This tension, as Rancière and Sontag both discuss, endows photographic images with a unique subjective power to create a representation of reality that is in direct contrast with the perceived objectivity that they are often assumed to depict. The perceived objectivity of photography as a medium makes more dangerous the affective, subjective power of reality construction that the

---

[32] Sontag, *On Photography,* 24-5.
[33] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 10.
[34] Sontag, *On Photography,* 55.
[35] Jacques Rancière, "Notes on the Photographic Image," essay, in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff, 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2013), 86–95.
[36] Rancière, "Notes on the Photographic Image," in Mirzoeff, 91.

images contain. For Rancière and Sontag, photographic images are an effective way to visually capture and transmit a specific, constructed reality that serves a representational purpose, one that leaves out facets of reality in its construction.

Photographic images, especially photographic images that contain depictions of suffering, have the capacity to invoke immediate emotional responses in the viewers as they are confronted with a difficult reality presented to them through the image. However, the nature of photographic imagery as a medium, in terms of one's ability to turn away from or refuse to look at images, the tendency for images to be widespread and repeatedly viewed, as well as the inherent distance between what is being portrayed within the image and the individual who gazes at the image, can lead to immediate emotional responses that are fleeting, and even the most critical and specific reactions of what is depicted can eventually fade away, especially when guided by other factors, including the images' oversaturation or how they are framed.[37] For Sontag, repeated exposure to depictions of suffering, often within images, rather than consistently encouraging the viewer to act or change their perception of what is depicted in the image, can and often does result in apathy and desensitization that reduce the likelihood and capacity of the viewer to be moved to action.[38] In her words, "images anesthetize," and at the same time as they make events certain or real, they can also make the viewer numb to the pain and suffering they see.[39] The human capacity to act, to respond to the suffering seen in images, is "sapped" by the nonstop, relentless diffusion of these horrific images that become so common due to new technologies present in contemporary daily life that make possible for the American

---

[37] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others,* 122.
[38] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others,* 108.
[39] Sontag, *On Photography*, 15.

population to be exposed to constant visual images, whether through television news or through other media sources, including social media.[40] This is especially true, I believe, when it comes to images depicting what I will later refer to as zones of endemic precarity, in which individual bodies suffer as a result of specific and calculated political purposes. Images depicting these sufferings, as I will later argue, are often made to be short-lasting in their effect and do not lead to public action, especially if the intended framing of these images is effective.

To this end, while it might be true in many cases that viewers become emotionally numb to a particular image or set of images, Sontag does not seem to account much for the intentional framing of images that occurs both within and outside of them, something which might impact the viewer's understanding and perception—how they think about, or *should* think about the reality portrayed to them as true in the photographic image, rather than just their immediate emotional response. In the case of an image depicting violence on television, found in a newspaper, or in a book, for example, the "hyper-saturation" that Sontag believes leads to boredom or apathy might be supplemented by a compelling caption or discussion, a way of thinking about the image, that accompanies the image, in addition to the effect of viewing the image itself. In this sense, perhaps it is not the shock-value of photographic images of violence that compels one to feel a certain way. Rather, it is about the construction of a certain reality, depicted in the image, but also in the way the image is presented to us, something that that generates perceptions and feelings about how individuals should respond to the image. Sontag does maintain that an acceptance of certain snippets of reality, even if the emotional response they generate is uncertain, accompany the dissemination of images of suffering. These realities,

---

[40] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others.* 108-9.

whether they are accurate or not, for both Sontag and Rancière, have a profound effect on the viewer's acceptance of the reality that is represented within the visual image.

Jean Baudrillard, like Sontag and Rancière, emphasizes the role that visual media play in portraying and constructing reality. Baudrillard discusses how the transmitting of visual imagery to the public was able to construct and maintain a state of hyperreality—a simulation of reality as real as reality itself but with no referential connection to the real.[41] For Baudrillard, the Gulf War was less a real event or war as it was a spectacle, mediated and shaped by visual imagery—the crucial force of hyperreality and simulation—through which an understanding of and acceptance of the Gulf War and what it meant was achieved as how it was depicted. The hyperreality of the Gulf War was made possible through careful (visual) representations depicting (simulating) what was happening during the events of the Gulf War. This hyperreality, as it was communicated to the American public, ultimately rendered what was actually occurring on the ground in Iraq, Kuwait, and the region secondary, somewhat irrelevant. The simulated reality, constructed through the visual media that was disseminated during the Gulf War, reached the American audience first, preceding and eclipsing any sort of alternative (and perhaps more accurate) representation of events. This hyperreal depiction of the Guld War through visual media thus became the primary understanding of the war. In this sense, it becomes possible to begin to see the large-scale construction and acceptance of a certain reality that mass visual media are capable of. For Baudrillard, the acceptance of a certain reality as true was made possible through the simulation of reality in visual media, with this hyperreality being the preliminary, and thus the most consequential, depiction of the political situation in the Gulf War for the American public.

---

[41] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, Mich: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2019), 1.

The acceptance of this reality as it was presented through visual media enabled an entire population to think about the Gulf War in a certain way.

This Baudrillardian understanding of visual media during the Gulf War as a simulation of a particular reality that obstructs and distorts the public's understanding of what is real make clear how, as Sontag and Rancière also describe, visual images are deceptive but effective in their ability to both obscure and shape reality. For all of these scholars, the ability for images to shape reality appears to be, at least in part, due to the perceived objectivity of the photographic image as a medium, in terms of the reality the images claim to depict and how what is present in images is widely accepted or made to appear as true. The perceived objectivity of photographic images is what allows them to so effectively serve as evidence that something exists. An image depicting Saddam Hussein's or Osama bin Laden's corpse was generally the only required proof that the public, at least the American public, needed to believe that those individuals were indeed dead. This is what makes the photographic images an effective medium for shaping the public's knowledge of an event or thing as true or real. However, for the purpose of this study, the perceived objectivity of the photographic image, its effectiveness to display to the public that certain events or realities happened or are happening, does not fully account the production of the feelings or perceptions (in addition to the knowledge of the existence) of certain events or realities that photographic images depict to the viewer. Sontag, Rancière, and Baudrillard all effectively discuss how images create a reality. But how do images (and how they are presented) help create a certain *perception* of such a reality, or knowledge, in the Foucauldian sense,[42] and

---

[42] Foucault explains that "power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations." Thus, for Foucault, and for this study, knowledge is both a form of

of what this reality *means*? And how do images contain and uphold dominant structures of power, in addition to facilitate an acceptance of a certain reality as true or real?

Sontag, Raniere, and Baudrillard aptly explain how photographic images serve as proof of reality. However, in order to understand how reality is thought about, and how in particular the public is encouraged to feel about, for example, the deaths of political leaders or the events of the war on terror beyond an acceptance that they occurred, or to develop an apathy for the destruction caused, an examination of the framing of certain images, that is to say, *how* they are presented and discussed, is crucial. The presentation of these images to the public, their framing, not only affirms that a reality present inside them is true, but it also establishes normative perceptions of that reality in terms of how it should be thought about, how the viewer should feel about what is represented, and sometimes what needs to be done about this accepted reality. The theoretical work of the scholars mentioned above takes the visual image as an effective medium through which a certain reality—in terms of an event of suffering, war, or violence— is constructed to be true or real. But as these representations are made to appear real, objective, or truthful, as they become (hyper)real, something occurs around and with these images that changes how they, and the realities they affirm, ought to be thought about, discussed, and perceived by the viewer. This emphasis on viewership necessitates the incorporation of the work of Judith Butler, particularly her discussion of framing and the role of visual frames.

Visual Framing

---

power and also an operation of it. From Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Second Vintage books edition. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

Judith Butler, in her two works that reflect on the violence of the post 9/11 world, *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*, explores how war is represented, understood, and framed visually in various contexts. Framing is the power to establish a normative ideal that preexists the analysis of anything, and in particular images, as they are presented to the viewer.[43] Frames guide reactions to images, whether they should be thought of as astonishing, revolting, or, alternatively, as necessary or normal.[44] Generally, a frame exists as an "editorial embellishment of the image," one that "implicitly guides interpretation."[45] Framing and frames exist both inside and outside of the image. Framing informs the way that images are staged, the perspectives that are included or excluded in them, and how they are captioned and discussed as they are presented to the viewer. It is through frames and framing that various social and political structures are constructed and maintained as reality. And it is also through these structures that violence can be perpetrated against certain populations, rendering them particularly vulnerable. Put differently, frames are, for Butler, the mechanisms through which societies often come to understand war and the violence committed during war against certain individuals or populations.

For Butler, framing is the power to regulate recognition and apprehension. Framing shapes the ways in which human life recognizes other human lives as losable or injurable, or alternatively, as not losable or not injurable.[46] These visual frames, or again *how* images are presented to the public, make possible the (re)production of certain conditions that enable human beings to understand certain lives as recognizable, and others as unrecognizable, unimportant, or

---

[43] Butler, *Frames of War,* 6.
[44] Butler, *Frames of War,* 11.
[45] Butler, *Frames of War,* 8.
[46] Butler, *Frames of War,* 1.

even non-existent, as their suffering is placed outside of the reality that is presented by and through the visual frame. Pushing further Sontag's work on photography, Butler, in their assertion about framing, implies that the framing of photographic images, through the inclusion and exclusion of realities into the "field of perception," is indicative of the power that the image has. The image's power is to push the viewer towards a certain interpretation of reality. Thus, the image does not only affect the viewer emotionally or for a short time.[47] It is this ability of the visual frame or framing to guide the interpretation of reality that makes framing especially valuable to studies like mine that seek to emphasize the role of images in guiding perceptions of violence and vulnerability during times of conflict.

Framing's power to guide the interpretation of visual images is a key contribution to previous theories of visual media as this approach displays how visual images are themselves capable not only of constructing a reality, as Sontag, Rancière, and Baudrillard have shown, but also of affecting how viewers or receivers of these visual frames understand a reality that is visually presented to them. Through visual framing and frames, certain powers, often political powers, gain the ability to not only encourage or discourage what and how the viewer thinks or feels about certain events or issues, but also to uphold various norms that inform how the public is to understand and be receptive of the violence and vulnerability revealed in certain images.[48] By relating visual images to vulnerability, frames influence whose vulnerability is acknowledged and recognized, and, by contrast, whose is ignored or allowed to continue. Crucially, when a frame is broken, that is to say, when an image resists the normative framing that attempts to

---

[47] Butler, *Frames of War,* 66.
[48] Butler, *Frames of War,* 1.

establish what is being depicted, a "taken-for-granted reality is called into question,"[49] thus possibly enabling viewers to see how the intended framing of that image was orchestrated by a certain authority or source of power that would benefit from the controlling of this frame and of the image. By questioning visual frames, breaking them apart, and examining their function, the structures of power as they are present in visual images can be revealed and analyzed to display the broader operations of (political) power that benefit from the affective force of such framing.

Conceptualizing Vulnerability

As previously shown, images have a profound effect on the construction and apprehension of a certain reality, particularly as they provide depictions of violence and vulnerability. Images that depict violence or vulnerability, according to their framing, and as Butler made clear, can impact not only the ways that the public is made to understand instances of violence portrayed in the image, but also how the public should respond to the violence or perception of vulnerability. Visual depictions of vulnerability and violence are important in generating and sustaining not only a certain reality, but also an understanding of that particular reality, all of which can impact how war is experienced by those who visualize it within the media, from afar, but also those who suffer from the violence of war first-hand. What is meant by vulnerability in the context of this thesis, and the role that it plays in instances and discussions of contemporary violence, can be further conceptualized in order to understand how vulnerability appears and how it is made use of by way of images such as those that will be discussed in the following chapters.

---

[49] Butler, *Frames of War,* 12.

For Butler, as noted in the introductory chapter, vulnerability is thought of in terms of a precariousness that is fundamental to the very condition of being human, being alive, and having a body. Precariousness is the inescapable threat of corporeal harm that exists as a result of the potential exposure to violence on the part of another being or body that can even threaten one's existence as a living body.[50] Precariousness as a condition paradoxically establishes that all bodies are at once vulnerable to one another and also dependent on something other than and outside of themselves.[51] No matter what actions might be taken to protect oneself from or rid oneself of this existential vulnerability, it is not possible to free oneself of the precariousness that is inherent to one's existence.[52] All life, then, is fundamentally precarious; the condition of precariousness, this inherent vulnerability, is what makes humans both constantly vulnerable to one another, but also dependent on one another, on institutions, or generally on things outside of themselves for protection.[53] This paradox reveals how vulnerability cannot be thought of outside of social and political conditions, as these conditions regulate humans' interactions with bodies and things outside of themselves. Precariousness, then, cannot be separated from the political and social conditions that might protect or exploit this vulnerability. This exploitation of precariousness is, for Butler, precarity, or the unequal allocation of precariousness to certain individuals or groups of individuals through a certain exposure to violence, poverty, or legal exclusion that occurs as a result of these social and political conditions and structures.[54] Precarity is the unequal distribution and exploitation of the inherent condition of precariousness through

---

[50] Butler, *Frames of War*, 3.
[51] Butler, *Frames of War,* 23.
[52] Butler, *Frames of War,* 30.
[53] Butler, *Frames of War,* 23.
[54] Butler, *Frames of War,* 3.

the recognition and apprehension of certain populations or groups of people as "ungrievable," or as "lose-able," with their inherent precariousness judged to be in less need of protection than others'.[55] This differential allocation of precarity, as Butler sees it, occurs predominantly through the process of visual framing that enables certain normative frameworks to be created and upheld to allow the public to deem individuals or groups of individuals less valuable, than others, not grievable, and less deserving of protection.

The absence of grievability appears to be closely tied to matters of precarity. The failure to recognize or apprehend individuals as grievable or mournable lives contributes to their increased precarity and increased exposure to violence in various forms. This condition of ungrievability is often achieved through the exclusion of some individuals or groups from the realm of national public mourning whereby lives that matter, that is to say, lives that are politically and socially significant, are typically photographed, memorialized, and thus constituted as lives that are *worth* mourning because they have been granted value and significance to begin with.[56] In this way, the act of public mourning, in other words, of commemorating and making visible grievable lives, is a "presupposition for the life that matters."[57] By contrast, ungrievable life that is excluded from the public space of mourning is not considered a death in the eyes of the nation or society because, as a life, it was never made to matter. The individual who bore this ungrievable life was deemed "already dead," with their life "derealized," or deemed insignificant and invisible far before the moment it came to an end.[58] The process whereby individuals become ungrievable, unmournable, and excluded from the

---

[55] Butler, *Frames of War,* 31.
[56] Butler, *Frames of War,* 36-7.
[57] Butler, *Frames of War,* 14.
[58] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 33.

realm of public mourning is an inherently visual process, Butler suggests, which occurs through a framing of visual depictions of violence and suffering (exploitations of precariousness) that present them as unimportant, inconsequential, or, if at all relevant, as a necessary step to achieve some larger political purpose.

As discussed in the introduction, similar to Butler's conception of vulnerability (as precarity and unmournability) is Giorgio Agamben's notion of *homo sacer.* To recall, *homo sacer* is an individual or body who, like the ungrievable life/body discussed by Butler, exists in a state of exploited and heightened vulnerability, and occupies a space outside of the law and political life.[59] *Homo sacer*, similar to ungrievable life, "cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed."[60] This means that *homo sacer* can be murdered with impunity, without consequence, and its death cannot mean anything to the public. Thus, it cannot and will not be mourned. *Homo sacer* is not considered to be a life that matters, and its existence is merely biological, embodying "bare life," or the ancient Greek understanding of zoē (the simple fact of being alive) in contrast to bios (the political life that holds meaning and is grieved).[61]

Of crucial importance to this thesis is the assertion made by both Butler and Agamben, but essential to critical visuality studies too, that the (visual) processes whereby individuals or groups of individuals becomes hyper-vulnerable—precarious, ungrievable, *homines sacri*—are saturated with political power. Agamben asserts that the creation of *homo sacer* as an (excluded) part of the political order—which I contend, like the rendering of individuals unmournable, is made possible through framing— is not just any operation of (bio)power but rather the original

---

[59] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Meridian (Stanford, Calif: Stanford Univ. Press, 2010).
[60] Agamben, *Homo Sacer,* 82.
[61] Agamben, *Homo Sacer,* 1-7.

operation of sovereign power.[62] Butler, too, finds the making of individuals as precarious and ungrievable, by way of framing, to be a "politically saturated" endeavor that comes about through certain political decisions and social practices.[63] For both of these theorists, the method through which individuals are exposed to hypervulnerability (which again, I emphasize, occurs through visual framing) is carried out by actors or forces that claim to hold or embody sovereign power, making the construction and perpetuation of these hypervulnerable conditions a political endeavor that often serves to establish or maintain sovereign power.

State Vulnerability

The assertion that the rendering vulnerable of certain populations or individuals is a political operation is further supported by the work of various scholars who posit that states, or at least actors that hold and embody political power, can also be seen as vulnerable, although perhaps in a different way. I believe that states, in particular the United States, benefit from the rendering of individuals and groups of individuals vulnerable. Often, states take advantage of making other bodies or groups vulnerable in order to compensate for the negative implications of their own vulnerability or insecurity. I suggest that this is precisely what was felt and what was achieved by the United States in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Whereas modes of vulnerability discussed by Butler and Agamben primarily refer to conditions experienced by individual bodies and lives, or groups of individuals, a different sort of vulnerability can be experienced by the state and its body politic. This form of vulnerability often appears as a vulnerability that threatens the identity of the figurative collective body of the sovereign,

---

[62] Agamben, *Homo Sacer,* 6.
[63] Butler, *Frames of War,* 1.

particularly in terms of its privileged, secure position that makes up its identity as a sovereign or state. This perspective, somewhat different from yet inspired by the previous notions outlined by Butler and Agamben, suggests that vulnerability is not only relevant to discussions of violence as it impacts or targets individual bodies or groups of bodies, but also to concerns about the insecurity of the state's own body and its very existence. Furthermore, by understanding states as actors who also experience vulnerability, I believe that it becomes clear that, as is the case with the rendering of individual bodies vulnerable, attempts to make vulnerable or invulnerable the state body (through the use of visual framing often) is a political endeavor that serves specific political purposes or goals.

Critical international relations (IR) theory, particularly the work of queer and gender IR scholars, has addressed this idea of the vulnerable body of the state. Queer and gender scholars in IR have also highlighted strategies and policies that states develop to remedy or even make use of this vulnerability while achieving specific political purposes in the process. In her 1999 work *Faking It: U.S. Hegemony in a "Post-Phallic" Era,* Cynthia Weber examines the gendered vulnerabilities felt by the United States's body politic, especially in terms of how the United States "imagines" itself and cares about its appearance, paying particular attention to how this issue took place in the context of the United States' foreign policy in the Caribbean from the mid to late 20th century.[64] During various political crises occurring throughout this period, the figurative body of the United States appeared as both gendered and sexualized.[65] Crucially, Weber's central claim is that, as a result of the United States' loss of influence over Cuba in its interactions with Fidel Castro in the 1960s, the United States' body (its masculine identity) was

---

[64] Cynthia Weber, *Faking It: U.S. Hegemony in a "Post-Phallic" Era* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999), xiv.
[65] Weber, *Faking It,* xiv.

symbolically "castrated," and its "normalized hegemonic masculinity" was stripped away.[66] As a result, the United States, even if it was by "faking it," as Weber puts it, continually attempted to maintain its bodily identity as masculine. Relying on the method of rereading developed by French literary theorist Roland Barthes in his reading of Honore de Balzac's story *Sarrasine*, Weber reveals that it is possible to interpret U.S. foreign policy after it is enacted, or after, as Barthes would say, the story is told.[67] Weber's rereading of United States' foreign policy, and her development of additional meanings about and interpretations of this policy, can also show that, in the context of 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror, the United States' bodily identity cannot just be revealed as gendered, with all of the perceptions and implications that come along with this implication, but also that this gendered identity is fallible, particularly in its masculinity. This suggests that one facet of vulnerability, as it plays out in the context of states and the state body, is gendered, and that a state, the United States in this case, can have a *fallible* gendered identity that is always vulnerable to being stripped or emasculated.

Speaking more to the specific context of the war on terror, Laura Sjoberg's 2013 text *Gendering Global Conflict* asserts, somewhat like Weber, that war cannot be properly understood without a consideration of the role of gender.[68] Sjoberg explains that the relational identities of states, from which states' sense of ontological security is derived, are gendered, and this gendering of state identities can serve and has served as both a cause of war and a justification for formulating and fighting global conflicts.[69] Both Weber and Sjoberg affirm that states, particularly the United States, have gendered identities that are vulnerable to harm or

---

[66] Weber, *Faking It,* 2.
[67] Weber, *Faking It,* 17.
[68] Laura Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013).
[69] Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict,* 123-135.

emasculation. But they also show that states often pursue political action– war, for example– to ensure or maintain this identity. Indeed, Sjoberg finds that the gendered sense of self of a given state is as important for that state (perhaps even more important) as its physical security, so much so that, in pursuing actions to affirm its gendered self-identity, a state may well compromise (render vulnerable and insecure) its own physical security, sometimes by enabling, allowing, or even ensuring violence against its citizens.[70] In line with the way Butler explains that precarity exploits an inherent vulnerability found in the condition of relationality that is crucial to being human, and reminiscent of how Weber understands how states can both affirm or lose their gendered sense of self through their political relations to other states, Sjoberg asserts that the gender-driven self-esteem or ontological security of a state is *always* formulated vis-a-vis (and threatened by) other states or actors, through their interactions or potential interactions with other states or other international actors.[71] Thus, as is the case with Butler's conception of vulnerability at the individual level, it appears that it is the encounter, or a threatened encounter, with another (also gendered) state or international actor that renders insecure or vulnerable the identity of the state, an identity that all of these theorists suggest is predominantly masculine or attempting to be perceived as masculine.

Thinking about vulnerability as a gendered concept allows us not only to consider how instances of vulnerability (as femininity) and invulnerability (as masculinity) may emerge in international relations, but also to ask how certain hyped-up displays of power or prowess serve to bolster the (gendered) identity of the state, while at the same time, as is inherent in matters of security and self-defense vis-a-vis other international entities, how these displays of power and

---

[70] Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict,* 123-4.
[71] Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict,* 125.

prowess might reveal that there is in fact something that is vulnerable to or in danger of being lost or destroyed in international relations. In this way, queer and gender scholars in critical IR show that, through (gendered) relations with other states, states are at risk of losing their gendered identities, but also that the (gendered) actions of states, especially as they interact with other states or international actors, indicate that there is something that can be lost, whether that is indeed a gendered identity or a sense of security that accompanies this gendered identity.

Working along this line of thinking, Tim Luke develops his understanding of hyper-power and hype-power.[72] Luke identifies the transition of American security policy from hyper-power to "hype-power" in the early 2000's. Hype-power is a neologism that, according to Luke, refers to the sensational and exaggerated displays of American power that are communicated to the world but that never really reflect the reality of geopolitics and the role of US power in it. These (often visual) displays of hype-power seek to elicit "powerful emotions and lasting impressions" among viewers across the world about the United States' abilities in international politics by way of "excessive coverage, extravagant marketing, or extended publicity."[73] In a way, Luke is emphasizing how, in a Baudrillardian sense as discussed above, the United States in the 21st century attempts to simulate hyper-power, which, different from hype-power, is the actual building up of excessive amounts of force and "reserves of power" that, during the Cold War, enabled the United States to dominate the global political order as a superpower.[74] Crucially, Luke points out that perceptions that the United States is a (masculine) hyper-power today are made possible by the performance of hype-power. In this sense, hyper-power has

---

[72] Timothy W. Luke, "Hyper-Power or Hype-Power?: The USA after Kandahar, Karbala, and Katrina," in *The Geopolitics of American Insecurity: Terror, Power, and Foreign Policy,* ed. Debrix, François, and Mark J. Lacy (London: Routledge, 2009).
[73] Luke, "Hyper-Power or Hype-Power?" 21.
[74] Luke, Luke, "Hyper-Power or Hype-Power?" 19.

merged with and become inseparable from displays of hype-power.[75] This means that, as Baudrillard argued was the case during the Gulf War, the United States in the 21st century seeks to convince the world (and its own population, too) that it is still a hyper-power through visual depictions that hyperbolize and exaggerate American power or capability for the (political) purpose of ensuring that the United States can still be regarded as supremely powerful and geopolitically dominant.

However, as Weber and Sjoberg have pointed out, the efforts to establish state identity (as masculine, as a hyper-power, as invulnerable) are not always entirely effective or able to achieve this sought after identity. In fact, these hyped displays also run the risk of revealing what is especially vulnerable about the United States' intended identity. Indeed, as hyped-up displays of American military strength and power became prevalent in the early 21st century, so too did rhetorics of "declinism" and "endism," thus revealing the United States as actually insecure and vulnerable. Many of these rhetorics became even more prevalent after the 9/11 attacks.[76] Thus, it appears that the merging of hyper-power with hype-power–or the shift in American security policy towards hype and overt exaggeration of American military might–served as an attempt, primarily through visual imagery, to shift the focus away from declining rhetorics of American power and to reemphasize or reconstruct the image of the United States as a secure and invulnerable political body. Still, examples of American vulnerability, as exemplified by the 9/11 attacks, keep on breaking through the simulation of hyper-power, and at times reveal the performative aspect of the United States' military apparatus and thus the United States' vulnerability to the violence and embarrassment that 9/11 represented.

---

[75] Luke, "Hyper-Power or Hype-Power?" 22-23.
[76] Luke, "Hype-Power or Hyper-Power?" 20.

Zones of Endemic Precarity and Selected Post-9/11 Images

I suggested in the previous sections that interactions with other states or international entities can and indeed do trigger the vulnerability of the United States and affect the perceptions of its own identity. This vulnerability and how it is exploited through the United States's interactions with other entities can be discussed in various ways: it may reveal that the United States is "faking" its gendered identity, or it may show that the United States is "hyping-up" its military capabilities. However, this section will focus on how the vulnerability of the United States, once it is revealed, is made use of, how it functions, and what its purpose sometimes becomes. On the one hand, Luke reveals that vulnerability– in the form of rhetorics discussing the end of American power– is dealt with by way of hype-power, although not entirely effectively since hype-power can actually lead to an intensification of these rhetorics.[77] In Luke's analysis, hype-power functions as an attempt to soothe or hide the revealed vulnerability, and to construct a supposedly superior narrative that insists on the fact that the United States remains a hyper-power. But, as previously discussed, with the help of scholars of gender and queer IR, by expressing one's intended identity as invulnerable, masculine, and hyper-powerful, one is also admitting or showing what one is in fact vulnerable to. In hyping-up one's capacity for self-defense, one is at the same time admitting that one remains vulnerable to harm from various international actors.

With all of this in mind, it would not make sense to make the claim that, after 9/11 revealed the United States as vulnerable, the primary response of the United States was to hide this vulnerability or make it invisible and forgotten, as Luke intimates hype-power may attempt

---

[77] Luke, *Hype-Power or Hyper-Power?* 20.

to do in most cases. It would not have been possible for this vulnerability to remain hidden, and it would have been impractical because this vulnerability, I argue, became invaluable to the United States' response to the attacks. The attacks of 9/11 were not responded to by the United States with measures designed to sweep away the vulnerability that had been revealed, at least not entirely. The admission or recognition of vulnerability triggered by the attacks– for example, by mourning victims or memorializing the loss of life year after year until today[78]– was not meant to be made invisible or soothed, but rather was exploited, and used to enact violence in its name, a violence that has served to establish the revealed vulnerability as something of the past but also to create more vulnerability. In this way, the vulnerability that was revealed about the United States as a result of the 9/11 attacks has served two paradoxical but related effects. On the one hand, the vulnerability, when revealed, has been mobilized as a justification to carry out hyped-up acts of military force in order to again establish the United States as a hyper-power, which in turn has helped to remediate the vulnerability. On the other hand, this vulnerability has been used to leverage public acceptance of operations of military power in response to the initial attacks. These hyped-up military responses have thus ensured the rendering vulnerable of various populations and bodies in what in this study I refer to as endemic zones of precarity, that is to say, spaces in which various individuals are exposed to suffering at the hands of United States' hype-power, a suffering that often continues unmediated and unaddressed by the United States' public and the United States' government.

François Debrix, pushing further the arguments made by Luke, has discussed how hyped-up displays of military power are deeply related to the proliferation of vulnerability, drawing a

---

[78] Here, I am referring to the creation of the Transportation Security Administration, created on November 19, 2001, to oversee the security of transportation systems within and connecting to the United States to beef-up security measures to prevent another attack like 9/11. See https://www.tsa.gov/history.

connection between Luke's notion of hype-power and the generation of zones of death and death-making.[79] What Debrix argues is that contemporary forms of hype-power, especially in the context of the United States, have evolved from spectacles of death and death-making to the making of more subdued, less visible ways of causing death or spreading various forms of violence against a wide range of populations, perhaps even America's own population.[80] What is key here for the purpose of this study is not only that hype-power operates through spectacles of exaggerated, visible operations of state power, but also that it enables the creation of more hidden modes of violence or vulnerability that are often removed from public sight, thus enabling the formation of what Debrix terms a "condition of endemic precarity."[81] In this condition, bodies are made to exist in a constant state between life and death, a state not unlike that of bare life or ungrievable life whereby individual bodies are subjected to a type of living that situates them as not fully alive or not truly a life, and yet at the same time not yet dead. The bodies who are subjected to this condition are sometimes the targets of brutal, vicious forms of violence, but, alternatively, are neglected from life-saving care, both experiences which may go unnoticed or unaddressed as the existence of bodies in these "extra/ordinary" conditions is seemingly superfluous or inconsequential.[82] The deaths of bodies in these conditions, conditions that still come about as a result of American hype-power, thus become common, banal, and invisible.

---

[79] François Debrix, "Necropolitics and American Hype-Power," SPECTRA 10, no. 1 (September 12, 2023): 65–74, https://doi.org/10.21061/spectra.v10i1.236.
[80] Debrix, "Necropolitics of American Hype-Power," 67.
[81] Debrix, "Necropolitics of American Hype-Power," 71.
[82] Debrix, "Necropolitics of American Hype-Power," 70.

Debrix's assertion that such conditions of endemic precarity can occur as a result of operations of hype-power makes evident the intimate connection between the United States' response to the vulnerability that was revealed in the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent rendering vulnerable of populations both within and outside of the United States as a result of the attacks, thus revealing a proliferation or contagion of vulnerability that occurred as a result of the United States' own felt vulnerability. For the United States after 9/11, the response to the revealed or felt vulnerability was not only the enactment of a war on terror that was riddled with operations of hype-power, but also a proliferation of what I refer to as zones of endemic precarity. In these zones of endemic precarity produced by the United States after 9/11, bodies and lives were turned into *homines sacri*, ungrievable, and perpetually precarious. These zones of endemic precarity, as well as the operations of hype-power that enabled the conditions for these zones to emerge, showed how the United States decided to deal with its vulnerability in the aftermath of 9/11.

In addition to displaying how the United States responded to its own vulnerability by creating more vulnerability, often via zones of endemic precarity, in the aftermath of 9/11, this study develops a connection between the United States' ability to render vulnerable (even if endemically so) certain populations in the post-9/11 era and the role that images have played in this context by allowing, or even encouraging, the United States to do this. In *Frames of War*, Butler emphasizes that framing works in tandem with state power to "rationalize" the state's own operations.[83] Alongside policy, the framing of images targets perceptions, and more specifically for the purpose of this study, perceptions of the vulnerability of the United States and of the

---

[83] Butler, *Frames of War,* 29

suffering taking place in zones of endemic precarity, thus shaping the decisions to make vulnerable certain groups or bodies and making them appear logical or reasonable to mostly the American viewer of the images. Thus, images and their framing seem to be not just implicated in rendering precarious certain populations in the post-9/11 period but are a vital part of this process. Crucially images that contain strong motifs of violence and suffering appear to have a far greater effect on viewers– whether in generating emotional responses, such as apathy, or constructing a particular understanding of reality– than other images that do not contain these motifs or showcase them less overtly, as theorists of visual culture have argued.

A particular set of images that depict the events of 9/11 as well as various domestic and foreign campaigns during the war on terror best display the connection between images and the creation of zones of endemic precarity and their lasting effects. Facets of vulnerability as outlined by various theorists discussed in this chapter, as well as how visual culture, and images specifically, operate, are helpful to identify certain images that might otherwise be thought of as depictions of necessary or ordinary operations of American military power. The framing of the sorts of vulnerability discussed in this chapter in an image of the 9/11 attacks, perhaps as an unforgivable exploitation of precariousness, can reveal how images are used to urge the viewer to develop an emotional connection to a given event or situation. This connection can, in turn, impact how the viewer will react to another image later on, perhaps an image depicting various Iraqi detainees being tortured at Abu Ghraib and thus can influence the viewer's apprehension of the second image or event. Theorizations of vulnerability outlined in this chapter can help to pinpoint the experiences of those bodies and lives depicted in the images, and they can also help to explain the emotional and apprehensive impact that images can generate. The connection between these two dimensions– different forms of vulnerability and the apprehensive and reality-

affirming function of the image– is what makes images a crucial tool in the normalization of the vulnerabilities which were necessary for the formation of zones of endemic precarity in the post-9/11 context. This, in turn, necessitates an analysis of various images captured between the 9/11 attacks and the symbolic "end" of the war on terror in August 2021.

The study performed in the following chapters will begin by analyzing three selected images that speak to the kind of vulnerability that was experienced by the United States (as individual bodies and as the state body) during and right after the 9/11 attacks. These three images begin to reveal how the framing of images of mass destruction and vulnerability can influence public understanding of the event or disaster that is displayed in the images. The first image, taken by Doug Mills (AP) on September 11, 2001, is one of the most well-known images selected in this study.[84] The image was taken at an elementary school in Florida, and it depicts the moment that President Bush was informed by a member of his staff that a second airplane collided with the World Trade Center. This image is a representation of the figurehead of the United States in a position of heightened vulnerability as he was forced to act as both the leader of a nation under attack and as the figure responsible for the well-being of the children in the classroom.

The second image, paired with the third image, was taken by Doug Kanter (AFP/ Getty Images) and published in an article by U.S. News and World Report on September 14, 2001,[85] depicts a lone man standing among the rubble of the destroyed North Tower of the World Trade

---

[84] Doug Mills, Sept 11 Bush Classroom, September 11, 2001, Photograph, September 11, 2001, Associated Press, https://newsroom.ap.org/editorial-photos-videos/detail?itemid=dbff2088eccc4c788262dda98fd7aed8&mediatype=photo.

[85] Roger Simon, "An America Afraid: The Day the U.S. Lost Its Innocence," *US News & World Report*, September 14, 2001, //www.usnews.com/news/articles/2001/09/14/innocence-lost-forever-on-911.

Center, calling out for any surviving victims.[86] The man in the image is covered from head to toe in dust, and the ruins of the North Tower of the World Trade Center, along with the grey sky, create an otherworldly scene of complete and utter destruction. The third image, taken by Larry Downing and published by Reuters on September 16, 2001, displays the severely damaged and crumbling side of the Pentagon building that was hit days before by American Airlines Flight 77.[87] In the background of this image is the U.S. Capitol Building and the landscape of D.C. at dawn. And hanging on the damaged wall of the Pentagon building, beside the rubble, is a large American flag. Both of two images in this pair were taken and published in the days immediately following the 9/11 attacks. These two images reveal that the 9/11 attacks indeed rendered the United States unprecedentedly vulnerable, and crucially, established the sort of vulnerability that the United States would later act in response of. The two images of ground zero and the Pentagon turned, at least partially, into rubble provide strong renditions of Butler's conception of precariousness, whereby states like the United States, no matter how strong they are militarily, cannot release the bodies and lives within them from their own sense of human vulnerability.[88]

These three images depict the destruction and vulnerability of symbols of United States' political, economic, and military power, and, crucially, display the utter vulnerability of both innocent American bodies and symbolic American infrastructure. These visual representations of American institutions being destroyed help to reveal that the 9/11 attacks intentionally made vulnerable average American lives and normal American infrastructure that nonetheless was

---

[86] Doug Kanter, *TOPSHOT-US-ATTACKS-TRADE CENTER RUBBLE*, September 11, 2001, Photograph, September 11, 2001, https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/man-stands-in-the-rubble-and-calls-out-asking-if-anyone-news-photo/150092224?adppopup=true

[87] Larry Downing, *The Damaged Area of the Pentagon Building, Which a Commercial Jetliner Slammed into on September 11, 2001, Is Illuminated at Sunrise with the U.S. Capitol Building in the Background.*, September 16, 2001, Photograph, September 16, 2001, Reuters, https://widerimage.reuters.com/photographer/larry-downing.html.

[88] Butler, *Frames of War,* 30.

symbolic of a privileged American identity. Additionally, these images are selected for this study due to their role in establishing vulnerability as alien to the United States but also as taking place within the United States' borders. The two images of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon that represent the destruction on 9/11 are also foregrounded with American flags. This sort of framing makes these images particularly effective in reminding the viewer that the attacks did not take place in an overseas warzone, but rather in the economic and political capitals of the United States (or even the typical American classroom). It is through the visual framing of these images that the viewer can understand the massive destruction of the attacks as otherworldly but also at the same time as being in and about America. It is also this framing that enables the United States' public to apprehend the 9/11 attacks as representing, at least for a moment, America's position as no longer invulnerable or hyper-powerful, with the attacks marking a violation of the privileges that living in a hyper-securitized state afforded average Americans. In this way, these images, through their embedded depictions of vulnerability, enforce the idea that 9/11 was indeed a revelation of the vulnerability of the United States that, up to this moment, almost alien to the American viewer. These images also begin to reveal that vulnerability can serve a specific (political) purpose, in this case, depicting how the attacks were alien to the American experience yet deeply personal to the United States' identity and typical way of life.

At the same time as these three images reached the American public, so too did another image that depicts the response by the President and first responders to the attacks. This selected image, taken by Eric Draper on September 14, 2001, displays President George W. Bush mid-speech at Ground Zero, standing on top of the rubble, next to a retired New York City firefighter,

above hundreds of rescue workers, police, and firemen.[89] This image is currently located in the National Archives, but was released in a White House statement on September 14, 2001,[90] and it (and many others depicting this moment) has been published in many different venues since it was taken, most notably by Time Magazine on September 24, 2001.[91] This image is highlighted because it helps to understand how the vulnerability both revealed and exploited by the 9/11 attacks was not brushed aside nor hidden. Rather, this image shows how United States' precarity metaphorically (and literally, in the image) was mobilized as the foundation upon which the United States chose to rebuild itself and determine its future policy decisions. Thus, this image reveals how vulnerability and the enactment of violence can be mutually constitutive and, often, are inseparable from one another. This image depicts the President and figurehead of the United States as not destroyed or broken by the vulnerability that is nonetheless contained in the image, as President Bush and those in the image stand tall despite (and in response to) the vulnerability resulting from the attacks. In other worlds, this image affirms precarity and strength simultaneously. It reveals an injured but not broken United States, thus emotionally priming viewers for policy decisions that will soon justify the placement of so many bodies into zones of endemic precarity, and for what many can now understand as the greater good of the U.S. nation and even the world. Put differently, this image and its framing bring to light the fact that vulnerability, in many images of and about the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath, were not denied

---

[89] Eric Draper, President George W. Bush and White House Staff Watch News Coverage of Flight 175 Striking the South Tower of the World Trade Center at Emma E. Booker Elementary School in Sarasota, Florida, September 11, 2001, Photograph, September 11, 2001, NAID: 204326996, National Archives, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/204326996.

[90] George W. Bush, "President Bush Salutes Heroes in New York," The White House: George W. Bush, September 14, 2001, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010914-9.html.

[91] "The TIME Vault: September 24, 2001," TIME.Com, http://time.com/vault/issue/2001-09-24/page/28/.

or made invisible, but rather were placed front and center to set the stage for two decades of a global war on terror that were to follow.

After the initial attacks depicted in the previous images, and amid the war on terror, two images evoking strong instances of vulnerability are selected for this study as they also display how the United States responded to the vulnerability showcased in the previous images. The first image in this set captures U.S. private Lynndie England, a member of the 372nd Military Police Company stationed at Abu Ghraib prison[92] in Iraq, posing for the camera, while holding one end of a leash. The other end of the leash is wrapped around the neck of a naked Iraqi detainee as he lays on the ground of the prison.[93] This photograph was originally taken in November 2003, along with hundreds of other photographs that were released to the public beginning in early May 2004, and it was also made public in a CBS report,[94] with the *Washington Post* and other outlets later releasing more photographs and reports of the tortures carried out inside the prison.[95] These photographs were immediately followed by mass news coverage and dissemination of the Abu Ghraib images by many major news outlets. The second of these selected images shows hundreds of Iraqi prisoners closed in behind a chain link and barbed wire as they await their release from the Abu Ghraib prison on June 23, 2006, and it was taken by Wathiq Khuzaie and

---

[92] Abu Ghraib, located in about twenty miles west of Baghdad, Iraq, was a notorious prison under the rule of Saddam Hussein. It was later taken over the by United States and made into a U.S. military prison housing thousands of (mostly innocent civilian) inmates. The prison would become famous after several hundred images were leaked in May 2004 that depicted the torture that was performed to inmates at the prison. For more information on Abu Ghraib and the torture carried out there, see https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/10/torture-at-abu-ghraib.

[93] "Soldier Charged with Abusing Iraqi Prisoners," NBC News, May 7, 2004, https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna4927273.

[94] Rebecca Leung, "Abuse At Abu Ghraib: CBS News," May 5, 2004, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/abuse-at-abu-ghraib/.

[95] Scott Higham and Joe Stephens, "New Details of Prison Abuse Emerge," The Washington Post, May 21, 2004, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A43783-2004May20.html.

published by Getty Images and Reuters.[96] The foreground and focus of this image is the fence and barbed wire, with the men placed in the background, which emphasizes their imprisonment and separation from the photographer. These selected images, in two different yet related instances, underscore the effectiveness of images in shaping normative apprehensions for certain lives as grievable and relevant, while making other lives and bodies ungrievable or superfluous. Both images portray various bodies in extralegal states of suffering, reminiscent of Agamben's *homo sacer*. The fenced in and tortured bodies are depicted as little more than cattle, totally subservient to their American captors and eerily reminiscent of some of the photographs that came about after the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps at the end of World War II (thus also implicating the United States and its citizens as accepting such crimes). The existence of these images, and the various manifestations of vulnerability contained within them, suggests that the previously described images depicting the terror of 9/11 and its immediate aftermath were able to foster a social and political environment that allowed endemic precarity to come about (as is confirmed by the images from Abu Ghraib). If not for the presentation of vulnerability in the images of 9/11 as real yet alien, incomprehensible, unacceptable, and in need of retaliatory action, there may not have been a sociopolitical context that would tolerate, or even encourage, the conditions and actions that took place at the Abu Ghraib prison and revealed through their images. The Abu Ghraib images are thus crucial in revealing how, perhaps as a result of the perceptions of retaliatory action that came out of the images of the 9/11 attacks, the United States rendered other bodies endemically precarious in response to the vulnerability contained and framed in the initial 9/11 images.

---

[96] Khuzaie Wathiq, June 23, 2006, Photograph, June 23, 2006, Reuters. From Alasdair Soussi, "The Abu Ghraib Abuse Scandal 20 Years on: What Redress for Victims?," Al Jazeera, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/27/the-abu-ghraib-abuse-scandal-20-years-on-what-redress-for-victims.

However, the framing of the Abu Ghraib images reveals another crucial element of the arguments of this study. Namely, that relegating bodies to a state of endemic precarity, as the images from Abu Ghraib show, when portrayed visually, can also display the United States as weak or vulnerable, visually implying what the United States was threatened by while its military carries out the depicted acts of violence against the prisoners. In this sense, these Abu Ghraib images also function to break through the dominant ideologies that work to rationalize wartime actions, as they are indicative of what the United States remains afraid of (and thus vulnerable to).[97] The ambivalence regarding vulnerability in these images can thus lead the viewer to question whether responding to the initial vulnerability by way of endemic precarity was a suitable strategy. Speaking to arguments introduced earlier in this chapter, these images raise questions surrounding why the United States believed that it had to imprison so many bodies, if not out of fear for these prisoners' actions against the United States.

Taken years after the previous images from Abu Ghraib, a final set of two images that I have selected reveal how images and their framing can indicate who, in this case at the symbolic end of the war on terror, is really the vulnerable subject. One image, taken by Sargent Isiah Campbell (U.S. Marine Corps via AP) on August 8, 2021 and published by the Associated Press shortly after, captures 23 year old Marine Sergeant Nicole Gee holding a baby at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan.[98] This image, which spread across social and news

---

[97] Butler discusses the ability of certain media to "break through the dominant ideologies that rationalize war" in a reflection on poems written by prisoners at Guantanamo Bay in her book *Frames of War*, 61. These poems represent the ability to break through the dominant frames of war as they exposed the hypocrisy of the war on terror and the effects that the war had on real human beings, rather than what was portrayed in the dominant, pro-U.S. narrative of the war.

[98] Campbell Isiah, Sgt. Nicole Gee Holding Baby in Kabul, Afghanistan, August 20, 2021, Photograph, August 20, 2021. From Brian Melley and Hanson Amy, "Slain Marine Who Cradled Baby at Kabul Airport Loved Her Job," AP News, August 29, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-kabul-islamic-state-group-14ffbf5bcf4b67596420bd95e89785f6.

media upon the news of the tragedy of Gee's death days later as a result of a suicide bombing, shows Gee gazing down affectionately at the Afghan child who is barefoot, presumably orphaned, and asleep in her arms. Although this photo's framing might have attempted to portray the United States as caring and protective (of the child, or metaphorically, of the civilians of Afghanistan), this frame ultimately breaks down when the viewer learns that the protective, caring soldier was killed by enemy combatants mere days after the photograph was taken.[99] This image of what should be a more vulnerable child and perhaps a less vulnerable adult/ US soldier, reveals through its inconsistencies (both contained within the frame of the image and outside of it) that, actually, both the Afghan child and the American soldier were vulnerable and subject to harm. It also suggests that, two decades after the war on terror started, America has still not shaken off its vulnerability from those who sought to harm it. The image of Gee and the Afghan baby crucially suggests, a bit like the images of Abu Ghraib, that inconsistencies in the narrative that frames an image of/about vulnerability as well as the reality outside of the frame can help the viewer to break away from the frame and to be open to another message, in this case, the idea that the innate vulnerability of the United States and its bodies that was exploited by the attacks of 9/11 was not still not eliminated after twenty years of conflict.

A final selected image, also depicting a scene at the time of the chaotic American departure from Kabul, captures a moment on August 16, 2021, when Afghan citizens race alongside a U.S. Air Force transport plane as it moves down the runway at the same airport as the previous image, leaving those running after it to a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan behind.[100] In the

---

[99] Brian Melley and Hanson Amy, "Slain Marine Who Cradled Baby at Kabul Airport Loved Her Job," AP News, August 29, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-kabul-islamic-state-group-14ffbf5bcf4b67596420bd95e89785f6.

[100] Ahmad Seir et al., "Kabul Airport Plunges into Chaos as Taliban Patrol Capital," AP News, August 16, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-784681c4400b097cf73b93cec34c5c61. Although the image has been

image, published by Associated Press and on social media alongside video footage of the departure that became widespread at the time of the American withdrawal, hundreds of Afghan civilians chase the comparatively giant U.S. Air Force plane down the runway, desperately but unsuccessfully, even fatally, attempting to reach the plane. The image is blurry, as if the viewer is caught up in the chase alongside those depicted in the image. This image furthers the notion that both the United States and those it allegedly sought to protect (Afghan citizens) are still vulnerable at the end of the war. Furthermore, this image does not display an honorable American departure from a successful military operation, but, rather, a palpably chaotic rush by Afghan citizens after a fleeing United States who abandoned Afghanistan to the Taliban after two decades of fighting. This image is particularly telling as it offers an example of the breaking of a frame, as the image's display of the United States as larger and stronger than the small, ant-like Afghan citizens in pursuit of the United States' plane does is not consistent with the discussions and previous image of the withdrawal that portray the United States at the time as still vulnerable. This image, with its framing of the United States as a militarized power that flees from a place it once invaded, breaks through previous accounts of the war on terror that, once, effectively, and with the help of images, made United States' operations in Afghanistan seem necessary, honorable, and about U.S. hyper-power.

The inconsistencies in the framing of the selected two images of events from the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan reveal the changes in perception of America from a strong power who stood atop of its revealed vulnerability to a fleeing, failed protector of those weaker and more vulnerable bodies than the United States itself and which the United States claimed to

---

published in many sources such as the Associated Press article above, the image is a still taken from a video captured by an unknown source.

protect. The vulnerabilities depicted in these images reveal that both the United States *and* the country it sought to liberate from terror actually remained vulnerable after so many years of war. Furthermore, these two images of the United States' withdrawal indicate that the zones of endemic precarity created in the years after the 9/11 attacks, and which were portrayed at the time as necessary for the United States to recover its former geopolitical hyper-powerful position, failed to remedy the vulnerability on the part of the United States, on and after the 9/11 attacks, as the United States actually remained vulnerable for the duration of the war, up to the moment when it fled Afghanistan.

Conclusion and Next Chapter

Although the images introduced above are not the full extent of the visual framings that will be analyzed in the following chapters, what all of these visual displays are able to portray is the presence of an operative relationship between the various vulnerabilities discussed in this chapter and the ability of some of these vulnerabilities to be transposed to various groups of people with the help of visual frames. The images depicting the events of and after 9/11 indicate that it is possible to implicate images in the process of rendering (endemically) vulnerable some bodies or groups of bodies in the post-9/11 period, as several images are framed in ways that privilege a certain understanding of events such as the 9/11 attacks, the torturing of foreign (often civilian) populations, and the United States' withdrawal at the end of the war. Furthermore, these selected images, through their various depictions of vulnerability, speak to the effectiveness of the decision by the United States to render vulnerable other populations in order to, as I have argued previously, reinstate the United States' geopolitical position that was threatened due to the 9/11 attacks. Depictions of the United States as vulnerable at the end of 20

years of conflict show that, even with the use of visual frames, the United States did not fully recover from its vulnerable position.

All of these observations indicate that images depicting instances of vulnerability and violence are not simply depictions of these events, but that, through visual framing, they are attempts at portraying vulnerability and violence in a particular way, which in turn is meant to uphold or challenge the viewer's perceptions of what is depicted in the image. These attempts to influence perceptions, crucially, are often indicative of operations of state power that, as this study makes evident, seek to normalize conditions that rely on the placement of certain bodies into zones of endemic precarity. The following chapter explains how the stage was set, through images and their framing, for the United States to do just that in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

The next chapter also analyzes four images that represent scenes from the attacks on 9/11 and the immediate actions taken by both President George W. Bush and first responders. This chapter discusses how the framing of these 9/11 images facilitated certain perceptions of and narratives about the United States' own vulnerability in the aftermath of the attacks, and how this vulnerability needed to be addressed. In this chapter, I will argue that these images of violence and vulnerability were framed in a specific way that took for granted the depictions of the United States as vulnerable in order to legitimate the chosen responses and to garner public support for the enactment of a global war on terror that, in turn, would make inconsequential or unimportant the placement of certain populations into zones of endemic precarity. Thus, this next chapter will begin to reveal that there was and continues to be a direct link between the formation of zones of endemic precarity and the images of the 9/11 attacks.

Chapter 3: September 11 and the Vulnerability of the United States' Sense of Masculine First-Worldism

> The United States, by using this term [terrorist], positions itself exclusively as the sudden and indisputable victim of violence, even though there is no doubt that it did suffer violence. But it is one matter to suffer violence and quite another to use that fact to ground a framework in which one's injury authorizes limitless aggression against targets that may or may not be related to the sources of one's own suffering.
>
> -Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*

Introduction

As discussed in the last chapter, zones of endemic precarity can form inside and outside of the boundaries of the United States in large part due to operations of U.S. hype(r)-power. However, and crucially to the arguments of this study, before these zones of endemic precarity took form during the war on terror, it was necessary, as Judith Butler has shown, for the appropriate social and political conditions to be constructed in the United States to make it possible not only the toleration of but also, in many cases, the support for rendering vulnerable (even endemically so) so many bodies throughout the war on terror. In other words, before it was possible for zones of endemic precarity to come about after, and as a response to, the 9/11 attacks, it was necessary for the American public to be prepared to accept the perspective that the actions taken against the perpetrators of the attacks (and those who were said to support them) were justified. This initial step is the focus of this chapter. It is also a crucial prerequisite to a discussion of the existence of and experiences within the zones of endemic precarity created during the war on terror (and their purpose for the United States, something which will be examined in Chapter 4). Thus, the present chapter will turn its attention to a series of images that reveal the framing of the vulnerability experienced by and inside the United States during and right after the 9/11 attacks, and it will examine the framing of the response to the attacks.

The four images analyzed in this chapter show not only that the United States experienced a state of unprecedented vulnerability because of the attacks, but also that this vulnerability was experienced by the United States, its figurehead (the US President), and its citizens. Crucially, I emphasize the role of gender in the framing of these vulnerabilities, with the theoretical backing of scholars such as Cynthia Weber, Judith Butler, and Laura Sjoberg. The four images in this chapter begin to explain how the initial experience of violence was framed as something that should not and did not authentically exist or belong inside of the masculine hype(r)-powerful space of the United States. Thus, the violent outcome of the initial attacks was framed as a sort of "othered" or alien vulnerability, not unlike the sort of vulnerability that would have been expected in war-torn or "third world"[101] countries. This vulnerability was perceived to be outside of and unlike the United States, and foreign to the American experience. As images that emphasized this sort of vulnerability became publicized, so too did a parallel (gendered) narrative that communicated to the American public that, rather than succumbing to this experience of vulnerability or attempting to render the vulnerability completely obsolete, the United States (and those inside of it) would start to make use of the vulnerability as a way of standing back up and reasserting a sense of (masculine) first-worldism that was made vulnerable by the attacks (as shown in these images). This reassertion would take place through a retaliatory war against terror that would rekindle a sense of first-worldism. Thus, the particular yet unprecedented sort of vulnerability that the United States and its bodies experienced as a result of the 9/11 attacks served as the foundation for the response that led to the war on terror and to

[101] While I am aware that the phrase "third world" is an outdated and incorrect term for countries in the Global South, it is a phrase and concept taken from Judith Butler's work on the war on terror and important to this study's conceptual understanding of the vulnerability experienced by the United States because of the 9/11 attacks. See Butler's book *Precarious Life,* 39.

the production of the conditions that would enable, even encourage, the creation of various zones of endemic precarity that, during the war on terror, would emerge both within and outside of the United States.

President George W. Bush's Experience on September 11, 2001

On the morning of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush visited Emma E. Booker Elementary School in Sarasota, Florida, where he planned to read and give a brief talk to students and staff on the importance of education and his administration's plans for educational reform.[102] Prior to entering the elementary school, President Bush had been informed that an airplane had flown into one of the World Trade Center towers, but at that point the administration was largely under the impression that the incident had been accidental.[103] In the span of a only a few minutes, President Bush was informed by his staff that a second airplane had flown into the South Tower of the World Trade Center. In what is now a famous moment, the small, ordinary Florida elementary school classroom was transformed into what would become a widely viewed room inside which the President and his staff were left to watch and react to the terrorist attacks on television.[104] It was inside this elementary school, from the moment Bush learned about the attacks and began to address the situation, that some of the most well-known images were taken on the day of the 9/11 attacks. The selected image below, *figure 1,*[105] taken by White House photographer Doug Mills, displays the very moment that President

---

[102] Gary Gregg, "George W. Bush: Foreign Affairs, Miller Center," October 4, 2016, https://millercenter.org/president/gwbush/foreign-affairs.
[103] Gregg, "Bush: Foreign Affairs."
[104] Gregg, "Bush: Foreign Affairs."
[105] Doug Mills, Sept 11 Bush Classroom, September 11, 2001, Photograph, September 11, 2001, Associated Press, https://newsroom.ap.org/editorial-photos-videos/detail?itemid=dbff2088eccc4c788262dda98fd7aed8&mediatype=photo.

Bush is told about the second attack on the World Trade Center, and is forced to accept the vulnerability that being the President of the United States under attack granted him, in addition to the vulnerability of being outside of the White House or another secure environment. The framing of this photograph, especially in terms of how it deals with the image's setting, is in many ways indicative of how attacks were, for regular Americans, experienced as an exploitation of an inherent vulnerability that targeted the future safety of the United States through some of its most vulnerable population.

Figure 1: White House chief of staff Andrew Card interrupts President George W. Bush as he reads to children to inform him that a second plane flew into the World Trade Center, during a visit to the Emma E. Booker Elementary School in Sarasota (Photograph by Doug Mills, September 11, 2001, AP, Fair Use determination attached).

There is quite a lot pictured in this image, between President Bush and his chief of staff, as well as the many children pictured sitting in front of the two politicians on the floor of the

classroom [106] Crucially though, what makes this photograph perhaps most striking to the viewer is the setting of this photographed moment. Made immediately evident to the average American viewer through the board games stacked on the wall, the bright children's books and posters behind the President, and the group of children seated on the floor in front of the President, this image was taken from the inside of a typical American elementary school classroom. The classroom is a setting where young children—a group thought of as the most vulnerable of the American population—gather to learn and spend most of their time. The classroom is a space that is thought to be safe, nurturing, and comfortable. This setting is made even more striking as it is contrasted with the seriousness of the situation and the reaction to it as evidenced clearly on President Bush's face. The contrast between the setting of the image and the perception of what President Bush is experiencing in this moment in many ways establishes the foundation for what will become a theme within the first set of images discussed in this chapter: the extent to which the attacks exploited the vulnerability of regular Americans and threatened their futures, in terms of their immediate physical safety, but also in relation to the normalcy of their day-to-day-lives.

The setting of an elementary classroom is dramatic and reveals a lot about what has been framed as being at stake in the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent war on terror. It seems almost intentional that President Bush became aware of the attacks in a classroom setting. Once again, the classroom space is typically home to the population of the most vulnerable human bodies: young children. As defined by Judith Butler in her work on human vulnerability and the war on terror, the notion of precariousness suggests that human beings are constantly exposed to and

---

[106] Doug Mills, *Sept 11 Bush Classroom*, September 11, 2001, Photograph, September 11, 2001, 010911018710, Associated Press, https://newsroom.ap.org/editorial-photos-videos/detail?itemid=dbff2088eccc4c788262dda98fd7aed8&mediatype=photo.

potentially threatened, but also potentially protected, by other human beings.[107] Importantly though, this condition of precariousness, as it establishes vulnerability as a result of one's inherent relational state vis-a-vis others, positions children, to a great extent, in a condition of increased precarity and vulnerability, particularly compared to their adult counterparts, as children rely on others for protection and care to a much greater extent than adults. For Butler, this increased exposure to the other that targets the youngest of the human population is so widely felt and acknowledged that the increased vulnerability of children is generally recognized by all.[108] This concept is also discussed by Adriana Cavarero in her work on horrorism.[109] Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero, referencing primarily Thomas Hobbes' notion of the state of nature, asserts that it is indeed children who are the most vulnerable among the human population, as they are completely dependent on another (usually feminine) figure to either provide care, or, in a horrific alternative, to decide to harm the child.[110] Similar to Butler, Cavarero asserts that children are generally considered the most vulnerable group of the human population, and are placed at the mercy of others to a far greater extent than adult and far more independent bodies. It is the child who is almost completely exposed to the implications that come out of another's choice of providing either protection or harm. In this way, the child seems to be positioned as the epitome of the natural vulnerability, or precariousness, experienced by all human beings.

With this theoretical understanding of the heightened vulnerability inherent to children, one can begin to see that what this image communicates to the viewer is a particular framing

---

[107] Butler, *Frames of War*, 14.
[108] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 43.
[109] Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (Columbia University Press, 2009).
[110] Cavarero, *Horrorism*, 22-24.

that, through President George W. Bush's presence in a setting meant for the United States' most vulnerable bodies, establishes the President of the United States—a figure, as Cynthia Weber argues, who both is representative of and communicates the identity of the United States' body politic—[111] as experiencing the immediate vulnerability of the United States under attack while himself positioned in a space of heightened vulnerability as the classroom he is in is not a secure space. In other words, as this image depicts President Bush becoming aware of the 9/11 attacks in a classroom, and his presence in the classroom situates him in a space of further heightened vulnerability or insecurity, his learning of the attacks increases the overall sense of vulnerability as displayed in the image. His position as representative of and as someone who communicates the American identity, as Weber puts it, means that, as Bush is experiencing this vulnerability, so too is the United States, at least symbolically. The President, who would generally be pictured dealing with such crises in a space such as the White House's Oval Office, was not only outside of such a preferable space of symbolic protection and power on 9/11, but furthermore he was in a setting that is designed to hold America's most vulnerable bodies. The vulnerability inherent to the children that would generally be encapsulated by the classroom space, as it frames this image, acts as a sort of magnifier for the vulnerability that President Bush, the representative of the United States' own vulnerability, was experiencing in the moment of the attacks, and that by extension the viewer experiences upon viewing the face of the President in this image. Thus, from the very moment that the President became aware that America was under attack, he was photographed in a setting not only abnormal to where the President would be expected to deal with such matters, but in a place that is home to the most vulnerable bodies in the United States.

---

[111] Weber, *Faking It*, xiv.

At the same time that this image, as it builds on the seriousness of the situation, exacerbates the experience of vulnerability as portrayed by President Bush, the classroom setting that frames it also makes the image effective at communicating to the viewer what is at stake in the 9/11 attacks as the issue is not only about the infrastructure and American bodies lost as a result of the violence of the attacks, but also about the future of the American way of life. This future, a future which the framing of the image also depicts as vulnerable, is represented here through the next generation of Americans who are expected to develop and be nurtured in the very room where President Bush is sitting as he hears about the attacks for the first time. Thus, the image's framing brings to the forefront the point that, in addition to the violence that was experienced by (mostly)[112] adult bodies in the World Trade Center and the Pentagon at that very moment, the attacks also make vulnerable those bodies who are already inherently more vulnerable than adults, and whose future and safety must now be safeguarded to ensure the future and safety of the United States. Reflecting on the impact that being in an elementary school had on his reaction to the news of the attacks, Bush claimed, as published in many articles that accompanied this very image, that when he was notified of the second tower being hit as he sat with the children, he refused to make any sort of move or change his behavior because "I [President Bush] didn't want to rattle the kids. I [President Bush] wanted to project a sense of calm."[113] It was to provide this sense of calm and to protect the American children from panic, President Bush says, that he waited to finish reading to the children before he addressed the situation with his advisors in another room in the school. Thus, from the very moment that

---

[112] Of the nearly 3,000 deaths as an immediate result from the 9/11 attacks, eight of them were children, including three eleven-year-olds on flight 77. Three college students were killed on flight 93. From "9/11 Investigation," Federal Bureau of Investigation, https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/911-investigation

[113] Gregg, "Bush: Foreign Affairs."

President Bush became aware that America was experiencing an unprecedented attack on 9/11, the classroom environment (once again pictured in *figure 1*) necessitated that he, and, through the image, the viewer too, consider not only the vulnerable American public that was immediately at stake in the violence of the attacks, but also America's children, who in the image are the embodiment of the future of the United States as a safe, secure, and "first-world" place generations to come.

As discussed, the image in *figure 1* establishes from the very beginning two things in terms of its framing of the vulnerability of the United States because of the 9/11 attacks. First, President Bush, the figurehead of the United States, as he was in a space of heightened vulnerability when he came to learn that the United States was under attack, experienced a sort of magnified, exacerbated vulnerability as he was not pictured in a position that communicated power but, rather, was shown in a position of vulnerability, surrounded by children, the epitome of human vulnerability and precariousness. Second, the image in *figure 1,* through its depiction of President Bush's reaction to the attacks and with him being accompanied by American children, begins to frame 9/11 as something targeting the vulnerability of the future of the United States, as the viewer of the image must consider the children in the image who embody the future potential of the United States. Thus, the image in *figure 1*, in its representation of President Bush's initial experience with 9/11 and its ties to the protection of future American children, begins to establish what will become a trend: namely, the association of the 9/11 attacks with a loss of a US sense of masculine (sovereign, first-world) identity.

When the American public learned of President Bush's location when the 9/11 attacks occurred*,* the extent to which the United States was rendered vulnerable was communicated to the people, both in terms of the violence against those experiencing the attacks and of the

vulnerability experienced by President Bush seen in the image in *figure 1*. One article, by the British newspaper *The Guardian*, and published the day after the attacks, expressed concern over President Bush's removed location on the day of the attacks, stating that his presence so far from the White House and his inability to return to his expected position "gave a clue as to how heavy a blow had been struck against the United States."[114] The distance at which the President experienced and addressed the attacks was a concern for the American public, and was likely exacerbated by his preoccupation with the safety of the children rather than the security of the United States, with President Bush unable to be seen as properly, masculinely, fulfilling his role as commander in chief. As President Bush became aware of the attacks from the removed classroom location, he, as he himself stated, assumed a role not as the leader and strong protector of United States' sovereignty, but rather as someone who prioritized caring for the vulnerable children in the classroom, taking up a position that, as Cavarero discusses, is generally regarded as feminine, or, at the very least, not typical of a masculine posture of power that, as Weber has shown, is historically understood to be the role and image of the President of the United States.[115] What this means is that this framing of President Bush coming to understand that the nation is under attack may well have led to his identity being associated with femininity more than masculinity.

---

[114] Duncan Campbell, "'The US Will Hunt down and Punish Those Responsible for These Attacks,'" The Guardian, September 12, 2001. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/12/september11.usa15.

[115] Weber, *Faking It*, p. xiv. However, that is of course not to say that caring for children necessarily is or should be a feminine role, but rather that it is a role traditionally taken up by women, especially in the classroom setting, due to patriarchal social structures. Nothing is essential or natural about thinking of women as the primary caregivers of children. But, as previously stated, both Cavarero and Butler discuss the primary figure tasked with the protection of children is generally accepted or understood as a feminine figure in societies. Furthermore, in 2001 roughly 80% of all teachers, those who spend their time in classrooms and who engage with children in the way photographed in *figure 1*, were women. See "Digest of Education Statistics, 2012" (National Center for Education Statistics), https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12_081.asp.

With this framing of the image in *figure 1* as displaying President Bush, and thus, symbolically, the United States, as a somewhat feminized and emasculated body in a heightened state of vulnerability, we can begin to understand how the attacks represented a (gendered) vulnerability or insecurity that targeted the established (masculine) sovereignty of the United States by way of its Presidential figurehead. In a 1998 article titled "Performative States," Weber posits that Butler's understanding of the performativity and performance of gender can also be applied to the notion of statehood and state sovereignty.[116] For Weber, it can be argued that states perform their sovereignty in a way that is similar to how bodies perform their gender. In this way, a state's identity, including its sense of sovereignty, like a body's gender, does not exist pre-discursively, and is instead a "fluid condition" [117] that must be "performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its result."[118] So, as Weber argues, actions that appear to affirm a state's sovereign subjectivity at the same time establish that it does not really exist and that it must constantly be performed again and again.

This understanding of state identity and sovereignty, when considered in the context of the image in *figure 1*, furthers the idea that such a framing of President Bush and the United States in a state of (feminized) vulnerability would cut through past discursive efforts of hype(r)-power that, as the previous chapter mentioned, became popular in the wake of the Cold War and that sought to establish the United States' sense of sovereign subjectivity as hyper-powerful and, at the same time, hyper-masculine. Thanks to Weber's notion of sovereign statehood as discursively produced through performances of (masculine) behavior, one can begin to see that

---

[116] Cynthia Weber, "Performative States," Millennium: Journal of International Studies 27, no. 1 (March 1998): 77–95, https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298980270011101.
[117] Weber, "Performative States," 89.
[118] Weber, "Performative States," 90.

such a (feminized) state of vulnerability displayed in a broadly disseminated image from the very beginning, right after the attacks, not only placed the president in a state of heightened vulnerability, but also made vulnerable and threatened the established sovereignty of the United States.

The image in *Figure 1* frames the 9/11 attacks, as they were experienced by President Bush, as rendering vulnerable not only those immediately affected by the violence of attacks, but also those whose future depend on the safeguarding of American security, American sovereignty, and the American way of life, a theme which will become increasingly present in the following images. However, as this initial image frames the attacks in terms of the future of (the children) of the United States, it once again frames the President of the United States in a somewhat feminized position, far removed from the action, and unable to do much more than protect the young children in his immediate vicinity, a concern that was expressed by news outlets at the time. The framing of President Bush as doubly vulnerable[119] helps to establish that the 9/11 attacks represented a moment of vulnerability that acted as a first instance of discursive undercutting of a previously sought out sense of invulnerability that, through various operations of hype-power disguised as hyper-power, the United States had been attempting to maintain and perform its (masculine) identity in the decade before the 9/11 attacks.[120] Once again, the image discussed above helps to display from the very onset of the war on terror how the framing of the

[119] To reiterate, by "doubly vulnerable," I am referring to the vulnerability that President Bush was experiencing as both the leader and figurehead of a nation under attack, and simultaneously as the (feminine) caretaker of the children in a classroom, who are some of the most vulnerable bodies.
[120] Timothy W. Luke, "Hyper-Power or Hype-Power," 20.

experience of the 9/11 attacks in the United States positioned the United States (through its figurehead, primarily) in a feminized role and state of vulnerability.[121]

The Destruction in New York City and Arlington, Virginia

Taking place far from Emma E. Booker Elementary School, a different, far more visceral and physically intimate sort of vulnerability was photographed and communicated to the American public from New York City and Arlington, Virginia in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Two different, but thematically similar, images that display the damages that occurred on 9/11 frame the attacks and the vulnerability that they trigger as alien and unnatural, as something that does not belong to the United States and yet somehow occurred within its borders, and at a close distance from those who witnessed it through these images. This framing functions both to further the extent to which the attacks can be seen as a threat to the accepted (masculine) sovereign identity of the United States and to set up, through the sense of wrongness portrayed by the images, the idea that this vulnerability needs to be displaced and recovered from immediately to maintain such a (masculine) sovereign identity.

The first of these two images, seen in *figure 2*, captured by Doug Kanter and published in an article by *U.S. News and World Report* on September 14, 2001,[122] was taken in the minutes just after the first tower of the World Trade Center collapsed.[123] It displays the utter chaos and

---

[121] Butler, Weber, and Sjoberg all discuss vulnerability as always already wrapped up in feelings or perceptions of femininity, whereas the pursuit of invulnerability is generally considered a masculine endeavor.
[122] Roger Simon, "An America Afraid: The Day the U.S. Lost Its Innocence," *US News & World Report*, September 14, 2001, //www.usnews.com/news/articles/2001/09/14/innocence-lost-forever-on-911.
[123] Doug Kanter, This 11 September 2001 File Photo Shows a Man Standing in the Rubble, and Calling out Asking If Anyone Needs Help, after the Collapse of the First World Trade Center Tower in New York City., September 11, 2001, Photograph, September 11, 2001, Getty images, https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/this-11-september-2001-file-photo-shows-a-man-standing-in-news-photo/119987308.

destruction of the North Tower as a single man stands in the foreground before the wreckage, calling out to any surviving victims. The next image, seen in *figure 3*, by Larry Downing and published by Reuters on September 16, 2001,[124] is a photograph that was taken in the early morning of September 16, 2001, only days after American Airlines flight 77 crashed into the side of the Pentagon Building.[125] In this image, the ruined wall of the Pentagon is framed by an early morning view of Washington D.C., featuring the Capitol Building and various other government buildings. Both of these images showcase, alongside various degrees of physical damage and destruction, American flags, an important element that furthers the sense of damage but also the wrongness portrayed by these images as they further situate the attacks as both alien to the United States and having taken place inside the United States, thus affecting the identity of the United States but also necessitating an immediate response to and displacement of the event.

---

[124] Larry Downing, *The Damaged Area of the Pentagon Building, Which a Commercial Jetliner Slammed into on September 11, 2001, Is Illuminated at Sunrise with the U.S. Capitol Building in the Background.*, September 16, 2001, Photograph, September 16, 2001, Reuters, https://widerimage.reuters.com/photographer/larry-downing.html.
[125] "Timeline: The September 11 Terrorist Attacks," Miller Center, August 11, 2020, https://millercenter.org/remembering-september-11/september-11-terrorist-attacks.

Figure 2*:* A man stands in the rubble after the collapse of the first tower of the World Trade Center, calling out for any living victims on September 11, 2001. (Photograph by Doug Kanter, Getty Images, Fair Use determination attached).

Figure 3*:* The side of the Pentagon building that was severely damaged when it was struck by American Airlines Flight 77 on September 11, 2001. The Pentagon building is pictured at sunrise on September 16, 2001, with the United States Capitol in the background. (Photograph by Larry Downing, September 16, 2001, Reuters, Fair Use determination attached).

Although the images in *figure 2* and *figure 3* display the damages inflicted on American buildings during the 9/11 attacks, the image in *figure 2* represents the devastation more intimately, almost as a first-person representation that draws the viewer into the image and the event rather than positioning the viewer at a distance from the disaster. The lessening of distance between the viewer and the disaster urges the viewer to imagine the attacks and the physical violence that they caused in a way that is akin to how they were experienced by those who directly endured the suffering. As Susan Sontag writes in *Regarding the Pain of Others,* images of suffering are often reproached among scholars for placing a certain distance between those who endure the suffering and those who watch or view it.[126] Photographs, as they depict an event captured but also mediated by a camera, from a place not of suffering but of observing such suffering, create a distance between the viewer of the image and that which is shown in the image. This distance, as Sontag discusses, can potentially limit the degree to which emotional responses are experienced by the viewer, or it can even make viewers apathetic to the suffering that is depicted. However, the unique style of the *figure 2* photo, the assumed closeness of the photographer to the disaster, seems, to an extent, to close this distance, drawing the viewer into the bodily experience that resulted from the collapse of the first tower rather than observing it from a great distance. The closeness to the disaster, as it places the viewer amid the chaos, does not limit the reaction to the scene but rather seems to elicit a more intense and visceral response from the viewer than some other images of the attacks, or even of the same destruction. Thus, this image's framing of the attacks as alien or otherworldly is felt by way of a closeness that strengthens this particular framing.

---

[126] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 117-118.

The intimacy through which the image in *figure 2* encourages the viewer to feel the loss of the United States' sense of first-worldism is present in the captioning of the image as it reached the public in a September 14, 2001 article published in *U.S. News & World Report.* This image and the 9/11 attacks were discussed by staff writer Roger Simon as having revealed "an America no one had ever seen before," "an America afraid."[127] What Roger confirmed in this caption is that this image is an effective portrayal of the violence of the attacks that relegated the United States to a state of vulnerability that is felt to be abnormal, unusual, and really not about the United States. This sort of reaction to images like the one in *figure 2*, as Butler has argued, is representative of an apprehension of what the attacks took from the United States as its sense of first-world normalcy and privilege were attacked on 9/11. The complete destruction taking up the entire visual frame of *Figure 2* has the effect of making it seem as though the image, if not for the inclusion of the somehow still standing American flag as a reminder that this scene is taking place in New York City, could be a depiction of any other war-torn, unsafe, and violent nation, and not about something taking place in the United States. This apprehension of the alienness or otherness caused by the attacks as expressed by the image in *figure 2* is an effective tool through which the United States would later represent the attacks as something that would not occur again on US soil, but also as something that required a swift and certain response so as to limit the extent to which this feeling of otherness or vulnerability could affect the way of life in the United States.

The image in *figure 3* similarly frames the 9/11 attacks as an unprecedented and intimately uncomfortable threat to the United States' accepted way of life. Although this

---

[127] Roger Simon, "The Day Terror Came Home to Us," US News & World Report, //www.usnews.com/news/articles/2001/09/14/innocence-lost-forever-on-911.

photograph is taken at a physical distance from the Pentagon building, the image in *figure* 3 seems to lessen the feeling of distance between the depicted event and the viewer. The framing strategy chosen in this image is different from the previous image's framing. Rather than closing the distance between the viewer and the event by providing a first-person representation of the destruction, the image in *figure 3* frames the severely damaged and crumbling wall of the Pentagon Building in the foreground, contrasted with the still standing yet shadowed Capitol Building and the Washington, D.C. skyline in the background. This stark contrast between the damaged Pentagon Building and the view of Washington, D.C. forces the viewer to understand that the attacks, both in D.C. and in New York City, occurred inside of the United States, and not in a distant place. Similar to what is shown in *figure 2,* the framing of the attacks in the image in *figure 3* is effective in its ability to close the distance that is often associated with images that limit emotional responses, as Sontag mentions. The inclusion of the damaged Pentagon as framed by the Washington, D.C. skyline acts as a visual proof (thus reflecting the evidentiary function of images, as discussed by many theorists of visual culture[128]) that establishes not only that the attacks occurred, but also, and crucially, that they occurred inside the United States. This framing is proof that the attacks penetrated the borders of the United States and violated its sovereignty, with the image in *figure 3* serving as both the proof of this and a reminder of it that one can return to again and again, whether by choice or through constant exposure in the media.[129] Framed in this way, the image ensures that no American viewer can feel as though there is a great distance between the violence of the attack and their lives, even as time passes

---

[128] See, for example, this function of images as discussed by Judith Butler, *Frames of War,* 83- 4 or Sontag, Regarding *the Pain of Others,* 83 and 104.

[129] In *On Photography,* Sontag discusses how images capture a certain reality that can be, whether by choice or through media exposure, returned to again and again to reify such a reality and confirm its existence. See Sontag, *On Photography*, 23.

and the attack starts to be thought of as an event in the past. The closeness that the framing of the images discussed here ensures has to do with the point that the attacks, even through memorialization, will always be thought of and remembered as something that was intimately experienced, even if the viewer was thousands of miles away, since the framing insists on the fact that an alien form of violence was brought inside the territory of the United States, too close to all those Americans who were not supposed to be familiar with such instances of violence.

These images, in their framing of the attacks as both intimately close and alien, also show that the events of 9/11 (and their representations) were a violation of the accepted experience of life in the United States, something that was interpreted as not belonging to the US experience and needing to be remedied as soon as possible. Somewhat similar to Weber's discussion of how certain actions or events can discursively construct the identity of a state as sovereign, in her own discussion of the attacks on 9/11 in *Precarious Life*, Butler identifies a function of the attacks as an event that triggered the sense that the widely accepted privileges assumed to be granted by a sovereign United States were, at least in that moment, no longer true or felt by many Americans. Butler discusses how the violence that was brought inside of the United States by the 9/11 attacks may have represented a loss of the United States' sense of "first-worldism," or its privilege to not have to experience violations of its own sovereignty, even while the United States feels free to violate others' sovereignty whenever it desires.[130] The loss of first-worldism, as Butler identifies it, represents, as Weber would likely agree too, an event or a moment through which the performed (masculine) hype(r)-powerful identity of the United States is ineffective at preventing a violation of the United States' sense of invulnerability. The ineffectiveness of the

---

[130] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, 39.

identity of the United States as a masculine hype(r)-power undercuts the perception of this identity, and reveals that it is, in many ways, a mere performance. In other words, Butler discusses the attacks as a violation of the United States' accepted sense of first-worldism, revealing the United States' sovereign status as mere performance, or perhaps as a fallacy that never truly promotes the safety and security of the United States and of the bodies residing within its borders. Butler's conception of the United States' loss of first-worldism can also be observed in the framing of the image in *figure 1,* as was discussed above, as the image urges the viewer to consider how the children depicted in this image might no longer be safe and their futures may eventually be compromised. Butler's understanding of the images of the 9/11 attacks and their frames as representing a loss of American first-worldist privilege, paired with Weber's understanding of sovereignty as discursively constituted, explains how the intimately felt otherness of the images in *figures 2 and 3* frames the attacks as both a threat to the United States' masculine sense of sovereignty and as something that, as we will begin to see, should be addressed and hopefully expelled to limit the effects of this threat on the weakened perception of the United States as a sovereign state.

Butler's understanding that the 9/11 attacks represented a violation of the United States' sense of first-worldism, or sovereign identity, relates to what both images in *figure 2* and *figure 3* communicate to the viewer, in terms of their internal framing, but also in terms of how they were discussed as they were disseminated to the American public. As the images in *figure 2* and *figure 3* show, the vulnerability experienced by the attacks was framed as vulnerability that, for most Americans, was not an expected part of America as a first-world nation. Yet, both images, through their inclusion of the American flag, and, especially in the image in *figure 3*, with its clear setting in the United States' capital, leave the viewer with little choice but to realize that the

attacks indeed took place in the United States, and that the United States was no longer invulnerable from this sort of "violence initiated from abroad."[131] Through their framing of the attacks both as alien and as a confirmation of their occurrence within the United States, the two images encourage the viewers to, as Roger Simon put it in his September 14, 2001 article, "[feel] the same way crime victims feel: vulnerable, naked, no longer in control."[132] This journalist's expression of the feelings of vulnerability elicited by images such as those in *figure 2* and *figure 3* indicates the impact of the framing of the attacks on America's identity in a way that is not unlike the apprehensive effect of the image in *figure 1* discussed above. These images in *figures 2* and *3*, like in *figure 1,* make us understand the attacks as an uncomfortable threat to the previously accepted privilege and safety granted to the United States. And again, with the help of Butler and Weber, we can see that this threat manifested itself as a threat to the sovereign identity of the United States as the attacks undercut the comfortable way of life taken for granted by most Americans as a result of their first-worldism.

The images in *figure 2 and figure 3*, by showing two quintessentially American buildings—one, an "icon of capitalism,"[133] and the other, a symbol of United States security and hyper-power—in a state of severe damage or even unrecognizability, and by depicting them in a way that helps to close the distance between the viewer of the image and the suffering it reveals, make even more intimate but also effective the apprehensive power of framing the attacks as a threat posed to United States' sense of masculine first-worldism. The destruction of these

---

[131] Butler, *Precarious Life,* 39.
[132] Simon, "The Day Terror Came Home to Us."
[133] From the title of a September 12, 2001, Washington Post Article "An Icon of Capitalism: 'Now it's all Gone': World's 5th-Tallest Buildings Housed Offices, Retail Shops." Greg Schneider, Sep 12, 2001. http://login.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/icon-capitalism-now-all-gone/docview/1962441451/se-2.

buildings can be perhaps thought of as a sort of castration of American masculine first-worldism or hype(r)-power, not unlike that experienced by the United States in its dealings with Fidel Castro in the 1960s, as discussed by Weber in her book *Faking It.*[134] The framing of these two images urges the viewer to understand how the two symbolic buildings were transformed. As the images tell us, when the two buildings, representations of American military and economic power once again, were brought down, their symbolic strength and power were cut down with them. Not only does the violation done to these buildings make the scene appear fundamentally—and visually—wrong and unappealing, but, through the buildings' utter destruction, the images sever the United States' identity from the discursive function of these buildings as representations of masculine military and economic power. In other words, the destruction of the World Trade Center and the damage to the Pentagon building represent the taking down of two examples of what Weber refers to as discursive elements that were used to perform the United States' sovereign identity and that, as Butler would add, established a sense of American first-worldism.

When juxtaposed to previous images (or memories) of the famously tall and sleek structures that used to be the World Trade Center towers in New York City[135] as they stood before the attacks, the image of the destruction of these iconic towers, with their clean lines becoming jagged shards of metal that trapped and killed thousands of Americans (or at least bodies that would later be framed and discussed as American) encourages an understanding of how completely transformed this hub of American economic power has become, and how utterly ruined it now is. At the same time, the image in *figure 3*, through its depiction of a once proud

---

[134] Cynthia Weber, *Faking It.*
[135] "World Trade Center," World's Tallest Towers, https://skyscraper.org/tallest-towers/world-trade-center/.

symbol of American defense and national security now seen to have crumbled, communicates not only the wrongness of the event, but also a sense that the assumed supremacy of the United States' military and defense capabilities failed. And they failed not just to protect US citizens in New York City, Arlington, and Pennsylvania,[136] but also to protect those employed and working at the Pentagon and were ultimately in charge of representing and communicating the American identity to the American population.

When the visual wrongness or perhaps otherworldliness of the ruins at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon is placed in the context of accompanying discussions of these images in the media, Butler's understanding of the attacks as a loss of American "first-worldism" can be closely connected to Weber's understanding of sovereignty as performance, a performance that was interrupted by the 9/11 attacks. On that day, not only were American borders revealed as permeable, and the US sense of security was brought into question, but also, in a more physical yet visual sense, the United States, for the first time since the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, experienced a form of violence that, as Butler notes, was not expected to take place inside a "first-world" nation like the United States. Many news articles that accompanied these images and others like them in the days that followed the attacks referenced a sense of alienation or third worldliness. One headline from the *Wall Street Journal* described an image of the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center as a "War Zone Amid Clouds of Ash."[137] Another

---

[136] I am referring here to United Airlines flight 93, which was also hijacked like the other flights on 9/11. However, some of the passengers and crew aboard this plane were able to fight off the hijackers and overtake the cockpit, preventing the plane from reaching its intended target in Washington, DC. United Airlines flight 93 ultimately crashed in a field outside of Shanksville, PA. All 43 people aboard died in the crash. For more information, see https://www.flight93friends.org/flight-93-story.

[137] From "Nation Stands in Disbelief and Horror: Streets of Manhattan Resemble War Zone Amid Clouds of Ash," *Wall Street Journal*, September 12, 2001.

headline emphasized the "Mountains of Rubble" that yielded "Mostly Death and Despair."[138] The perceived strangeness of the violence present in these images and the headlines that helped to frame their interpretation are indicative of the way a "third-world warzone" was visually and symbolically brought inside the United States. Along with this "foreign" feeling of a warzone also came the physical vulnerabilities that the attacks brought to the bodies inside the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, and in the four planes. And this was supplemented by another vulnerability that was more internal and ideological and that threatened the privileged identity of the United States, an identity that assumed that the United States was different and better than its third-world counterparts who were supposedly used to, often at the hands of the United States itself, enduring this sort of violence. This latest form of vulnerability, as depicted in images of the effects of the 9/11 attacks and in the framing of such images, and coupled with the magnification of a threat to the future of the United States (as represented by the image in *figure 1*), now required that the United States, if it was to recover from these attacks, also needed to recover from this loss of first-world privilege by reasserting its dominant masculinity, its hype(r)-power status, and its sovereignty. Understanding how these two images and the vulnerability they helped to frame, represented an atypical or alien threat to the United States' sense of first-world privilege enables us to better grasp how these attacks represented (as we already saw with the first image) an emasculation or perhaps feminization of the United States' identity, and thus started to shape what was to become the necessary course of action for the United States to recover from such a violation.

---

[138] From Dan Barry, "THE SEARCH; Rescuers Find Few to Save as the Mountains of Rubble Yield Mostly Death and, Destruction" *The New York Times*, September 13, 2001, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/13/us/after-the-attacks-the-search-a-few-moments-of-hope-in-a-mountain-of-rubble.html.

A (Re)Masculinization of the United States

As the images in *figure 1, figure 2,* and *figure 3* have shown, the 9/11 attacks placed the United States in a state of atypical but heightened vulnerability. The attacks rendered the safety of many bodies in the United States vulnerable but also led to an uncertainty about the safety of American bodies in the future. Importantly, what these images also displayed was the fact that the attacks threatened the position of the United States as a hype(r)-power, and they endangered the privileged sense of first-worldism that was perceived to be an integral part of the United States' identity. However, and crucially to this study, at the same time as these images, through their framing, communicated the attacks as otherworldly, alien, and not belonging to the United States (even though they also provided the photographic evidence that they did occur inside of the United States), images of the United States (and its symbolic figurehead, the US President) getting back up again and literally standing atop this destruction started to reach the American public too. For example, through a representation of the United States getting back up again, the image in *figure 4* frames President Bush, and, by extension, the United States as a whole, as attempting to reassert the United States' sense of masculine first-worldism and hype(r)-power.

Figure 4 is an image taken on September 14, 2001 that captures a moment during which President Bush delivered an impromptu speech to roughly 400 police officers, firefighters, and rescue workers at Ground Zero during the rescue and excavation efforts immediately following the attacks.[139] President Bush delivered this speech as he stood atop the rubble of a crushed fire

---

[139] Eric Draper, *Standing Atop Rubble with Retired New York City Firefighter Bob Beckwith, President George W. Bush Addresses Approximately 400 Police, Firemen and Rescue Workers by Bullhorn at the Site of the Collapsed World Trade Center in New York City*, September 14, 2001, Photograph, September 14, 2001, 213246384, National Archives, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/213246384.

truck at the base of the destroyed World Trade Center towers. President Bush, speaking to the crowd, holds a megaphone in one hand, his other hand resting on the shoulder of retired New York City Firefighter Bob Beckwith, who stands beside President Bush and gazes into the crowd of working men. This image, taken by White House photographer Eric Draper, was published soon after it was taken as the center of a two-page spread in the September 24, 2001 *Time Magazine* Special Issue publication, with a similar image taken during the same speech printed on the cover,[140] and also reproduced on the front page of the *New York Post* on September 15, 2001.[141] This particular photograph, with the accompanying speech by the President and the abundance of news articles that reproduced it, is a prime example of how the attacks were communicated both as an alien targeting of the United States' sense of masculine first-worldism and as something that would not be ignored and would have to be used to justify the war against terror that would reestablish the United States' threatened sense of masculine first-worldism.

---

[140] "The TIME Vault: September 24, 2001," TIME.Com, http://time.com/vault/issue/2001-09-24/page/28/.
[141] "Covering 9/11: New York Post," The New York Post, September 11, 2011, https://nypost.com/2011/09/11/covering-911/.

***Figure 4**:* President Bush, standing on top of the rubble of the World Trade Center in New York City next to retired firefighter Bob Beckwith, addresses a large crowd of police, firemen, and rescue workers. (Photograph by Eric Draper, September 14, 2001, National Archives Catalog, ID 213246384, Public Domain)

The message of this image and its overall framing can be encapsulated by President Bush's own words from the famous speech that he is seen delivering in the photograph (*figure 4*). In this improvised speech, Bush declared to the crowds of (mostly)[142] men around him that, although "America today is on bended knee in prayer for the people whose lives were lost here…", at the same time, "I [Bush] can hear you, the rest of the world hears you, and the people who knocked these buildings down *will hear all of us soon*."[143] At the very same time that the United States was framed as experiencing an intense and otherworldly sense of vulnerability, a

[142] Importantly, though, there are no women pictured in this particular image.
[143] *Former Pres. George W. Bush Speaks from Ground Zero in 2001, ABC News* (ABC News, 2001), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkvsjOEzhzQ. (my emphasis added).

vulnerability that challenged the its sovereign identity and sense of masculine first-worldism, the United States was also depicted as starting to rebuild itself—both literally and symbolically—so that those who perpetrated the attacks and the entire world that was watching would again "hear" and be made to experience the reassertion of the recovered (masculine) first-worldist privilege of the United States. Within the image in *figure 4*, this message is conveyed visually. President Bush is pictured, no longer in a classroom surrounded by children this time, but on the ground and in the thick of the action, alongside hundreds of American servicemen, heroic workers who would spend months, even years, recovering the bodies lost in the attacks and who would thus begin to, at least symbolically, help rebuild America. Crucially though, all these workers, as seen in the image, are standing on top of the destruction that they have just experienced. The destruction, with all its implications as discussed above, is no longer dominating the frame here. Rather, the destruction is what these American first-responders now stand on top of and will build on. The framing of the image in *figure 4* thus suggests that the attacks did not completely break the United States and that the United States is still standing. Indeed, the cover of *Time Magazine* depicting another image from this same moment comes with the title: "One Nation, Indivisible,"[144] thus furthering the notion that an injured United States is still united and not defeated. And its ability to stay united during its time of injury only proves its strength. In this way, the framing of the United States right after the 9/11 attacks, as displayed by this image, encourages the viewer to accept that the vulnerabilities previously discussed did occur, but that, at the same time, the United States remained united and will ultimately recover from the attacks, and will even become stronger. The image in *figure 4*, in the way it frames the attacks, portrays both a measure of strength and of masculinity. But it also remains a

---

[144] "The TIME Vault: September 24, 2001."

representation of vulnerably, framing the newly found strength (and the recovery of the threatened masculine first-worldism) as something that can only emerge from the vulnerability (and feminization) that was experienced by the United States during the attacks.

The message communicated to the viewer by the image *in figure 4* is the need to portray and perform the United States' recovery effort as a masculine undertaking. The image in *figure 4* is the first image that we see that contains any bodies, or at least the implication of bodies, that are not in any immediately visible state of heightened vulnerability. It can also not be thought of as a coincidence that, in this image, men take over and dominate the frame, thus also dominating the perception of who will be responsible for the recovery, as well as how the narrative of the United States' post-9/11 re-empowerment will need to be perceived. As Weber might argue, the inclusion of so many men in the visual frame is indicative of a concerted effort by the United States to perform its masculine sovereignty again, and to begin to reestablish what was threatened by the attacks. This is a point that is discussed by feminist IR scholar J. Ann Tickner in her review of feminist perspectives on the 9/11 attacks. In this essay, Tickner discusses how, even though there were plenty of women present both in the rescue efforts in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and also in the subsequent military invasion of Afghanistan, women were consistently left out of the frame in US media. This absence of women in the media reinforced militarized masculinities in the United States and relegated the reference to the place of women in the conflict to the fate of oppressed women in Afghanistan.[145] As Tickner argues, there was a clear intentionality of admitting men into the visual frame while leaving women out of it. IR feminist scholars like Tickner, Weber, or Sjoberg would suggest that this careful framing of the

---

[145] Tickner, J. Ann. "Feminist Perspectives on 9/11." International Studies Perspectives 3, no. 4 (2002): 333–50. https://doi.org/doi:10.1111/1528-3577.t01-1-00098.

recovery efforts as masculine served a specific purpose, one that I believe was fundamental to reasserting the United States' threatened sense of masculine first-worldism and hype(r)- power.

Reflecting on how states sometimes include or exclude women and femininity from the discourse on war and conflict, Sjoberg, in *Gendering Global Conflict*, discusses how war narratives shape war fighting, which in turn justify the creation of (more) war narratives.[146] This means that war is often fought on two fronts, each impacting the other. One front is the competing narratives about the war; the other is the physical front where two entities engage in military combat. Ultimately, Sjoberg argues, it comes down to which entity's narrative can more dominantly assert its masculinity, all the while effectively subordinating their enemy's masculinity or even feminizing them.[147] At the same time that narratives frame the action of one state as masculine, these narratives also construct the subordinated masculinity (and sometimes feminization) of other states or groups.[148] For Sjoberg, what is communicated to the public at home, in terms of the masculinity of the state engaged in war, is significant enough to be considered another front in the conflict, as the public's understanding and support for the state and the war is at stake. I believe that the image in *figure 4*, especially the overt masculinity it conveys to the viewer, is a representation of the United States' push to begin to rebuild its sense of first-worldism or sovereign identity as it was threatened with the risk of having this privilege put in question, with the United States taking up a war-time hyper-masculine narrative to accomplish re-empowerment. This hyper-masculine narrative, as it is communicated by the

---

[146] Laura Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict*, 119-120.
[147] Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict,* 120.
[148] Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict,* 120.

framing of images such as the one in *figure 4*, informed and shaped the first front of the war on terror, roughly one month before the United States officially invaded Afghanistan.[149]

Understanding how various narratives about military action and war are gendered, as Sjoberg argues, can help us to further the argument that the threat to or loss of American first-worldism, as evidenced by the framing of previous images, was always already a gendered threat or loss. Thus, the attempt to reassert this first-worldism, or the (masculine) sense of sovereignty, was necessarily going to be a gendered pursuit. Images like those in *figure 2* and *figure 3* that confirm that the United States' borders were penetrated, with the US sense of security granted by its self-identified hype(r)-power status now violated, also display *gendered* events and moments that convey the vulnerability of *gendered* senses of hype(r)-power and first-world privilege. Understanding military action and narratives as gendered makes clearer how the remasculinization present in the framing of images such as that in *figure 4* was essential to reestablishing the United States' sense of first-worldist masculinity that was exposed in the 9/11 attacks. Thought of in this way, and in particular reflecting on the bodies that are included or excluded from the visual frame, the image in *figure 4* is a first step towards attempting to (re)build a narrative of the United States' re-masculinization by portraying those bodies who are featured in the image and are climbing on top of the rubble—thus also establishing their enduring survival—as *masculine* saviors or heroes. Rather than denying the damage that has occurred, or attempting to make it not visible, *figure 4* frames the attacks and their destruction as something that the men who represent the American recovery are on top of, and thus in control of, too. In this way, these men, symbolic of the revival of American masculine first-worldism, are not crushed or defeated by the attacks but are standing tall to take up these attacks as a literal

---

[149] "Timeline: The U.S. War in Afghanistan," https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan.

and metaphorical platform from which future US policy in what will become the war on terror will be based on. Put differently, the image in *figure 4,* with its framing of the recovery effort as masculine, acts as a visual confirmation of the notion that, in Bush's words, the "great people" who were "moved to defend a great nation" in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks were, from the very beginning, a masculine people. Thus, the United States' actions to reassert dominance were meant to be a necessarily masculine endeavor.[150]

However, this image also complicates previous understandings of gender, and the role that gender would subsequently play in the efforts of the United States to reassert its threatened sense of masculine first-worldism. Indeed, in this image, the damage and all the vulnerability revealed by it, are present alongside various masculine heroes that are expected to drag the United States out of this vulnerable state. What this means is that, while this image undoubtedly represents the recovery effort of 9/11 as masculine, it also does not deny the presence of (feminine) vulnerability. In fact, it depends on this (feminine) vulnerability to enforce the newly found masculine recovery. As Tickner suggests, the vulnerability associated with the 9/11 attacks became a crucial part of the war effort that followed, as it was accepted that "real men cried and tears were no longer a sign of weakness" in this the post-9/11 moment.[151] As this image and Tickner both indicate, it was necessary for the United States to grieve *at the same time* as Americans participated in the hypermasculine reaffirmation of what had been threatened and made vulnerable. This image thus adds a crucial dimension to the present analysis of US vulnerability by helping us to establish the point that the narrative about rebuilding the United States (literally and metaphorically) was always already embedded with its own feminization,

---

[150] George W. Bush, "Statement by the President in Address to the Nation," September 11, 2001, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html.
[151] Tickner, "Feminist Perspectives on 9/11," 342.

never completely severed from the feminization that it experienced during and after the 9/11 attacks that rendered vulnerable the United States' sense of masculine first-worldism.

The particular role of both masculinity and femininity that frame the image in figure *4*—as it portrays the re-masculinization of the United States as springing from a sense of feminization—is crucial to understanding many of the actions later undertaken by the United States during the war on terror. Among other things, Sjoberg's discussion of war narratives as necessarily gendered helps to establish the point that the image in *figure 4* frames the United States' response to the attacks as occurring on top of and in response to the violence *and* as gendered, from the very beginning. In this way, the (gendered) recovery effort cannot be separated from the (gendered) vulnerability experienced by the attacks. Understanding the 9/11 attacks as a representation of an emasculation experienced in and by the United States, and the retribution and rebuilding framed as masculine (or as a remasculinization) enables an understanding of the attacks and the framing of the United States' recovery efforts as mutually constituted, relying on each other for justification. Without the framing of the attacks in first three images as an emasculating or feminizing threat to United States' sense of masculine first-worldism, the framing of the United States' recovery from the attacks as hyper-masculine would not have been possible or necessary. Nor would later efforts to feminize or subordinate enemies during the war on terror may have been needed. In other words, the violence that challenged the first-worldism of the United States also, and at the very same time, enabled the United States to begin to (re)assert a newfound masculine (hyper)power, whether effectively or not. It is this attempt at remasculinization, spearheaded by the image in *figure* 4, and inherent in the US response to the 9/11 attacks, that would later be on display in the policies and actions deployed by the United States in the Middle East and inside the United States too during the war on terror.

Conclusion and Next Chapter

The four images analyzed in this chapter have helped us to clarify what was made vulnerable for the United States in the 9/11 attacks and how the United States decided to recover from this newfound sense of vulnerability. The first image displayed two crucial facets of the vulnerability experienced by President Bush, and thus by the United States, during the 9/11 attacks. President Bush, as this first image shows, was immediately placed in a state of feminized vulnerability, in the company of America's most vulnerable population rather than in a position that granted him the ability to protect the United States from the attacks that were happening at that same moment. Furthermore, this image helped to establish that the attacks represented not only the immediate physical vulnerability of those bodies who were present in the Twin Towers, the Pentagon Building, or on United Airlines Flight 93, but also the threat to the symbolic future of America, with its future (masculine) sovereignty being undercut. The images in *figures 2* and *3* revealed a different sort of vulnerability, but one that also targeted the future of the United States, as it was communicated to the American public. These two images made clear that the attacks brought an othered, atypical, and alien experience of violence into the United States, one that was not expected to ever take place in the United States and thus was a violation of the United States' sense of (masculine) first-world privilege. These attacks penetrated the United States' borders and violated the sovereignty of the United States in a way that was not considered previously possible and thus was unacceptable. Yet, this violation was accompanied by the framing of the response to the attacks as something that could and would be recovered from through a masculine reassertion of American dominance, as the image in *figure 4* clearly displayed. Since, as I argue, the threat to first-world privilege that the attacks represented was

gendered, threatening the United States with feminization, the recovery of US privilege required a remasculinization of the United States and of its symbolic figurehead, President Bush. This attempt to recover a first-world superiority and privilege through a remasculinization of the United States was emphasized through the dominance of heroic (male) American rescue workers in the frame of the fourth image discussed in this chapter, a frame and image which establish efforts at rebuilding from the attacks and seeking retribution as masculine endeavors.

These four images and their framing show how, in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, vulnerability—as a threat to the future of the bodies of the United States and to the US identity as a masculine hype(r)-power and first-world state—was used as a platform and justification for actions that would be undertaken during the war on terror. The next chapter will demonstrate how the enactment of US policies and war operations in response to the vulnerabilities revealed by the 9/11 attacks sought to reassert the masculine dominance of American power, while at the same time attempting to emasculate and subordinate perceived enemies of the United States. These policies and operations began to take shape immediately after the attacks, with the United States' airstrikes and ground invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, and the fall of Taliban strongholds in Kabul and Kandahar by early December 2001.[152] Roughly eighteen months after the 9/11 attacks, the United States and coalition forces, under the premise that Saddam Hussein, the dictator of Iraq, was in possession of or developing weapons of mass destruction, invaded Iraq to heroically "free its people and to defend the world from grave danger."[153] By December 13, 2003, Saddam Hussein was captured and put on trial,

---

[152] Council on Foreign Relations. "Timeline: U.S. War in Afghanistan." https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan.

[153] This is a quote from President George W Bush's March 19, 2003, speech to the United States in which he explained that the United States would begin operations in Iraq and why. George W. Bush, "President Bush

later to be hanged.[154] After the United States' invasion of Iraq, and the looting that followed the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, the United States took over the country, started to rebuild it, and began utilizing Abu Ghraib,[155] Saddam Hussein's notorious former prison located 20 miles west of Bagdad.[156] The following chapter will analyze two images from the Abu Ghraib prison. The existence and publication of these images and the various states of vulnerability contained in them suggests that the images analyzed in this next chapter that focuses on the terror of 9/11 and its immediate aftermath were able to foster a social and political environment that allowed endemic precarity to come about during the war on terror, at Abu Ghraib, and in other places too. If not for the visual framing of vulnerability in the images of 9/11 that, as we saw, depicted US vulnerability as real yet alien, as incomprehensible and violating, yet in need of retaliatory action, there may not have been a favorable context that would tolerate, justify, or even encourage the conditions and actions that took place at the Abu Ghraib prison and their images.

Addresses the Nation," March 19, 2003, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/iraq/news/20030319-17.html.

[154] Council on Foreign Relations. "Timeline: U.S. War in Afghanistan."

[155] The US military, upon defeating Saddam Husseins regime in March 2003, needed a facility to detain and interrogate those it suspected to be enemy insurgents, terrorists, or other criminals. After the fall of Iraq, the United States repurposed Hussein's famous prison, which would soon become the United States' primary detention center for detainees in Iraq. For more information, see https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/10/torture-at-abu-ghraib or https://www.cnn.com/2013/10/30/middleeast/iraq-prison-abuse-scandal-fast-facts/index.html.

[156] Hersh, Seymour. "Torture at Abu Ghraib." The New Yorker, September 13, 2013. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/10/torture-at-abu-ghraib.

Chapter 4: Sexual Torture at Abu Ghraib: The United States' Attempt at (Re)Masculinization

> I shared a deep disgust that those prisoners were treated the way they were treated. Their treatment does not reflect the nature of the American people. That's not the way we do things in America. And so I- I didn't like it one bit.
>
> -President George W. Bush, April 30, 2004

Introduction

The September 11, 2001 attacks represented for the United States a moment when its sense of masculine first-worldism was rendered vulnerable in a way that was felt to be unprecedented. No longer was the United States a place that was immune from foreign attacks as its citizens were made unsafe and insecure in a way that was alien and foreign to the American way of life, while, at the same time, the President of the United States had taken up a position of increased and feminized vulnerability as a result of the attacks. As the previous chapter argued, the rendering vulnerable of the United States' accepted sense of masculine first-worldism and hype(r)-power was immediately taken up and built upon in the post-9/11 recovery efforts, both in terms of recovering from the immediate damages to United States' infrastructure, but also in terms of conducting in military operations that would seek to retrieve the dominant identity of the United States and its sovereignty. This connection between the rendering vulnerable of the United States and an emasculation of its identity, and its response to this emasculation through the enactment of a global war on terror starts to show how vulnerability and violence are intertwined, a theoretical claim that will be further developed in this chapter.

This chapter begins by contextualizing the years between the 9/11 attacks and the events that resulted in the two images discussed in this chapter. This contextualization focuses on elements relevant to the theme explored in the previous chapter, with events and images which

set the grounds for the war on terror and the United States' military intervention in Iraq, which, again, were attempts at reasserting the United States' masculine sense of hype(r)-power. The chapter then moves on to discuss the torture conducted against perceived enemies of the United States at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, inside of which a zone of endemic precarity started to become visible. The analysis of the first image (*figure* 5) will discuss the torture carried out by the United States at the Abu Ghraib prison and argue that the explicit sexual element of this torture is indicative of the United States' attempt at reasserting its status of the United States as a masculine hype(r)-power through the war on terror. The chapter goes on to discuss another image (*figure 6*), which displays a large group of detained men as they await their release from Abu Ghraib roughly three years after the first image was taken. This second image offers a very different framing and is in contrast to the previous image's portrayal of a sexualized, racialized, and subordinated enemy. The image in *figure 6* demonstrates the efforts pursued by United States' leadership to maintain a sense of (moral and ideological) distance between the United States and its perceived enemies, and it shows how the framing that constructed this distance was no longer fully effective, perhaps as a result of the release of images that lessen this distance (such as the one in *figure 5*). What these two images reveal is that the United States, in its attempt at remasculinization, carried out systematic sexual torture at Abu Ghraib for the purpose of feminizing and emasculating its enemies, and of reinforcing a difference or distance between itself and its enemies. However, as the image in *figure 6* demonstrates, the dominant apprehension of the war on terror as a necessary response to the 9/11 attacks, as well as a morally justified and righteous cause, did not hold up when faced with the atrocities that were revealed by the images from Abu Ghraib, and specifically the image in *figure 5.* This shift in perception, and what I consider the failure of the framing of the image in *figure 6*, begins to tell

us that, in its pursuit to reassert its masculinity, the United States ultimately made itself more vulnerable, further weakening the perception of itself as a masculine, hype(r)-powerful state, and instead tying itself to repugnant actions similar to those it condemned in the first place and claimed to go to war against.

The Invasion of Afghanistan and the War in Iraq

Before the two images selected for this chapter can be discussed, the several years between the 9/11 attacks and the events captured in these photographs must be explained, paying specific attention to how military and policy operations after 9/11 began to represent various attempts by the United States to (re)masculinize itself. As I have discussed previously, the 9/11 attacks in the United States were followed by the enactment of an immediate war on terror. This war was from the very beginning an attempt to reassert the United States' threatened sense of masculine first-worldism. However, and crucially, attempts at reasserting the United States as a masculine first-world hype(r)-power were always already intertwined with matters of feminization and femininity.

The United States' invasion of Afghanistan in October-November 2001, and later of Iraq in March 2003, were full of visual representations of (masculine) hype(r)-power. But there were also many representations of more feminine operations of American so-called soft power. For example, in President Bush's October 7, 2001 speech announcing the airstrikes in Afghanistan that would mark the start of the global war on terror, Bush framed the choice to strike against al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan by emphasizing that, while there will be violence, "at the same time, the oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of America and our

allies," as the United States would "drop food, medicine, and supplies."[157] Once the global war on terror had begun, and the United States stated its endeavor to reassert itself as a masculine hype(r)-power, the United States remained attached to more feminine matters of vulnerability. This attachment can be seen, for example, through the United States' vow to protect those who were most vulnerable, especially women and children. For example, in an address by Bush in late-January 2002, the President stated that "All fathers and mothers, in all societies, want their children to be educated, and live free from poverty and violence," and this represented a key reason why, according to Bush, the invasion of Iraq was both necessary and justified.[158] This speech is indicative of the United States' efforts to act as a global bastion of moral supremacy, vowing to take care of those who were most susceptible to the negative effects of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In only a few months, the United States had both experienced an unprecedented vulnerability through the 9/11 attacks and begun to reassert its position as a hype(r)-power through operations that contained massive amounts of force and violence (airstrikes and ground invasions). And yet the United States also emphasized the promise to provide softer, more humanitarian efforts to care for those individuals who would be most vulnerable to the U.S. invasion and attacks. As Tim Luke has discussed, these elements of both outright masculine operations of hard power and soft power measures are crucial to the project of United States hype(r)-power, with the framing of the war on terror containing both dimensions of power.[159]

---

[157] George W. Bush, "Global War on Terror," National Archives, October 7, 2001, https://www.georgewbushlibrary.gov/research/topic-guides/global-war-terror.
[158] Bush, George W. "President Delivers State of the Union Address." The White House: George W. Bush, January 29, 2002. https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html.
[159] Luke, "Hyper-Power or Hype-Power," 20- 21.

The invasion of Iraq in March 2003, perhaps even more so than the invasion of Afghanistan 16 months earlier, is a clear representation of the measures taken by the United States to demonstrate its ability to swiftly assert its dominance over its enemies, and thus reasserting its identity as a secure, powerful, and capable state. President Bush, in an address to the nation on March 19, 2003, explained that the United States was going to war against Iraq, and that the military operation in Iraq would be named "operation Iraqi freedom," referencing the United States' supposed goal of removing Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction (or, perhaps, his means of creating them, as the distinction was not clearly made) that the Bush Administration claimed threatened the safety of both the world and of innocent Iraqi civilians. In line with the broader war on terror, Operation Iraqi Freedom was a military conquest enacted by the United States and framed by the presumption that the United States would be a moral beacon in the Middle East, protecting the world from the actions of the Hussein regime, a regime that the United States claimed was terrorizing its own citizens and the rest of the free world.[160] Similar to Afghanistan, in Iraq, the United States relied on operations of both hard and soft power to justify its invasion. What followed the United States' invasion of Iraq was indeed the defeat of the Hussein regime, seen in the infamous imagery of Hussein's toppled statue in Baghdad, after a military campaign that was one of the "swiftest advances of heavy arms in history," according to the way President Bush characterized it in his famous "Mission Accomplished" speech aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln on May 1, 2003.[161] However, unlike Afghanistan, the presence of elements of soft power that, as Luke explained, are crucial to the

---

[160] George W. Bush, "President Delivers State of the Union Address," The White House: George W. Bush, January 29, 2002, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html.
[161] George W. Bush, "President Bush Announces Major Combat Operations in Iraq Have Ended," May 1, 2003, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/05/20030501-15.html.

promotion of the United States as a hype(r)-power, was greatly reduced in Iraq, particularly as a result of the widespread publication of images of United States' torture of Iraqi detainees at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison. In this way, the War in Iraq is indicative of how the United States both asserted its masculine dominance and, at the same time, failed to uphold the softer operations of power and its promised moral responsibilities. The contrast between the United States' clearly masculine conquering of the Hussein regime and its subsequent failure to maintain its semblance of operations of soft power complicated the United States' continued attempts at reasserting itself as a masculine global power. Thus, Iraq provides an important and clear example of how the United States' attempts at reaffirming its masculinity by antagonizing and attacking its enemies lead to the weakening of the United States' framing of the war, and ultimately to the rendering vulnerable of its image as a morally justified global hype(r)-power.

Torture at Abu Ghraib

In late February 2004, only thirteen months after the United States invaded Iraq and swiftly toppled Saddam Hussein's regime, a fifty-three-page report by United States Army Major General Antionio M. Taguba, not intended for public release but later obtained and published by *CBS News* and *The New Yorker*, was produced, detailing the various institutional shortcomings in the leadership and operations at the Abu Ghraib war prison outside of Baghdad, Iraq. These shortcomings, the report claimed, contributed to the systemic abuse and (more often than not,

sexual) torture of many of the thousands of detainees[162] at the prison.[163] This investigation and subsequent report were conducted after word got out that a detainee at Abu Ghraib had been killed during interrogation in November 2003. This report, colloquially called the "Taguba report," described findings on the torture and prisoner abuse observed at Abu Ghraib:

> "Between October and December 2003, at the Abu Ghraib Confinement Facility (BCCF), numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses were inflicted on several detainees. This systemic and illegal abuse of detainees was intentionally perpetrated by several members of the military police guard force (372nd Military Police Company, 320th Military Police Battalion, 800th MP Brigade), in Tier (section) 1-A of the Abu Ghraib Prison (BCCF)."[164]

Shortly after the Taguba report was completed, suggesting the presence of systemic and illegal detainee abuse, Seymour Hersh of the *New Yorker* obtained the report and published a famous article discussing the torture at Abu Ghraib and its implications. Hersh's article followed the publication of many of the Abu Ghraib photographs on April 28, 2004, in a *60 Minutes II* news report aired by *CBS News* that described the abuse in detail and displayed images of the abuse to the American public.[165] In the wake of the breaking of the news of the torture at Abu Ghraib, first mentioned by *CBS* and *The New Yorker* once again, an explosion of media stories took place that discussed the torture at Abu Ghraib as news agencies acquired more photographs of the

---

[162] I would like to make it clear that although I use the word 'detainee' throughout this chapter for thematic reasons, those imprisoned at Abu Ghraib were overwhelmingly innocent civilians. Of the several thousand people imprisoned at Abu Ghraib by the fall of 2003, many were teenagers and women, often picked up at random military sweeps and checkpoints. According to the International Red Cross, 70-90% of those imprisoned at Abu Ghraib were innocent and arrested mistakenly, and this estimate is likely lower than the reality. For more information, see Seymour M. Hersh's article "Torture at Abu Ghraib," published in *The New Yorker* on April 30, 2004, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/10/torture-at-abu-ghraib or "The Abu Ghraib abuse scandal 20 years on: What redress for victims?" https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/27/the-abu-ghraib-abuse-scandal-20-years-on-what-redress-for-victims.

[163] "U.S. Army Report on Iraqi Prisoner Abuse," *NBC News*, May 4, 2004, https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna4894001.

[164] "U.S. Army Report on Iraqi Prisoner Abuse."

[165] Although this *60 Minutes II* episode appears to no longer be in any of CBS's archives, it can be accessed on YouTube at https://youtu.be/onPH6Xkq2zQ?si=4Otceil6y2OSwbaG.

torture, many deciding to publish them for public viewing.[166] The image in *figure 5* is one image that was released alongside many others in the media frenzy surrounding the *60 Minutes* report. This image was originally published in a May 7, 2004 *NBC News* article,[167] and was reproduced on May 17, 2004 in *Time Magazine.*[168] The image in *figure 5* originates from the hundreds of images obtained by *The Washington Post* when they were leaked from Abu Ghraib.

Figure 5*:* US Army Private First-Class Lynndie England holding a leash around the neck of a naked male prisoner at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. (*The Washington Post* via *NBC News,* Public Domain)

---

[166] These images were reported to authorities in Iraq by Joe Darby after he came across the images on a CD given to him by Charles Graner. It is not clear whether Graner was aware that this CD had these images on them when he gave it to Darby. See https://www.cbsnews.com/news/exposing-the-truth-of-abu-ghraib/.
[167] "Soldier Charged with Abusing Iraqi Prisoners," NBC News, May 7, 2004, https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna4927273.
[168] Claudia Wallis, "Iraq: Inside Abu Ghraib: Why Did They Do It?," *TIME*, May 17, 2004, https://time.com/archive/6738503/iraq-inside-abu-ghraib-why-did-they-do-it/.

The image in *figure 5* was most likely taken in the fall of 2003 by the military police officers in charge of running the prison.[169] In this image, United States Army Private First-Class Lynndie England is holding onto what appears to be a dog leash, staring down at a naked male prisoner, who the guards referred to as "Gus",[170] and who has the other end of the leash wrapped around his neck as he lays sprawled and naked on the floor of the prison. Many scholars have discussed this image, and other Abu Ghraib images, in terms of the role of various hierarchies of race, gender, and sexuality.[171] Like many of these scholars, I too believe that there is a clear role played by race, gender, and sexuality in this image. More specifically, I find this image to be a prime representation of the policies made by the United States to reassert its masculine identity and to challenge or even erase the masculinity of its enemies, or to feminize them, as a retaliation for the 9/11 attacks that, as discussed in the previous chapter, threatened the United States' own sense of masculine security. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Laura Sjoberg has argued, along with other gender IR scholars, that attempts to subordinate an enemy's masculinity, or even to feminize an enemy, is a crucial part of the construction of effective narratives of and around war that both seek to justify the war and with to portray to the public that one state is in charge of the war.[172] Although the narratives that Sjoberg discusses are generally thought as narratives produced for the general public, I believe that the narrative produced through this particular image (which was most likely meant for viewing by prison guards and US military personnel) is nonetheless crucial to understanding how the United States' attempt at retrieving its

---

[169] Hersh, "Torture at Abu Ghraib."
[170] Stone Phillips, "Behind the Abu Ghraib Photos," NBC News, October 2, 2005, https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna9532670.
[171] See, for example Butler, *Frames of War*, 74-99 or Susan Sontag, "Regarding The Torture Of Others." The New York Times, May 23, 2004. https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/regarding-the-torture-of-others.html., and Puar, Jasbir K. "Abu Ghraib: Arguing against Exceptionalism." Feminist Studies 30, no. 2 (2004): 522–34. https://doi.org/10.2307/20458978.
[172] Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict*, 119-121.

masculine identity was dealt with. Even though the image might not have been intended for public viewing, it nonetheless is a valuable indication of the narratives that were being produced during the war on terror *by and within* the United States' military in Iraq, as well as of the public response, that, as I will explain later, started to impact this narrative *after* it had been constructed during the first 13 months of the invasion of Iraq.

Because the image in *figure 5* was taken by United States soldiers at Abu Ghraib as they carried out acts of torture there, the initial audience for this image can be thought of as the United States military itself, as I mentioned above, or at least those who spent their time in Iraq physically subordinating and demeaning the enemies of the United States. However, after the images were released, the audience became the general public—the American public, but also everyone in Iraq and across the Middle East who saw these images at the time. Importantly, as Nicholas Mirzoeff has noted, both civilians and combatants in Iraq had heard rumors about tortures occurring at Abu Ghraib long before the United States' public and the world became aware of the crimes taking place there.[173] The early knowledge (even before the American public became aware of it) of the torture at Abu Ghraib by Iraqi civilians might be seen as yet another level of fear and intimidation through the continued threat of sexual torture if one were to find oneself imprisoned at Abu Ghraib.

In *Frames of War,* Judith Butler also discusses the audience of the Abu Ghraib photographs and how these images represent their own form of embedded photography during the War in Iraq.[174] Butler explains how these images, and the relationship between the photographer and the scene that is photographed, exist "by virtue of the frame," and that this

---

[173] For more information, see Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Invisible Empire: Abu Ghraib and Embodied Spectacle," *Visual Arts Research* 32, no. 2 (2006): 38–42.
[174] Butler, *Frames of War*, 82-23.

apprehensive frame mediates the relationship between the soldiers in Iraq and the detainees or enemy combatants, but also that this relationship was not unique to those present and photographing the images at Abu Ghraib.[175] The framing of this image, then, is a crucial image to look back on and discuss because, as visual culture and post-colonial scholar Priya Dixit explains, "looking [back] at the United States via different sites" (such as images taken from inside a military prison in Iraq) can help "make visible the racialized [and perhaps sexualized, and cultural, one might add] power structures that categorize and classify others as 'dangerous.'"[176] Thus, as Dixit argues, looking back on matters of visuality, of who/what is seeing and being seen, can help us better understand the underlying power dynamics at play in that moment, particularly between the "us" of the United States soldier and the "them" of the sexually subordinated and racially othered detainees at Abu Ghraib. Moreover, as I have argued, this analysis can reveal how these power differentials were indicative of a United States seeking to subordinate and humiliate its enemies' masculinity *in order to* reaffirm its own sense of masculine first-worldism.

The image in *figure 5* depicts the detained bodies at Abu Ghraib in a way quite similar to Giorgio Agamben's description of *homo sacer*.[177] Like Agamben's understanding of *homo sacer*, the man in this image, and what he represents to the United States, is an outcast or a banned man, his very existence criminalized, tabooed, and labeled as dangerous.[178] Butler, too, in *Precarious Life,* discusses the operation of state power at sites of indefinite detention, such as Abu Ghraib,

---

[175] Butler, *Frames of War*, 82.
[176] Priya Dixit, "Decolonizing Visuality in Security Studies: Reflections on the Death of Osama Bin Laden," *Critical Studies on Security* 2, no. 3 (September 2, 2014): 337–51, https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2014.978670, pp. 339-340.
[177] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.
[178] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 79.

in a way that is reminiscent of Agamben's analysis. Butler writes that, through the indefinite detention (and torture) of these banned and tabooed bodies, the United States asserts a new form of sovereignty by exerting a power that determines who is "dangerous, and, therefore, without entitlement to basic human rights."[179] Butler, like Agamben, explains that it is the identity of the detainees at Abu Ghraib—as racialized or "banned" enemies—that justifies the United States' operation of sovereign (bio)power, which places the detainees outside the law. It is in this extralegal zone of endemic precarity that the United States may carry out sexual acts of torture against racialized and feminized others, with little consequence—at least not until after the world became aware of the torture through the public release of the photographs, which in turn rendered vulnerable the identity that the United States had been constructing for itself since the 9/11 attacks.[180]

As presented by this image, the detainee is completely at the will of the United States soldier, prevented from doing anything to protect himself from the harm being done to him. The detainee at Abu Ghraib is, in this way, much like *homo sacer*, with the detainee's utter inability to resist the torture being inflicted against him as he is dehumanized and made to crawl naked on the floor like an animal. Indeed, as Agamben discusses, *homo sacer* is outside of the law, unprotected and thus likely to be harmed without legal redress. This understanding of vulnerability in terms of the systematic placement of bodies outside of the law is present in this image and speaks to the (extra)legal position of the detainees at Abu Ghraib. Multiple reports throughout the Bush Administration and prior to the release of the Abu Ghraib photographs

---

[179] Butler, *Precarious Life,* 57.
[180] Although the Abu Ghraib scandal had great consequences for the apprehension of the United States as a morally justified hype(r)-power, there was little systematic change that occurred as a result of the torture at Abu Ghraib, in terms of how the United States leadership viewed the combatants as outside of the protections of international law.

revealed that the United States did not deem Taliban and al Qaeda detainees to be entitled to prisoner of war (POW) status.[181] This means that even bodies who were only suspected to be enemy combatants were not granted the rights of POWs according to the Geneva Conventions.[182] Because of the Bush Administration's circumvention of international law, detainees like the one present in the image in *figure 5* were not considered by this administration to be legally protected from acts of violence, insults, intimidation, nor were they required to be given adequate food, clothing, and medical care, even though torture, as it is defined by the Geneva conventions, was still technically banned by both international and US law.[183] Thus, even though many of those tortured at Abu Ghraib were innocent civilians, the United States was able to systematically place detainees outside of the realm of international law and U.S. law and inside what I would call a zone of endemic precarity where their abuse and torture could occur without any legal consequences for the perpetrators (the perpetrators being the United States as a whole, not just the individual soldiers who carried out the crimes at Abu Ghraib). This systematic positioning of these detainees outside of the protection of the law also explains how vulnerability occurs within zones of endemic precarity where, as Chapter 2 discussed, bodies are subject to a violence that often goes unnoticed and, in this case, experience a violence that circumvents the perceived legal protections traditionally granted to enemy combatants during times of war. These bodies, as

---

[181] Rather, these individuals were categorized by the Bush Administration as "unlawful combatants." For more detail on this categorization, and the United States ability to circumvent international humanitarian law during the war on terror, see Richard Jaques, "Query: Is There a Status of 'Unlawful Combatant,'" in Issues in International Law and Military Operations, International Law Studies, v. 80 (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 2006).

[182] Donald Rumsfeld, "Defense Department Briefing," C-SPAN.org, February 8, 2002, https://www.c-span.org/program/news-conference/defense-department-briefing/153221. See also Ari Fleischer, "Statement by the Press Secretary on the Geneva Convention," The White House: George W. Bush, May 7, 2003, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/05/20030507-18.html and "The Torture Memos" can be accessed here https://www.aclu.org/documents/memo-regarding-torture-and-military-interrogation-alien-unlawful-combatants-held-outside.

[183] "Protected Persons: Prisoners of War and Detainees," *International Committee of the Red Cross*, https://www.icrc.org/en/law-and-policy/protected-persons-prisoners-war-and-detainees.

Agamben and Butler have stated, become completely vulnerable, at the total mercy of the treatment inflicted by those who hold political power. In other words, the torture at Abu Ghraib experienced by the detainees can be seen as a violence enacted by the United States that seeks to relegate enemies of the United States to a condition of bare life, unprotected form mental and bodily harm, and placed, once again, outside existing legal categories and frameworks that could ensure their protection.

With this understanding of how bodies like the one visible in the image in *figure 5* were intentionally placed inside zones of endemic precarity, the framing of this image and its portrayal of normalized power differentials become even clearer. The image in *figure 5* is framed in a way that communicates a sense of normalized dehumanization and humiliation of the detainee. In the image, the United States soldier is positioned higher physically than the detainee, who is laying below the soldier on the floor. Reminiscent of Mirzoeff's understanding of how the visual and visual culture can help to enforce and portray authoritative power through the representation of physically separated bodies, the visual separation in this image underlines the point that there is a (visually reinforced) hierarchy of power.[184] In Mirzoeff's understanding, the image and the two bodies' positions in it reinforce the message that the United States' soldier has all the power and the detainee, at the soldier's feet, has no power at all, since the two bodies are made to look separate and different. The detainee in this image is, in this moment, not permitted to stand up or to wear clothes, nor is he allowed to be "unleashed," his movements completely restricted by the soldier who holds the leash. England's stance, which seems casual and even playful, in contrast to the obvious distress of the detainee, furthers the notion that this is acceptable and normalized behavior at Abu Ghraib. The detainee is so completely stripped of his rights that England appears

---

[184] Mirzoeff, *The Visual Culture Reader*, xxxi.

at ease placing a leash around his neck and treating him as she pleases, not worried at all about the danger that the detainee once supposedly posed to the United States and that allegedly made it acceptable for him to be, as Butler has written, completely stripped of his basic human rights.[185] These physical positions and the different traits between the two bodies emphasized by this image contribute to the framing of the United States soldier as unquestionably in control (physically, mentally, and sexually), powerful, and thus masculinized,[186] while the Iraqi detainee and enemy of the United States is forcibly weakened, subordinated, dehumanized, and possibly feminized.

The imbalance of power in this image, between the U.S. soldier and the detainee, is one that relies on differences in physical power and legal, authority. But it also depends on a clear representation of gendered and sexual imbalance. Crucially, the inclusion of a gendering and

---

[185] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 57.

[186] Even though, clearly, Lynndie England is a woman. This study will not directly discuss this trait of England, as I focus predominantly on the gendering of the United States' identity. However, many journalists and academics have discussed specifically the element of the gender of the torturers at Abu Ghraib. Notably, Barbara Ehrenreich, in a May 2004 article "Feminism's Assumptions Upended," argued that the torture at Abu Ghraib, though abhorrent, as an indicator of gender equality. See Barbara Ehrenreich, "Feminism's Assumptions Upended," Los Angeles Times, May 16, 2004, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-may-16-op-ehrenreich16-story.html. Ryan Ashley Caldwell, social and cultural theorist, discusses how England and the other female torturers at Abu Ghraib were "fallgirls," in the aftermath of the scandal, scapegoated and unfairly portrayed in the media as the primary perpetrators of the torture largely due to the fact that they are women, even while the dominant masculine structures in the U.S. military (that allowed the torture to occur) were mostly undiscussed. See Ryan Caldwell, *Fallgirls: Gender and the Framing of Torture at Abu Ghraib,* 1st ed. (Routledge, 2012). Laura Sjoberg also addresses the gender of the torturers at Abu Ghraib directly, focusing on how the media reflected on the agency of England and Harman in the torture, rather than the actions themselves. Sjoberg explains how media discussions of England points toward the figure of the idealized woman soldier, who must be strong enough to carry out the actions of a (male) soldier, but still in need of male protection or domination (as the media framed England as having been manipulated by the other male soldiers into this behavior). Furthermore, Sjoberg also describes how England's' gender enhances the emasculating element of the torture carried out at Abu Ghraib, as being tortured by a woman further feminizes the detainee's masculinity (p.95). See Laura Sjoberg, "Agency, Militarized Femininity and Enemy Others: Observations From The War In Iraq," International Feminist Journal of Politics 9, no. 1 (March 2007): 82–101, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740601066408. For more works that focus on the gender of England and the torturers at Abu Ghaib, see, for example, Aziza Ahmed, "When Men Are Harmed: Feminism, Queer Theory, and Torture at Abu Ghraib," in *Feminisms of Discontent*, ed. Ashleigh Barnes (Oxford University Press, 2015), 194–216, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199452941.003.0009. See also Melanie Richter-Montpetit and Annick T.R. Wibben, "Militarized Masculinities, Women Torturers, and the Limits of Gender Analysis at Abu Ghraib," 1st ed. (Routledge, 2016), 92–116, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315687490-6.

sexualizing component with regards to the enemy/detainee furthers the understanding of the image as a direct, and seemingly obvious, attempt by the United States at remasculinization as it clearly depicts the violation of the masculinity of enemies and detainees in Iraq. Susan Sontag writes, in her well known essay "Regarding the Torture of Others" (that discusses the Abu Ghraib photographs) that the image in *figure 5,* and the vision of the United States' soldier and the Iraqi detainee pictured in it, is unmistakenly laced with sexual innuendo.[187] Sontag describes how England's choice to walk the detainee with a leash is indicative of "classic dominatrix imagery,"[188] through which the United States abroad is represented as sexually dominating a feminized, "submissive" enemy as the United States performs acts of (sexual, physical) domination. This point is reinforced by other Abu Ghraib photos that display acts of sodomy and other perceived homosexual acts. This image and the many other images from Abu Ghraib contain explicit elements of sexualized behavior that show the detainees in positions of sexual humiliation (mostly homosexual positions), something which also worked in "perfect concert with the homophobia within the US military," as Butler argues in *Frames of War*.[189] Implicit in the scenes of forced submissive or homosexual acts by detainees is the assumption that the United States' military is fundamentally not homosexual, and that homosexuality is, for the United States' military, synonymous with feminization or the subjugation of masculinity. Therefore, forced homosexual acts are a suitable punishment for the enemies who are aligned with or similar to those who emasculated the United States on 9/11. This dual function of sexual torture at Abu Ghraib—as confirming the subordinated masculinity of the enemy and enforcing

---

[187] Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Torture Of Others," *The New York Times*, May 23, 2004, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/regarding-the-torture-of-others.html.
[188] Sontag, "Regarding the Torture of Others," 5.
[189] Butler, *Frames of War*, 90.

the hegemonic masculinity of the United States—is crucial to the framing of the image in *figure 5* as it represents not only the subjugation of the enemy in perceived retribution to the 9/11 attacks, but also the continued (re)construction of the United States' (heteronormative) masculinity.

In addition to the United States' own understanding of homosexuality, as it appears in the Abu Ghraib images, it is clear that the religious and cultural identity of the enemy (Muslim and Arab) played a fundamental role in the United States' ability to create an environment in which the sexually subordinated detainees were photographed at Abu Ghraib. Hersh, author of the famous "Torture at Abu Ghraib" article in *The New Yorker*, is one among a multitude of writers who remarked that the Abu Ghraib photographs were also displays of the exploitation of Muslim beliefs for the purpose of sexual humiliation. Hersh writes in his article that the Abu Ghraib photographs are especially effective at humiliating the enemy because "homosexual acts are against Islamic law and it is humiliating for men to be naked in front of other men."[190] Although there is much to unpack in this statement, particularly in terms of its generalization of Muslim culture and behavior, the essay was widely circulated at the. As Hersh explains, it is clear that the United States soldiers at Abu Ghraib used the perceived Islamic identity of the detainees (even if this understanding of Islam and Arabic culture was stereotyped and incorrect) as a tool to deepen the humiliation of the acts that were being carried out. In this way, the forced sexual humiliation committed by US soldiers at Abu Ghraib, carried out to increase the feelings of masculine domination by the perpetrators, exploited the Muslim identities of the detainees for the purpose of humiliating them sexually. The otherness of the detainees, then, became an instrument of and for torture, shame, and subordination by the United States at Abu Ghraib while, as gender and

---

[190] Hersh, "Torture at Abu Ghraib."

visual culture scholar Jasbir Puar has argued, it also implied (incorrectly) that the United States, and the non-Muslim world more generally, was more accepting of homosexual acts and would thus feel less humiliated by such acts.[191] And again, at the same time as the United States violated the identities of those it was systematically torturing at Abu Ghraib, the United States was reasserting its own identity, not only as a masculine dominating force over the detainees, but also, and as Puar writes, as the superior moral authority who, as seen in the discussions of the image in *figure 5,* thought of itself as less homophobic and perhaps more egalitarian than its Muslim and Arab enemies, thus further helping to bolster its own sense of moral self-righteousness through its actions at Abu Ghraib and in the rest of the war on terror.[192]

Furthermore, the fact that the image was taken at all, that it exists, and crucially that it was viewed by those at the prison for months before it was released to the public can reveal yet another facet of the sexual torture and subordination evidenced in the image in *figure 5.* Indeed, this image, and many other photographs like it, is reminiscent of pornography, as a photo taken in the midst of a sexual and erotic moment so that it could be returned to and viewed again later.[193] Along this understanding of the images at Abu Ghraib as a matter of pornography, feminist historian Joanna Bourke, writing for *The Guardian* in May 2004, describes the photos as an "aesthetic of pornography." [194] Bourke's understanding of the images as representing "aesthetic pornography" adds another layer of explanation for why the image was taken. It also

---

[191] See Jasbir K. Puar, "Abu Ghraib: Arguing against Exceptionalism," *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 2 (2004): 522–34, https://doi.org/10.2307/20458978.
[192] Lynndie England, the soldier depicted in the image in *figure 5,* is, after all, a woman.
[193] According to the 2004 book *The Torture Papers,* the infamous photograph of the naked detainees stacked on top of each other to form of a pyramid was made the screensaver on one of the computers at the Café at Abu Ghraib, displaying how the images of the sexual torture at Abu Ghraib were indeed used as a form of pornography. For more information, see Karen J. Greenberg and Joshua L. Dratel, eds., *The Torture Papers: The Road to Abu Ghraib* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
[194] Joanna Bourke, "Torture as Pornography," *The Guardian*, May 7, 2004, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/may/07/gender.uk.

exposes another reason why those within the image in *figure 5* were made to pose in such vulgar and sexualized positions. Per Bourke, the images were taken, at least in part, for the purpose of future viewing, thus explaining why the staging of the images torture at Abu Ghraib was so methodical, with both soldier and detainee performing their differentiated positions and roles for the camera. In this aesthetically pornographic way, it is not only the act of sexual torture that subordinates the detainee, but also the very fact that the image was taken in the first place, especially as detainees at Abu Ghraib were aware that they were being photographed as they were forced to endure acts of sexual torture.[195] In this way, the photographing of the sexual torture at Abu Ghraib ensures a temporal extension and perhaps perpetuation of the event, since even after the torture ends, there will remain a visual proof of the humiliation that the detainees had to endure. This dimension was particularly effective in the outrage that came out of the Muslim world after the publication of the photographs.[196]

The framing of this image taken by a participant in the torture makes the image's frame somewhat similar to the frame present in the image in *figure 2* from the previous chapter, particularly in terms of how it offers a sort of first-person account of torture at Abu Ghraib. As members of the public see this image, they must come to understand that it was taken in/as an intimate moment by a participant in the violence who also wanted to capture the moment on camera. The participant in the torture, in that moment, was both torturer and photographer. Thus, there is with this image a blurring of the line that demarcates viewer, photographer, and participant. This framing draws the viewer into the role of photographer, too, potentially

---

[195] *The Torture Papers*, 508.

[196] This outrage was so great, the photos so offensive, that Islamic extremist militants beheaded an American hostage in an act they claimed to have carried out as retribution for the photographs. For more information, see Whitaker, Brian, and Luke Harding. "American Beheaded in Revenge for Torture." The Guardian, May 12, 2004. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/may/12/iraq.alqaida.

lessening the distance between the viewer and the perpetrator of the torture. The viewer, especially the American viewer who is allegedly represented overseas by their military, when looking at the image in *figure 5*, is thus also urged to view the image as a participant—the photographer behind the camera—and not as an innocent or distant (as Sontag as argued) viewer. Yet, the intimacy of this image, its initial intention as it was meant to remain unseen by most eyes, makes its message that much more powerful for members of the public, as the usually unseen or hidden violence in zones of endemic precarity now become visible for the pubic and in a much more authentic fashion than through second-hand accounts of the events.

Thus, crucially, the framing of this image, as it draws (American) viewers into the event whether they want it or not, helps to portray the events or actions depicted by this photograph not as fringe actions by a small, unrepresentative group of American servicemen (a few "bad apples"[197]), but rather as revealing of the United States' attempts at reasserting its masculine hyper-power. The image in *figure 5* clearly demonstrates that the actions at Abu Ghraib were not just those of a few "un-American" soldiers in an "exceptional, isolated" case, as Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld put it,[198] and that Abu Ghraib was not something that "does not reflect the nature of the American people," as President Bush described the torture there.[199] Rather, the image, its framing, and what is shows are indicative of systematic attempts as emasculating the enemy in order to reassert the United States' own masculinity as a result of the apprehensive

---

[197] "Bad apples" was a phrase that was used by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, as well as other top U.S. officials, when describing the soldiers who carried out torture at Abu Ghraib.
[198] In a press conference on May 4, 2002, Rumsfeld described the abuse at Abu Ghraib as "exceptional" and "isolated" and "totally unacceptable and un-American" when asked by reporters. See Donald Rumsfeld, "Iraqi Prisoner Abuse," PBS News, May 4, 2004, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/iraqi-prisoner-abuse.
[199] President George W. Bush, cited in Thom Shanker and Jacques Steinberg, "THE STRUGGLE FOR IRAQ: CAPTIVES; Bush Voices 'Disgust' at Abuse of Iraqi Prisoners," The New York Times, May 1, 2004, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/01/world/the-struggle-for-iraq-captives-bush-voices-disgust-at-abuse-of-iraqi-prisoners.html.

conditions that affected the United States during and in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, as the previous chapter described. The understanding of this image, and others like it, as representing not the actions of a few but rather the attitudes of much of the United States towards its enemies during the war on terror has been discussed in detail by both Sontag and Puar. Sontag claims that, regardless of whether they were committed by only a handful of individuals or not, ultimately the photographs "are us."[200] What Sontag means here is that, because the actions in the photograph, and the photograph itself, came about as a result of systematic policies by the Bush administration towards its enemies, the United States in general—both its service members, but also its entire population—could no longer separate itself from the actions of those who actively committed the violence at Abu Ghraib. Those soldiers who participated in and photographed the torture *are* the United States, and they embody the United States' own policies and the perceptions in constructing the enemy. Similarly, Puar argues against the exceptionalist narrative pursued by the Bush administration and the United States' military regarding the torture at Abu Ghraib. Puar writes that the torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib was neither "exceptional nor singular," and instead was a manifestation of President Bush's racist, sexist, and homophobic agenda during the war on terror. Thus, it was a continuation of the United States' imperial, hegemonic, and hype(r)-powerful policies that often take place by way of racial and sexual violence.[201] What Sontag and Puar believe is that, contrary to what Rumsfeld and Bush claimed about the torture at Abu Ghraib, both the torture and the photographing of the torture were part of a broader project during the war on terror that sought to racialize, feminize, and subordinate the enemy. However, in doing so, and, as I have argued, the United States, through

---

[200] Sontag, "Regarding The Torture Of Others."
[201] Puar, "Abu Ghraib: Arguing against Exceptionalism," 522- 532.

its military, was also continuously attempting to increase its own sense of masculinity and security, by way of the complete subordination and domination of prisoners at Abu Ghraib.

After Abu Ghraib Became Visible

About two years after the public became aware of the sexual torture that the United States systematically carried out at Abu Ghraib and saw, through the release of images such as the image in *figure 5*, the sexual crimes perpetrated out against Iraqi detainees at the prison, the United States military announced that it was going to shut down its operations at Abu Ghraib and return the prison back to Iraqi control as a sign of good faith to the new Iraqi government.[202] The second image discussed in this chapter, displayed in *figure 6*, [203] was taken in June 2006 by Wathiq Khuzaie, a prominent Iraqi photographer hired by *Getty Images* during the War in Iraq. [204] This image, along with similar images taken by Khuzaie the same day, was published in multiple news reports on the prison's long transfer back to Iraqi control, including in articles in the *New York Times,*[205] the *Los Angeles Times,*[206] *CNN,*[207] and *Al Jazeera*.[208] The image captures a moment during one of the organized releases of detainees from Abu Ghraib as part of the

---

[202] Michael Howard, "Shamed US to Hand over Abu Ghraib Prison to Iraqis," *The Guardian*, March 10, 2005, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/mar/10/iraq.michaelhoward.
[203] Wathiq Khuzaie, Further Prisoners Are Released From Abu Ghraib Prison, June 23, 2006, Photograph, June 23, 2006, 71280096, Getty Images, https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/iraqi-prisoners-wait-to-be-released-on-june-23-2006-at-abu-news-photo/71280096.
[204] "Their War at Home: Iraqi War Photographers," https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/12/19/world/middleeast/20111219-iraqi-photographers.html.
[205] Thom Shanker and Sabrina Tavernise, "Murder Charges for 3 G.I.'s in Iraq," *The New York Times*, June 20, 2006, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/20/world/middleeast/20iraq.html.
[206] Andrew J. Bacevich, "Op-Ed: The Closing of Abu Ghraib and the U.S. Failure in Iraq," *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 2014, https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-bacevich-abu-ghraib-20140420-story.html.
[207] "Iraq Prison Abuse Scandal Fast Facts," *CNN World*, October 30, 2013, https://www.cnn.com/2013/10/30/middleeast/iraq-prison-abuse-scandal-fast-facts/index.html.
[208] Alasdair Soussi, "The Abu Ghraib Abuse Scandal 20 Years on: What Redress for Victims?," *Al Jazeera*, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/27/the-abu-ghraib-abuse-scandal-20-years-on-what-redress-for-victims.

drawn out transition back to Iraqi control.[209] What this image represents, I argue, is a framing of the United States and its behavior at Abu Ghraib no longer from an internal, participatory perspective (unlike the previous image), but rather from the perspective of someone on the outside, a non-participant in the torture or in the actions that led to the torture inside Abu Ghraib. What this image and its framing emphasize, I suggest, is the continued attempt by the United States to represent its enemies as fundamentally different or distanced from itself. However, my discussion of this image seeks to show how this continued framing, accompanied by the efforts taken throughout the war on terror to reassert United States' identity as a hype(r)-power, was not entirely effective at ridding the United States of its vulnerability that was revealed in the 9/11 attacks, and that contributed to the weakening of the United States' ability to uphold its intended image as a hype(r)-powerful and hyper-masculine first-world power and moral authority. The image in *figure 6*, quite different from the previous image (which was again taken by and for the United States military and perpetrators of the sexual torture), is a strong representation of how the United States, through its policy at that time, actually helped to manufacture its own continued vulnerability, insecurity, and weakness. Or, put differently, the United States' pursuit of masculine hype(r)-power during the war on terror continued its association with matters related to the United States' own vulnerability or perhaps femininity, as explained in the previous chapter.

---

[209] "U.S. To Shut Down Abu Ghraib Prison," *CBS News*, March 9, 2006, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-to-shut-down-abu-ghraib-prison/.

Figure 6*:* A group of Iraqi prisoners wait to be released from Abu Ghraib prison during its transition from United States' control to Iraqi control on June 23, 2006. (Photograph by Whathiq Khuzaie, Getty Images, Fair Use determination attached)

The image in *figure 6*, similar to the previous image, depicts the detainees at Abu Ghraib in a way that remains in line with Agamben's *homo sacer*, and particularly here, Agamben's reference to the bodies found inside the concentration camps during World War II. The image in *figure 6* displays a section of hundreds of similarly dressed men clutching what little belongings they managed to keep while they were imprisoned at Abu Ghraib. They all stand behind two fences, one made of chain link, the other of barbed wire, as they wait to finally be released from the prison and gain back the rights that had been taken from them while imprisoned at Abu Ghraib. These bodies, like those in the concentration camps during World War II, are depicted as nameless, criminal, and dangerous enough to be relegated to a separate space inside which they were systematically subjected to torture and abuse, all the while lacking any legal recourse to challenge what was being done to them. In this way, the bodies behind these two fences, as was

mentioned above, have been placed in a zone of endemic precarity where their bodily and mental well-being was entirely placed at the mercy of those who did exercise power and force over them, and who thus were able to decide of their fate. In this way, this image may appear to be yet another representation of the conditions developed by the events and images discussed in chapter 3. This image may remind us of how the framing of the 9/11 attacks enabled the United States to carry out military operations that deemed it pertinent to place enemy bodies into spaces in which they would be not only stripped of their rights, but also indefinitely punished and tortured, and made completely subservient to the will of their United States' captors. However, in the present case, and unlike the image in *figure 5,* after the world (as well as the American public) became aware of the torture that the United States had committed against detainees at Abu Ghraib, the accepted notion that the United States was a morally righteous victim as a result of the 9/11 attacks who was justified in its military actions (as the previous chapter sought to display), this United States' image began to slip. As Butler would describe it, the initial frame that allowed the United States to violently respond to the 9/11 attacks began to breakdown through images like the one seen *figure 6* and as a result of the changes in the United States' own sense of itself after the behavior of its soldiers in Iraq.

In the image in *figure 6*, what seems to be the most prominent framing element are the two fences that seemingly separate the photographer and the viewer of the image from the detainees positioned on the other side of the fence and still inside the Abu Ghraib prison. Similar to the visual separation of the two bodies in the image in *figure 5,* this double fence can be seen as a visual form of separation, an element once again that Mirzoeff claims is crucial to the successful division of bodies and to the operation of state power as it often takes place in visual

culture.[210] And, unlike the image in *figure 5,* this image's photographer is not a participant in the internal procedures at Abu Ghraib, but rather an onlooker of the conditions and torture that occurred there. Moreover, the viewer of this image becomes a passive, non-intervening viewer, which is perhaps a shortcoming of some photographic images, as discussed by Sontag most prominently in her book *On Photography*.[211] In this way, this image, unlike two of the previous images discussed in this study, is framed in a way that emphasizes the perceived distance between the viewer of the crimes at Abu Ghraib and those who have experienced the crimes themselves, with the fences acting as a marker of this difference, and increasing the distance for the viewer to be able to feel the suffering that has taken place in the prison. The double fence that frames this image is thus both a literal and a metaphorical rendition of the framing that was also present in the previous image, and of all the attempts to further the perception of the United States as dominant, superior, but also separate and fundamentally different from those imprisoned at Abu Ghraib.

However, even as this image depicts those imprisoned at Abu Ghraib from a distance, it is not fully successful in enforcing the feelings of distance between the viewer—in this case the American viewer—and the imprisoned detainees at Abu Ghraib. Even though the photograph seems to establish a space of difference between the American viewer of this image and the Iraqi detainee (seen through the fence that separates the photographer and the viewer from the detainees), the framing of the war on terror that had been cultivated after 9/11, because of the Abu Ghraib scandal, was beginning to be made vulnerable and to break down. Before the Abu

---

[210] Mirzoeff, *The Visual Culture Reader*, xxxi.

[211] In of *On Photography*, Sontag writes "To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them. Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more—and more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize." See Sontag, *On Photography*, 21.

Ghraib images were released, and afterwards, to a large extent, the United States' government framed the War in Iraq as a war of liberation that would free Iraqi people from the evil and sadistic plans of their dictator, Saddam Hussein. President Bush's March 19, 2003 address to the nation sums up the intended framing of the War in Iraq—a framing that I argue was beginning to falter by the time the image in *figure 6* reached the public—as a matter of heroic liberation:

> In this conflict, America faces an enemy who has no regard for conventions of war or rules of morality. Saddam Hussein has placed Iraqi troops and equipment in civilian areas, attempting to use innocent men, women and children as shields for his own military -- a final atrocity against his people.[212]

It is clear from Bush's own words that, at that point, the United States was at least somewhat successful in framing its war in Iraq as a necessary moment in the war on terror and as a way to free Iraqi civilians from a dictator that had little care for the lives of his own people. Indeed, in mid-March 2003, around the same time that President Bush gave this speech and outlined how the United States was understanding the invasion of Iraq, over 65% percent of Americans supported military action in Iraq to put an end to Saddam Hussein's rule. And in February 2003, roughly 57% of Americans believed the false claim that Hussein and his regime had somehow aided in the 9/11 terror attacks against the United States.[213] What Bush's own words and these statistics reveal is that, much before the release of the Abu Ghraib photographs, the framing of the War in Iraq was, at least for the majority of Americans, successful in its portrayal of the war on terror and the invasion of Iraq as justified and necessary, particularly since Saddam Hussein, whom many believed had been involved, even if indirectly, in the 9/11 attacks, was thought to

---

[212] George W. Bush, "President Bush Addresses the Nation," March 19, 2003, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/iraq/news/20030319-17.html.
[213] Carroll Doherty and Jocelyn Kiley, "A Look Back at How Fear and False Beliefs Bolstered U.S. Public Support for War in Iraq," Pew Research Center (blog), March 14, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/03/14/a-look-back-at-how-fear-and-false-beliefs-bolstered-u-s-public-support-for-war-in-iraq/.

have had a part in the emasculation of the United States. In this way, the framing of the War in Iraq was also premised upon the redemption of the United States from the vulnerability that the 9/11 attacks represented.

However, by May 2004, only 13 months after the initial invasion of Iraq, public opinion started to change, and the dominant framing of the War in Iraq that was in place in early 2003 started to crumble. As the image in *figure 5* and other images like it were made visible to the American public, it seems that Americans began to question whether Operation Iraqi Freedom was indeed about freeing Iraqi people, and the world, from Hussein, or whether it had turned into something that began to make the United States appear a bit too similar to those it claimed to want to free the world of. A May 2004 poll shows that the belief in the United States that the war effort was going well dropped by almost 25% from January 2004, largely as a result of the Abu Ghraib torture scandal.[214] The percentage of Americans who disapproved of President Bush's policies in Iraq had risen by more than 12%, too.[215] As public opinion started to shift, President Bush desperately sought to uphold the dominance of the framing that had previously been successful in creating support for the War in Iraq, and ultimately enabled the majority of Americans to believe that going to war was the righteous and moral thing to do. Addressing the photographs from Abu Ghraib, and the sexual torture that occurred there, Bush stated on May 1, 2004 that he "shared a deep disgust that those prisoners were treated the way that that they were treated," and that the sexual torture "does not reflect the nature of the American people."[216] The

---

[214] "Iraq Prison Scandal Hits Home, But Most Reject Troop Pullout," May 12, 2004, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2004/05/12/iraq-prison-scandal-hits-home-but-most-reject-troop-pullout/.
[215] Iraq Prison Scandal Hits Home, But Most Reject Troop Pullout."
[216] Bush, cited in Thom Shanker and Jacques Steinberg, "THE STRUGGLE FOR IRAQ: CAPTIVES; Bush Voices 'Disgust' at Abuse of Iraqi Prisoners," *The New York Times*, May 1, 2004, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/01/world/the-struggle-for-iraq-captives-bush-voices-disgust-at-abuse-of-iraqi-prisoners.html.

purpose of my discussion of public opinion here, in tandem with the representation of the verbal framing of the war on terror by the United States president, is to argue that, between the first image discussed in this chapter and the second image in *figure 6*, a significant change in the perception of the War in Iraq took place. As a result, the belief in the war's framing by those in charge of United States' policies, after the United States was revealed to be displaying a behavior that previously had been thought to be more akin to what the 9/11 terrorists and other "evil" people did, started to erode too.

In other words, what the change in public opinion on the War in Iraq and the increased disapproval rating of President Bush in May 2004 reveal is that, between the publication of the first image discussed in this chapter and the second image, there was a significant change in the apprehension of the policies carried out by the United States. This change, I believe, renders the framing in this image, as it seeks to uphold a degree of separation between the United States (particularly its military and those who represent it in Iraq and Afghanistan) and its enemies, no longer completely successful. In a way, Abu Ghraib scandal marks the breakdown of the initial and dominant framing of the war on terror and the war in Iraq. As Butler discusses in *Frames of War,* when the frame breaks down, some "taken-for-granted reality is called into question," and the authority that seeks to "orchestrate" and control the dominant frame is exposed.[217] When the frame starts to crumble and the dominant apprehensive narratives that shape military activity no longer hold sway over the vast majority of the American population, it becomes possible for the public to question what is being seen and challenge the previously dominant frame. In other words, as the dominant frame—the view, set up in the previous chapter, that the war on terror was a necessary response to reaffirm the accepted safety and first-worldism that living in the

---

[217] Butler, *Frames of War*, 12.

United States granted its citizens—breaks down, the public can begin to perceive the immoral perpetrator of violence as the United States itself.

Thus, the image in *figure 6,* had it been seen prior to the release of the Abu Ghraib photos, could have turned out to be a significant representation of the successful framing of the differential positions during the war on terror between the morally righteous bodies fighting for the United States and the world, and the sexually subordinated and racialized bodies of enemies relegated to "the other side of the fence" as they are a threat to the United States' accepted sense of masculine first-world privilege. However, this image was now viewed in the wake of the Abu Ghraib torture photos and was thus perceived along the lines of an event that, as Michael Howard of *The Guardian* puts it, revealed by the United States' attempt to "draw a line under one of the most shameful episodes of the Iraq war."[218] The shift that came as a result of the image in *figure 5* and its framing of sexual torture at Abu Ghraib undercuts the intended framing of the image in *figure 6* and effectively portrays the United States as, once again, not very different from its enemies, particularly in terms of the deviant behavior it was willing to display at Abu Ghraib. This shifted framing, crucially, reveals a new form of insecurity for the United States, one which has come about as a result of actions that initially were undertaken to resecuritize and remasculinize the United States and its image as a first-world hypermasculine power.

This revelation in May 2004 of the United States as the perpetrator of horrific tortures also speaks to how images have a securitizing function. Visual culture and international relations theorist Jessica Auchter notes that the viewing or public display or certain images, particularly of

---

[218] Howard, Michael. "Shamed US to Hand over Abu Ghraib Prison to Iraqis." *The Guardian*, March 10, 2005, sec. World news. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/mar/10/iraq.michaelhoward.

obscene images of death and of corpses, functions to shape narratives of and about security.[219] For my purposes, I would like to focus on Auchter's discussion of how images of atrocity and suffering (including images of torture) can have an insecuritizing function. Auchter, in her analysis, discusses how images of Osama bin Laden's corpse were intentionally made invisible, their viewing banned for the American public, as their release was believed to pose a serious security threat to the United States, both in terms of the safety of its troops in the Middle East and in terms of the threat of future terrorist attacks as terrorists may seek revenge for bin Laden's death and the release of images of his dead body.[220] Priya Dixit, too, discusses how President Obama asserted that the release of the images of bin Laden's corpse.[221] This resulted in "not many people in the US,"[222] or anywhere for that matter, seeing the images of bin Laden's corpse so as to prevent any negative security impacts felt by the United States. I believe that the perceived threats posed by the bin Laden corpse images, as discussed by both Auchter and Dixit, are rather similar to the actual effects of the Abu Ghraib images that took place seven years before bin Laden's killing, particularly in terms of how they were able to diminish US security upon their release, and led to the failure of the once dominant frame crafted after 9/11.

The images from Abu Ghraib, such as the image in *figure 5,* represent the moment when the United States, through its own actions deployed to resecuritize itself or to re-empower the perceptions of its first-worldist, masculine, and hyper(r)-powerful self, actually began to be reconnected with the vulnerability that it first experienced on 9/11. Because the Abu Ghraib images were seen not only by the United States' public but also by its enemies and the rest of the

---

[219] Jessica Auchter, *Global Corpse Politics: The Obscenity Taboo*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations (Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2021).
[220] Auchter, *Global Corpse Politics,* 93- 96.
[221] Dixit, "Decolonizing Visuality" 346.
[222] Dixit, "Decolonizing Visuality" 341.

world, the dominant narratives that supported the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as necessary for the United States' own resecuritization, and perhaps for the security of the world, began to slip, and they started to be replaced with security and vulnerability narratives that now included the United States' own abusive and abhorrent behavior towards both enemy fighters and civilians in the country it claimed to seek to protect and liberate. The beginning of the erosion of the dominant narrative of re-securitization and removal of the initial vulnerability during the war on terror, and its replacement with questions about the morality and righteousness of the United States' military pursuits in Afghanistan and Iraq, had immediate material and insecurutizing effects for Americans in Iraq. For example, the retaliatory beheading of American journalist Nick Berg by militants in May 2004 was proclaimed to have been carried out, according to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (a close follower of bin Laden who carried out this beheading), as retaliation for the treatment of the detainees at Abu Ghraib and the release of the photographs.[223] This example further shows how the release of the Abu Ghraib images marked a turn whereby the image started to work to negatively impact the security of the United States, diminished the effectiveness of the dominant framing surrounding the United States' occupation in the Middle East, and likely contributed to President Obama's decision not to release the bin Laden corpse images several years later. However, as the first chapter of this study has shown, the United States' sense of vulnerability and insecurity weakens the United States' masculinist, first-worldist, and hype(r)-powerful understanding of itself, but it also often leads to efforts by the United States to forcefully and violently reassert its security, something which might help to

[223] Brian Whitaker and Luke Harding, "American Beheaded in Revenge for Torture," *The Guardian*, May 12, 2004, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/may/12/iraq.alqaida.

explain the surge in US troops in Iraq in 2007, and the continued presence of the U.S. military there until 2011.[224]

As this chapter has shown, the image in *figure 6* is a visual representation of how the United States, as a result of the revelation of the torture it committed at Abu Ghraib, had begun to be the cause of its own vulnerability. The image in *figure 6* reveals how the dominant framing of the war on terror began to break down. The Abu Ghraib images now implicated the United States with actions that play a key role in the diminishing trust placed in the Bush Administration and its actions in the Middle East. This distrust, and the breaking down of the initial frame, would be seen in future administrations as will be discussed in the following chapter. Thus, the images and scandal at Abu Ghraib can be seen as a turning point as the United States' own behavior during the war on terror started to implicate the United States in its own increased sense of vulnerability and insecurity and thus failed to promote its threatened masculinity and hype(r)-power.

Conclusion and Next Chapter

The two images discussed in this chapter help to show that the abuse and torture carried out at the Abu Ghraib prison were neither exceptional nor the work of a few sadistic and un-American soldiers in Iraq, as leaders such as President Bush and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld wished to claim. Rather, these images reveal that, inside the Abu Ghraib prison, there was a normalized (sexualized) differential of power between the United States' soldiers and the Iraqi enemy. This normalized power imbalance stripped away all autonomy and legal subjectivity from those imprisoned at Abu Ghraib, placing them in what I call a zone of endemic precarity,

---

[224] "Timeline: The Iraq War," Council on Foreign Relations, https://www.cfr.org/timeline/iraq-war.

outside of legal protections, and in positions of complete and utter exposure to the will of the United States' soldiers. The relegation of detainees at Abu Ghraib to this endemically vulnerable condition, seen with the detainee in the image in *figure 5*, was, as this chapter has argued, the result of systematic policy choices that were made in the aftermath of 9/11 and which once again sought to reassert the United States' sense of masculine first-world hype(r)-power. The sexual abuse at Abu Ghraib present in the first image in this chapter is thus an affirmation and representation of the United States' attempt at achieving this remasculinization on the ground in Iraq, and essentially at performing such a remasculinization for the camera.

Alternatively, the second image discussed in this chapter, in *figure 6,* displays the framing of the efforts made by the United States to reassert its masculinity after news of the Abu Ghraib torture reached the public. The image in *figure 6* is shown and framed from the perspective of a viewer who is external to the prison and who is not a willing participant in the torture at Abu Ghraib. What this second image conveys is that the United States indeed placed thousands of bodies into a zone of endemic precarity at Abu Ghraib, stripping them of their rights and dignity as they were abandoned to a state of living or being reminiscent of what Agamben described as *bare life.* The framing of these bodies, as they are depicted in this image, as distant and separate from the United States and from those who imprisoned and tortured them, however, is challenged by the changing perceptions about the United States that came about in the wake of the Abu Ghraib sexual torture scandal. Although many people, including many Americans, continued to believe that the war on terror and the War in Iraq were justified, this image marks the beginning of the breakdown of the dominant frame that was crafted for the war on terror after 9/11, as was discussed in the previous chapter. In other words, the Abu Ghraib images, and the public scandal they caused, helped to reveal that the United States was not a

bastion of moral authority in the Middle East, and instead, through the systematic sexual subordination of its enemies, was perhaps not so different from the enemy bodies it attempted to portray as "deviant," "othered," or "evil," and thus not worthy of human rights and protections. This slippage in the dominant framing of the War in Iraq and the war on terror was nonetheless representative of the power of images to increase narratives of insecurity and vulnerability.

The framing of the war on terror as a necessary response to 9/11, as a perceived morally justified fight against evil, and as an effort for the United States to retrieve its masculine hype(r)-power, as this chapter has begun to show, started to break apart in the midst of the war on terror, especially as the world became aware of the behavior of American soldiers in Iraq and at the Abu Ghraib war prison. The next chapter will turn its attention to some of the final events of the war on terror. It will discuss two images that depict events during the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. Chapter 5 will seek to display that, in the two images selected for this chapter, the various actions undertaken by the United States in its continued attempt at remasculinization and at reclaiming its threatened image as a first-worldist hype(r)-power did not wholly rid the United States of its vulnerability, and perhaps even made the United States more vulnerable and insecure (and thus more feminine, from a gendered perspective). This final substantive chapter, in its discussion of the end of the war on terror and of the state of the United States' own sense of masculine first-worldism and hype(r)-power in 2021, will also make crucial the connection between matters of vulnerability and violence. It will also explain that violence undertaken in the name of vulnerability does not ultimately rid the vulnerable subject or self of its felt vulnerability, and instead, can actually lead to a proliferation of vulnerable effects and conditions. Chapter 5 will thus reveal the contagious quality of violence and vulnerability during the war on terror, which is a major theoretical contribution of this study.

Chapter 5: The Symbolic End of the War on and Terror the Differential Experience of Vulnerability

> Our abandonment of the Afghans who helped us, counted on us, and staked their lives on us is a final, gratuitous shame that we could have avoided.
>
> -George Parker, *The Atlantic*, August 15, 2021

Introduction

As I argued in the previous chapter, the United States carried out various (masculine) operations and instituted various policies during the war on terror to, at least in part, re-establish itself as a first-world hype(r)-power. These actions, including, the sexual torture carried out at the Abu Ghraib prison, contributed to the formation of zones of endemic precarity in which many (othered, mostly innocent) bodies were made to suffer in often unseen, unmourned, and unmediated conditions. Still, as the world came to know about the actions carried by the United States at Abu Ghraib, the dominant framing of the war on terror as a morally justified war against terrorist actors began to crack as was seen with the breakdown in the framing of the image in *figure 6* discussed in the previous chapter. As a result, it became possible for the viewer to start to pick apart the dominant framing of the war on terror that the United States sought to uphold (and still after the Abu Ghraib scandal too). This chapter will discuss how, roughly fifteen years after the Abu Ghraib images, the United States, and the dominant framing it pursued through most of the war on terror, was (still) vulnerable at the time of the August 2021 military withdrawal from Afghanistan. This vulnerability, though different from the vulnerability of Afghan civilians that some of the images in this chapter present, targets the identity of the United States as hype(r)-powerful and morally righteous nation, an identity that, once again, the United States has relied on throughout the war on terror in its entirety.

This chapter will begin with a contextualization of the relevant policy and events that took place between the images discussed in the previous chapter and the August 2021 United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan. The chapter will then turn to the image featured in *figure 7,* which showcases the moment when United States Marine Corps Sergeant Nicole Gee cradled an Afghan infant during the evacuation at the international airport in Kabul. I argue that the image's intended framing contrasts with how it was actually framed in media coverage following its widespread publication. This coverage predominantly occurred after Gee's death as a result of an ISIS-K[225] suicide bombing at the airport, which killed 13 U.S. service members and roughly 170 Afghan civilians.[226] This image and its framing display the fact that the United States, in addition to the Afghan child seen in the image, remains fundamentally vulnerable due to its own decisions in the post-9/11 era. This vulnerability is represented in this image by the death of Gee. However, this image, and its framing of the United States as both a protector but also as the relevant vulnerable subject of the image, is indicative of the continued role of images in upholding the zones of endemic precarity constructed throughout the war on terror, as it also keeps largely invisible and unworthy the vulnerability experienced by Afghan civilians.

The second image that will be discussed in this chapter also comes from a moment during the withdrawal at the airport in Kabul. The image in *figure 8* displays a United States' Air Force

---

[225] The Islamic State (referred to as ISIS or IS) is a transnational Islamist extremist militant group. The group emerged from the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which contained former Al Qaeda members that fought in Iraq against the United States. The group established its branch in Afghanistan in 2015, known as Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), which is made up of Pakistani, Afghan, and Central Asian militants aimed at undermining the legitimacy of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, and targeting the United States forces. It is crucial to note that IS, and the arm of IS in Afghanistan (ISIS-K) is by no means allied with the Taliban. In fact, the two groups are bitter enemies with IS seeing the Taliban as too weak and compromised, largely due to the Taliban's negotiations with the United States. For more information, see Clayton Thomas, "The Islamic State: Background, Current Status, and U.S. Policy," May 6, 2024, Congressional Research Service, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10328.

[226] Matthew Olay, "Kabul Airport Attack Review Reaffirms Initial Findings, Identifies Attacker," U.S. Department of Defense, April 15, 2024, https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3741245/kabul-airport-attack-review-reaffirms-initial-findings-identifies-attacker/.

transport plane as it travels down the runway while hundreds of Afghan civilians chase it in a desperate attempt to flee their country. This second image frames the United States as the dominant power, seemingly less vulnerable in this image in comparison to the depicted Afghan civilians running after the plane. Yet, this image's display of an excessive imbalance of power between the United States and the Afghan civilians, combined with this image's erasure of the dominant framing of the war in Afghanistan as morally justified, points to the way that the display of hyper-power by the United States during the withdrawal rendered the United States vulnerable to an assault on and affront to its own self-image, as the United States left those it claimed to protect in a state of abandon and despair.

The vulnerability that is presented in these two images, the vulnerability of both the United States and the Afghan civilians, reveals that the violence taken up (as revenge, as imperialism, as a reaffirmation of U.S. hype(r)-power, or remasculinization) during the war on terror did not fully manage to rid the United States of the insecurity that it felt about itself, and that was initially revealed through the images of the September 11, 2001 attacks. Both images in this chapter show how, after two decades of war, the violence and re-securitization efforts in the war on terror were always intertwined with matters related to the United States' own vulnerability. Although both the United States and the innocent civilians of Afghanistan (and of many others in the various war-ravaged places that fell victim to U.S. violence during the war on terror) experienced vulnerability both during the war on terror and the withdrawal from Afghanistan, this final chapter emphasizes how the vulnerability experienced by the United States is actually distinct from the vulnerability experienced by the civilians impacted by the war on terror, particularly in terms of the felt effects of this vulnerability, as well the stakes involved in it. This chapter, then, closes the study's evaluation of images during the period of the war on

terror to argue that, at least in the case of the United States in the aftermath of 9/11, violence does not do away with vulnerability, and furthermore that the violence used to resecuritize the United States (and allegedly Afghan civilians too) may have contributed to the United States' continued sense of vulnerability at the symbolic end of the war on terror.

From Abu Ghraib to the August 2021 U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan

This section will provide a brief account of the major events in the war on terror between the moment depicted in *figure 6* (in June 2006) discussed in the previous chapter and the August 2021 United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan that marked the symbolic end to the war on terror and of the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan.

In November 2006, shortly after the Abu Ghraib prison was transferred to the new Iraqi government, Saddam Hussein was sentenced to death by hanging after being found guilty of committing crimes against humanity by the Iraqi High Tribunal.[227] This sentencing furthered violence in Iraq as many of Hussein's Sunni supporters in northern Iraq vowed to take revenge for Hussein's conviction and sentencing.[228] Hussein was executed on December 30, 2006, and the video of his gruesome hanging was made public, with the video primarily understood to mark a triumphant moment for many in the West, but also fueling the anger of Hussein's supporters and anti-U.S. sentiment in Iraq.[229] The summer months of 2006 saw an in increase in violence in Afghanistan as well as in Iraq, with suicide attacks and other bombings more than doubling.[230] In early 2007, struggling with this increase in violence, President Bush announced the advent of

---

[227] "Timeline: The Iraq War," Council on Foreign Relations, https://www.cfr.org/timeline/iraq-war.
[228] "Timeline: The Iraq War."
[229] "Timeline: The Iraq War."
[230] "Timeline: The U.S. War in Afghanistan," Council on Foreign Relations, https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan.

what became known as "The Surge," which was an increase in the number of U.S. troops in Iraq by 20,000 in order to, according to Bush, "help the Iraqis carry out their campaign to put down sectarian violence and bring security to the people of Baghdad."[231]

When Barack Obama became president in 2008, he vowed to begin removing U.S. troops from Iraq by August 2010. However, President Obama, in February 2009, announced that the United States would send 17,000 more troops to fight in Afghanistan, stating that Afghanistan was more important (than Iraq) to the United States in its efforts to combat terrorist forces.[232] As the United States began to withdrawal troops from cities in Iraq, Obama explained that this new policy for the War in Afghanistan was necessary to link the success of the War in Afghanistan to the safety and stability of Pakistan.[233] This new policy explicitly tied the defeat of al Qaeda to both Pakistan and Afghanistan, as Obama further stated in March 27, 2009, that the new strategy would "disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and [to] prevent their return to either country in the future."[234] Later that same year, Obama committed another 30,000 troops to Afghanistan to help train Afghan Security Forces and so that the United States could "help create the conditions for the transfer of security responsibilities to the Afghans."[235]

In May 2011, United States Navy Seals killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan. Although bin Laden's death was significant, his killing spurred discussions about troop withdrawal and the efficacy of continuing the Afghanistan war.[236] By June 2011, a record number of Americans

---

[231] George W. Bush, from "The Iraq War," George W. Bush Library, https://www.georgewbushlibrary.gov/research/topic-guides/the-iraq-war.
[232] "The Iraq War."
[233] "The Iraq War."
[234] "Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," whitehouse.gov, March 27, 2009, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-a-new-strategy-afghanistan-and-pakistan.
[235] Barack Obama, as cited in "1999-2021: The U.S. War in Afghanistan."
[236] "1999-2021: The U.S. War in Afghanistan."

reported that they no longer supported the War in Afghanistan, and Obama announced that he would bring home roughly 33,000 troops from Afghanistan.[237] Talks about the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, and discussions related to Afghanistan's independent political future occurred in Bonn, Germany in December 2011, although this conference was largely a failure amid raging insurgency in Afghanistan, and with Pakistan's refusal to attend the conference.[238] Later that month, the United States would officially remove all troops from Iraq.[239] Soon after the failed Bonn conference, tensions between the United States and the Taliban rose. After several incidents involving civilian deaths, Afghan President Hamid Karzai began to demand that foreign troops be removed from Afghan villages and instead remain confined to military bases with the intention of facilitating the transition of Afghan security from U.S./NATO control to Afghan control.[240]

In April 2017, at the beginning of President Donald Trump's first term, the United States dropped a large bomb in eastern Afghanistan, killing over 90 Islamic State (IS) militants.[241] Trump later expressed interest in increasing U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan by several thousand, after troop presence there had dropped during the Obama administration. Trump ultimately sent roughly 4,000 troops to Afghanistan in June 2017.[242] By June 2017, the Taliban controlled over one third of the country, and the Islamic State (IS) gained public attention as it

---

[237] "1999-2021: The U.S. War in Afghanistan."
[238] "1999-2021: The U.S. War in Afghanistan."
[239] Although this was the official announcement, quite a few U.S. troops actually remained in Iraq after the war ended. For more information, see Laura Baldor and Tara Copp, "Why U.S. Forces Remain in Iraq 20 Years after 'Shock and Awe,'" *PBS News*, March 15, 2023, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/why-u-s-forces-remain-in-iraq-20-years-after-shock-and-awe.
[240] "1999-2021: The U.S. War in Afghanistan."
[241] Sune Engel Rasmussen, "US 'mother of All Bombs' Killed 92 Isis Militants, Say Afghan Officials," *The Guardian*, April 15, 2017, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/15/us-mother-of-all-bombs-moab-afghanistan-donald-trump-death-toll.
[242] *Associated Press*, "US Sending Almost 4,000 Extra Forces to Afghanistan, Trump Official Says," The Guardian, June 16, 2017, US news, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jun/15/us-troops-afghanistan-trump-administration.

established a presence in Iraq and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Kabul was experiencing more suicide bombings by the Taliban than ever before.[243] Trump announced his plan to withdraw from Afghanistan based only on the "conditions on the ground," [244] as opposed to previous timelines negotiated by the Obama Administration. Soon after, Taliban attacks rose in Afghanistan amid the U.S. reescalation.[245]

Withdrawal negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban continued until the end of September 2019, when Trump called off peace talks after a U.S. soldier was killed by the Taliban. Amid increases in fighting and violence between the U.S. and the Taliban in 2019, U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad was able to negotiate a peace deal between the United States and the Taliban in February 2020.[246] The Afghan government continued to be weakened by the Taliban's activity in the country and the United States' decision to carry on peace talks without the Afghan government being involved. By November 17, 2020, the United States announced its troops would be reduced by half by January 2021, and, in April 2021, newly elected President Joe Biden announced that the United States would extend the U.S. withdrawal from the previously planned May 2021 until the symbolic date of September 11, 2021.[247] However, due to escalations in Taliban activity in Kabul and the rest of the country, the Biden administration would move the deadline to August 31, as the country rapidly fell to Taliban control.[248]

This brief and by no means exhaustive summary of the most significant policies, actions, and events that occurred in the fifteen-year period between the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and

---

[243] "1999-2021: The U.S. War in Afghanistan."
[244] Trump, as cited in "1999-2021: The U.S. War in Afghanistan.".
[245] "1999-2021: The U.S. War in Afghanistan."
[246] "1999-2021: The U.S. War in Afghanistan."
[247] "1999-2021: The U.S. War in Afghanistan."
[248] Ruby Mellen, "The Shocking Speed of the Taliban's Advance: A Visual Timeline," *The Washington Post*, August 16, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/16/taliban-timeline/.

the withdrawal from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 highlights the unstable and often chaotic environment within which the situations depicted in the final two images that will be discussed in this study took place. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had negative effects on the political stability and humanitarian situations in both countries, and in the region in general. In both conflicts, civilians suffered greatly. In Iraq, as well as in Afghanistan, critical infrastructure was decimated, and most Iraqis, including engineers, lawyers, academics, and an estimated half of the nation's medical doctors, had been displaced.[249] In Afghanistan, the Taliban quickly took control amid the U.S. withdrawal in 2021, and the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai ultimately fled the country.[250] Since the August 2021 U.S. withdrawal, the Taliban has issued over eighty decrees that limit the rights of women and girls.[251] This chapter's analysis of the selected images will shed light on how, through these images, the fate of the civilians in Afghanistan was framed by the United States' vulnerability after two decades of war.

Sergeant Nicole Gee and the (still) Vulnerable Subject(s)

In mid-August 2021, the Taliban had made rapid territorial gains across the provincial capitals of Afghanistan, including Zaranj, Kandahar (the birthplace of the Taliban), Herat. By August 14, the Taliban was quickly encroaching on Kabul. At that time, the last batch of United States' troops were still in Kabul, rushing to complete the withdrawal and to evacuate U.S.

---

[249] Yara Asi, "Shock and Awe: Life in Iraq Twenty Years after the US-Led Invasion," Arab Center Washington DC, June 16, 2023, https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/shock-and-awe-life-in-iraq-twenty-years-after-the-us-led-invasion/.
[250] Akram and Akbar, "US Withdrawal from Afghanistan."
[251] Nancy Messieh, "Inside Afghanistan's Gender Apartheid: Listen as Women Reveal the Impact of the Taliban's Oppressive Decrees," Atlantic Council, March 7, 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/inside-afghanistans-gender-apartheid-listen-as-women-reveal-the-impact-of-the-talibans-oppressive-decrees/.

troops, military equipment, and vulnerable civilians by the end of the month.[252] The first image that will be discussed in this chapter comes from one of the final days of the hectic U.S. withdrawal. The image depicts United States Marine Corps Sergeant Nicole Gee cradling an Afghan infant at Hamid Karzai International Airport on August 20. The image of Nicole Gee and the infant was taken by Marine Corps Sergeant Isiah Campbell, and it was published by many media sites, including *The New York Times*,[253] *Politico*,[254] *Associated Press,*[255] *People*,[256] and *CBS News*.[257] Before being published in these major media outlets, the image was posted on Gee's personal Instagram on the same day it was taken, August 20. It has since garnered over 190,000 "likes" and 7,000 comments. Most of the engagement with the post occurred after Gee's death, which took place less than a week after in a suicide bombing attack at the Abbey Gate of the Kabul airport on August 26, 2021.[258]

---

[252] *Reuters*. "Evacuations from Afghanistan by Country," August 30, 2021. https://www.reuters.com/world/evacuations-afghanistan-by-country-2021-08-26/.
[253] Dave Phillips, "Among the Troops Who Died, Two Women on the Front Line," The New York Times, August 28, 2021, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/28/us/soldiers-killed-in-afghanistan.html.
[254] Associated Press, "Slain Marine Who Cradled Baby at Kabul Airport Loved Her Job," POLITICO, August 29, 2021, https://www.politico.com/news/2021/08/29/nicole-gee-kabul-suicide-bombing-507144.
[255] *Associated Press,* "Slain Marine Who Cradled Baby at Kabul Airport Loved Her Job," POLITICO, August 29, 2021, https://www.politico.com/news/2021/08/29/nicole-gee-kabul-suicide-bombing-507144.
[256] Naledi Ushe, "Father of Slain Marine Nicole Gee, Who Cradled Baby at Kabul Airport, Calls Daughter a 'Warrior,'" People.com, https://people.com/politics/father-of-slain-marine-nicole-gee-cradled-afghan-baby-kabul-airport-talks-her-legacy/.
[257] Associated Press, "Sacramento Marine Sgt. Nicole Gee, 3 Other Californians Among Afghanistan Bomb Victims," *CBS News*, August 28, 2021, https://www.cbsnews.com/sanfrancisco/news/sacramento-marine-gee-other-californians-among-afghanistan-bomb-victims/.
[258] To view Nicole Gee's August 20, 2021, Instagram post, follow this link https://www.instagram.com/p/CS0LAGFh35Y/?igsh=MWNoaTdvMmtlYjFtOQ==

Figure 7*:* United States Marine Corps Sgt. Nicole Gee is pictured cradling an Afghan infant at Kabul Airport on August 20, 2021, six days before she was killed in a bombing by ISKP militants in Kabul. (Photograph by Sgt. Isaiah Campbell/U.S. Marine Corps, Public Domain)

There are many relevant elements to this image and its framing, both internal to the image and to how it has been discussed in the media. However, I will begin by first discussing the image without the added context of Gee's death. I will then move on to discuss the image's framing of Sgt. Gee and the infant after the viewer is made aware that Sgt. Gee, and perhaps the child too, was killed in the attacks at the Kabul airport on August 26, 2021.[259] My purpose in discussing the image both before and after the news of Gee's death is to emphasize how the viewer's perception of this image changes upon the knowledge that Gee was killed, which I

[259] It is unknown whether the child in the image, along with Sgt. Gee, was killed. The fate of the child in this image, and many other children in other images from the August 2021 withdrawal remains unknown. There is no public information that I could find regarding the identity of the child in this image, or the child's whereabouts and condition.

believe speaks to both the changing apprehension of the war on terror and in Afghanistan during the chaos of the withdrawal, but also to the continued rendering invisible or unreal of the vulnerability faced by "other" civilians during the war on terror.

This image was taken by a member of the United States military with the knowledge, if not the intention, that it would be viewed by both the U.S. government (and its allies), and the American public.[260] Because the image was taken by a member of the United States military deployed to Afghanistan, it can be viewed as an instance of what Judith Butler discusses in *Frames of War* as "embedded reporting." Embedded reporting, as Butler describes, refers to certain journalistic practices that are taken up by the United States government and media in order to regulate what is seen, and how it is seen, by the United States population, and is especially prevalent during times of conflict.[261] This form of reporting enables the U.S. government to effectively regulate "our cognitive apprehension of the war" by enabling some images, such as the image in *figure 7*, to reach the public and influence our understanding of the experience of the war on terror, here, the withdrawal from Afghanistan in particular.[262] Although there was, at least by August 2021, various instances of media messages and images that undercut the dominant U.S. governmental framing of the war in Afghanistan as necessary,[263] the

---

[260] The photographer, Sgt. Isiah Campbell, has a role knows colloquially as "combat camera," and publishes many of his photographs in a digital portfolio at the Defense Visual Information Distribution Service (DVIDS), which is an operation under the Defense Media Activity that aims to provide a "timely, accurate and reliable connection between the media around the world and the military serving at home and abroad," according to the DVIDS website. DVIDS provides a platform for (curated) media to be uploaded by service members in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait, and other locations worldwide, which are then accessed by both the media and the general population. For more information, see https://www.dvidshub.net/about.

[261] Butler, *Frames of War*, 66-68.

[262] Butler, *Frames of War*, 66.

[263] I am referring here to, for example, Ben Anderson's VICE documentary "This is What Winning Looks Like" (2013) that covers some of the challenges faced by the International Security Assistance Force with drug abuse, sexual abuse, corruption, and general disillusionment during the war in Afghanistan. Another example is the "Kill Team Photos" published originally in *Der Spiegel*, but later in American media such as *Rolling Stone* and *The New Yorker* in March 2011, which depict U.S. Army soldiers posing with dead Afghan civilians in a way that is clearly reminiscent of the Abu Ghraib images. A last example, though not of images or visual media, is the "Afghan

dominant framing of the conflict continued to be reinforced throughout the war on terror by embedded journalists such as Sgt. Isiaah Campbell, whose job was to act as a photographer for the United States department of defense. In this way, because of its embedded perspective, the photograph in *figure 7* can be seen as an image produced to affirm and share a specific, intentionally framed perspective about the United States and for the United States regarding the role of the U.S. military in the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and even in the war on terror in general.

With this initial framing in mind, we can see how the image most strongly conveys a positive representation of American servicemen (and servicewomen) in Afghanistan as they take up the responsibility of caring for and protecting civilians. In the image, Sgt. Gee is centered, and she gazes down intently at the Afghan child whom she cradles in her arms, just as a mother might hold and protect their own child. Importantly, it is Gee's face, what makes her recognizable as a human being, that is in full focus, and not the infant's. The rest of the image's "hardness"—the uniform that represents Gee as a United States marine, the equipment, and the bare budling behind the two figures—is contrasted by the soft, vulnerable child. Pictured in this moment, Gee is represented as the main subject of the image, a subject who has become personally responsible for keeping the anonymous child safe, even as she is clearly also the strong, skilled, and highly trained representation of U.S. power, depicted through her uniform.

As Chapter 2 above has discussed at length, children are largely viewed to be in a condition of increased precariousness compared to their adult counterparts, and such an

---

Papers," published in December 2019 by the Washington Post. The Afghan Papers make public many previously unpublished accounts of went wrong in Afghanistan as states by key members of the United States government and military, this article becoming the basis of the book *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* by Craig Whitlock of the Washington Post.

increased vulnerability is generally recognized by all people.[264] The human child is situated in a position of heightened precariousness because the child is completely at the mercy of another, more capable human who can care for and protect the child from harm. This image strongly frames this aspect of the innate and increased vulnerability of human children, while the image directly places the United States' soldier—representing the United States' military operations in Afghanistan and during the withdrawal from the war on terror—as bearing the responsibility of caring for this helpless child. Thus, the framing of the image in *figure 7* is emphasizes a narrative that has been constructed about the war on terror by various administrations for the previous two decades, a narrative that was able to justify the invasion of Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks. This image conveys the message that the United States was justified in its actions in Afghanistan (and Iraq) because its goals were to protect the vulnerable civilians from the threat of terrorism and the harm that would come to them if certain evil, othered terrorists were to gain political control in these countries. This framing is indicative, too, of the use of visual representation of "softness" in pursuing a dominant framing of the war.

We can see here, in this initial framing of the image in *figure 7,* the crucial impact and the effectiveness of U.S. masculine hype(r)-power through its combined use of soft-power and hype, as the intended hyping-up of a moment of American soft-power is meant to contribute to a dominant framing of the withdrawal from Afghanistan.[265] Without this softer depiction of U.S. power, the initial narrative about the necessity of the United States' invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and two-decades about the justification for the United States' presence in the

---

[264] See Butler, *Frames of War*, 14 and *Precarious Life*, 43.
[265] Luke, "Hyper-Power or Hype-Power?" 18–33.

"humanitarian"[266] mission of the withdrawal, might not have appeared to be as successful as it was said to be by the United States and its leaders. Indeed, Gee's own Instagram caption is emblematic of this very narrative. Gee commented on this image on her Instagram page with the phrase "I love my job,"[267] thus emphasizing how connected her presence in the United States' military and in Afghanistan was to the mission of serving both as a caregiver and a soldier. This sentiment was shared not just by Gee, but also by President Joe Biden who, referring to marines like Gee that were stationed in Afghanistan to safeguard the withdrawal, described them as "heroes who have been engaged in a dangerous, selfless mission to save the lives of others."[268] It is clear that, in the initial framing of this image, through the sentiments shared by Gee herself, and with the words of the President of the United States, the United States' presence in Afghanistan was still framed as a mission rooted in the protection of those who could not protect themselves from the violence that was occurring during the time of the withdrawal and throughout the war on terror.

However, and crucially in the context of this study's focus on the interrelation between vulnerability and violence, the death of Sergeant Gee a few days later plays a key role in the use of this image in the American media. Gee's death reveals how the image and the events that it represents were ultimately framed to American viewers in a different way than what its initial

---

[266] Most of the governmental framing of the U.S. involvement in the final weeks of the withdrawal from Afghanistan emphasized the humanitarian role of the U.S. military, and its focus on evacuating refugees while protecting them from the encroaching Taliban. For an example of this framing, see "Units Recognized for Afghanistan Withdrawal Mission," Association of the United States Army, September 7, 2022, https://www.ausa.org/news/units-recognized-afghanistan-withdrawal-mission.

[267] Nicole Gee (@nicole_gee__), Kabul, Afghanistan I love my job, August 20, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CS0LAGFh35Y.

[268] Joe Biden, cited in Rouan, Rebecca Morin and Rick. "Biden Meets with Families of Service Members Killed in Kabul Suicide Bombing." USA TODAY, August 29, 2021. https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2021/08/29/joe-biden-meets-families-13-service-members-killed-kabul-bombing/5641896001/.

framing sought to achieve as the scene was first captured by Sgt. Isiah Campbell's camera. In most cases, the image was published in the media following Gee's death, as well as the death of 12 of her fellow servicemembers. The context of Gee's death acts as a sort of counter-narrative that complicates the initial intended framing of the image. Gee, the initially strong and protective figure in the image, was killed only days after the image was taken in a two-part suicide attack carried out by the Islamic State that occurred at the Kabul airport on August 26, 2021.[269] Her death, and the widespread news reports of her death that followed this image's publication, helps to emphasize how Gee, and what she was meant to represent for the United States' military (in terms of her portrayal as both a soldier and a caregiver), was always inherently vulnerable too. This image, now read with the additional framing layer of Gee's death, positions Gee (and what she represents) as an inherently vulnerable target, at risk of being harmed, just as the infant child that Gee is cradling in the photograph is seen as vulnerable, too. However, while this new framing situates Gee (and by extension, the United States' presence in and withdrawal from Afghanistan) as vulnerable, it also alters the initial emphasis of the infant. Indeed, this new framing overshadows and renders invisible or unrecognizable the Afghan infant's own precarity, and all that the infant represents.

As discussed above, the image in *figure 7* was taken by a member of the United States military and can be seen as an example of an embedded framing of the Afghan child as the more vulnerable subject, with the U.S. soldier taking up the role as protector of this vulnerable child. But, with the knowledge of Gee's death, what is now communicated is more complex. It starts to reveal a different dynamic of precariousness, both on the part of the United States' soldier, and

---

[269] Sayed Ziarmal Hashemi et al., "Kabul Airport Attack Kills 60 Afghans, 13 US Troops," *AP News*, August 27, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/europe-france-evacuations-kabul-9e457201e5bbe75a4eb1901fedeee7a1.

for the Afghan infant in the image. As indicated above, after Gee's death, no longer does the Afghan infant stand out as the subject whose vulnerability is primarily emphasized. The acknowledgement of Gee's death and 12 of her colleagues now frames the image in a way that, as Butler might argue, is revealing of a precariousness that is innate to all human life and that is shared by all, soldier and infant alike. As Butler writes, the shared vulnerability to a "sudden address from elsewhere" is an inherent condition of all life, and this condition is not fully escapable regardless of one's attempts to securitize or protect oneself or others from it.[270] In this way, the image can be seen to highlight the point that, as a result of the shared human experience of precariousness, the American soldier, even when initially presented in the image as hyper-securitized in comparison to the infant, is also and always vulnerable through her inescapability from vulnerability.

Yet, as Butler also argues, this shared condition of precariousness is often differentially distributed across and experienced by various bodies based on their particular political and social conditions and contexts, such as war or the belief that the war in Afghanistan was something valiant, heroic, or even humanitarian, as I have shown was the belief of Gee herself.[271] This image, now seen with the knowledge that Gee was killed in an operation that she admittedly "loved" participating in, reveals how Gee was in fact made precarious as a result of the initial experience of vulnerability felt by the United States during and after 9/11 and in its sustained efforts during the war on terror to recapture its threatened sense of masculine hype(r)-power. Thus, this image can be understood to offer a framing of the war on terror that underscores how Gee was made especially vulnerable *because* of the previously discussed framing of the United

---

[270] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 29.
[271] Butler, *Precarious Life.*

States as vulnerable and of the war on terror as the necessary course of action to remedy this initial vulnerability. The image thus reveals that her own precariousness was exploited by the United States' decision to deploy her to Afghanistan during the withdrawal and to place her in a position of increased precarity and harm. This additional layer in the image's framing—and the way that this framing positions Gee in a position of precarity in the context of an American-led war—helps to encourage the (American) viewer to interpret the image as an illustration of a condition whereby Gee and her fellow service members were made more vulnerable and exposed to more violence as a direct result of the United States' continued presence in Afghanistan. Put differently, this image shows how a war enacted by the United States (at least in part, to reassert its threatened identity as a masculine first-world hype(r)-power) rendered vulnerable not only its targeted victims and innocent civilians in the Middle East, but also some members of its own population. Through its own actions and decisions (in this case, the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the war on terror) the United States can be described as having exposed *itself* (Gee and other killed service members) to a condition of increased precarity. The precarity that the United States exposed itself to occurred through its own choice to place its soldiers in an area that had become dangerous as a result in part of the United States' own actions over the past two decades of the war, and for the United States to restore its position as the (masculine, dominant) leader of the entire mission.

While the families of Gee and her fellow fallen service members did not go as far as to directly critique this dimension of the war in Afghanistan, some were nonetheless quite vocal about their criticism of the withdrawal. Particularly, some families of the killed service members

spoke out against Biden's framing of the withdrawal as a success only days after their deaths,[272] and his failure to acknowledge it as an operation that placed their loved ones in a position of heightened vulnerability. These families spoke quite publicly, for example, during the 2024 Republican National Convention, criticizing the dangerous conditions of the withdrawal that ultimately led to their loved one's deaths, something which stood in stark contrast to the framing of the withdrawal as successful.[273] What the families were criticizing, as the memorialization of Gee and her fellow service members displayed, was the United States' exposure of Gee to precarity during the withdrawal in Afghanistan, but a precarity, as I have argued, that came about as a result of the prolonged war. This critique of the withdrawal, along with the image of Gee, helps to provide a counter-framing to a two-decades long dominant attempt at framing the war on terror as one that would (re)securitize both the United States and Afghanistan.

The emphasis on Gee and her fellow service members has another implication for the framing of vulnerability in this image. As I have pointed out, when the image in *figure 7* reached the public, Gee had already been killed. Acting as a sort of memorialization of Gee in the media, the image was often accompanied by captions describing Gee as the victim of a tragic terrorist attack, thus also serving as a sort of eulogy for the suicide bombing victims and to emphasize their selflessness and heroism.[274] As Susan Sontag discusses in *Regarding the Pain of Others,* a fundamental driver of the viewer's interpretation of an image are is an image's accompanying

---

[272] Nick Niedzwiadek, "A Defiant Biden Calls Afghanistan Exit a 'Success,'" Politico, August 31, 2021, https://www.politico.com/news/2021/08/31/biden-afghanistan-withdrawal-speech-508036.
[273] Jonathan Cooper et al., "Families of Service Members Killed during Afghanistan Withdrawal Criticize Biden at GOP Convention," AP News, July 18, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/gold-star-families-rnc-gop-convention-b8d043475a5cb8cb7735c366ba75502d.
[274] See, for example, "Sacramento Marine Sgt. Nicole Gee, 3 Other Californians Among Afghanistan Bomb Victims," CBS News, August 28, 2021, https://www.cbsnews.com/sanfrancisco/news/sacramento-marine-gee-other-californians-among-afghanistan-bomb-victims/. This article briefly outlines Gee's life and concludes by listing the 13 killed American service members. There is not even a mention of killed or wounded Afghans in the article.

captions and titles.[275] For Sontag, the texts that accompany images are especially important in forcing the image's interpretative power in a certain direction, as "all photographs wait to be explained or falsified" through the text that accompanies them.[276] For Sontag, these accompanying narratives typically point the viewer towards the relevant subject in the image. Yet, in *Frames of War,* Butler pushes back on Sontag's thinking, conceding that captions and textual analyses are necessary to help drive interpretation, but that images themselves have their own apprehensive power, even without an explicitly outlined narrative that goes along with the image.[277] When considering both Sontag's and Butler's thoughts on the interpretative capability of images and their accompanying texts, I find that this image, through both the internal elements of the image itself (as outlined above) and the additional layer of framing produced by its captions in the media, actually functions to decenter or even erase the precarity of the Afghan child, while simultaneously amplifying the precarity but also the recognizability of Gee and her fellow service members, who now become the main subjects of the image.

As Sontag notes, the text that accompanies an image primes the viewer to understand the suffering that the image conveys, or in this case the prelude to suffering. Some telling examples of texts and titles that media publications added to this image were: "Slain Marine who cradled baby at Kabul airport loved her job,"[278] "Biden to Kabul attackers: 'We will hunt you down and make you pay,'"[279] and "Among the Troops Who Died, Two Women on the Front Line."[280]

---

[275] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 10-15.
[276] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 10.
[277] Butler, *Frames of War,* 66-67.
[278] Brian Melley and Hanson Amy, "Slain Marine Who Cradled Baby at Kabul Airport Loved Her Job," *AP News*, August 29, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-kabul-islamic-state-group-14ffbf5bcf4b67596420bd95e89785f6.
[279] Kevin Liptak, "Biden to Kabul Attackers: 'We Will Hunt You down and Make You Pay,'" *CNN*, August 26, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/26/politics/biden-kabul-attack/index.html.
[280] Dave Phillips, "Among the Troops Who Died, Two Women on the Front Line," *The New York Times*, August 28, 2021. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/28/us/soldiers-killed-in-afghanistan.html.

While I will not discuss the particular verbiage of each of these titles, I wish to point to these headlines as evidence of how the framing of the withdrawal, and of this particular moment during the withdrawal, asserts a lack of consideration for not only the fate of the child who was initially pictured as the more precarious figure in the initial framing, but also imposes a complete invisibility for the roughly 170 Afghan civilians who were killed in that same attack.[281] As Butler discusses at length, framing—both in terms of an image's internal depiction of a certain moment and in the context of an image's dissemination in the media—shapes the viewer's apprehension of what is being depicted. This apprehension, as I discussed in Chapter 2, has implications for the grievability of certain bodies, and for the question of whether their lives are apprehended as lives at all.[282] The image in *figure 7,* I believe, is a clear example of this particular function that images have to erase, or at least make unreal, the precarity of some populations. Moreover, it points towards the continued practice of rendering invisible the vulnerability of "othered" bodies who were directly impacted by the actions of the United States during the war on terror. Although the image, prior to Gee's death, clearly portrayed the Afghan infant as the vulnerable subject in the image, the image and its main narratives after Gee's death zero in on Gee's own vulnerability and ignore the more than ten civilians who were killed for every American service member during the attack in Kabul.

In this way, the scarce discussion of the Afghan victims of the attack at the Kabul airport serves as yet another example of how, during the war on terror and in Afghanistan, and as Butler identified years before, "precariousness is not always honored," especially when it comes to the lives (and deaths) of those who are excluded from the "realm of public mourning," and who are

---

[281] Ali M. Latifi, "Families of Kabul Airport Bombing Victims Scramble for News," *Al Jazeera*, August 27, 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/27/afghanistan-kabul-airport-bombing-victims.
[282] Butler, *Precarious Life.*

rendered invisible in the narratives that the media create about an image and the event it depicts.[283] The focus in the American media on the death of Gee and other service members functions to emphasize that the lives of Gee and her fellow service members are lives that matter, are remain real, as the grievability for Gee and her companions is foregrounded by the framing of this image. This grievability can be seen in the above titles and captions accompanying the images, but also in the public recognition of the deaths of the soldiers by President Biden and First Lady Jill Biden, who both traveled to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware to be present when the remains of the Americans killed in the attack returned to United States soil.[284] Such a public recognition by the United States' figureheads helps to reinforce the (dead) American subjects as lives worthy of mourning, but it also erases the lives (and deaths) that are not mentioned or recognized.

The differential vulnerability that this image presents, in terms of the vulnerability of the American soldier who was killed only days after the image was taken as opposed to the vulnerability of the child, reveals that, while the United States itself, U.S. soldiers, and Afghan civilians (as well as other civilians affected by during the war on terror) can all be portrayed as vulnerable, the experience of vulnerability is substantially different for bodies that represent or are recognized by the United States. Compared to bodies that are not deemed worthy of grievability by the United States. While Gee and her fellow service members were vulnerable bodies, placed in a precarious warzone that ultimately led to their deaths, they were always already apprehended, in and by the United States as lives that mattered and that were real. They could not be, going back to Agamben's theorization of *homo sacer*, killed without consequence,

---

[283] Butler, *Precarious Life,* 43, 32—35.
[284] Aamer Madhani, "Biden Pays Respects to US Troops Killed in Afghanistan," *AP News*, August 29, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-biden-troops-killed-509f29aaca012ee8e83871d2c03384bf.

unlike those many Afghan civilians killed in the Kabul airport attack.[285] From the moment the service members died that day, the perpetrators were to be "hunted down," as Biden said in a speech on the day of their deaths. This vow of revenge (for the deaths of the American soldiers) served as a reaffirmation that their lives were always meaningful.[286] Even though the precariousness of the Afghan infant may have been recognized in the initial framing of this image, the later dissemination of the image in the media failed to apprehend the child as a human body exposed to precarity, experiencing a heightened state of vulnerability that the United States can be said to have exacerbated, if not caused. The failure to accept this child's life as precarious, or the child's position as a result of a U.S.-produced mode precarity, renders his or her death inconsequential. Thus, the vulnerability experienced by the Afghan civilians (represented in this image by the infant) is clearly marked as a different sort of vulnerability, a vulnerability in this case that renders certain lives and deaths invisible, unmourned, and unrecognized by the United States. Their lives are relegated to the status of "already dead," invisible, and insignificant lives far before the moment when they may end.[287]

Another interesting dimension to this image, and its presence in the media after Gee's death, was the fact that it was this particular image of Gee that was used in the media instead of other images that might depict Gee's corpse or her casket even. Although it is possible to find images of Gee's casket and funeral procession online, most of the images published in the media are about Gee while she was alive and serving in the U.S. military. Speaking to the visuality of dead bodies, Jessica Auchter notes how certain images of dead bodies or caskets are selectively shown, while others are made invisible. This selective presentation of dead bodies depends on

---

[285] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 1-7
[286] Liptak, "Biden to Kabul Attackers."
[287] Butler, *Precarious Life,* 33.

who, based on the identity of the dead body, is granted typical measures of respect and dignity in contrast to the other deaths or dead bodies who are not granted this form of respect.[288] Such a practice can be observed, for example, in the refusal of the United States to release images of bin Laden's corpse or burial out of fear that the images could endanger U.S. troops in the Middle East as they could become victims of retaliatory attacks.[289] Auchter, in her study on the visuality of corpses, argues that there is what she calls an obscenity taboo, a social and political norm against showing some corpses, particularly Western or white corpses like Gee's. This taboo is generally applied to bodies of American soldiers, something that was legally instituted through the 1991-2009 Dover Ban, which banned news photographers from Dover AirForce Base, among other facilities where military remains are brought back to the United States in caskets.[290] What Auchter mentions is that the taboo or ban about the viewing of American corpses, or of caskets containing corpses, has to do both with the generally accepted respect given to dead bodies in political communities, but also with the political risk involved as a result of the public's viewing of American military corpses during wartime.[291] Auchter writes that the ban, or in the present case the media's sensitivity towards actually showing Gee's corpse or her casket, exists in part to "remove death as an effect of war from the visible sphere."[292] Thus, with Auchter's help, I suggest that the fact that the image represents Gee alive, rather than after her death, can be seen as a framing device aimed at mitigating the vulnerability that the United States would experience

---

[288] Auchter, *Global Corpse Politics*.
[289] Auchter, *Global Corpse Politics,* 93.
[290] Bradford J. Kelley, "PHOTOS OF THE FALLEN AND THE DOVER BAN: AN ANALYSIS OF BANNING THE MEDIA FROM PHOTOGRAPHING MILITARY COFFINS," *Kansas Journal of Law & Public Policy* 26, no. 1 (September 1, 2016): 116–42.
[291] Auchter, *Global Corpse Politics,* 45.
[292] Auchter, *Global Corpse Politics*, 45.

upon a possible increase in public outrage as a result of Gee's death and the death of 12 other service members in Kabul.

Presenting the public with images of Gee's casket in the media would likely have highlighted the bodily vulnerability that affected the lives of members of the United States' military during the withdrawal. Thus, the presence of the image in *figure 7* in the many media stories about Gee's death and that of her colleagues also helps to show how the United States was particularly vulnerable at the time of the withdrawal to certain counter-framing narratives, like those provided by the families of the victims, counter-narratives which could have been strengthened further by images of Gee's dead body or her casket, and thus had to be left unseen. The preferred inclusion of an image of Gee while she was still alive suggests that this image could have been used to preemptively protect the United States from the risk of increased public outrage about the withdrawal from Afghanistan and about the war on terror in general, particularly with regards to the lives that the war took away. Yet, the image's depiction of Gee while she was alive and serving, and the absence of images of her corpse or casket, did not completely erase the harm done to Gee. Instead, it mostly served to lessen the public outcry as the American public learned of those who died in the attack. More importantly, however, the general lack of visual emphasis on the Afghan victims, or the complete absence of these victims' corpses in the media, further erased the violence and vulnerability that the 170 civilians who perished endured in that moment, but also that they suffered from during the last two decades of war on terror. Had images of a dead Afghan infant been seen in the media, perhaps the United States' public could have apprehended the lives lost in the attack as more than American lives. Thus, the invisibility of corpses and caskets, as Auchter discusses, has differential effects on the vulnerability of Afghan civilians compared to that of the members of the United States' military.

This differential visibility protects the United States from its own felt vulnerability on the one hand, while it furthers the endemic precarity of the Afghan population on the other.

What all these elements of the framing of the image in *figure 7* show, as I have argued above, is that the United States, after two decades of fighting to reassert itself as a masculine global hype(r)-power, remained vulnerable. Despite this, and crucially, the differential vulnerability of Afghan civilians was still far less visible or recognizable than the vulnerability of the United States. In this way, the image in *figure 7* also demonstrates that the actions the United States carried out throughout the war on terror to displace or limit its own initial vulnerability were framed in a particular way that derealized the systemic and endemic precarity of many civilians (including Afghan citizens) who experienced this vulnerability daily, and who often did not choose to participate in the events of the war in Afghanistan.

The U.S. Flight from Afghanistan and the Continued Presence of Vulnerabilities

The second and final image that will be discussed in this chapter represents a moment from one of the final days of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, as the United States was scrambling to transport personnel, Afghan civilians, and vital supplies out of Afghanistan before the August 31, 2021 withdrawal deadline set by President Biden. The image displays a United States Air Force C-17 transport plane as it moves down a runway at the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, while hundreds of Afghan civilians chase the plane down the tarmac, desperate to leave the country and flee from the encroaching Taliban.[293] The image is a still that comes from a video taken by an unknown source, most likely a civilian who was present

[293] Samya Kullab, "Afghan Woman in Limbo at Kabul Airport after Taliban Sweep," *AP News*, August 17, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-women-kabul-f6fa72e3289f7d6c33ddf84d5a7c4bc2.

at that moment and recorded the video on their smartphone. The video was originally posted on *Twitter* by Afghan journalist Bilan Sarwary.[294] After its publication on *Twitter*, the video went viral and was posted online in various news media including *The Guardian,*[295] *NBC News,*[296] *The Washington Post,*[297] and *Al Jazeera*.[298] This particular image, taken from the video, was published by *The Associated Press*[299] and *The New York Times*,[300] as well as on many social media posts.

---

[294] Bilal Sarwary (@bsarwary), "16 August , 2021, Hamid Karzai international Airport." Twitter, August 15, 2021.
[295] Luke Harding and Ben Doherty, "Kabul Airport: Footage Appears to Show Afghans Falling from Plane after Takeoff," The Guardian, August 16, 2021, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/16/kabul-airport-chaos-and-panic-as-afghans-and-foreigners-attempt-to-flee-the-capital.
[296] Saphora Smith et al., "Flights Resume at Kabul Airport as U.S. Aims to Extract 22,000 Afghans Who Helped Military," NBC News, August 17, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/afghans-scale-walls-rush-tarmac-frenzy-flee-kabul-wakes-taliban-n1276889.
[297] Susannah George et al., "Scenes of Deadly Chaos Unfold at Kabul Airport after Taliban's Return," The Washington Post, August 16, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/16/afghan-kabul-airport/.
[298] "Afghans Cling to Moving US Air Force Jet in Desperate Bid to Flee," Al Jazeera, n.d., https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/16/afghans-cling-to-plane-defining-image.
[299] Ahmad Seir et al., "Kabul Airport Plunges into Chaos as Taliban Patrol Capital," AP News, August 16, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-784681c4400b097cf73b93cec34c5c61. See also Samya Kullab, "Afghan Woman in Limbo at Kabul Airport after Taliban Sweep," AP News, August 17, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-women-kabul-f6fa72e3289f7d6c33ddf84d5a7c4bc2.
[300] Helene Cooper, "Military Clears Crew of Plane That Took Flight as Afghans Fell to Their Deaths," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2022. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/13/us/politics/military-clears-crew-afghan-evacuation.html.

***Figure 8*:** Hundreds of Afghan civilians run alongside a U.S. Air Force transport plane as it takes off from the Hamid Kharazi international airport, desperate to escape from their country amid U.S.-led evacuation of people and supplies in Kabul, Afghanistan on August 16, 2021 (Unknown Source, Fair Use determination attached).

This image and its framing, as I will argue, are full of contradictions. The image depicts the United States as strong, dominant, and powerful, especially compared to the Afghan civilians shown in the image. But, as I will reveal and explain in my analysis, the image also represents the United States as vulnerable and feminized, as it flees "with its tail between its legs" from the country which it spent 20 years attempting to free from the terrorists that would soon take it over completely. However, and like the previous image in this chapter, the image in *figure 8* also depicts the vulnerability experienced by the Afghan civilians in a way that is fundamentally different from the vulnerability of the United States. The discussion of this differential vulnerability continues in this section to emphasize one of the key arguments of this chapter (and

of the overall thesis) regarding the shared, and yet fundamentally distinct, vulnerability experienced by the United States and Afghan civilians.

At first glance, the image in *figure 8* depicts an imbalance of power between the United States—represented by the Air Force plane—and the "other,"—the civilians in Afghanistan—represented by the mass of bodies running alongside the plane. The clear (physical) imbalance based on the size difference between the massive U.S. Air Force transport plane and the small, almost ant-like, Afghan civilians seems to communicate to the viewer that it is the United States who has all the military power and control of the situation in this moment, whereas the Afghan people are completely helpless and at the mercy of the United States. The sheer scale of the plane in this image compared to the Afghan bodies suggests that this image is an accurate representation of American military (hyper) power vis-à-vis Afghan civilians. The Air Force plane completely dominates the visual frame, with the Afghan civilians appearing to be puny and completely helpless by comparison. In fact, the power differential in the image is so obvious that the viewer might not be able to resist thinking about what would happen if the soft, vulnerable bodies of the running civilians were hit by the massive metal plane. In fact, some of the Afghan civilians that were chasing after the plane that day were physically crushed to death by the wheels of the plane around the time that this footage was captured, although the reports made no mention of the identity of the victims.[301] Clearly, this image insists on the visual discrepancy between the United States, depicted as holding virtually all the physical power, security, and invulnerability, and the Afghan people rendered completely powerless. Yet, even though the image is a clear depiction of the imbalance of power between the United States and the Afghan

---

[301] *Reuters*, "Human Remains Found in Landing Gear of Military Flight from Kabul, Says U.S. Air Force," Reuters, August 17, 2021, sec. World, https://www.reuters.com/world/human-remains-found-landing-gear-military-flight-kabul-says-us-air-force-2021-08-17/.

bodies, there is still something about this portrayal that invites the American viewer to feel some discomfort about this image. This discomfort, I believe, has to do with the contradiction between the United States as a hyper-powerful state, and the United States as a nation that is in the act of fleeing, and is seemingly shown to be running away from its own supposed values and objectives (starting with the protection of Afghan citizens).

As Tim Luke mentions about hype(r)-power, hype(r)-power can appear "quite ominous, unattractive, or even repulsive," at least without the accompanied affective power of attraction provided by the hype.[302] As I have briefly discussed in Chapter 2, Luke's discussion of hype—in terms of its ability to affect a certain narrative or events— is in line with the role of framing that I have discussed throughout this study. In other words, I believe that what Luke is pointing to is that instances of hyper-power, without some visual framing that can support such instances (and that Luke often calls hype), are likely to be poorly received as they can be seen as excessive and perhaps without justification. Understood in this way, the absence of hype (or the absence of a dominant frame) can render instances of American hype(r)-power crude, ominous, unattractive, and repulsive to the viewer. Hype(r)-power, without affective publicity or good marketing that a well-functioning or favorable framing may add to it, can lead to discomfort and displeasure on the part of those who view or experience this modality of US power (including the American public), thus making the state/nation that displays this hype(r)-power vulnerable to criticism. Thus, this image can be seen as an illustration of what Luke is getting at in his discussion of the necessity of hype in the success of hype(r)-power, and in the narratives of "declinism" or "endism" that often accompany bouts of hyper-power.[303] The image in *figure 8,* because it is

---

[302] Luke, "Hyper-Power or Hype-Power?", 21.
[303] Luke, "Hyper-Power or Hype-Power?", 20.

manifestly representative of a hype(r)-power that does not frame the United States as a morally righteous fighter of terrorism, but rather depicts the US as an escaping bully, can bring forth feelings of repulsion, particularly when juxtaposed to the sight of the Afghan civilians which it crushes. This, in turn, makes the United States vulnerable to a sense of disillusion among U.S. viewers in particular about the United States' hyper-masculine identity and the morally allegedly justified incursion in Afghanistan.

This image's display of hyper-power, and crucially the lack of a supporting frame for it, is confirmed by the public sentiment on the War in Afghanistan and the decision to withdraw American troops. Around the time of the withdrawal, most Americans (69%) believed that the United States had failed in achieving its goals in the war.[304] Furthermore, most Americans also believed that the United States' decision to withdraw troops and end the war in Afghanistan was the right decision.[305] These statistics make evident that a large portion of the United States' population was no longer under the belief that the dominant U.S. framing of the war in Afghanistan, as was discussed in Chapter 3, was still relevant and applicable at the time of the withdrawal. Various events, including the numerous increases of troops throughout the previous administrations, as well as the continued failures of the United States to negotiate a favorable withdrawal agreement with Afghanistan and the Taliban, likely contributed to the general perception that the war was no longer representative of the United States' initial framing, and thus that it needed to be concluded.

---

[304] Katherine Schaeffer, "A Year Later, a Look Back at Public Opinion about the U.S. Military Exit from Afghanistan," Pew Research Center, August 17, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/08/17/a-year-later-a-look-back-at-public-opinion-about-the-u-s-military-exit-from-afghanistan/.
[305] Katherine Schaeffer, "A Year Later, a Look Back at Public Opinion about the U.S. Military Exit from Afghanistan."

At the time that the image in *figure 8* reached the public, as discussed above, the hyper-power that the United States was displaying in the war was *not* accompanied by a strong framing of the withdrawal that was favorable to the United States' position as morally justified in its actions. The weakened framing of the war on terror and this show of blatant hyper-power, as I have suggested based on Luke's argument above, can in part lead to negative feelings from the viewer regarding the show of force[306] that is on display in the image. What this image also shows, through its representation of the power of the United States as compared to the Afghan civilians, and crucially, is that 20 years after the 9/11 attacks and the war in the Middle East, the United States is now depicted as a hype(r)-powerful subject that is quite literally running over those it claimed to protect. In other words, this image reveals that, at the symbolic end of the war on terror, the United States is a hype(r)-powerful figure that is also the main perpetrator of vulnerability during the war on terror. Furthermore, the image also shows that the United States is proliferating vulnerability onto other bodies and nations *because* it is desperate to flee from Afghanistan—and the war on terror—and get far away from the chaos that it, in part, caused. Thus, while the United States is seen in this image as much stronger than the Afghan civilians, this strength is actually being performed in a moment of intense vulnerability, as the U.S. is desperately fleeing from Afghanistan. Once again, these mixed messages in the image represent key contradictions. All in all, this image acts as a visual depiction of the hypocrisy, and perhaps

---

[306] "Show of force" is a phrased used by the United States military to describe actions that display its presence and capabilities in an area during a time of conflict. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. used shows of force during the war on terror to try to "deter enemy activities and protect coalition forces on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq." See "Show of Force," U.S. Department of Defense, https://www.defense.gov/Multimedia/Photos/igphoto/2001986875/. However, "show of force" is also a phrase used by Tim Luke in his 1992 book *Shows of Force: Power, Politics, and Ideology in Art Exhibitions* to describe the way certain art exhibitions can function as powerful ideological displays that aid in reproducing particular social and political conditions. See Timothy W. Luke, *Shows of Force: Power, Politics, and Ideology in Art Exhibitions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992).

the inaccuracy too, of the initial intended framing of the United States through the entire war on terror. It shows to the US and global public that the United States, at the end of the war, is both invulnerable *and* vulnerable, and that it deploys its physical strength in response to an initial vulnerability it never was truly able to recover from. The next part of this section will discuss this image further and expand on the contradictory messages that the image conveys, by returning to a primarily gendered lens.

As my discussion of the intended framing of the image in *figure 7* indicated, the United States' position in the war on terror, and during the withdrawal in 2021 specifically, was framed by the United States and those who photographed it as one that was not just an operation of hype(r)-masculine power. Indeed, it was framed, perhaps primarily, as an operation that was humanitarian and "soft," by appearing to prioritize the protection of vulnerable Afghan civilians. However, the humanitarian softness of the United States that was portrayed by Gee in the image in *figure 7* is now undercut by the clear representation of U.S. (masculine) hype(r)-power in the image in *figure 8*. Paying close attention to the gendered elements of the power imbalance in the image in *figure 8*, I believe that this image, in combination with the intended framing of the previous image, is representative of a moment in which the United States' masquerade of humanitarian "soft" power at the time of the withdrawal was revealed for what it was. Thus, when the two photos are juxtaposed to one another, the U.S. gender identity actually appears to be mixed. My understanding of what I call the masquerade of U.S. power reflected in the juxtaposition of the two images discussed in this chapter is somewhat similar to Cynthia Weber's understanding of U.S. masquerade in the context of Cold War US foreign policy in the Caribbean.[307] However, unlike Weber's discussion of the male masquerade of U.S. femininity in

---

[307] See especially Weber, *Faking It,* 105- 126.

her book *Faking It* (and in particular during the US "intervasion" of Haiti in 1994), the masquerade of femininity that the United States attempts to perform during the withdrawal from Afghanistan does not wholly "rephallusize" or re-empower the United States. Rather, as the image in figure 8 displays, the United States continues to appear vulnerable and insecure as it is pictured running for its life at the same time that it looks inappropriately strong, dominating, and hype(r)-masculine (by crushing Afghan bodies). Thus, the gendered identity of the United States highlighted in these two images can be thought of, to borrow Weber's terminology, as an instance of mixed gender identity—perhaps as a queer identity too—as opposed to a desired display of "straight, masculine hegemonic identity."[308] Such a visual display, in other words, is full of (gendered) contradictions.

In Weber's discussion of the United States' "intervasion" of Haiti in *Faking It*, Weber points to the ability for the United States to, at least momentarily, regain its lost sense of "phallic" (hegemonic masculine) power, not by faking its possession of the phallus (masculine power), but rather by faking *not* having the phallus.[309] Because the Clinton Administration was able to "masquerade" what would have been considered a masculine invasion of Haiti by framing the operation as a (feminine) "intervasion," the United States's identity was able to appear primarily feminine and lacking "phallic power," although it was undetectably masculine (in terms of possession of the phallus)[310] at the same time. According to Weber, this mixing of gender signs ultimately helped the United States to be perceived as having regained its

---

[308] Weber, *Faking It,* 127.
[309] Weber, *Faking It*, 105.
[310] Importantly though, as Weber writes, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis it is not possible to ever have or be the phallus. In this way, even pretending not to possess the phallus or phallic power is a "double pretending," as one cannot have the phallus to begin with. See Weber, *Faking It,* 109.

hegemonic power (masculinity) after the operation, if only temporarily.[311] Put differently, the United States acted as both masculine and feminine, but *appeared* as primarily feminine, in order to carry out an 'intervasion' that ironically reasserted its hegemonic masculine power in the Caribbean region. I believe that the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the mixed gender representations visible in the two images, reveals a similar "mixing" of signs and events whereby the United States may have intended to appear feminine through its framing of the withdrawal as a humanitarian mission, while it also possessed utterly disproportionate (masculine) hype(r)-power "underneath" the masquerade, and as revealed by the framing of U.S. power, strength, and domination in the image in *figure 8.*

The "masquerading" as feminine or humanitarian that the United States was performing at the time of the withdrawal can be seen in the image in *figure 7*, as I have discussed above. Sergeant Gee is shown in this image as a caring, almost mothering, protector of the Afghan child. This image, through its representation of Gee, and by extension of the United States, as humanitarian and caring, suggests that the withdrawal mission was accompanied by more feminine, or less masculine, signs and values. Even though, as I have made clear, this humanitarian framing of the image (and of the withdrawal) did not actually protect or securitize the Afghan civilians, or even American soldiers like Sergeant Gee, the image nonetheless is indicative of the efforts made by the United States to portray its actions and identity at the time of the withdrawal as being predominantly about caring for the vulnerable and protecting those who needed to flee the country. It is also interesting that the United States' figurehead at the time of the withdrawal (President Biden), like President Clinton at the time of the Haiti 'intervasion,'

---

[311] Weber, *Faking It*, 105-109.

has been compared to or associated with former President Jimmy Carter.[312] As Weber writes, Carter was a figure who is "often read as feminine" and who "signifies sexual purity."[313] Clinton's association with Carter around the time of the Haiti 'intervasion' helped Clinton (and the operation) to appear more feminine, "pure," and humanitarian.[314] Biden's comparison to Carter, like Clinton before, can perhaps be read in the same way. In fact, the similarities between the two U.S. figureheads might have been another reason for the United States' intended framing of the withdrawal from Afghanistan as a matter of displaying US humanitarian values and good intentions.

By contrast, the masculine (phallic) power revealed by the image in *figure 8* is marked by the physical strength that the United States is shown to be possessing, at least in comparison to the Afghan civilians. The "phallus" that the United States is revealed to possess in the image is also represented by the massive, phallic-shaped Air Force plane that dominates the image. This symbolic plane/phallus is stronger, bigger, and seemingly unstoppable compared to the representation of the weak and helpless (thus, feminized) Afghan civilians. As the civilians unsuccessfully attempt to run down the tarmac and leave the country, the United States' symbolic phallus is represented as the more potent entity, able to move seemingly without restraint. In this way, the exposure of the United States' phallus/plane also makes the Afghan civilians appear especially weak and without control or agency, since they clearly do not stand a

---

[312] For discussions in the media regarding the similarities between President Biden and President Carter, see Maureen Dowd, "The Jimmy Carter and Joe Biden Show," *The New York Times*, May 1, 2021, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/01/opinion/joe-biden-jimmy-carter.html. See also Ron Elving, "When a First-Term Democratic President Struggles, People Talk about Jimmy Carter," *NPR*, July 10, 2022, sec. Politics, https://www.npr.org/2022/07/10/1110486735/when-a-first-term-democratic-president-struggles-people-talk-about-jimmy-carter, and Zurcher, "Problems That Plagued Carter Have Also Troubled Biden," *BBC*, December 30, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cpvv2p96erxo.

[313] Weber, *Faking It,* 106.

[314] Weber, *Faking It,* 106.

chance of stopping the plane and leaving Afghanistan. The U.S. Air Force plane in this image, unlike the Afghan civilians, is associated with (masculine, phallic) agency, revealed through the plane's ability to move without opposition, while the Afghan civilians, no matter how quickly they try to run or hold onto the U.S. plane, are given no choice but to remain in Afghanistan or die trying to escape (as some of them are crushed by the plane too). The association here between the United States' sense of masculinity and its hype(r)-powerful agency (and the vulnerable/feminized Afghan civilians' lack of agency) is a well-documented association in feminist and gender scholarship.[315] This visually depicted discrepancy in agency/power between the United States and the Afghan civilians furthers the representation of the United States' show of force in this image as a masculine act. Thus, the hyper-masculine depiction of the United States' identity in the image can reveal that the previous image's framing of the United States as a more feminine caregiver was only an act, or as Weber might say, a male masquerade. This is not to say, however, that the show of masculinity presented in the image in *figure 8* is authentic, or wholly indicative of the United States' identity at this time. Rather, the image's show of U.S. masculine power in the image in figure 8 is still accompanied by more feminine signs at the time of the withdrawal.

Indeed, while the United States is depicted as the (more) masculine force in the image in *figure 8*, the United States still does not appear in this image to have "regained its regional phallus—and the sense of hegemonic [masculine] identity that comes with it," as Weber puts

---

[315] For example, V. Spike Peterson discusses how, per the "heterosexist ideology," women/the feminine object is seen as passive, and the act of agency and penetration are definitively masculine (and usually European and heterosexual). See V. Spike Peterson, "Political Identities/Nationalism as Heterosexism," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1, no. 1 (January 1999): 34–65, https://doi.org/10.1080/146167499360031, 40. Cynthia Enloe has also discusses the "severely restricted agency" of certain marginalized women, compared to masculine counterparts. See Cynthia H. *Enloe, Bananas, Beaches & Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 8.

it.[316] While the United States is, in this moment, putting its metaphorical phallus on display, and thus showing the world that it still possesses masculine hype(r)-power, it is once again, at the same time, pictured to be fleeing from Afghanistan in panic. This contrast between masculine hype(r)-power and typically more feminized traits of fear and vulnerability reveals that the United States is still vulnerable or perhaps still emasculated and dis-empowered at the time of the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the so-called end of the war on terror. We can thus think of the of United States' phallus in this image (again, through the massive and dominating U.S. Air Force plane) as wimpish, or even flaccid. The United States is not able to fully perform its masculinity, as that this visual display of the U.S. phallus/hype(r)-masculinity does not wholly rid the United States of its vulnerability. In this way, it seems that the United States' own sense of vulnerability, felt since the 9/11 attacks, is not and perhaps cannot be overcome despite the United States' final display of force, strength, and domination (via its big, strong, and shiny plane/phallus).

Laura Sjoberg, discussing the gendered perceptions of the act of fleeing conflict, writes that gendered stories around war generally posit that "stoic men outlast wars of attrition," and that they choose to face threats to their country head-on.[317] By contrast, the act of fleeing from danger or conflict is generally considered a more feminine act. While the United States in the image wants to look masculine in terms of its display of force, and particularly compared to the Afghan civilians, the image also depicts the United States as not wanting or not being able to face the danger (of the Taliban taking over Kabul and encroaching on the airport) head on. Rather, the United States, as it is shown to be fleeing, becomes weak, vulnerable, and feminized,

---

[316] Weber, *Faking It, 2*
[317] Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict*, 103.

at the very same time that the image's frame tries to represent it as masculine and hype(r)-powerful. The United States, despite its masculine performance of superior military power, is also depicted as not having been able to 'finish' the job. With this dual representation of U.S. gender in the image, we could take up Weber's language again and suggest that the United States' identity is queer, as it appears to harness both masculine traits of strength, power, and force while it also gives in to perceived feminine traits by looking fearful, insecure, and needing to escape.

To summarize, what my discussion of the gendered elements present in the image has shown is that, at the time of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States' identity appears to be both masculine and feminine, invulnerable and vulnerable. On the one hand, the plane/phallus represents the United States as strong and hyper-powerful. So much so that it is capable of literally crushing those weaker Afghan bodies under the weight of its seemingly masculine power. On the other hand, it also becomes apparent that, even as the United States "whipped out" its phallus, so to speak, and thus also revealed the masquerade of the first image, it was not fully rid of visual signs depicting it as feminine or vulnerable as it leaves Afghanistan and Afghan bodies behind. Crucially, unlike the more feminine framing of the United States in the image in *figure* 7, the representation of U.S. femininity in the image in *figure* did not help the United States to "rephallusize" itself. Unlike the image in *figure 7*—which, as discussed above, represents an embedded and cultivated portrayal of U.S. femininity through its framing of the withdrawal as humanitarian—the image in *figure 8* contains a more unintentional or reactionary show of vulnerability/femininity, captured by a non-U.S. civilian, that does not frame the United States' mission in Afghanistan as humanitarian. Rather, this image's representation of U.S. vulnerability leaves the United States looking like a mixed, perhaps queer, figure that did not

come out of Afghanistan (and of the war on terror) as wholly re-masculinized or re-securitized. The discussion of the mixing of gender presentations in this image highlights how the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, unlike the Haitian 'intervasion' discussed by Weber perhaps, exposed rather than resolved contradictions in gendered operations of U.S. hype(r)-power, somewhat queering U.S. national identity at the end of the war on terror, and thus not allowing the United States to get rid of its vulnerability or insecurity.

Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed the framing of two prominent images that represent key moments from the summer 2021 United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan and the symbolic end of the War on Terror. These images and their framing, as I have discussed, reveal not only the enduring presence of vulnerability after two decades of war, both on the part of the United States and of the civilians impacted by the war on terror, but also the differential framing and experience of vulnerability for the United States and the Afghan civilians. The first image discussed in this chapter—the image of Unites States' Marine Sergeant Nicole Gee cradling an Afghan infant days before her (and perhaps the infant's) death—shows how, through the embedded framing of the image, the intended narrative of the U.S.-led withdrawal from Afghanistan emphasized humanitarian action and the safeguarding of Afghan civilians. The image's revised framing upon Gee's death alters this initial frame and interpretation, and points toward the way the framing of certain images can make the vulnerability of some bodies hyper-visible while making that of other bodies unrecognizable or unimportant. This image, through its representation of Gee as the caring and protective mother/soldier, and later as the main vulnerable subject after her death, reveals how the United States ultimately helped to create the

precarious conditions that were experienced by its own citizens (starting with US soldiers). These conditions ultimately resulted in the death of American bodies, as well as the continued vulnerability of non-US and "othered" civilians whose lives (and deaths) were not recognized or mourned by the United States.

The second image in this chapter captures an instance when the United States, at the time of the withdrawal, exercised its alleged (masculine) hype(r)-power in response to the vulnerability it felt as it left Afghanistan. However, due to the ineffective framing of the United States' withdrawal as humanitarian or morally righteous, the hype(r)-power present in the image in *figure 8* comes off as unsettling or repugnant. Furthermore, this image, in conversation with the previous image in *figure 7*, makes the United States appear as a "mixed gender" figure or subject as it flees from Afghanistan, and ultimately from the war on terror. Examining the image in *figure 8*, alongside the image in *figure 7,* from the perspective of gender helps to emphasize how the United States was both a (masculine) hype(r)-power that literally crushed "othered" bodies beneath the weight of its power, but also a feminized, weak, and fleeing subject that was so desperate to leave Afghanistan that it felt it had no choice but to hurt and kill those bodies who got in the way. Viewing the two images in this chapter as evidence of the "queering" of the United States' identity and behavior at the time of the withdrawal helps to underline the various contradictions between the supposed goals of the war on terror expressed two decades earlier (right after 9/11) and the final attitude and actions of the United States at the war's end. The contradictions present in the image in *figure 8*, in particular, indicate that the United States, after 20 years of fighting in the war on terror, was *still* wrapped up in concerns about its own vulnerability, and crucially that it never was able to get rid of the vulnerability felt on and right

after 9/11 (see Chapter 3 again) that it nonetheless attempted to displace by way of policies, strategies, and actions that sought to render other bodies vulnerable.

Epilogue: Rereading Images of 9/11 and the War on Terror

This thesis has attempted to examine—from my perspective as someone who was not yet alive during the 9/11 attacks and who remained politically illiterate throughout most of the war on terror—a recent period of U.S. history and international politics by turning to the media that I (and many Americans) often relied on as this history and politics unfolded: images. My motivation for returning to these images and their framing has been to offer a retrospective and critical account of how and why, based on these images, two decades of violence might have been able to occur, and of what the representations of violence and vulnerability in these images might reveal about the United States and might mean for those impacted by the United States' actions and policies during the war on terror (including individuals like myself). This Epilogue first seeks to explain why I decided to revisit the war on terror through a rereading/reviewing of several images and their framing, and what this approach has allowed me to do. This chapter continues by discussing what my rereading/reviewing has, thematically, uncovered about the images and their framing regarding the vulnerability and violence on display during the war on terror. Finally, I conclude this Epilogue (and the thesis) by reflecting on what this study reveals about how we might approach images—and the violence and vulnerability they represent and frame—in a way that is more critical, and perhaps more equitable too.

Why Rereading/Reviewing?

As might be evident to a reader familiar with Cynthia Weber's book *Faking It*,[318] my approach to this thesis' discussion of the selected images from the war on terror (especially its denouement in the final chapter) has been inspired by the narrative rereading method presented by Weber in this pivotal 1999 text. In *Faking It*, similar to this study, Weber draws from an arsenal of imagery, public speeches, and foreign policy decisions to retell the story of U.S. relations with the Caribbean over roughly thirty years (from Castro's take over in Cuba to Bill Clinton's "intervasion" of Haiti in the 1990s). While Weber does not explicitly focus on the framing of actual images as her primary method of analysis, contrary to what I do, her emphasis on rereading can explain why my own rereading of the war on terror is necessary and valuable, as well as why taking a rereading or "writerly" approach to viewing images is crucial.

Weber, drawing on a well-known insight from Roland Barthes,[319] reiterates throughout her book that "what is told is always in the telling."[320] For both Weber and Barthes, the meaning of a story does not derive solely from its original or intended denotation. Rather, what is "told" by a particular story has just as much to do with how it is (re)told—what is reemphasized or reflected upon or re-narrated, which new perspectives are included or excluded by the reader/observer, and why or to what end the (re)telling is undertaken in the first place. In other words, it is not merely the initial telling of a story that matters; for Weber, and for Barthes, it is how a story is retold, and how new or different interpretations of a story can add to or detract from the initial story, that is crucial. Weber's rereading approach—the approach that has inspired

---

[318] Weber, *Faking It: U.S. Hegemony in a "Post-Phallic" Era* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999).
[319] In *Faking It*, Weber draws from Roland Barthes' essay *S/Z*. In *S/Z*, Barthes performs a detailed literary analysis of Honoré de Balzac's story *Sarrasine* and discusses how texts and readers interact to produce meaning. Barthes' analysis in *S/Z* has been influential in literary theory, post-structuralism, and feminist and gender theory, among many other fields. See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, 1st American ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).
[320] Roland Barthes, 1974, 213, as cited in Weber, *Faking It*, 127. The phrase "what is told is always in the telling" is the quote that begins the conclusion chapter of *Faking It*.

my own narrative approach in this thesis—is derived from Barthes' *S/Z*, in which Barthes retells Honoré de Balzac's story *Sarrasine.* Barthes' retelling, crucially, does not seek to clarify or find "'the' singular meaning" of Balzac's story.[321] Rather, Barthes's retelling provides a narrative that pluralizes the original story's meaning, and reveals new interpretations of the story (for example that "castration is contagious," a central theme of *Faking It*).[322] As Weber puts it, this perspective allows us to appreciate the interpretative plurality of a text by employing a "connotative or figurative" reviewing of events.[323] Just as Weber proposed to reread U.S. policy in the Caribbean in the latter part of the 20th century as both "communication and countercommunication, as denotation and connotation,"[324] focusing in particular on the function of gender in the narrative rather than on the generally understood or surface-level meanings and interpretations of key events, so too have I attempted to pluralize, in a way, the meanings of the images selected in each chapter of this study, and their representation of the United States' identity and insecurity and of its enemies during the War on Terror.

What Weber's theorizing, via Barthes, inspired me to do in this thesis is to approach each selected image in the study like a piece of "writerly" [325] work. What this means is that—like the various U.S. actions in the Caribbean that Weber recounts—the images selected in this study, and the story that they have told about the United States, are "works in progress" that are "actively coproduced or coauthored" by their viewers, and the meaning that is derived in their

---

[321] Weber, *Faking It*, 17.
[322] Barthes, *S/Z An Essay*, 213, as cited in Weber, *Faking It,* 14.
[323] Weber, *Faking It,* 17.
[324] Weber, *Faking It,* 18.
[325] Writerly work, as opposed to readerly work, is work that is open and participatory in interpretation and meaning making. Writerly work can be reread, with different facets of the message of the work being revealed each time. None of these newly revealed facets or interpretations of the text, however, are objectively *correct*. Rather, they are only an additional interpretation. See Weber, *Faking It*, 17-19.

rereading (or in this case, their reviewing) can disrupt an accepted or dominant narrative.[326] This coproducing or coauthoring of the images (and what they depict) has also been influenced by what I call their framing. Framing, as I have discussed throughout this thesis, refers to the (often politically motivated) visual and discursive elements through which we perceive and interpret the events, bodies, and lives represented in images.[327] Crucially, as Judith Butler argues, frames and framing have the power to regulate if and how we value certain lives, and which lives we recognize as vulnerable. Thus, we can see viewers of images from the war on terror—including viewers of the eight images analyzed in this study—with the influence of images' framings as coauthors or reproducers of the narratives of the war on terror that these images supposedly represent. My rereading of the images has functioned to, on the one hand, describe the dominant framing of the images (the dominant reading at the time), but also to go further and review the images as they depict other messages and framings—perhaps ones that were missed at the time that they were made public, especially in the images in the final chapter of this thesis. My focus on the framing of vulnerability in the images analyzed in this study helps to show how certain bodies (state or individual) were presented as vulnerable at the time each image was produced and disseminated, and how this framing of vulnerability shaped the American public's understanding of the bodies or beings that were represented, as well as the events that the images reference. My rereading of these images and their framing has also made it possible to recognize other vulnerable bodies that were rendered less visible by the original framing, and to identify alternative and often more nuanced interpretations of the vulnerability that is depicted in the images. When a certain image (the image in *figure 4*, for example) is viewed, initial viewers of

---

[326] Weber, *Faking It*, 17.
[327] Although, to be clear, in *Frames of War*, Butler argues that framing impacts not just visual media. See Butler, *Frames of War*.

the image might understand the image as a representation of an injured United States standing back up after the attacks. In this way, the dominant framing of this image—perhaps thought of as a popular and privileged state-supported reading or interpretation of the image—can be reread, internalized, and redirected by the viewer. This reading of the image, influenced by the image's framing, as I have emphasized, helped to (re)produce certain apprehensive conditions regarding the onset of the war on terror. However, upon my own rereading and reviewing of this writerly image more than two decades later, I am able to pluralize the image's meaning, and I can try to tell another story. In my retelling, I point out that, while the image may have been read initially as a representation of the U.S. getting back up again, this image can also be understood as a rendition of how U.S. vulnerability was used as a justification for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and that it contains both masculine and feminine, vulnerable and invulnerable, depictions of the United States' identity or sense of self.

Barthes' and Weber's emphasis on the interpretative function of writerly reading has helped me to analyze the framing of images, to understand and narrate various images' unstable interpretative function, and to reread the selected images in search of alternative meanings that can produce a different, and perhaps more critical, understanding of the war on terror. By rereading the images in this study, and reconsidering their previous readings/framings, I have attempted to provide a different understanding of the war on terror. This alternative reading does not claim to be more correct or definitive. Instead, it seeks to show how reexamining each image's representation of vulnerability and violence reveals new ways of understanding U.S. behavior and policy following 9/11. My rereading of these images and their framing sheds light on how the United States has both projected and responded to vulnerability—both its own vulnerability and the vulnerability of other(ed) bodies.

What Is Told in this Retelling? A Brief Reflection on the Study's Central Themes

Through the analyses that I have performed in the previous chapters, I have offered another (re)telling of the war on terror, one that makes clear the connection between the vulnerability felt by the United States during and as a result of 9/11 and the US decision to carry out widespread violence against both combatants and civilians in Afghanistan, Iraq, and surrounding countries in the context of the war on terror. The United States' regime of hype(r)-power, as I have theorized it in this thesis, has been displayed in prominent images as masculine and invulnerable, but also as vulnerable and feminine or feminized, even if it was done for the sake of trying to recover a feeling of invulnerability or hyper-masculinity. I have attempted to argue that the violence perpetrated by the United States to alleviate or displace the feelings or perceptions of its own vulnerability throughout the war on terror did not wholly relieve the United States from the experience of vulnerability (that, in fact, was initially photographed). In fact, the actions taken by the United States in the post-9/11 period can be seen to have exacerbated feelings and conditions of vulnerability on the part of the United States, but also on the part of Afghan and Iraqi civilians. Thus, as my reviewing or rereading of the selected images in the previous chapters has shown, the violence carried out by the United States during the war on terror—at least in part as a response to the violence suffered on 9/11—does not appear to have re-empowered the United States. It did not undo the vulnerability that was first felt by the United States two decades before the final image in this study was taken. This is the first major theme and conclusion of this study.

This key theme—that the violence that took place after the U.S. experienced the vulnerability of 9/11 did not wholly rid the United States of its experience with vulnerability—is

accompanied by another central theme. Namely, that the vulnerability that the United States is often pictured to be experiencing is fundamentally different, in both experience and in the political stakes involved, from the vulnerability felt or experienced by innocent civilians or even by the alleged enemies of the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the surrounding areas affected by the war on terror. This concept of differential vulnerability, which I have developed with the theoretical backing of scholars including Judith Butler, Tim Luke, Francois Debrix, Jasbir Puar, and Jessica Auchter (among others), can be seen in most of the images in this study and in their framings. While the four images in Chapter 3 display a vulnerable United States, they do not include any injured or dead American bodies. Similarly, the image in *figure 7*, depicting Sergeant Nicole Gee cradling the Afghan infant, shows Gee alive, even though the image was mostly published in news articles that revealed the tragedy of her death several days after the photo was taken. What this shows, as I pointed out throughout this study, is that the vulnerability of the United States and its bodies is generally recognized and apprehended as a *vulnerability that matters*, even if and when this vulnerability was used as a justification for a war that rendered many of the United States' own individual bodies (starting with US soldiers) vulnerable and even at risk of physical harm and death.

Alternatively, images like those in *figure 5* and *figure 8* represent the often hyper-visible and yet unmediated vulnerability of "othered" bodies during the war on terror. Both images (in *figure 5* and *figure 8*) reveal how the United States, and many of those viewing these images, did not apprehend the lives of those othered bodies as grievable or as lives that matter and are in need of protecting. In other words, while American bodies were rendered vulnerable—for example, the Americans on 9/11 or Sergeant Nicole Gee during the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan—the vulnerability of those representing the United States was not always visible in

the images, even if their vulnerability was generally recognized by the American public, as seen in the public mourning of American[328] lives lost on 9/11 and the memorials for Gee after her death. And, as I have discussed with the help of Butler and Auchter in particular, the absence of vulnerable American bodies in prominent images is actually a representation of this recognition of American lives as subjects with political respect and belonging. On the other hand, the vulnerability and lives of "othered" bodies, like those of the various detained Iraqis in the image in *figure* 5 or the Afghan infants and civilians in the images in *figure 7* and *figure 8*, though often highly visible in these images, are often not framed as lives that need be preserved or grieved. This is yet another concluding insight provided by this study.

A final and related theme and concluding point of this study is that the United States, in the post-9/11 period, has dealt with recovering from its own vulnerability (or perceived emasculation or even feminization) by way of making others vulnerable (or feminized or emasculated). This theme has been discussed in reference to the image in *figure 5* from inside the Abu Ghraib prison, as well as the image of the U.S. transport plane desperately trying to flee from the Kabul Airport in *figure 8*. These two images, together, are indicative of how, when the United States feels it is (still) vulnerable, it acts or responds by rendering other bodies vulnerable and open to harm. In the first case, this can be seen through the systematic sexual torture of the enemy combatant, and in the second one, through the brutal and ruthless crushing of more vulnerable bodies under the wheels of the US plane/phallus. Furthermore, both images (in *figures 5* and *8*) represent counterexamples of the dominant narrative or framing that sought to situate the United States as the moral protector of those weaker and more vulnerable bodies in Afghanistan and Iraq, a narrative or framing that the United States had attempted to (re)tell

---

[328] Although, as I have previously mentioned, many of the lives lost on 9/11 were not American lives.

throughout the war on terror. The United States' response to its own vulnerability—rendering others vulnerable with a show of force that can undercut the dominant narrative of the war as well as the initial US sense of vulnerability—was observed at the beginning of the war on terror through the United States' various military campaigns in Afghanistan and later Iraq in 2003, military operations that brought violence and vulnerability to thousands of civilians, continued at Abu Ghraib through the normalized torture by US soldiers that took place there, and, by the symbolic end of the war on terror, were bookended with the final image of the U.S. plane literally crushing Afghan citizens and leaving them to be victimized by the Taliban regime that the United States had sworn to defeat back in 2001 as retaliation and punishment for their having rendered the United States vulnerable on 9/11.

This last theme is also visible—and it closes the analysis of this thesis—when we consider the image in *figure 8* and the image in *figure 4* together. The connection between the image in *figure 4* that represents President George Bush standing on top of the ruined World Trade Center just after the 9/11 attacks and the image of the U.S. fleeing from the international airport in Kabul is based on the fact that they both depict an assertion of U.S. hype(r)-power and remasculinization as a response to vulnerability. As I have shown throughout this study, the recovery (or remasculinization) of the United States was always already related to the United States' own sense of vulnerability. As the image in *figure 4* demonstrates, the vulnerability experienced by the United States—represented in the image through the damages that occurred at the World Trade Center on 9/11—was used as a symbolic platform from which the US remasculinization efforts could spring. Similar to the image of Bush and the (masculine) recovery workers in *figure 4*, the image in *figure 8* displays the United States' last-ditch effort at recovering and reasserting its (lost) masculinity. Just as Bush stood tall on top of the rubble of

the World Trade Center, the United States, during the withdrawal in 2021, is depicted as attempting to stand tall (or erect) again, but this time by sitting on top of the ruined country of Afghanistan and of its citizens whom it crushes. These two images—from the first and last chapters of this thesis, respectively—blatantly reveal the attempt by the United States at using its own vulnerability—the ruined world trade center on the one hand, two decades and trillions of dollars of failed U.S. policy in the war on terror in the other—as a basis from which it is pictured and can be seen to be reasserting its masculine hype(r)-power (figure 4) and/or desperately seeking to re-empower itself (figure 8).

What Does This Study Reveal About Viewing Images More Critically?

As I have described throughout this thesis, from 9/11, through Abu Ghraib, and all the way to the withdrawal from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, the United States has, in various images, been represented or framed as both vulnerable and invulnerable. These representations have had important political and social consequences for the understanding of the war on terror on the part of the United States' viewer. To reflect further on this point, in Chapter 3, I pointed out how the United States operationalized its own photographed vulnerability for the sake of rallying the nation behind the war. Later, in Chapter 4, I sought to show how the United States exercised complete control over the endemically vulnerable bodies of those imprisoned at Abu Ghraib to increase its sense of security and remasculinization. The vulnerability so clearly evidenced by the Afghan bodies running after the U.S. transport plane at the Kabul airport does not take away from the fact that Sergeant Gee, an American soldier and citizen, was also killed during the withdrawal. My purpose here, in reiterating these images and moments that depict a shared (even if differential) experience of vulnerability on the part of both American bodies and

"othered" bodies, is to emphasize, as Butler and Luke have suggested as well, that no matter how much might or how much "hype" a state or even an individual body displays, the innate, fundamental vulnerability of human beings indicates that we are all vulnerable to bodily harm at some level. In this final section, I want to suggest that if we take up a writerly approach to viewing images—that is, recognizing that images have no fixed meaning, and that we can thus think critically about how and why they might be framed in certain ways—and if we also keep in mind that all humans are, at a most basic level, vulnerable to harm by virtue of their constant relations with others (or their sociability), it may be possible to view or read images (especially during times of war) in a way that is appropriately critical and that works against the rendering of lives (often through the very act of seeing) unrecognized or ungrievable.

Thinking about Butler's theorizing of precariousness and grievability alongside Weber's emphasis on the writerly pluralization of (an image's) message(s) leads me to return briefly to an event that I mentioned but did not discuss in detail in Chapter 5, but which I think can act as a useful allegory for the urgent necessity to think about how to view images more critically. As I briefly noted in Chapter 5, the members of Sergeant Nicole Gee's family, as well as the families of other service members killed during the Kabul airport bombing, headlined the 2024 Republican National Convention and spoke out in support of then Presidential candidate Donald Trump.[329] Their reason for speaking at the convention, in the words of Gee's mother-in-law, was that "Joe Biden has refused to recognize [the deceased service members'] sacrifice."[330] It appears

---

[329] Jonathan Cooper et al., "Families of Service Members Killed during Afghanistan Withdrawal Criticize Biden at GOP Convention," AP News, July 18, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/gold-star-families-rnc-gop-convention-b8d043475a5cb8cb7735c366ba75502d.

[330] "'Joe Biden has refused to recognize their sacrifice,' Christy Shamblin, the mother-in-law of Marine Sgt. Nicole Gee, told the crowd." From Cooper et al., "Families of Service Members Killed during Afghanistan Withdrawal Criticize Biden at GOP Convention."

that the anger and grief felt by the killed service members' families was not only due to the loss of their loved ones. Rather, according to Gee's mother-in-law, the families of the killed service members were angry because the lives and deaths of their loved ones had not been properly *recognized* or *grieved* by the Biden Administration. Biden, according to Gee's mother-in-law, had not properly recognized the loss of life, unlike Trump who, as Gee's mother-in-law claimed, "knew all of [the killed service members'] names" and "all of their stories."[331]

In returning to this moment, I wish to emphasize that what was tragic for Gee's mother-in-law was again that she felt that her daughter had not been grieved by the Biden Administration. As a result, Gee's mother-in-law, and many of the family members of the killed US soldiers, threw their political support behind Donald Trump, a candidate who has made it quite clear that he is not beyond dehumanizing and refusing to grieve for many (mostly non-white or non-American) immigrants, convicted felons, and political enemies in a way that is not so different from the lack of grievability and the sense of vulnerability of many of the victims of the Kabul Airport bombing.[332] In line with the core themes of this thesis, this event represents a moment in which an experience of vulnerability is responded to with actions that increase the vulnerability of others. In thinking about this story and reflecting on how the treatment of the U.S. service members killed in the Kabul Airport bombing may have led to their families' support for Trump, I begin to wonder where the cycle of violence and vulnerability could have been stopped, and what might prevent it in the future.

---

[331] Cooper et al., "Families of Service Members Killed during Afghanistan Withdrawal Criticize Biden at GOP Convention."

[332] For example, Trump vowed, on April 16, 2025, to begin to deport "homegrown" Americans to the famously brutal and inhumane prisons in El Salvador as punishment for committing the "heinous" crimes of being an immigrant, speaking out against the current administration, or being a suspected member of a gang. See Cooper et al., "Families of Service Members Killed during Afghanistan Withdrawal Criticize Biden at GOP Convention."

Clearly, if the fallen U.S. service members had not been sent to Afghanistan to begin with, they would not have been killed, and their loved ones might not have felt justified in their support of someone like Trump. If human beings, but specifically those political elites in the West who wage war, were to recognize (or cared to prevent the exploitation of), as Butler writes, "the existential conception of 'precariousness'" present in all lives, including the lives of U.S. citizens, perhaps wars like the war on terror would not be waged in the first place.[333] Yet, it is hard to consider a world in which, even with the widespread acknowledgement of the United States, its citizens, and the rest of the world as inherently precarious, the war on terror would not have taken place. Indeed, just after the 9/11 attacks, 82% of Americans stated that they supported U.S. military actions against 9/11 terrorists, *even if it entailed mass U.S. casualties.*[334] Still, I would suggest that, if we begin to look at images in a far more critical, or perhaps writerly, way, we may be able to better interrogate the images' frames and to question our initial responses to images. I cannot offer a definitive path toward collectively recognizing and caring about the shared vulnerability of all human beings—or about the differential allocation of precarity often caused by war. But I do believe that those of us who already hold the conviction that all lives are equal and grievable, whether it is a U.S. soldier or an Afghan infant, must work to resist the persistent and politicized framing of images as they appear in the media. If, for example, we saw the image of Gee and recognized the violence done to her (and, at the same time, to the Afghan infant) by the United States, our apprehension of Gee might be more likely steered towards recognizing her as a vulnerable body and victim of a U.S.-led war that had little to do with

---

[333] Butler, *Frames of War*, 3.
[334] Hannah Hartig and Carroll Doherty, "Two Decades Later, the Enduring Legacy of 9/11," Pew Research Center, September 2, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/09/02/two-decades-later-the-enduring-legacy-of-9-11/.

American safety, as opposed to being thought of as a willing participant in what she believed was a humanitarian mission.

As Butler writes in *Frames of War,* the framing of images can compel even those of us committed to resisting framing to feel less sympathy for the death of those deemed different, weaker, or "other" than us, or to believe that protecting one vulnerable race requires the decimation of another.[335] This means that, while we might not always be successful in resisting a visual frame (or the work and power of images in the first place, as discussed in Chapter 2), those of us who are intent on viewing images more ethically and critically must take up a position that is grounded in the understanding that all life is vulnerable and in need of protection, thus recognizing our inherent interconnectedness, but also never choosing to value one life over that of another.[336] By maintaining this ethical position and remaining highly critical of an image's framing (both internal and external to the image), or again by viewing the image as a writerly "text" (thus always open to more reinterpretation), I believe that we can better equip ourselves, at least at an individual level, to resist the dominant framings that, over two decades ago, led more than 80% of Americans to support the war on terror that decimated millions of innocent civilians.

---

[335] I am referencing here the genocide being carried out by Israel, with the help of the United States, against Palestinians.

[336] Key to Butler's analysis in *Frames of War* is the idea that we must prioritize our ethical responsibility over the care of others, since our innate precariousness as human beings is bound up in our relations with other humans. See Butler, *Frames of War*, 61.

Bibliography

A Wall Street Journal News Roundup. "Nation Stands in Disbelief and Horror: Streets of Manhattan Resemble War Zone Amid Clouds of Ash." *Wall Street Journal*, September 12, 2001.

A WALL STREET JOURNAL News Roundup. "TERRORISTS DESTROY WORLD TRADE CENTER, HIT PENTAGON IN RAID WITH HIJACKED JETS: NATION STANDS IN DISBELIEF AND HORROR STREETS OF MANHATTAN RESEMBLE WAR ZONE AMID CLOUDS OF ASH." *Wall Street Journal (1923-)*, September 12, 2001. 2074397392. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Wall Street Journal.

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Meridian. Stanford, Calif: Stanford Univ. Press, 2010.

Ahmed, Aziza. "When Men Are Harmed: Feminism, Queer Theory, and Torture at Abu Ghraib." In *Feminisms of Discontent*, edited by Ashleigh Barnes, 194–216. Oxford University Press, 2015. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199452941.003.0009.

Akram, Saira, and Muqarrab Akbar. "US Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Emerging Challenges and Future Prospects." *Global Foreign Policies Review* VI, no. I (March 30, 2023): 97–111. https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2023(VI-I).09.

Al Jazeera. "Afghans Cling to Moving US Air Force Jet in Desperate Bid to Flee," n.d. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/16/afghans-cling-to-plane-defining-image.

Ali, Doa. "How to Kill an Entire Country: The Legacy of the Sanctions against Iraq." Transnational Institute, July 26, 2023. https://www.tni.org/en/article/how-to-kill-an-entire-country.

Almond, Kyle. "The 9/11 Photos We Will Never Forget." CNN, September 10, 2021. https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2021/09/us/9-11-photos-cnnphotos/.

Anastacio, Nicholas, and Mark Murray. "The Iraq War — by the Numbers." NBC News, March 20, 2023. https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meetthepressblog/iraq-war-numbers-rcna75762.

Asi, Yara. "Shock and Awe: Life in Iraq Twenty Years after the US-Led Invasion." Arab Center Washington DC, June 16, 2023. https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/shock-and-awe-life-in-iraq-twenty-years-after-the-us-led-invasion/.

Associated Press. "Slain Marine Who Cradled Baby at Kabul Airport Loved Her Job." POLITICO, August 29, 2021. https://www.politico.com/news/2021/08/29/nicole-gee-kabul-suicide-bombing-507144.

———. “US Sending Almost 4,000 Extra Forces to Afghanistan, Trump Official Says.” *The Guardian*, June 16, 2017, sec. US news. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jun/15/us-troops-afghanistan-trump-administration.

Association of the United States Army. “Units Recognized for Afghanistan Withdrawal Mission,” September 7, 2022. https://www.ausa.org/news/units-recognized-afghanistan-withdrawal-mission.

Auchter, Jessica. *Global Corpse Politics: The Obscenity Taboo*. Cambridge Studies in International Relations. Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

Bacevich, Andrew J. “Op-Ed: The Closing of Abu Ghraib and the U.S. Failure in Iraq.” Los Angeles Times, April 20, 2014. https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-bacevich-abu-ghraib-20140420-story.html.

Baldor, Laura, and Tara Copp. “Why U.S. Forces Remain in Iraq 20 Years after ‘Shock and Awe.’” PBS News, March 15, 2023. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/why-u-s-forces-remain-in-iraq-20-years-after-shock-and-awe.

Barry, Dan. “AFTER THE ATTACKS: THE SEARCH; A Few Moments of Hope In a Mountain of Rubble.” *The New York Times*, September 13, 2001, sec. U.S. https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/13/us/after-the-attacks-the-search-a-few-moments-of-hope-in-a-mountain-of-rubble.html.

Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. 1st American ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor, Mich: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2019.

———. *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

Bleich, Erik. “Defining and Researching Islamophobia.” *Review of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 2 (2012): 180–89.

Bourke, Joanna. “Torture as Pornography.” *The Guardian*, May 7, 2004, sec. World news. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/may/07/gender.uk.

Bush, George W. “Global War on Terror.” National Archives, October 7, 2001. https://www.georgewbushlibrary.gov/research/topic-guides/global-war-terror.

———. “President Bush Addresses the Nation,” March 19, 2003. https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/iraq/news/20030319-17.html.

———. “President Bush Addresses the Nation,” March 19, 2003. https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/iraq/news/20030319-17.html.

———. “President Bush Announces Major Combat Operations in Iraq Have Ended,” May 1, 2003. https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/05/20030501-15.html.

———. “President Bush Salutes Heroes in New York.” The White House: George W. Bush, September 14, 2001. https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010914-9.html.

———. “President Delivers State of the Union Address.” The White House: George W. Bush, January 29, 2002. https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html.

———. “September 22, 2001: Address on the U.S. Response to the Attacks of September 11.” UVA Miller Center, October 20, 2016. https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/september-22-2001-address-us-response-attacks-september-11.

———. “Statement by the President in Address to the Nation,” September 11, 2001. https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html.

“Bush Ratings Improve But He’s Still Seen as Unilateralist: AMERICANS AND EUROPEANS DIFFER WIDELY ON FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES.” Pew Research Center, April 17, 2002. https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/pdf/Pew-Apr02-Bush-Euro-poll.pdf.

Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2016.

———. *Precarious Life : The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2004.

Caldwell, Ryan. *Fallgirls : Gender and the Framing of Torture at Abu Ghraib*. 1st ed. Routledge, 2012.

Campbell, Duncan. “‘The US Will Hunt down and Punish Those Responsible for These Attacks.’” *The Guardian*, September 12, 2001, sec. World news. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/12/september11.usa15.

Cavarero, Adriana. *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*. Columbia University Press, 2009.

CBS News. “Sacramento Marine Sgt. Nicole Gee, 3 Other Californians Among Afghanistan Bomb Victims,” August 28, 2021. https://www.cbsnews.com/sanfrancisco/news/sacramento-marine-gee-other-californians-among-afghanistan-bomb-victims/.

CBS News. “U.S. To Shut Down Abu Ghraib Prison,” March 9, 2006. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-to-shut-down-abu-ghraib-prison/.

"CIA Told to Do 'Whatever Necessary' to Kill Bin Laden - The Washington Post." Accessed December 16, 2024. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2001/10/21/cia-told-to-do-whatever-necessary-to-kill-bin-laden/19d0e8f1-dbe5-4b07-9c47-44c5b4328f1f/.

CNN World. "Iraq Prison Abuse Scandal Fast Facts," October 30, 2013. https://www.cnn.com/2013/10/30/middleeast/iraq-prison-abuse-scandal-fast-facts/index.html.

Cooper, Helene. "Military Clears Crew of Plane That Took Flight as Afghans Fell to Their Deaths." *The New York Times*, June 14, 2022, sec. U.S. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/13/us/politics/military-clears-crew-afghan-evacuation.html.

Cooper, Jonathan, Farnoush Amiri, Matthew Lee, and Steve Peoples. "Families of Service Members Killed during Afghanistan Withdrawal Criticize Biden at GOP Convention." AP News, July 18, 2024. https://apnews.com/article/gold-star-families-rnc-gop-convention-b8d043475a5cb8cb7735c366ba75502d.

Cordesman, Anthony H. "AFGHAN PUBLIC OPINION AND THE AFGHAN WAR: SHIFTS BY REGION AND PROVINCE," 2009. https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/094013_afghanpollbyregion.pdf.

Council on Foreign Relations. "Timeline: The Iraq War." Accessed March 24, 2025. https://www.cfr.org/timeline/iraq-war.

Council on Foreign Relations. "Timeline: The U.S. War in Afghanistan." Accessed February 9, 2025. https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan.

"Covering 9/11: New York Post." The New York Post, September 11, 2011. https://nypost.com/2011/09/11/covering-911/.

Cox, Michael. "PARADIGM SHIFTS AND 9/11: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AFTER THE TWIN TOWERS." *Security Dialogue* 33, no. 2 (2002): 247–51.

Debrix, François. "Necropolitics and American Hype-Power." *SPECTRA* 10, no. 1 (September 12, 2023): 65–74. https://doi.org/10.21061/spectra.v10i1.236.

"Digest of Education Statistics, 2012." National Center for Education Statistics. Accessed February 9, 2025. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12_081.asp.

Dixit, Priya. "Decolonizing Visuality in Security Studies: Reflections on the Death of Osama Bin Laden." *Critical Studies on Security* 2, no. 3 (September 2, 2014): 337–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2014.978670.

Doherty, Carroll, and Hannah Hartig. "Two Decades Later, the Enduring Legacy of 9/11." *Pew Research Center* (blog), September 2, 2021.

https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/09/02/two-decades-later-the-enduring-legacy-of-9-11/.

Dowd, Maureen. "The Jimmy Carter and Joe Biden Show." *The New York Times*, May 1, 2021, sec. Opinion. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/01/opinion/joe-biden-jimmy-carter.html.

Downing, Larry. *The Damaged Area of the Pentagon Building, Which a Commercial Jetliner Slammed into on September 11, 2001, Is Illuminated at Sunrise with the U.S. Capitol Building in the Background.* September 16, 2001. Photograph. Reuters. https://widerimage.reuters.com/photographer/larry-downing.html.

Draper, Eric. *Standing Atop Rubble with Retired New York City Firefighter Bob Beckwith, President George W. Bush Addresses Approximately 400 Police, Firemen and Rescue Workers by Bullhorn at the Site of the Collapsed World Trade Center in New York City*. September 14, 2001. Photograph. 213246384. National Archives. https://catalog.archives.gov/id/213246384.

Ehrenreich, Barbara. "Feminism's Assumptions Upended." Los Angeles Times, May 16, 2004. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-may-16-op-ehrenreich16-story.html.

Elving, Ron. "When a First-Term Democratic President Struggles, People Talk about Jimmy Carter." *NPR*, July 10, 2022, sec. Politics. https://www.npr.org/2022/07/10/1110486735/when-a-first-term-democratic-president-struggles-people-talk-about-jimmy-carter.

Enloe, Cynthia H. *Bananas, Beaches & Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

Federal Bureau of Investigation. "9/11 Investigation." Page, n.d. https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/911-investigation.

Fleischer, Ari. "Statement by the Press Secretary on the Geneva Convention." The White House: George W. Bush, May 7, 2003. https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/05/20030507-18.html.

Former Pres. George W. Bush Speaks from Ground Zero in 2001. ABC News, 2001. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkvsjOEzhzQ.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. Second Vintage Books edition. New York, NY: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc, 1995.

Gee, Nicole. "Kabul, Afghanistan I Love My Job." Social Media. Instagram, August 20, 2021. Nicole Gee (@nicole_gee__), Kabul, Afghanistan I love my job, Instagram photo, August 20, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CS0LAGFh35Y/?igsh=MWNoaTdvMmtlYjFtOQ%3D%3D.

George, Susannah, Adam Taylor, Dan Lamothe, and Jennifer Hassan. "Scenes of Deadly Chaos Unfold at Kabul Airport after Taliban's Return." *The Washington Post*, August 16, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/16/afghan-kabul-airport/.

George W. Bush Library. "The Iraq War," n.d. https://www.georgewbushlibrary.gov/research/topic-guides/the-iraq-war.

Greenberg, Karen J., and Joshua L. Dratel, eds. *The Torture Papers: The Road to Abu Ghraib*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Gregg, Gary. "George W. Bush: Foreign Affairs." Miller Center, October 4, 2016. https://millercenter.org/president/gwbush/foreign-affairs.

Haggerty, Kevin D., and Amber Gazso. "Seeing beyond the Ruins: Surveillance as a Response to Terrorist Threats." *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie* 30, no. 2 (2005): 169–87. https://doi.org/10.2307/4146129.

Harding, Luke, and Ben Doherty. "Kabul Airport: Footage Appears to Show Afghans Falling from Plane after Takeoff." *The Guardian*, August 16, 2021, sec. World news. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/16/kabul-airport-chaos-and-panic-as-afghans-and-foreigners-attempt-to-flee-the-capital.

Hartig, Hannah, and Carroll Doherty. "Two Decades Later, the Enduring Legacy of 9/11." *Pew Research Center* (blog), September 2, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/09/02/two-decades-later-the-enduring-legacy-of-9-11/.

Hersh, Seymour, M. "Torture at Abu Ghraib." The New Yorker, April 30, 2004. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/10/torture-at-abu-ghraib.

Hettena, Seth. "Reports Detail Abu Ghraib Prison Death; Was It Torture?" NBC News, February 17, 2005. https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna6988054.

Higham, Scott, and Joe Stephens. "New Details of Prison Abuse Emerge." The Washington Post, May 21, 2004. https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A43783-2004May20.html.

Howard, Michael. "Shamed US to Hand over Abu Ghraib Prison to Iraqis." *The Guardian*, March 10, 2005, sec. World news. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/mar/10/iraq.michaelhoward.

International Committee of the Red Cross. "Protected Persons: Prisoners of War and Detainees." Accessed March 6, 2025. https://www.icrc.org/en/law-and-policy/protected-persons-prisoners-war-and-detainees.

Isiah, Campbell. *Sgt. Nicole Gee Holding Baby in Kabul, Afghanistan*. August 20, 2021. Photograph.

Jaques, Richard. "Query: Is There a Status of 'Unlawful Combatant.'" In *Issues in International Law and Military Operations*. International Law Studies, v. 80. Newport, RI: Naval War College, 2006.

Kanter, Doug. *This 11 September 2001 File Photo Shows a Man Standing in the Rubble, and Calling out Asking If Anyone Needs Help, after the Collapse of the First World Trade Center Tower in New York City.* September 11, 2001. Photograph. Getty images. https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/this-11-september-2001-file-photo-shows-a-man-standing-in-news-photo/119987308.

Kelley, Bradford J. "PHOTOS OF THE FALLEN AND THE DOVER BAN: AN ANALYSIS OF BANNING THE MEDIA FROM PHOTOGRAPHING MILITARY COFFINS." *Kansas Journal of Law & Public Policy* 26, no. 1 (September 1, 2016): 116–42.

Kennedy, Liam. "Remembering September 11: Photography as Cultural Diplomacy." *International Affairs* 79, no. 2 (March 2003): 315–26. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.00310.

Khuzaie, Wathiq. *Further Prisoners Are Released From Abu Ghraib Prison*. June 23, 2006. Photograph. 71280096. Getty Images. https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/iraqi-prisoners-wait-to-be-released-on-june-23-2006-at-abu-news-photo/71280096?

Kiley, Carroll Doherty and Jocelyn. "A Look Back at How Fear and False Beliefs Bolstered U.S. Public Support for War in Iraq." *Pew Research Center* (blog), March 14, 2023. https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/03/14/a-look-back-at-how-fear-and-false-beliefs-bolstered-u-s-public-support-for-war-in-iraq/.

Kullab, Samya. "Afghan Woman in Limbo at Kabul Airport after Taliban Sweep." AP News, August 17, 2021. https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-women-kabul-f6fa72e3289f7d6c33ddf84d5a7c4bc2.

Latifi, Ali M. "Families of Kabul Airport Bombing Victims Scramble for News." Al Jazeera, August 27, 2021. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/27/afghanistan-kabul-airport-bombing-victims.

Leung, Rebecca. "Abuse At Abu Ghraib: CBS News," May 5, 2004. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/abuse-at-abu-ghraib/.

Liptak, Kevin. "Biden to Kabul Attackers: 'We Will Hunt You down and Make You Pay.'" CNN, August 26, 2021. https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/26/politics/biden-kabul-attack/index.html.

Luke, Timothy W. "Hyper-Power or Hype-Power?: The USA after Kandahar, Karbala, and Katrina." In *The Geopolitics of American Insecurity: Terror, Power and Foreign Policy*,

edited by François Debrix and Mark J. Lacy, 1st ed., 18–33. PRIO New Security Studies. Abingdon: Routledge, 2009.

———. *Shows of Force: Power, Politics, and Ideology in Art Exhibitions*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1992.

Madhani, Aamer. "Biden Pays Respects to US Troops Killed in Afghanistan." AP News, August 29, 2021. https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-biden-troops-killed-509f29aaca012ee8e83871d2c03384bf.

Mellen, Ruby. "The Shocking Speed of the Taliban's Advance: A Visual Timeline." *The Washington Post*, August 16, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/16/taliban-timeline/.

Melley, Brian, and Hanson Amy. "Slain Marine Who Cradled Baby at Kabul Airport Loved Her Job." AP News, August 29, 2021. https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-kabul-islamic-state-group-14ffbf5bcf4b67596420bd95e89785f6.

Messieh, Nancy. "Inside Afghanistan's Gender Apartheid: Listen as Women Reveal the Impact of the Taliban's Oppressive Decrees." *Atlantic Council* (blog), March 7, 2024. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/inside-afghanistans-gender-apartheid-listen-as-women-reveal-the-impact-of-the-talibans-oppressive-decrees/.

Miller Center. "Timeline: The September 11 Terrorist Attacks," August 11, 2020. https://millercenter.org/remembering-september-11/september-11-terrorist-attacks.

Mills, Doug. *Sept 11 Bush Classroom*. September 11, 2001. Photograph. 010911018710. Associated Press. https://newsroom.ap.org/editorial-photos-videos/detail?itemid=dbff2088eccc4c788262dda98fd7aed8&mediatype=photo.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "Invisible Empire: Abu Ghraib and Embodied Spectacle." *Visual Arts Research* 32, no. 2 (2006): 38–42.

———, ed. *The Visual Culture Reader*. 3rd edition. London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013.

NBC News. "Soldier Charged with Abusing Iraqi Prisoners," May 7, 2004. https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna4927273.

NBC News. "U.S. Army Report on Iraqi Prisoner Abuse," May 4, 2004. https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna4894001.

Nick Niedzwiadek. "A Defiant Biden Calls Afghanistan Exit a 'Success.'" Politico, August 31, 2021. https://www.politico.com/news/2021/08/31/biden-afghanistan-withdrawal-speech-508036.

Obama, Barack. “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan.” whitehouse.gov, March 27, 2009. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-a-new-strategy-afghanistan-and-pakistan.

Olay, Matthew. “Kabul Airport Attack Review Reaffirms Initial Findings, Identifies Attacker.” U.S. Department of Defense, April 15, 2024. https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3741245/kabul-airport-attack-review-reaffirms-initial-findings-identifies-attacker/.

Peterson, V. Spike. “Political Identities/Nationalism as Heterosexism.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1, no. 1 (January 1999): 34–65. https://doi.org/10.1080/146167499360031.

Pew Research Center. “Bush and Public Opinion: Reviewing the Bush Years and the Public’s Final Verdict,” December 18, 2008. https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2008/12/18/bush-and-public-opinion/.

Pew Research Center. “Iraq Prison Scandal Hits Home, But Most Reject Troop Pullout,” May 12, 2004. https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2004/05/12/iraq-prison-scandal-hits-home-but-most-reject-troop-pullout/.

Phillips, Dave. “Among the Troops Who Died, Two Women on the Front Line.” *The New York Times*, August 28, 2021, sec. U.S. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/28/us/soldiers-killed-in-afghanistan.html.

Phillips, Stone. “Behind the Abu Ghraib Photos.” NBC News, October 2, 2005. https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna9532670.

Post Staff Report. “Covering 9/11.” New York Post, September 11, 2011. https://nypost.com/2011/09/11/covering-911/.

President (2001-2009 : Bush). Office of Management and Administration. Office of White House Management. Photography Office. *Standing Atop Rubble with Retired New York City Firefighter Bob Beckwith, President George W. Bush Addresses Approximately 400 Police, Firemen and Rescue Workers by Bullhorn at the Site of the Collapsed World Trade Center in New York City*. Records of the White House Photo Office (George W. Bush Administration). Accessed January 27, 2025. https://catalog.archives.gov/id/213246384.

Press, Associated. “Slain Marine Who Cradled Baby at Kabul Airport Loved Her Job.” POLITICO, August 29, 2021. https://www.politico.com/news/2021/08/29/nicole-gee-kabul-suicide-bombing-507144.

Puar, Jasbir K. “Abu Ghraib: Arguing against Exceptionalism.” *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 2 (2004): 522–34. https://doi.org/10.2307/20458978.

Qazi Zada, Sebghatullah, and Mohd Ziaolhaq Qazi Zada. "The Taliban and Women's Human Rights in Afghanistan: The Way Forward." *The International Journal of Human Rights* 28, no. 10 (November 25, 2024): 1687–1722. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2024.2369584.

Rancière, Jacques. "Notes on the Photographic Image." In *The Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff, 3rd ed., 86–95. Routledge, 2013.

Rasmussen, Sune Engel. "US 'mother of All Bombs' Killed 92 Isis Militants, Say Afghan Officials." *The Guardian*, April 15, 2017, sec. World news. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/15/us-mother-of-all-bombs-moab-afghanistan-donald-trump-death-toll.

Reuters. "Evacuations from Afghanistan by Country," August 30, 2021. https://www.reuters.com/world/evacuations-afghanistan-by-country-2021-08-26/.

Reuters. "Human Remains Found in Landing Gear of Military Flight from Kabul, Says U.S. Air Force." *Reuters*, August 17, 2021, sec. World. https://www.reuters.com/world/human-remains-found-landing-gear-military-flight-kabul-says-us-air-force-2021-08-17/.

Richter-Montpetit, Melanie, and Annick T.R. Wibben. "Militarized Masculinities, Women Torturers, and the Limits of Gender Analysis at Abu Ghraib," 1st ed., 92–116. Routledge, 2016. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315687490-6.

Rouan, Rebecca Morin and Rick. "Biden Meets with Families of Service Members Killed in Kabul Suicide Bombing." USA TODAY, August 29, 2021. https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2021/08/29/joe-biden-meets-families-13-service-members-killed-kabul-bombing/5641896001/.

Rumsfeld, Donald. "Defense Department Briefing." C-SPAN.org, February 8, 2002. https://www.c-span.org/program/news-conference/defense-department-briefing/153221.

———. "Iraqi Prisoner Abuse." PBS News, May 4, 2004. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/iraqi-prisoner-abuse.

Sarwary, Bilal. *16 August , 2021, Hamid Karzai International Airport.* August 16, 2021. Image from Video. https://x.com/bsarwary/status/1427210620668203014.

Sayed Ziarmal Hashemi, Rahim Faiez, Lolita C. Baldor, and Joseph Krauss. "Kabul Airport Attack Kills 60 Afghans, 13 US Troops." AP News, August 27, 2021. https://apnews.com/article/europe-france-evacuations-kabul-9e457201e5bbe75a4eb1901fedeee7a1.

Schaeffer, Katherine. "A Year Later, a Look Back at Public Opinion about the U.S. Military Exit from Afghanistan." *Pew Research Center* (blog), August 17, 2022. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/08/17/a-year-later-a-look-back-at-public-opinion-about-the-u-s-military-exit-from-afghanistan/.

Schneider, Greg, and David S. Hilzenrath. “An Icon of Capitalism: ‘Now It’s All Gone’: World’s 5th-Tallest Buildings Housed Offices, Retail Shops.” *The Washington Post*, September 12, 2001. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2001/09/12/an-icon-of-capitalism-now-its-all-gone/63016867-6378-4542-b6b3-34a24dc0a8b1/.

Seir, Ahmad, Tameem Akhgar, Kathy Gannon, and Jon Gambrell. “Kabul Airport Plunges into Chaos as Taliban Patrol Capital.” AP News, August 16, 2021. https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-784681c4400b097cf73b93cec34c5c61.

Shanker, Thom, and Jacques Steinberg. “THE STRUGGLE FOR IRAQ: CAPTIVES; Bush Voices ‘Disgust’ at Abuse of Iraqi Prisoners.” *The New York Times*, May 1, 2004, sec. World. https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/01/world/the-struggle-for-iraq-captives-bush-voices-disgust-at-abuse-of-iraqi-prisoners.html.

Shanker, Thom, and Sabrina Tavernise. “Murder Charges for 3 G.I.’s in Iraq.” *The New York Times*, June 20, 2006, sec. World. https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/20/world/middleeast/20iraq.html.

Simon, Roger. “An America Afraid: The Day the U.S. Lost Its Innocence.” *US News & World Report*, September 14, 2001. //www.usnews.com/news/articles/2001/09/14/innocence-lost-forever-on-911.

———. “The Day Terror Came Home to Us.” US News & World Report. Accessed February 9, 2025. //www.usnews.com/news/articles/2001/09/14/innocence-lost-forever-on-911.

Sjoberg, Laura. “Agency, Militarized Femininity and Enemy Others: Observations from The War In Iraq.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 9, no. 1 (March 2007): 82–101. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740601066408.

———. *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/sjob14860.

Smith, Saphora, Matteo Moschella, Courtney Kube, and Chantal Da Silva. “Flights Resume at Kabul Airport as U.S. Aims to Extract 22,000 Afghans Who Helped Military.” NBC News, August 17, 2021. https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/afghans-scale-walls-rush-tarmac-frenzy-flee-kabul-wakes-taliban-n1276889.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. Pearson Always Learning. London: Penguin Books, 1979.

———. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. London: Penguin Books, 2019.

———. “Regarding The Torture Of Others.” *The New York Times*, May 23, 2004. https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/regarding-the-torture-of-others.html.

Soussi, Alasdair. “The Abu Ghraib Abuse Scandal 20 Years on: What Redress for Victims?” Al Jazeera, n.d. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/27/the-abu-ghraib-abuse-scandal-20-years-on-what-redress-for-victims.

Stubblefield, Thomas. *9/11 and the Visual Culture of Disaster*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015.

The Costs of War. “BY THE NUMBERS: Afghanistan before and after 20 Years of War (2001-2021): Costs of War.” Accessed July 8, 2024. https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/Afghanistanbeforeandafter20yearsofwar.

The Costs of War. “Human Costs of U.S. Post-9/11 Wars: Direct War Deaths in Major War Zones,” March 2023. https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/WarDeathToll.

The Costs of War. “Summary of Findings: Costs of War.” Accessed July 8, 2024. https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/summary.

The Costs of War. “U.S. Budgetary Costs of Post-9/11 Wars,” September 2021. https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/BudgetaryCosts.

“Their War at Home: Iraqi War Photographers.” Accessed March 1, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/12/19/world/middleeast/20111219-iraqi-photographers.html.

Thomas, Clayton. “The Islamic State: Background, Current Status, and U.S. Policy,” May 6, 2024. Congressional Research Service. https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10328.

Tickner, J. Ann. “Feminist Perspectives on 9/11.” *International Studies Perspectives* 3, no. 4 (2002): 333–50. https://doi.org/doi:10.1111/1528-3577.t01-1-00098.

TIME.com. “The TIME Vault: September 24, 2001.” September 24, 2001.

U.S. Department of Defense. “Show of Force,” n.d. https://www.defense.gov/Multimedia/Photos/igphoto/2001986875/.

USA Today. “Joe Biden Meets Families of 13 Service Members Killed in Kabul Bombing.” Accessed March 29, 2025. https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2021/08/29/joe-biden-meets-families-13-service-members-killed-kabul-bombing/5641896001/.

Ushe, Naledi. “Father of Slain Marine Nicole Gee, Who Cradled Baby at Kabul Airport, Calls Daughter a ‘Warrior.’” People.com. Accessed March 25, 2025. https://people.com/politics/father-of-slain-marine-nicole-gee-cradled-afghan-baby-kabul-airport-talks-her-legacy/.

Wallis, Claudia. “Iraq: Inside Abu Ghraib: Why Did They Do It?” TIME, May 17, 2004. https://time.com/archive/6738503/iraq-inside-abu-ghraib-why-did-they-do-it/.

Weber, Cynthia. *Faking It: U.S. Hegemony in a "Post-Phallic" Era*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999.

———. "Performative States." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 27, no. 1 (March 1998): 77–95. https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298980270011101.

Whitaker, Brian, and Luke Harding. "American Beheaded in Revenge for Torture." *The Guardian*, May 12, 2004, sec. World news. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/may/12/iraq.alqaida.

World's Tallest Towers. "World Trade Center," n.d. https://skyscraper.org/tallest-towers/world-trade-center/.

Zurcher. "Problems That Plagued Carter Have Also Troubled Biden." BBC, December 30, 2024. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cpvv2p96erxo.

Fair Use Rationales

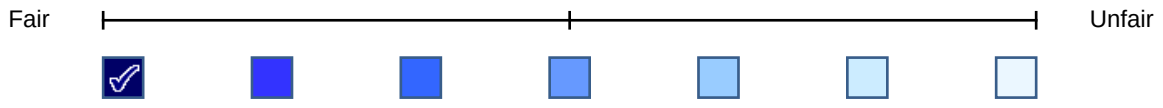
Fair Use Evaluation Documentation

Compiled using the **Fair Use Evaluator** [cc] 2008 Michael Brewer & the Office for Information Technology Policy, http://librarycopyright.net/fairuse/

Name:	Elizabeth Mennitt
Job Title:	
Institution:	Virginia Tech
Title of Work Used:	Sept 11 Bush Classroom
Copyright Holder:	2001 AP
Publication Status:	N/A
Publisher:	Associated Press
Place of Publication:	Sarasota, Florida, United States
Publication Year:	2001
Description of Work:	Photograph
Date of Evaluation:	May 15, 2025
Date of Intended Use:	May 6, 2025

Describe the Purpose and Character of Your Intended Use:

[+] Use is for "criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, (including multiple print copies for classroom use), scholarship or research"
[+] Use is transformative, i.e. it uses the existing work in a new way (creates an index to the work) or for a new purpose (parody, pastiche, instructional materials, etc.) Transformative works are favored because the purpose of U.S. Copyright Law is to encourage the development and dissemination of new knowledge to benefit the public and thereby advance learning.
[+] Use is socially beneficial (promotes the creation of new knowledge, learning, etc.) New perspective on image and event that it depicts
[+] Use is not-for-profit
[+] Use is clearly defined and is restricted in scope (limited duration, not iterative, restricted access, etc.)



Describe the Nature of Your Intended Use of the Copyrighted Work:

[+] Work to be used has been previously PUBLISHED by AP and various other news sites
[+] Work to be used contains limited new knowledge, content, or creative expression (in relation to previously copyrighted works)
[+] Original work was not created and/or has not been marketed for the stated purpose of the proposed use

Fair — Unfair

Describe the Amount of Your Intended Use in Relation to the Copyrighted Work as a Whole:

[+] Only the amount required to achieve the stated, socially-beneficial purpose or objective will be used (be that educational, artistic, scholarly, journalistic, etc.)
[+] If the entire work is to be used (which would NOT favor the use being fair), it is clear that no less than the entire work will achieve the stated purpose of the use (e.g. use of a photograph, a short poem, an article, etc.)

Fair — Unfair

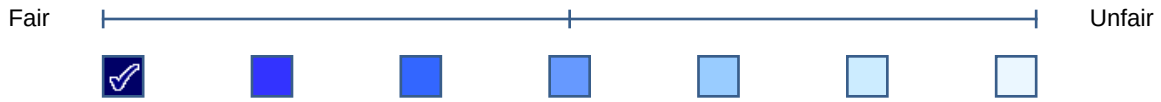
Describe the Effect of Your Intended Use on the Potential Market or Value of the Copyrighted Work:

[+] A market for the work as it will be used is absent or is negligible & use of the work will have little or no negative impact on its value or potential value
[+] Use of the work minimizes the potential for unauthorized use that could impact its value (i.e. steps are taken to ensure the content is not used outside of the stated purpose or audience)
[+] Use of the work has the potential to create or improve the market for the work
[+] Proper attribution will be given with the intended use

Fair — Unfair

The Average "Fairness Level," Based on Your Rating of Each of the 4 Factors, Is:

[see tool disclaimer for important clarifying information]:



Based on the information and justification I have provided above, I, Elizabeth Mennitt, am **UNDECIDED** whether this use if fair under Section 107 of the U.S. Copyright Code.

Signature: _____

Date of Signature: _____

***Disclaimer:** This document is intended to help you* collect, organize & archive the information you might need to support your fair use evaluation. *It is not a source of legal advice or assistance. The results are only as good as the input you have provided by are intended to suggest next steps, and not to provide a final judgment. It is recommended that* you share this evaluation with a copyright specialist before proceeding with your intended use.

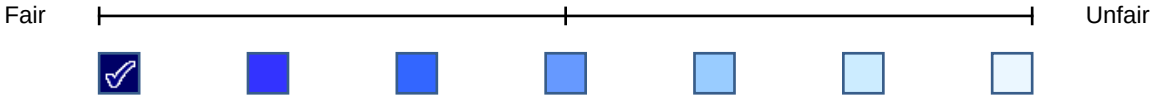
Fair Use Evaluation Documentation

Compiled using the **Fair Use Evaluator** [cc] 2008 Michael Brewer & the Office for Information Technology Policy, http://librarycopyright.net/fairuse/

Name:	Elizabeth Mennitt
Job Title:	
Institution:	Virginia Tech
Title of Work Used:	This 11 September 2001 File Photo Shows a Man Standing in the Rubble, and Calling out Asking If Anyone Needs Help, after the Collapse of the First World Trade Center Tower in New York City
Copyright Holder:	Doug Kanter Getty Images
Publication Status:	Published
Publisher:	Getty Images
Place of Publication:	New York
Publication Year:	2001
Description of Work:	Photograph
Date of Evaluation:	May 15, 2025
Date of Intended Use:	May 6, 2025

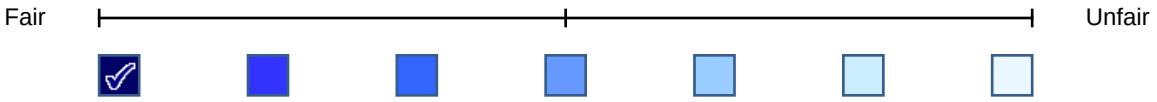
Describe the **Purpose** and Character of Your Intended Use:

[+] Use is for "criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, (including multiple print copies for classroom use), scholarship or research"
[+] Use is transformative, i.e. it uses the existing work in a new way (creates an index to the work) or for a new purpose (parody, pastiche, instructional materials, etc.) Transformative works are favored because the purpose of U.S. Copyright Law is to encourage the development and dissemination of new knowledge to benefit the public and thereby advance learning.
[+] Use is socially beneficial (promotes the creation of new knowledge, learning, etc.) [define how]
[+] Use is not-for-profit
[+] Use is clearly defined and is restricted in scope (limited duration, not iterative, restricted access, etc.)



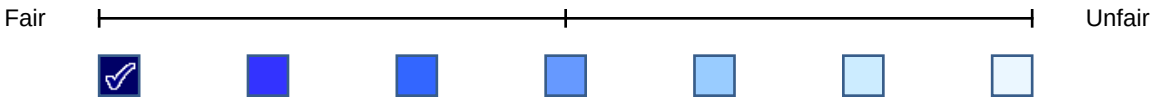
Describe the Nature of Your Intended Use of the Copyrighted Work:

[+] Work to be used has been previously PUBLISHED
[+] Work to be used contains limited new knowledge, content, or creative expression (in relation to previously copyrighted works)
[+] Work to be used is primarily of a factual nature (non-fiction, collection of facts, etc.)
[+] Original work was not created and/or has not been marketed for the stated purpose of the proposed use



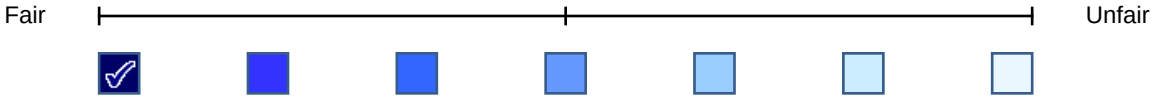
Describe the Amount of Your Intended Use in Relation to the Copyrighted Work as a Whole:

[+] Only the amount required to achieve the stated, socially-beneficial purpose or objective will be used (be that educational, artistic, scholarly, journalistic, etc.)
[+] If the entire work is to be used (which would NOT favor the use being fair), it is clear that no less than the entire work will achieve the stated purpose of the use (e.g. use of a photograph, a short poem, an article, etc.)



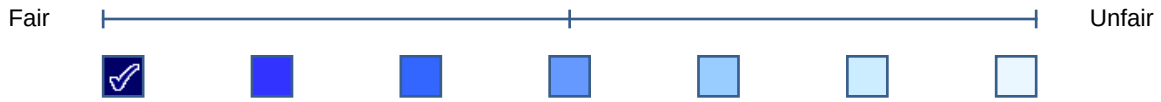
Describe the Effect of Your Intended Use on the Potential Market or Value of the Copyrighted Work:

[+] A market for the work as it will be used is absent or is negligible & use of the work will have little or no negative impact on its value or potential value
[+] Use of the work minimizes the potential for unauthorized use that could impact its value (i.e. steps are taken to ensure the content is not used outside of the stated purpose or audience)
[+] Use of the work has the potential to create or improve the market for the work
[+] Proper attribution will be given with the intended use



The Average "Fairness Level," Based on Your Rating of Each of the 4 Factors, Is:

[see tool disclaimer for important clarifying information]:



Based on the information and justification I have provided above, I, Elizabeth Mennitt, am **UNDECIDED** whether this use if fair under Section 107 of the U.S. Copyright Code.

Signature: _____

Date of Signature: _____

***Disclaimer:** This document is intended to help you* collect, organize & archive the information you might need to support your fair use evaluation. *It is not a source of legal advice or assistance. The results are only as good as the input you have provided by are intended to suggest next steps, and not to provide a final judgment. It is recommended that* you share this evaluation with a copyright specialist before proceeding with your intended use.

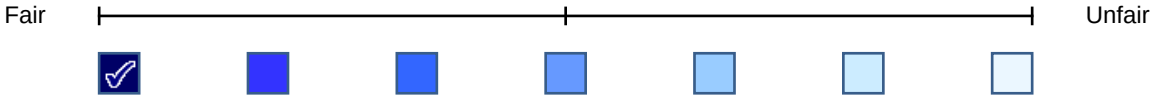
Fair Use Evaluation Documentation

Compiled using the **Fair Use Evaluator** [cc] 2008 Michael Brewer & the Office for Information Technology Policy, http://librarycopyright.net/fairuse/

Name:	Elizabeth Mennitt
Job Title:	
Institution:	Virginia Tech
Title of Work Used:	The Damaged Area of the Pentagon Building, Which a Commercial Jetliner Slammed into on September 11, 2001, Is Illuminated at Sunrise with the U.S. Capitol Building in the Background
Copyright Holder:	Larry Downing
Publication Status:	Published
Publisher:	Reuters
Place of Publication:	Washington, DC
Publication Year:	2001
Description of Work:	Photograph
Date of Evaluation:	May 15, 2025
Date of Intended Use:	May 6, 2025

Describe the Purpose and Character of Your Intended Use:

[+] Use is for "criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, (including multiple print copies for classroom use), scholarship or research"
[+] Use is transformative, i.e. it uses the existing work in a new way (creates an index to the work) or for a new purpose (parody, pastiche, instructional materials, etc.) Transformative works are favored because the purpose of U.S. Copyright Law is to encourage the development and dissemination of new knowledge to benefit the public and thereby advance learning.
[+] Use is socially beneficial (promotes the creation of new knowledge, learning, etc.) [define how]
[+] Use is not-for-profit
[+] Use is clearly defined and is restricted in scope (limited duration, not iterative, restricted access, etc.)



Describe the Nature of Your Intended Use of the Copyrighted Work:

[+] Work to be used has been previously PUBLISHED
[+] Work to be used contains limited new knowledge, content, or creative expression (in relation to previously copyrighted works)

Fair — Unfair

Describe the Amount of Your Intended Use in Relation to the Copyrighted Work as a Whole:

[+] Only the amount required to achieve the stated, socially-beneficial purpose or objective will be used (be that educational, artistic, scholarly, journalistic, etc.)
[+] If the entire work is to be used (which would NOT favor the use being fair), it is clear that no less than the entire work will achieve the stated purpose of the use (e.g. use of a photograph, a short poem, an article, etc.)
~~[+] The amount used falls within widely recognized fair use guidelines* vetted by key stakeholder groups [reference guidelines]~~

Fair — Unfair

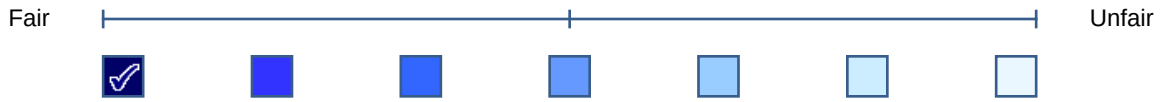
Describe the Effect of Your Intended Use on the Potential Market or Value of the Copyrighted Work:

[+] Use of the work has the potential to create or improve the market for the work
[+] Proper attribution will be given with the intended use
[+] A market for the work as it will be used is absent or is negligible & use of the work will have little or no negative impact on its value or potential value

Fair — Unfair

The Average "Fairness Level," Based on Your Rating of Each of the 4 Factors, Is:

[see tool disclaimer for important clarifying information]:



Based on the information and justification I have provided above, I, Elizabeth Mennitt, am asserting this use is **FAIR** under Section 107 of the U.S. Copyright Code.

Signature: _____

Date of Signature: _____

***Disclaimer:** This document is intended to help you* collect, organize & archive the information you might need to support your fair use evaluation. *It is not a source of legal advice or assistance. The results are only as good as the input you have provided by are intended to suggest next steps, and not to provide a final judgment. It is recommended that* you share this evaluation with a copyright specialist before proceeding with your intended use.

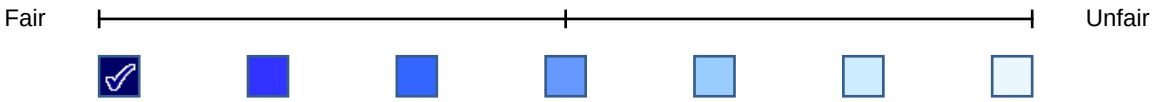
Fair Use Evaluation Documentation

Compiled using the **Fair Use Evaluator** [cc] 2008 Michael Brewer & the Office for Information Technology Policy, http://librarycopyright.net/fairuse/

Name:	Elizabeth Mennitt
Job Title:	
Institution:	Virginia Tech
Title of Work Used:	Further Prisoners Are Released From Abu Ghraib Prison
Copyright Holder:	Wathiq Khuzaie Getty Images
Publication Status:	Published
Publisher:	Getty Images
Place of Publication:	Abu Ghraib, Iraq
Publication Year:	2006
Description of Work:	Photograph
Date of Evaluation:	May 15, 2025
Date of Intended Use:	May 6, 2025

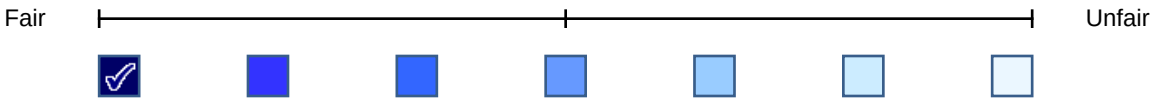
Describe the Purpose and Character of Your Intended Use:

[+] Use is for "criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, (including multiple print copies for classroom use), scholarship or research"
[+] Use is transformative, i.e. it uses the existing work in a new way (creates an index to the work) or for a new purpose (parody, pastiche, instructional materials, etc.) Transformative works are favored because the purpose of U.S. Copyright Law is to encourage the development and dissemination of new knowledge to benefit the public and thereby advance learning.
[+] Use is socially beneficial (promotes the creation of new knowledge, learning, etc.) [define how]
[+] Use is not-for-profit
[+] Use is clearly defined and is restricted in scope (limited duration, not iterative, restricted access, etc.)



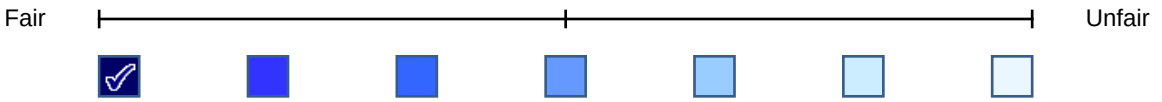
Describe the Nature of Your Intended Use of the Copyrighted Work:

[+] Work to be used has been previously PUBLISHED
[+] Work to be used contains limited new knowledge, content, or creative expression (in relation to previously copyrighted works)
[+] Original work was not created and/or has not been marketed for the stated purpose of the proposed use



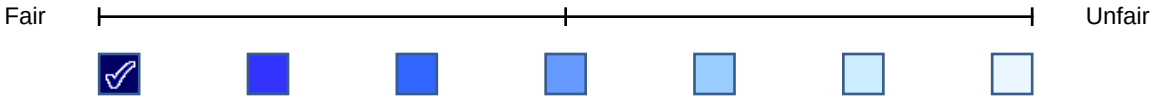
Describe the Amount of Your Intended Use in Relation to the Copyrighted Work as a Whole:

[+] Only the amount required to achieve the stated, socially-beneficial purpose or objective will be used (be that educational, artistic, scholarly, journalistic, etc.)
[+] If the entire work is to be used (which would NOT favor the use being fair), it is clear that no less than the entire work will achieve the stated purpose of the use (e.g. use of a photograph, a short poem, an article, etc.)



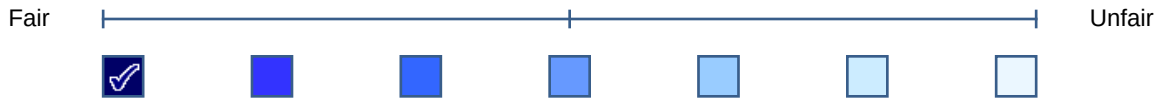
Describe the Effect of Your Intended Use on the Potential Market or Value of the Copyrighted Work:

[+] A market for the work as it will be used is absent or is negligible & use of the work will have little or no negative impact on its value or potential value
[+] Use of the work minimizes the potential for unauthorized use that could impact its value (i.e. steps are taken to ensure the content is not used outside of the stated purpose or audience)
[+] Use of the work has the potential to create or improve the market for the work
[+] Proper attribution will be given with the intended use



The Average "Fairness Level," Based on Your Rating of Each of the 4 Factors, Is:

[see tool disclaimer for important clarifying information]:



Based on the information and justification I have provided above, I, Elizabeth Mennitt, am asserting this use is **FAIR** under Section 107 of the U.S. Copyright Code.

Signature: _____

Date of Signature: _____

***Disclaimer:** This document is intended to help you* collect, organize & archive the information you might need to support your fair use evaluation. *It is not a source of legal advice or assistance. The results are only as good as the input you have provided by are intended to suggest next steps, and not to provide a final judgment. It is recommended that* you share this evaluation with a copyright specialist before proceeding with your intended use.

Fair Use Evaluation Documentation

Compiled using the **Fair Use Evaluator** [cc] 2008 Michael Brewer & the Office for Information Technology Policy, http://librarycopyright.net/fairuse/

Name:	Elizabeth Mennitt
Job Title:	
Institution:	Virginia Tech
Title of Work Used:	: Hundreds of Afghan civilians run alongside a U.S. Air Force transport plane as it takes off from the Hamid Kharazi international airport, desperate to escape from their country amid U.S.-led evacuation of people and supplies in Kabul, Afghanistan on August 16, 2021
Copyright Holder:	Unknown
Publication Status:	Published
Publisher:	Bilal Sarwary (@bsarwary), X
Place of Publication:	
Publication Year:	
Description of Work:	Still from video published on X
Date of Evaluation:	May 15, 2025
Date of Intended Use:	May 6, 2025

Describe the Purpose and Character of Your Intended Use:

[+] Use is for "criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, (including multiple print copies for classroom use), scholarship or research"
[+] Use is transformative, i.e. it uses the existing work in a new way (creates an index to the work) or for a new purpose (parody, pastiche, instructional materials, etc.) Transformative works are favored because the purpose of U.S. Copyright Law is to encourage the development and dissemination of new knowledge to benefit the public and thereby advance learning.
[+] Use is socially beneficial (promotes the creation of new knowledge, learning, etc.) Provides new insights into what image displays
[+] Use is not-for-profit

Fair — Unfair

Describe the Nature of Your Intended Use of the Copyrighted Work:

[+] Work to be used has been previously PUBLISHED
[+] Work to be used contains limited new knowledge, content, or creative expression (in relation to previously copyrighted works)
[+] Original work was not created and/or has not been marketed for the stated purpose of the proposed use

Fair — Unfair

Describe the Amount of Your Intended Use in Relation to the Copyrighted Work as a Whole:

[+] Only limited and reasonable portions will be used
[+] Only the amount required to achieve the stated, socially-beneficial purpose or objective will be used (be that educational, artistic, scholarly, journalistic, etc.) (still from video)
[+] If the entire work is to be used (which would NOT favor the use being fair), it is clear that no less than the entire work will achieve the stated purpose of the use (e.g. use of a photograph, a short poem, an article, etc.)

Fair — Unfair

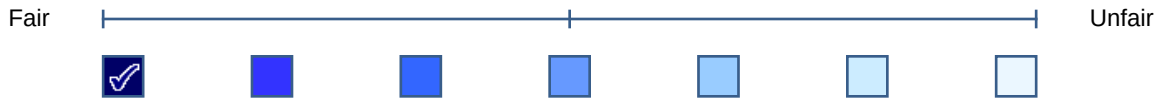
Describe the Effect of Your Intended Use on the Potential Market or Value of the Copyrighted Work:

[+] The work is NOT currently under commercial exploitation (out of print, no licensing available, etc.)
[+] A market for the work as it will be used is absent or is negligible & use of the work will have little or no negative impact on its value or potential value
[+] The copyright holder cannot be identified or cannot be found after a reasonable search, or, once found does not respond (one way or another) to requests for permission to use the work
[+] Use of the work minimizes the potential for unauthorized use that could impact its value (i.e. steps are taken to ensure the content is not used outside of the stated purpose or audience)
[+] Use of the work has the potential to create or improve the market for the work
[+] Proper attribution will be given with the intended use

Fair — Unfair

The Average "Fairness Level," Based on Your Rating of Each of the 4 Factors, Is:

[see tool disclaimer for important clarifying information]:



Based on the information and justification I have provided above, I, Elizabeth Mennitt, am asserting this use is **FAIR** under Section 107 of the U.S. Copyright Code.

Signature: _____

Date of Signature: _____

***Disclaimer:** This document is intended to help you* collect, organize & archive the information you might need to support your fair use evaluation. *It is not a source of legal advice or assistance. The results are only as good as the input you have provided by are intended to suggest next steps, and not to provide a final judgment. It is recommended that* you share this evaluation with a copyright specialist before proceeding with your intended use.