

US Suppressed Footage of Hiroshima for Decades

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Washington - As the world prepares to mark the 60th anniversary of the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Saturday, some American media experts see uncomfortable echoes between the suppression of images of death and destruction then and coverage of the war in Iraq today.

As author Greg Mitchell lays out in an article in Editor & Publisher this week, in the weeks following the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, U.S. authorities seized and suppressed film shot in the bombed cities by U.S. military crews and Japanese newsreel teams to prevent Americans from seeing the full extent of devastation wrought by the new weapons.

Tens of thousands died in each attack.

The U.S. military footage shot in color was classified as secret. It remained hidden until the early 1980s and has never been fully aired. The Japanese film shot in black and white was declassified and returned to Japan in the late 1960s.

Some of the images captured in the days after the bombings will finally be shown on a U.S. cable television channel as part of a documentary on Saturday.

"Although there are clearly huge differences with Iraq, there are also some similarities," said Mitchell, co-author of *Hiroshima in America* and editor of Editor & Publisher.

"The chief similarity is that Americans are still being kept at a distance from images of death, whether of their own soldiers or Iraqi civilians," he said.

In May, the Los Angeles Times released a survey of six months of media coverage of the Iraq war in six prominent U.S. newspapers and two newsmagazines - a period during which 559 coalition forces, the vast majority American, were killed. It found they had run almost no photographs of Americans killed in action. The same publications ran only 44 photos to represent the thousands of Westerners wounded during that same time.

"There's a mixture of censorship and self-censorship. In an information age, unfortunately what is missing is truthful and factual information," said Yahya Kamalipour, a communications professor at Purdue University in Indiana and author of *Bring 'Em On: Media and Politics in the Iraq War*.

Examples of overt censorship are the Pentagon's ban on filming the coffins of dead servicemen and women being brought back to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, as well as its continuing legal fight to prevent the publication of photographs and videos of detainee abuse in Abu Ghraib prison.

'Too Shocking'

Self-censorship happens when individual editors decide not to run photographs or footage of casualties because they deem them "too shocking" for readers or because they wish to avoid controversy or criticism.

"So much of the media is owned by big corporations and they would much rather focus on making money

than setting themselves up for criticism from the White House and Congress," said Ralph Begleiter, a former CNN correspondent, now a journalism professor at the University of Delaware.

Last October, Begleiter filed a lawsuit to force the Pentagon to release military photographs and video of the coffins being returned.

In April, the Pentagon made public more than 700 images all taken before June 2004. Begleiter said it appeared the military had stopped taking pictures of casualties being returned to avoid being forced to release more images.

In May 2004, when ABC's Nightline screened the names and photos of 721 U.S. forces killed in the Iraq war without any commentary, it caused furor. One company which owned eight ABC stations ordered them not to show the program and some conservatives denounced it as an anti-war gimmick.

One month before, when four U.S. contractors were murdered in Fallujah and their charred bodies were strung up from a bridge, most TV stations did not use the images. A survey of the 20 top circulating newspapers in the United States found only seven put a picture of the bodies on their front pages.

In 1945, U.S. policymakers wanted to be able to continue to develop and test atomic and eventually nuclear weapons without an outcry of public opinion.

"They succeeded but the subject is still a raw nerve. Americans remain very divided about nuclear weapons. We'll never know what impact the footage, if widely aired, might have had on the nuclear arms race and nuclear proliferation that plagues and endangers us today," Mitchell said.

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