

Revenge attack kills four soldiers after video shock

A video of American marines urinating on Taliban corpses went viral this month. Now, four soldiers could have been murdered in revenge. Should we censor to save lives?



CITIZENSHIP
HISTORY & POLITICS



American marines speak to a young man in Helmand province, Afghanistan © Getty Images

In a sun-baked, sandy yard, a group of marines stand over the bodies of three Taliban fighters. Joking, they unzip their flies, and urinate on the bloodied corpses. 'Have a good day, buddy!' laughs a voice behind the camera. After forty seconds, the film cuts.

Within days, this shocking video was all over the internet. American officials jumped to condemn it. The urinating marines, they say, will be tried for the war crime of desecrating the dead.

But the damage has already been done. Yesterday, four French soldiers were murdered by an Afghan man, apparently in an act of revenge. France has now stopped training troops in Afghanistan, and is considering withdrawing its forces from the country altogether.

For the Taliban, the incident is a public relations triumph. In an official statement, they called the act a contradiction of 'human and ethical norms.' Many normal Afghans, too, think the video

proves America is an enemy of Islam, which will 'never bring peace' to Afghanistan. For western forces – already struggling to win hearts and minds – the emergence of the clip is a huge blow.

This isn't the first time a photo or video has plunged international relationships into crisis. When US guards at Abu Ghraib jail were photographed abusing and torturing Iraqi prisoners, attacks against Americans in Iraq increased. Some think the publication of the photographs delayed the country's peace process by years.

Even when reports aren't correct, their consequences are unmistakably explosive. In 2005, the magazine *Newsweek* claimed that Guantanamo Bay interrogators had flushed a Qur'an – Islam's holy book – down the toilet. Fifteen people were killed in riots before the story was proved unreliable, and withdrawn.

Making information public can be destructive even out of war zones. By publishing diplomatic cables and secret

documents, Wikileaks exposed a host of shameful practices, comments and abuses. They also left trusting relationships between nations – often built up over years of peace talks – in tatters.

PRAGMATISM OR TRUTH?

Knowing the truth is important, some say, but not as important as peace and security. Crimes like Abu Ghraib are unusual: the benefits of dealing with them publicly are minor compared to the years of suffering such explosive coverage creates. When something will result in the deaths of many, it is sensible to keep it under wraps.

If we do not witness their crimes, others say, people can get away with anything. Our media has a responsibility to hold people to account. To ignore the truth because it may have damaging consequences is a failure of that responsibility. If peace is built on hidden torture, abuse and deception, it can not be called peace at all.

Q & A

Q So the things I watch have an impact all over the world?

A When we consume media, it's easy to forget it might impact the rest of the world. But coverage of events – and our response to that – feeds back into the events

themselves. A good example of this is the Libyan revolution. If it had been ignored by the media, western forces might not have intervened.

Q Is information often censored in the interests of national security?

A Yes. In the UK, for example, government departments routinely place restrictions on what information can be made public. Much

of this is covered by the Official Secrets Act, which employees have to sign if they come into contact with sensitive information.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'A lie is justified if it reduces suffering.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?