

Not Just “A Few Bad Apples”: Photographs of Atrocity and American National Power

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Photographs serve important functions in the lives of modern citizens. They are cultural objects, documenting a significant event or item, as well as routine happenings.<sup>1</sup> Photographs are both material and representational objects. They, in themselves, are an item— but they also represent whatever item they depict— a sunset, or, in the case of this paper, a tortured body. As cultural objects, photographs contain immense power. We photograph things deemed significant, worth remembering, or culturally acceptable.<sup>2</sup> We view photographs taken by others and identify with the subjects depicted in them. In her article, “Regarding the Torture of Others,” Susan Sontag states, “photographs are us.”<sup>3</sup> Considering the association between photographs and identity, scholars have pointed out the capacity of photographs to contribute to nation-building.<sup>4</sup> Katherine Henninger argues that when a photograph is taken of a culturally significant object, viewing it “sets off a complicated dance of identification” for a viewer belonging to the same group.<sup>5</sup> A viewer decides what or whom they identify with, and what or whom they don’t, and thus reinstate the boundaries of their group identity. In the representational and objective material of the photograph, there is the potential to capture a narrative about who or what belongs in their nation.

The rise of photojournalism has introduced a new genre of photographs to those available to viewership by members of a culture— the atrocity photograph.<sup>6</sup> Atrocity photographs depict acts of atrocity by individuals identifying with one group towards the “enemy,” who belong to another group. An audience identifying with the perpetrators’ group sees their nation’s power

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<sup>1</sup> Jakob, Joey Brooke. “What Remains of Abu Ghraib?: Digital Photography and Cultural Memory.” *Visual Studies* 31, no. 1 (2016): 31.; Henninger, Katherine . “Atrocity or Nation-Building? The Difference Is in the Eye of the Beholder.” *Mississippi Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2008): 250.

<sup>2</sup> Henninger, “Atrocity or Nation-Building? The Difference Is in the Eye of the Beholder,” 250.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Henninger, 240; Jakob Joey Brooke, “What Remains of Abu Ghraib?: Digital Photography and Cultural Memory.” *Visual Studies* 31, no. 1 (2016): 24.

<sup>5</sup> Henninger, “Atrocity or Nation-Building? The Difference Is in the Eye of the Beholder,” 240.

<sup>6</sup> Henninger, “Atrocity or Nation-Building? The Difference Is in the Eye of the Beholder,” 260.

over the enemy displayed in the photograph. According to Sontag, depictions of atrocity committed by members of “one’s own side” may not always invoke an immediate repudiation of the violence.<sup>7</sup> Members of an ingroup are more likely to either uphold the acts depicted as justified or make justifications for clear acts of brutality.<sup>8</sup> In the set of photographs from Abu Ghraib, this dynamic is clearly shown.

The photographs from the American prison at Abu Ghraib in Iraq have been identified by scholars as “atrocity photographs.”<sup>9</sup> On April 27, 2004, photographs leaked by Sergeant Joseph Darby aired on *60 Minutes*, granting the American public viewership of the torture of detainees at Abu Ghraib.<sup>10</sup> Specialist Charles Graner, cited as a ringleader of the abuse, shared a compact disk with Sgt. Darby which “featured naked and hooded Iraqi detainees in demeaning and sexually suggestive poses, while the participating US military members [stood] alongside, smiling and gesturing.”<sup>11</sup> With the post-9/11 War on Terror recently ended and Operation Iraqi Freedom in full swing, President George W. Bush sought to represent the photographs as the work of “a few bad apples.”<sup>12</sup> In an apology to King Abdullah of Jordan, President George W. Bush promised, “the actions of those folks in Iraq do not represent the values of the United States of America.”<sup>13</sup> Bush’s response to the photographs reflects a conviction shared by many— that these photographs, while taken by U.S. Army personnel, misrepresent the true character of America— a state that prides itself on democracy, freedom, and humanitarian values. These values, which define the face of American national identity, contradict how American national power over detainees is displayed in the photographs from Abu Ghraib. However, writing off

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>8</sup> Henninger, “Atrocity or Nation-Building? The Difference Is in the Eye of the Beholder,” 239.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>10</sup> Jakob, “What Remains of Abu Ghraib?: Digital Photography and Cultural Memory,” 23.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>13</sup> The White House, “President Bush, Jordanian King Discuss Iraq, Middle East,” Archives.gov, May 6, 2004. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2004/05/20040506-9.html>.

Abu Ghraib as the result of “a few bad apples” without thoughtful consideration of why these acts took place ignores the long-standing role of violence in the exertion of American national power over history.

When it comes to national values, most Americans would likely categorize torture as an “un-American” act. However, Robert P. Weiss argues, American “political institutions, legal culture, scientific community in and out of universities, and...popular culture have contributed to the development, refinement, and social acceptance of torture.”<sup>14</sup> Though not explicit, torture culture has been embedded in the practices of American military and intelligence operations for decades, and before that by vigilante groups such as white lynch mobs. It is a part of how America holds power as a sovereign state, both within and beyond its borders— try as presidents, and people, might to escape that reality.<sup>15</sup> An understanding of this embeddedness may be developed by referring to an earlier version of American atrocity photography— the lynching photograph.

Soon after the release of photographs from Abu Ghraib in 2004, commentators made comparisons to lynching photographs.<sup>16</sup> Henninger observes the trophy-like quality of photographs among perpetrators.<sup>17</sup> In both sets, perpetrators’ “smug gloating” and “shamelessness” horribly contradicts their brutal acts— an important dynamic for understanding the relationship between “Americanness” and atrocity.<sup>18</sup> Finally, common themes are seen in the sexualized nature of the torture; feminizing victims and masculinizing perpetrators. In this paper, I will examine the potential of atrocity photographs to serve as symbols of national power by depicting acts of brutality and dominance over enemies. Throughout my analysis, I will compare

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<sup>14</sup> Robert P. Weiss, “The American Culture of Torture: A Review Essay,” *Social Justice* 33, no. 1 (2006): 134.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>16</sup> Sante, Luc, “Tourists and Torturers,” *The New York Times*, May 11, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Henninger, “Atrocity or Nation-Building? The Difference Is in the Eye of the Beholder,” 238.

<sup>18</sup> Dora Apel, “Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib,” *Art Journal* 64, no. 2 (2005): 89.

photographs of lynchings as a lens through which to understand the inherent ‘Americaness’ of such atrocity. This paper will ultimately seek to understand the relationship between American atrocity photographs and the display of national power.



Figure 1. “11:01 p.m., Nov. 4, 2003. Detainee with bag over head, standing on box with wires attached.” (U.S. Government Copyright).

First shown on the broadcast of *60 Minutes II*, the photograph referred to as the “Hooded Man” served as an “icon of the abuse” in art, articles, and discourse surrounding the torture at Abu Ghraib (Fig. 1).<sup>19</sup> The photograph depicts a hooded detainee, Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh,

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<sup>19</sup> Sarah Boxer, “The World; Torture Incarnate, and Propped on a Pedestal,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2004.

standing precariously on the end of a box, his arms extended out to his sides. Electrodes are attached to each of his hands, and, it would later be revealed, to his penis. The photograph was taken by Staff Sgt. Ivan Frederick. Before releasing the image, the Army Criminal Investigation Command cropped the photo, omitting Frederick, who stood “on the periphery, seeming casually to adjust his own camera.”<sup>20</sup>



Figure 2. “2003. Lynndie England forcing an inmate, known to the guards as “Gus”, to crawl and bark like a dog on a leash. England is holding a leash attached to a prisoner collapsed on the floor.” (U.S. Government Copyright).

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<sup>20</sup> Henninger, “Atrocity or Nation-Building? The Difference Is in the Eye of the Beholder,” 258.

The photograph of Pfc. Lynndie England and a leashed prisoner is notable. It depicts England, a young, white woman, holding the leash attached to the neck of a collapsed, naked man (Fig. 2). The description of the photograph details that England was forcing the detainee to “crawl and bark like a dog.” Lynndie’s posture, however, does not convey the confidence associated with forcefulness. She looks down at the prisoner, who the guards have nicknamed “Gus.” She holds the leash, nearly taught, with one lax arm, as if posing to assert power. The power dynamics at play in this photo and behind the camera grant insight into questions of intentionality, the symbol of the body, and the trophy.



Figure 3. “11:50 p.m., Nov. 7, 2003. CPL GRANER and SPC HARMAN pose for picture behind the nude detainees.” (U.S. Government Copyright).

Photographs depicting “human pyramids” exist in a series among the photographs of Abu Ghraib (Fig. 3). There is a stark, horrific contrast between the “fun” of the human pyramid— a challenge common at community bonding activities— and the forcibly naked, hooded detainees. The men are pictured in what seems to be a moment of collapse, bracing themselves under the weight of the others. The bodies of the detainees— naked and off-balance— are humiliated in the photograph, demeaned and stripped of power under the hegemon of the United States military. In perhaps the most disturbing portion of the image, Specialists Charles S. Graner and Sabrina Harman pose behind the group, casting broad smiles, Graner offering a “thumbs up.” This casual, confident gesture contradicts the brutal torture, demonstrating the troops’ lack of doubt in their actions. Their confidence invokes the photographs’ capacity to serve as a trophy.

“Trophyness”



Figure 4. "The lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, a large gathering of lynchers. August 7, 1930, Marion, Indiana. Gelatin silver print. Copy photo. Frame, 11 x 9", photo, 3 7/8 x 2 3/4" inscribed in pencil on the inner, gray matte: "Bo pointn to his n—." On the yellowed outer matte: "klan 4th Joplin, Mo. 33." Flattened between the glass and double mattes are locks of the victim's hair." (Allen, James , and John Littlefield. 2025. Withoutsanctuary.org).



Figure 5. The lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, a large gathering of lynchers. August 7, 1930, Marion, Indiana. Gelatin silver print. 9 1/2 x 7 1/2" Etched in the negative: "Marion, Ind. Aug. 1930." (Allen, James , and John Littlefield. 2025. Withoutsanctuary.org).

In their representative and physical capacities, atrocity photographs become trophies, demonstrating the power of the in-group through which they circulate. Photographs taken at Abu Ghraib became transferable material through the use of compact discs, circulated to friends and family of perpetrators. The photographs thus became physical trophies of accomplishment— of victory over humiliated enemy bodies; of American military prowess. In an age before the

advent of the digital photograph, lynching photographs were likewise printed into postcards and bought by participants as souvenirs and circulated within a community of like-minded individuals.<sup>21</sup> A postcard from the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith was framed, alongside locks of the victims' hair, in a gruesome souvenir (Fig. 4). The materiality of photographs allows them to be traded, collected, and displayed as evidence of the success and vitality of "Americanness" over a national enemy.

Joey Brooke Jakob argues, "for a trophy to be a trophy, a particular meaning must be ascribed to the object itself."<sup>22</sup> For a photograph to showcase national power, its contents must depict a group's exercise of power—most often over a communally understood "Other."<sup>23</sup> The confident gestures of American soldiers—Spc. Graner's "thumbs up," for example, displays a sharp contrast to the naked, brutalized, and collapsed bodies of detainees (Fig. 3). Sgt. England's stance, even if lacking confidence, puts her above the collapsed man on the leash (Figs. 2). Sgt. Frederick posed Saleh precariously on the end of a box, arms extended to the side as if defeated, or trying to keep balance (Fig. 1). In each photograph, the positionality of detainees' bodies in relation to soldiers' reflects a dynamic of power favoring the troops. In the eyes of the troops and their audience of viewers, this dynamic validates a notion of national power in which the American military reigns victorious over its enemies. American democracy triumphs over Middle Eastern terrorism. In the photograph of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Phipps, the brutalized bodies of the men hang above a lynch mob (Fig. 5). One individual points toward them—etched in the frame, a note reads "Bo pointn to his n—" (*sic.*) (Fig. 4). Bo points, and the point immediately denotes ownership, the men being referred to as "his." The contrast between the limp bodies of the men and the pointing, leering crowd in the photograph represents

<sup>21</sup> Henninger, "Atrocity or Nation-Building? The Difference Is in the Eye of the Beholder," 247.

<sup>22</sup> Jakob, "What Remains of Abu Ghraib?: Digital Photography and Cultural Memory," 31.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

a sense of power– ownership– over Black people. The photograph becomes a trophy of White American power over Black individuals. However “Americanness” is defined, photographs, as cultural objects, work to represent a dynamic of power and stand as “trophies of accomplishment” for the defeat of national enemies.<sup>24</sup>

### The Perpetrators



Fig. 6. “Spectators at the lynching of Jesse Washington, one man raised for a better view. May 16, 1916, Waco, Texas. Gelatin silver print. Real photo postcard. 5 1/2 x 3 1/2” (Allen, James , and John Littlefield. 2025. Withoutsanctuary.org).

When asked to explain the motive behind the photographs taken at Abu Ghraib, Sgt. Lynndie England told investigators, “We thought it looked funny, so pictures were taken.”<sup>25</sup> The seeming obliviousness of the soldiers to their unconscionable actions demands to be understood, not to excuse the acts, but to showcase how the contradiction represents a disturbing norm, rather than an aberration, in American history.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>25</sup> Apel, “Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib,” 96.

The structure of the United States military may explain the contradiction between the gestures and actions of soldiers at Abu Ghraib. “To smile at the enemies’ pain,” Jakob states, is a part of a soldier’s job.<sup>26</sup> To a young soldier, the impetus to perform to the highest standard is strong, along with the sobering knowledge that death could come to them or others at any moment. How does a person deal with that knowledge? How does one look in the eyes of another as they commit heinous acts of torture on them, or even kill them? Often, this requires dehumanization. The forcible nudity of detainees. The human pyramid. There is an intentionality with which victims are posed by soldiers, and the smiles and gestures of soldiers indicate their need to fit into the “sympathetic culture of fellow ‘fun-seekers’,” with the knowledge that they could die tomorrow or are permitted to maim, torture, or kill the now inhuman bodies in front of them.<sup>27</sup>

Middle Eastern detainees were (and are) seen as terrorists, real threats to American democracy and national security. As defenders of democracy, Apel argues, soldiers’ “sense of community sanction was also fundamental to the torture and atrocities.”<sup>28</sup> It may be the case that Sgt. Frederick saw himself not forcibly posing Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh, a man like himself, but a dangerous enemy of the nation (Fig. 1). Specs. Graner and Harman might have thought the same (Fig. 3). Rather than viewing this as a justification for the soldiers’ acts, it showcases a dark pattern common to American nationalist groups. At a spectacle lynching, the sense of community sanction was potent. Large crowds gathered to watch the horrific events, with black victims seen as threats to the white community. A photograph from the lynching of Jesse Washington in Waco, Texas in 1916 showcases a massive group joined in support of the brutality (Fig. 6). Mirroring Abu Ghraib, lynch mobs created their own sympathetic culture surrounding

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<sup>26</sup> Jakob, “What Remains of Abu Ghraib?: Digital Photography and Cultural Memory,” 31.

<sup>27</sup> Henninger, “Atrocity or Nation-Building? The Difference Is in the Eye of the Beholder,” 258.

<sup>28</sup> Apel, “Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib,” 90.

the torture of a national enemy in the interest of defending the nation. In this case, the national enemy is Black Americans, who were perceived as a threat to whiteness, which was “code for America itself.”<sup>29</sup> Atrocity photographs showcase the perpetrator’s motivations for their acts and make evident the continued role of the torture, brutalization, and humiliation as acts of power in defense of the nation.



Fig 7. “The lynching of W. C. or R. C. Williams, his body hanging from oak tree, lower body covered with kitchen apron, blood streaming down legs suggests castration, onlookers include white men and young children. October 15, 1938, Ruston, Louisiana. Gelatin silver print. Press photo. 9 x 6.” (Allen, James , and John Littlefield. 2025. Withoutsanctuary.org).

### The Tortured Body

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

An analysis of how the bodies of Middle Eastern detainees Abu Ghraib and Black detainees in lynchings were brutalized reveals the intersection between white masculinity and American national power. In both sets of photographs, non-white, male victims are dehumanized by white, mostly male perpetrators. In the three photographs analyzed from Abu Ghraib, there is a sexual nature to the torture— the connection of an electrode to Saleh’s genitalia; the nakedness of the leashed prisoners and the men in the pyramid (Figs. 1, 2, 3). There is also an element of vulnerability beyond nakedness— prisoners are forced to balance on a box, or on top of each other, or be held at the neck by a leash (Figs. 1, 2, 3). The detainees are made to be off-balance, weak, and effeminate next to the overwhelming masculinized power of the U.S. military. Even with a female torturer, such as in the case of Lynndie England, masculinity, or lack of it, is key. Scholars have pointed out England’s own “masculinized figure,” with her short hair and military uniform (Fig. 2).<sup>30</sup> This masculinization is only reinforced by the detainees’ nakedness and collapsed position (Fig. 2). In each photograph, the image of weak, unstable, effeminate prisoners contrasts with the stable, fully clothed, masculine personnel in power.

The tortured bodies of Black men in lynching photographs demonstrate a similar power dynamic. Black men, stereotyped as “hyper-sexual” threats to white women, were also sometimes forcibly nude, and often castrated during lynching. In a photograph from the lynching of W.C. or R.C. Williams in Louisiana in 1938, Williams is pictured castrated and wearing a kitchen apron (Fig. 7). The feminization of Black men during lynchings served to “reaffirm notions of superior white ‘manliness.’”<sup>31</sup> Victim’s bodies become inhuman, part of the “undifferentiated mass” of the enemy— the Muslim “terrorists” or the Black “brutes.”<sup>32</sup> This

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<sup>30</sup> Apel, “Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib,” 95.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 93.

allows the perpetrators, audience, and viewers of the photographs to at once accept the torture of others and feel validated in their national power and superiority.

### Where Do We Go From Here?

“Photographs are us.”<sup>33</sup> In both sets of atrocity photographs analyzed, acts of torture are documented by perpetrators committed to the protection and preservation of America— whether America is defined by whiteness or by democratic values. When faced with the “irrefutable” evidence of an atrocity photograph, the reflex of the patriotic American may be to embark on a quest toward moral preservation— blaming the “bad apples,” viewing the photographs as artifacts of the past, doing everything in our power to widen the gap between the act of atrocity perpetrated by members of our nation and ourselves.<sup>34</sup> This reflex reinforces a viewpoint that sees the events depicted in these photographs as aberrations when they truly exemplify the interwovenness of torture and American national power. While Susan Sontag’s work more directly applies to journalistic photography of war, not photographs taken by perpetrators, her point stands— Americans should view these photographs as mirrors to themselves, rather than artifacts of the past.

Earlier, this paper discussed the capacity of atrocity photographs to serve as trophies for the accomplishments of the nation over Others. The “trophification” of the photographs does not end with the perpetrators, though. Looking back at atrocity photographs, it is tempting to “re-trophyify” them as artifacts of a brutal past that evidence a brighter present. Instead of acknowledging the violence continuously embedded in exertions of American national power, we use these photographs to reclaim our values— “this would never have happened today.” This paper should be taken as evidence against this statement— atrocity runs rampant in how

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<sup>33</sup> Susan Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Henninger, “Atrocity or Nation-Building? The Difference Is in the Eye of the Beholder,” 258.

Americans display power. Instead of upholding atrocity photographs as symbols of what America has overcome, they should be confronted as evidence of real issues we must continue to face.

It is just as tempting to blame the “bad apples.” We want to imagine that if we were in the place of a soldier at Abu Ghraib, we would not have taken the photo, grabbed the leash, or given the thumbs-up. These are the hypotheticals that a photograph can provoke in the minds of viewers, and they lead us to distance ourselves from the complexity of the acts that the photographs depict. A productive conversation may better flow from a serious investigation into the structures of culture in which these atrocities took place. The purpose would not be to absolve perpetrators of their crimes but to more fully condemn their actions in all aspects.

Whether centering white nationalism in lynching photographs or military power in the photographs from Abu Ghraib, photographs that register as displays of national power, in reality, display the opposite.<sup>35</sup> Upon closer examination, these photographs and the responses to them showcase an unwillingness for Americans to face the ugly nature of American power— from the post-Reconstruction era to 2004, and beyond. Americans must not view these photographs as lessons from the past, “re-trophy-ify” them as a show of “how far we’ve come,” or attempt to distance themselves from the torturers themselves. It is only in the recognition of the reality of the ongoing violence of American national power, that the nation can move towards change.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 260.

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#### Image Credits

- Allen, James, and John Littlefield. *The Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, a Large Gathering of Lynchers. August 7, 1930, Marion, Indiana. Gelatin Silver Print. Copy Photo. Frame, 11 X 9", Photo, 3 7/8 X 2 3/4" Inscribed in Pencil on the Inner; Gray Matte: "Bo Pointn to His N---." on the Yellowed Outer Matte: "Klan 4th Joplin, Mo. 33." Flattened between the Glass and Double Mattes Are Locks of the Victim's Hair."* 2025. *Withoutsanctuary.org*. [https://withoutsanctuary.org/pics\\_28r.html](https://withoutsanctuary.org/pics_28r.html).
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