

THE GIRL AND THE SOLDIERS

A Code of Conduct for Images of Children in Conflict

By James Thomas Snyder

James Snyder served on NATO's International Staff from 2005 to 2011.

While working on NATO's International Staff in Brussels I produced a promotion campaign for the organization during the 2009 Lisbon Summit. I asked member nations to suggest strong, powerful images showing the Allies in action in Afghanistan to demonstrate their contributions to NATO's most important mission since the end of the Cold War. I received dozens of images and using a variety of online combat camera resources went through thousands more to find images that clearly demonstrated individual national contributions. It's harder than it sounds.



Figure 1: Spanish Air Force tactical air controllers during a dust-off, Bal Murghab Forward Support Base, Afghanistan, 2008. (ISAF photo by U.S. Air Force TSgt Laura K. Smith.)

One image I remember was this one. My colleagues in the U.S. Mission loved it. I liked it, too. What's not to love? The pure joy of a child is obvious to anyone. It was displayed outside the U.S. Military Delegation with justifiable pride. But I didn't use it in my campaign. I explained that while it was "good optics," it didn't show anything real, tangible or concrete about the mission in Afghanistan. It made people feel good, but I needed images that could deliver more.



Figure 2: U.S. Army photo (date not known).

Imagine my surprise, then, when the same picture showed up in a similar campaign for the 2012 NATO Summit in Chicago, along with several more pictures of children. These, too, were similarly feel-good photos, like something you might see on a postcard printed on recycled paper and sold to benefit UNICEF. The 2012 campaign was billed “NATO Delivers: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow”. But from the pictures, it wasn’t clear *what* NATO had delivered. It’s true that due to the Allied intervention, security and aid, more children are in school and have access to basic medical care. But that certainly wasn’t demonstrated by these postcard pictures, as pretty as they may be.



Figure 3: Afghan girl outside of hospital in Mazar-E-Sharif, Afghanistan. Photo by US Army Sgt. Chris Harper.

By then, though, the picture of the girl with the soldiers had taken on a life of its own. Working on another project for NATO at the National Defense University at Ft. McNair in Washington, D.C., I found the image had been worked into wrought iron as part of a pictorial history of the U.S. Armed Forces in Lincoln Hall. The little girl was now the U.S. Army's answer to Sharbat Gula, whose famous haunted glance was captured for the cover of National Geographic magazine in 1985.



Figure 4: Photo by the author.

I didn't like what was being done with this girl and the others in the 2012 NATO campaign. I knew, for example, that we wouldn't use this image in Afghanistan or other Islamic countries to show what we were doing there because it displayed the soles of the girls' feet. So as a tool of political communications, the image was effectively moot. She made us feel good and that was all. And if we weren't thinking through the images we used to portray our actions, then we probably weren't really thinking how we portray and represent children, particularly those found in pictures like these from conflict regions. I don't have anything against taking pictures of children, and I think the work of combat camera crews is both heroic and necessary. My point is we need to be much more careful how and when we use those images for political effect. There is a place and a purpose for them. But we need to know what we are doing.



Figure 5: A Canadian soldier with Afghan children. Source: Canadian Forces Combat Camera

Pictures like these are used all the time, in photo essays for the Defense Department you can view, right now, online. The State Department, the White House, NATO – organizations and institutions use them. And other nations and their leaders do, too. Political figures most famously use children in photographs. There’s a reason we have the political cliché “kissing babies”.



Figure 6: President Obama meets a new resident during a visit to Prague in April 2009. Official White House Photo by Pete Souza

We should start by understanding how dramatically children play on our emotions. This is primarily why they are such good subjects for political communications. They represent innocence, joy, simplicity, goodness. We see ourselves in them, our own children, and our future. Being with children communicates that guilelessness by association. Violating that innocence is more than the same transgression against an adult because there are no mitigating circumstances with a child.



Figure 7: A child is given lessons by U.S. Marines at Forward Operating Base Geronimo in 2010. ISAF photo

That is perhaps why this photograph, a formative image of the war in Iraq, is so viscerally affecting. In early 2005, American soldiers killed this girl's parents who approached their checkpoint in a car. The soldiers also wounded her brother. The stark terror on her face, like the blood of her parents, is impossible to escape. If you were against the war, this would be your banner. If you supported the war, she would be on your conscience. Images like this must also remind us of the wide gulf of reality in conflict: the relief of security and liberation against chaos and mutilation and death.



Figure 8: Photo by Chris Hondros, Getty Images [RIGHTS NOT SECURED]

The child's power over the mind is well-understood by the most savvy political masters, which is another reason why we should be wary of how we use the pictures of children. Dictators like Josef Stalin Mao Zedong, Kim Il-Sung and others were regularly hagiographed in *drawings* with children but were rarely photographed with children. So they remind us that images of children can deceive, even as democratic nations operate in complex conflict environments. In many of these cases, children are dependent on foreign forces for security, food and shelter. Insurgent environments may be more fluid and intricate than appear in a photograph. As the counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen notes, "[B]eware the children....[C]hildren are sharp-eyed, lacking in empathy, and willing to commit atrocities their elders would shrink from." I remember visiting a Forward Support Base in Herat in late 2005 when just months after Italian troops had taken up there children were begging outside the gates for "*uno euro, uno euro*".



Figure 9: Children jostle for water handouts near Ghazni, Afghanistan, late 2010. Photo by U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Joseph Swafford.

There is no code of conduct for combat camera crews and certainly nothing similar for political communications professionals. We need one so that we can maintain our integrity, know that we are not exploiting children whom we probably have never met, and so that we can continue to communicate honestly and clearly with the public. For example, when I worked on my campaign, I found dozens of images like this one of U.S. service personnel visiting the burn ward at the Indira Gandhi Childrens Hospital in Kabul to donate toys and supplies. Hidden by the war is an epidemic of pediatric burns, caused mostly by kerosene fires which families use to heat and light their homes. I couldn't use the images because most of them are simply too horrifying. They could also be confused for wounds caused by terrorism or unexploded ordnance, not something as commonplace as a household burn. To be really effective, these pictures need to be applied to a campaign to support the hospital.



Figure 10: Navy Lt. Jessica Gandy visits with a young patient of the Indira Gandhi Childrens Hospital in Kabul, 2008. Photo by Navy Mass Communications Specialist Petty Officer 1st Class (AW) Monica R. Nelson

We should have a reasonable knowledge that the photos were taken in a public place or with the child's parent's consent. We should make reasonable attempts to protect the child's security by concealing, where necessary, the child's name as well as place and time of the photograph. Some of the photos in this essay were posted publicly with the names, locations and dates when they were taken. That could be dangerous for the kids or their families. When I worked on my campaign, I did not use any names (most weren't provided anyway), stuck to districts or regions instead of towns, and seasons instead of months. In some places you don't have to worry about things like that. But in some places, you do.



Figure 11: U.S. Navy Master Chief Petty Officer Susan Whitman shares candy with a young girl during a visit to the Camillian Social Center, which serves HIV/AIDS sufferers and their families in Rayong, Thailand, early 2012. Photo by U.S. Navy photo by Chief Petty Officer Eric S. Powell

Without being staged, the photograph must physically demonstrate some aspect of what we are trying to communicate. In the case of this photograph, for example, a medical officer is treating the child. It may illustrate, for example, that U.S. military personnel have treated hundreds of thousands of Afghans and flown thousands of them outside the country for medical treatment.



Figure 12: U.S. Army Spc. Joe Kunsch performs medical checks on village children during a combat patrol in Khowst province, Afghanistan, early 2012. U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Jason Epperson

Propaganda is often described as the exploitation of a public's emotions for political purposes. In today's emotion-saturated culture, that may be a moot point. But that doesn't mean we should abandon our principles and our integrity. Children are a real part of the environments in which we operate, and they will inherit the future for which we fight. We have an obligation to portray in a truthful and accurate way what we are doing for them and their families, and we need to use images of them to demonstrate that.



Figure 13: A U.S. soldier pulls security in Wardak Province, 2010. Photo by Jon Rosa.

This young soldier, Spc. Jessica Walker of Anoka, Minn. – in a feel-good photo if I ever saw one – has it right. “The goal is to form relationships,” she said in 2010, “not to just hand out stuff.” I think you can see from this photo she’s doing exactly that.



Figure 14: U.S Army photo by Pfc. Cameron Boyd