

## Regarding the Imprisonment of Others: Prison Abuse Photographs and Social Change

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Through four case studies of U.S. incarceration, this paper explores the relationship between the visualization of abuse and change in policy. By examining the verbal and visual presentations of abuses at Andersonville (1864-1865), Attica (1971), Guantánamo (2002-2005), and Abu Ghraib (2003-2005), the paper argues that there is no simple correlation between images, outrage, and social change. Querying prison images currently and historically questions the assumption that simply rendering visible the unseen will limit abuse. Indeed, these case studies suggest a more ambivalent role for the power of images: sometimes causing great change, at times resulting in little difference, and other times having questionable impact. At question is what role images play in drawing attention specifically to those places where attention was never meant to be, the institutions that have defined themselves by being out of sight and thus out of mind. In examining the power, use, and impact of still photographs, this paper interrogates the role of the state and identity in approaching structures of incarceration.

Pictures are thought to have great power because they can transfix popular attention on people or institutions in ways words alone cannot. The impact of visuals raises the question of how much effect images—particularly those of abuse, neglect, or violence—have in determining policy and shaping perception. Scholars have already shown that the visual depiction of atrocity, particularly in the form of genocide, has not necessarily translated into increased attention to similar abuses; however much they may structure subsequent visual tropes of depicting atrocity, for instance, Holocaust photos have neither prevented genocide nor made societies any less silent or complicit in similar atrocities. Indeed, the proliferation of such atrocity photos may provoke social change or aid efforts, but they may also facilitate passivity, induce fleeting individual feelings of guilt, or even preclude the act of bearing witness to human suffering that is said to be the greatest power of such images (Berger, 1980; Zelizer, 1998). Some have argued that public overexposure to atrocity images, using familiar formulas, can sap people's ability to empathize, resulting in "compassion fatigue" (Moeller, 1999) or what sociologists Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton (1948) famously called the media's "narcotizing dysfunction."

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How, if at all, does the role of images change when the scenes being depicted move from the battlefield to the big house—when photographs emerge of an institution whose power rests on *not* being visualized? After all, the secluded structure of imprisonment would seem to suggest an official belief that it would be difficult for prisons to successfully function as “complete and austere institutions” (Foucault, 1995 [1975]) if the public, physically or via photography, had regular and unrestricted access to prison conditions. In his foreword to an anthology of prisoner writings, journalist Tom Wicker (1998) notes the dual function of prisons: “to keep *us* out as well as *them* in” (p. xi; emphasis in original). These borders are accomplished not only through limiting the circulation of prisoner writings, which anthologies attempt to correct, but images of prison as well, which is why prison reformers have turned to images as a way of razing at least the metaphorical walls of incarceration. Believing that bringing prison, particularly prison abuse, into public view will create change, several photographers and reformers have turned to the camera as a way to create change regarding incarceration.

In U.S. history alone, photographers have documented torture in Confederate prisons during the Civil War, abuse on Southern chain gangs in the early 20th century, and the wretchedly banal existence of modern incarceration (Caldwell and Bourke-White, 1937; Ostman and Littell, 2005; Spivak, 1969 [1932]). Often times, such images of incarceration have been published with the express purpose of creating change in policy and public perception of prison and prisoners (e.g., Jacobson-Hardy, 1999). It is not just radicals and reformers who operate from a belief in the power of visuals; the government has historically tried to limit if not ban the visual depiction of prisons and treatment of prisoners—a policy arguably brought into existence by official fear that images would spark controversy and action critical of the state. As a result, official fiat seeks to limit the visualization of institutions such as prison because, as Simon Philpott (2005) argues, “what is represented by images is often of less concern to powerful interests than their existence” (p. 229).

Such contention over photographs rests on the notion that seeing is believing, that images provide the documentary evidence necessary to spark reform efforts. But how great is the impact of such images? This paper examines four case studies that can be viewed as conceptual models of the relationship between the visualization of prison abuse and subsequent discourse about and policy regarding prisons. These models—Andersonville (1864-1865), Attica (1971), Guantánamo (2002 to the present), and Abu Ghraib (2003 to the present)—all involve instances of prison abuse, whose visualization, under the “seeing is believing” logic, should lead to change, particularly given the discordant nature of such photos. That is, they show the fallibility of the state regarding precisely an institution whose success revolves around the presumed sanctity of state power.

By looking at the use and effect of news images of each case (mainly in the form of still photographs published in newspapers such as the *New York Times*), these models offer a paradigm for conceptualizing the relationship between images, incarceration, and structural change. Although change in policy is not the only valid measure of the power of pictures—one can easily imagine, for instance, useful research on the relationship between visuals and paradigmatic shifts (Perlmutter, 1998, attempts some of this)—such structural change is the focus here for reasons both pragmatic and political. Pragmatically, it is easier to quantify changes in policy than in attitude, especially regarding images of events that occurred more than a century ago. Politically, examining whether images factor into policy decisions uncovers the

material as well as ideological weight of visuals. Recognizing that policy change emanates not just from within government but also as the result of pressure applied from those outside of government, this paper also pays attention to whether images of abuse help catalyze or feed into social unrest. Querying prison images currently and historically questions the assumption that simply rendering visible the unseen will limit abuse. Indeed, these case studies suggest a more ambivalent role for the power of images: sometimes causing great change, at times resulting in little difference, and other times having questionable impact. Looked at another way, some highly visualized instances of abuse have resulted in little social change, and numerous reforms have emerged from events with scant photographic evidence. The discussion below picks up on Perlmutter's (1998) assertion that "icons of outrage"—dramatic and arresting images of tragedy or atrocity—do not drive policy, even when they prove highly controversial.

Although this paper is an examination of conceptualizing prison images, each model studied here illustrates the confluence of war and prison as a useful frame in select cases. That is, all four case studies involve the impact of incarceration and its relationship to war. Both war and prison involve the nation-state's imposition of force, and that imposition runs throughout each of the models studied here. Andersonville was one of the Confederacy's major prisons, and Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib have become synonymous with imprisonment during the "War on Terror." Within this, the Attica rebellion and its aftermath stand out for not involving a military prison, even if the events transpired against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. But in the view of Congressman Herman Badillo (Badillo & Haynes, 1972), who was on the team of observers at Attica, the military-style assault on the prison with shoot-to-kill orders from the upper echelons of government is convincing evidence that the situation was one of war. Indeed, the war paradigm was in motion before police retook the prison. The stark response by New York state officials framed the issue as one revolving around the safety and sanctity of the nation: Governor Rockefeller said the prisoners' demands "had political implications beyond the reform of the prison which it was not possible for us to conform to and at the same time preserve a free society in which people could have any sense of security," while the state's top corrections official said the rebellion "threatens the destruction of our free society" (quoted in Badillo & Haynes, 1972, p. 131). It is this presumed connection between incarceration and national security that makes it possible to speak of the relationship between Attica and Abu Ghraib. At a general level, both war and prison involve the state's power to deal with the "enemy," whether such an adversary is a "criminal" or a "combatant."

At question is what role images play in drawing attention specifically to those places where attention was never meant to be, the institutions that have defined themselves by being out of sight and thus out of mind. In examining the power, use, and impact of still photographs, this paper interrogates the role of the state and identity in approaching structures of incarceration. After examining each case study, the paper looks at the examples generally to contribute to existing literature about the relationship between photography and the state (Tagg, 1988), and about photography's power to either visually present order or to define the world (Hartley, 1992; Fishman and Marvin, 2003; Sontag, 2004a)—while also examining the relatively un-theorized issue of prison images.

The sample for this paper included books and hundreds of journalistic articles and photographic presentations in newspapers and magazines. I examined approximately 50 articles about Andersonville between January 1863 and December 1865; 200 articles about Attica between Sept. 9 and Oct. 15, 1971;

and several hundred articles about and AP photographs of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo between January 2002 and October 2005. While I examined other newspapers, I gave principal attention to the *New York Times*—both because it is widely viewed as “the paper of record” and because it is the major newspaper within the United States that has existed long enough to cover all four of the models studied herein. As with any source, it comes with its own biases, and I do not treat it as an impartial source. It was staunchly pro-Union during the Civil War and, because it tends to be more liberal than conservative, may be disposed to harsher criticism of Republican officials (Rockefeller for Attica, the Bush administration for Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo) than other publications. Still, it is the pre-eminent newspaper in the United States, and focusing on the *Times* offers some measure of consistency in showing how one of the nation’s top newspapers has positioned stories of prison abuse.

### Case Studies

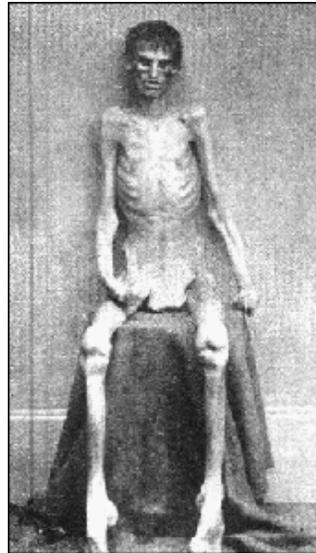
#### When Seeing is Enough: Andersonville and Photography’s Auspicious Beginnings

Although reports of abuse in Confederate prisons had emerged from escaped Union prisoners as early as 1861, it was the new medium of photography that stirred emotions, debate, and dramatic action by the state—the Union state, in this case (Goldberg, 1991, p. 20). Andersonville prison in Georgia, where approximately 100 prisoners died daily in the summer of 1864, became a symbol for the entire system of Confederate incarceration (ibid). Located in remote southwest Georgia, Andersonville quickly grew to incarcerate thousands of Union prisoners of war: After opening in February 1864, it held 23,000 by June and had 45,000 prisoners by the time it closed in April 1865. After political maneuvering by both sides, the prisoner exchange process that occurred in the early years of the war had broken down by the time Andersonville opened. This predictably led to a dramatic influx of prisoners in both the North and the South, leaving captives to suffer from malnutrition or endeavor risky escape attempts as conditions worsened in prisons on both sides due in part to resource shortages as the war continued to drag on (Silber, 2003, pp. 107-109). In the 14 months of Andersonville functioned as a prison, 13,000 Union prisoners died there, mostly from starvation or illnesses brought about by the wretched conditions of their captivity (ibid., p. 107).

Although Andersonville became a vital rallying cry for the Union against the Confederacy’s disrespect for human life, its conditions were not unique among Civil War prisons. Indeed, despite the high number of prisoners who died at Andersonville, the Confederate prison in Salisbury, North Carolina, actually had a higher *rate* of deaths among the captives held there: according to Silber (2003, p. 106), 34 percent of the 10,321 held there died. Such high mortality rates, emanating as much from resource scarcity as from sectional antipathy, were not limited to the South. The small western New York town of Elmira began to house a Union prison camp about the same time as Andersonville opened. It grew to hold about 12,000 men—about a quarter of whom died while incarcerated there, earning the prison the inglorious title of “death camp of the North” (Horigan, 2002). In his study of the military prisons in the Civil War, Charles Sanders Jr. (2005) notes that 30,218 of the 194,743 Union soldiers held in Confederates prisons died, whereas 25,976 of the 214,865 Rebel soldiers incarcerated in Union prison camps perished. Thus, one-seventh of every person who fought in the Civil War became a prisoner of war—and one-seventh of the prisoners of war “perished at the hands of their captors” (ibid., p. 1). The

same issues that made Andersonville stand out, from overcrowding to failed prisoner exchange, defined other military prisons on both sides of the battlefield. But it is the notorious prison of the defeated Confederacy that became a symbol for the North and a bellwether for the emerging photographic technology.

**Figure 1. Andersonville Emaciated Prisoner**



A picture of one of the Union soldiers incarcerated at Andersonville. As part of the emerging photographic technology, this and similar images from Andersonville prison helped raise public anger in the North. *Credit: The online guidebook [Sherpa Guides](#)*

Beginning in the winter of 1864, a barrage of reports emerged from escaped prisoners and others of abuse and maltreatment at Andersonville specifically, in addition to other Confederate prisons. Published in northern newspapers, including the *New York Times*, these articles and editorials were part and parcel of a political struggle being waged through the newspapers. The reports became further proof of the South's venality. Incensed by the reports—some of which some historians have subsequently alleged to be exaggerated or apocryphal (Marvel, 1994, p. 243)—Congress initiated an investigation of Southern prisons and ordered photographs of freed prisoners to be taken and included with its published findings in May of 1864. Five weeks after the Congressional report, two weekly illustrated magazines, *Harper's* and *Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, published engravings of the photographs of eight emaciated prisoners from Andersonville—images which now bring to mind the photographs of 20th century atrocity from the Holocaust. Both the congressional report and the illustrated magazines were spread far and wide; the Senate printed 20,000 copies of the report, and *Leslie's* at this time had a readership estimated at two-and-a-half million people (Goldberg, 1991, pp. 20-21). *Harper's* and *Leslie's* printed few words with the images, claiming that the visuals told the story by themselves. Indeed, the cover of *Leslie's* for the June 18 issue featured engravings of the eight prisoners on the bottom two-thirds of the page—and had a

seemingly incongruous news story boasting of Union military victories on the top third of the page, with no mention of the disturbing images that dominate the page, perhaps because the story was written and placed well in advance of the pictures becoming available or, alternately, because the newness of including photographs meant that packaging stories and images as related had not yet emerged. The caption for the images at the bottom of the lists the names and rank of each man shown, along with a note: "Union soldiers as they appeared on their release from the rebel prisons—from photographs made by order of Congress" (page reprinted in Goldberg, 1991, p. 23).

And yet no image can be fully understood without words, even if captions are not the primary way in which the image is contextualized and explained. Not yet printing pictures, the *New York Times* sought to make up for what the illustrated publications lacked in words; in editorials and news stories alike, the *Times* praised "our brave and patriotic soldiers" who faced the "atrocities of Southern despotism" at Andersonville ("Union Prisoners at Andersonville," Aug. 24, 1864). The combination of incensed newspaper coverage and widely publicized images fed Union calls for retaliation against Southern cruelty; the photographs were used to bolster not only Northern antipathy but the claim that the South intentionally abused its prisoners (as if Union prisons lacked their own levels of maltreatment). Calls to retaliate against the brutality of the South especially increased after Lincoln's assassination (Goldberg, 1991, p. 24). The pictures presented the emaciated prisoners as the helpless victims of an already treacherous Confederacy, men whose very human form was abused and transformed as a result of the South's willful negligence that denied them (adequate) food, medicine, or shelter. The North as a whole was assailed by these images and concomitant reports of prison abuse, with the prisoners being depicted as representatives of the North overall: the images and reports showed how "they" (the South) don't care about "us" (the North), who are all victims of this abuse. The photos, then, were enmeshed with the familiar boundaries of national identity, such that the abuses were presented as an offense to the group overall (Sontag, 2004a, p. 10).

As a result, Captain Henry Wirz, the highest ranking commander of the prison still alive at the war's end, was arrested in May for conspiring with other Confederate officials to "impair and injure the health and to destroy the lives ... of large numbers of federal prisoners" at Andersonville and "murder, in violation of the laws and customs of war" (quoted in Futch, 1968, p. 117).<sup>1</sup> With the images in mind, the military trial received sensationalist coverage; one front-page *New York Times* story about the case, written to describe the courtroom scene, opened by calling Wirz "[s]corned, loathed, despised, hated of all men and women" and wondering aloud why "there was no outraged soldier to take the law into his own hands and shoot the miserable creature as he walked with his guard, or sat on the luxuriously cushioned lounge between his counsel" (Dixon, 1865, p. 1). Because of Northern anger over the prison abuse, and because the other commanding officer of Andersonville died prior to the prison's closing, Wirz became the individual embodiment of Andersonville's horror, if not also the sole representative of Confederate

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<sup>1</sup> Fourteen of the other Confederate officials were named as co-conspirators: Jefferson Davis, J.A. Seddon, Howell Cobb, John H. Winder (who was deceased), Richard B. Winder, Isaiah White, W.S. Winder, W. Shelby Reed, R. R. Stevenson, S.P. Moore, Kerr (no first name given; former hospital steward at Andersonville), James Duncan, Wesley W. Turner, and Benjamin Harris. None of these men was tried for crimes at Andersonville or during the war overall. ("Execution of Wirz," November 11, 1865).

systemic injustice. Former prisoners testified at his trial to seeing the Swiss immigrant shoot and murder captives in cold blood—though some such testimony is suspect given that witnesses reported some of the egregious incidents as happening at a time when Wirz was not at Andersonville or involved acts the captain would have been incapable of carrying out due to debilitating illness and a disability in his arm (Futch, 1968, p. 117; Marvel, 1994, p.174). Still, Wirz was convicted and hanged in November 1865, the only Confederate prison official hanged after the war. His execution was not only public, it was photographed and published, as if to give closure to the Andersonville horror in a way similar to its initial description: through pictures. Both the living skeletons depicted in the images taken of Andersonville survivors and the righteousness of the Union's position were thought to be vindicated through Wirz's execution. There is now a prisoner-of-war museum in Andersonville—complete with a cemetery for the 13,000 who perished while confined in the prison—erected in 1988 and dedicated to all U.S. soldiers held as prisoners of war in any armed conflict.<sup>2</sup>

### **When Not Seeing is Enough: The Attica Rebellion and Prison Reform**

Following a scuffle with guards, a group of prisoners seized the D-Yard of Attica Correctional Facility on Sept. 9, 1971. An inchoate riot quickly transformed into a political rebellion, with 1,000 insurgent prisoners using their new-found position as leverage to address a series of longstanding grievances some had previously tried to address through other means. At the prisoners' request, a negotiation team was assembled, consisting of journalists, attorneys, academics, politicians, and activists—all of whom tried to mediate between the prisoners' demands and those of the government, as represented by Commissioner of Correctional Services head Russell G. Oswald. But negotiations broke down when the government and the prisoners couldn't agree on crucial issues. In the early morning of Sept. 13, Governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered New York State Troopers to retake the prison by force. With gas and with guns, the police recaptured the prison, in the process killing 29 prisoners and ten guards held as hostages by the prisoners (Wicker, 1975).

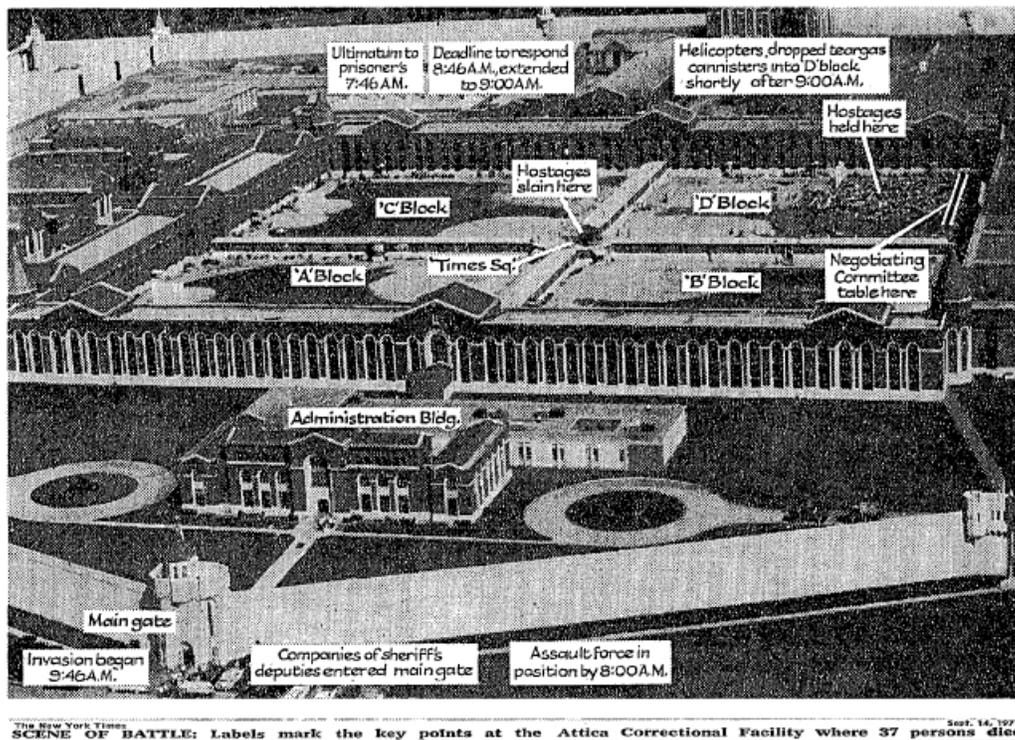
Images were a part of the Attica story from the beginning, but they hardly defined it. Indeed, many stories of the event lacked a photographic element at all, and those that did often had a limited or not particularly enticing visual component. The grey exterior of the prison was the most common image used, relying on the indexical power of images: A picture or drawing of the prison frequented stories about the tumult, together with arrows and captions to show viewers what part of the prison the insurgents

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<sup>2</sup> There is also an ongoing attempt to vindicate Wirz or to argue that the conditions at Andersonville were no worse than any other prison during the Civil War, whether operated by the Union or the Confederacy. Others argue that the resource-strapped Confederacy was unable to feed its own people adequately, and so prisoners suffered due to the South's lack of food and other supplies toward the end of the war, rather than Southern capriciousness. Such arguments take different forms, from scholarly arguments to the work by a Confederate women's memorial group in the town of Andersonville that erected a statue commemorating Wirz and "proclaiming him a scapegoat of Northern postwar anger" (Silber, 2003, p. 114). See Ovid Futch, *History of Andersonville Prison*, and J.H. Segars, ed., *Andersonville: The Southern Perspective*. Segars' book does contain photographs, although none of the images of the emaciated prisoners are included.

occupied, where hostages were being held, the route the observers had to take to enter the yard, and where negotiations were taking place. This use of the prison map parallels the use of maps in journalism for wartime explanation (Monmonier, 1999, pp. 2-24)—and indeed, the *New York Times* captioned the map as “scene of battle” (*New York Times*, Sept. 14, 1971, p. 28). Other images similarly utilized the indexical virtue of photographs, particularly the ubiquitous headshot of officials involved in negotiation, mainly Russell Oswald.

Figure 2. Attica Prison Map

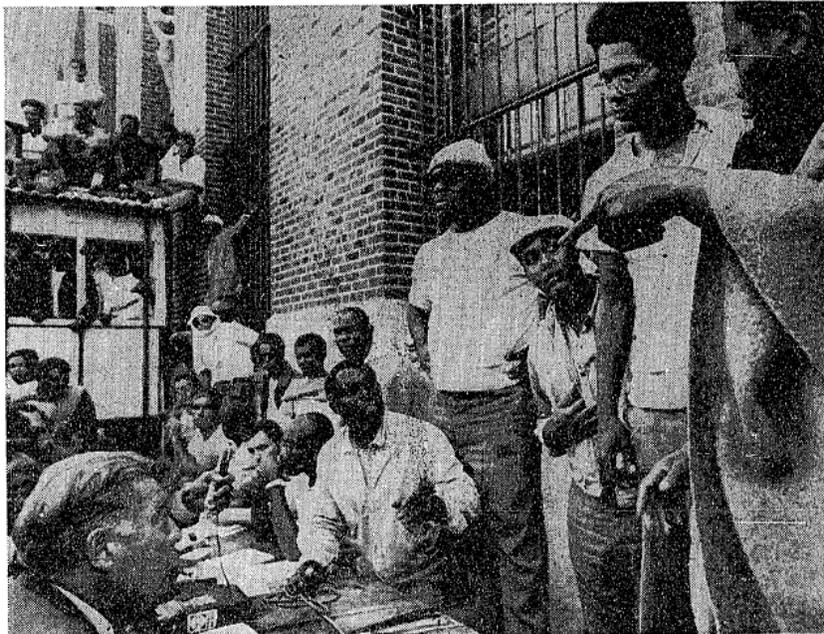


This map of Attica printed in the *New York Times* includes arrows guiding readers to where the action transpired behind prison walls. That such images became major visual elements of the story suggest the lack of Attica’s dramatic visualization. Credit: *New York Times*, Sept. 14, 1971, p. 28.

Of the relatively few photographs published that included people, rarely were they sympathetic to the insurgent prisoners. Those images that did emerge from behind the walls prior to the Sept. 13 assault showed prisoners deep in negotiation with Oswald and flanked by stone-faced members of the prisoners’ security team (*New York Times*, Sept. 11, 1971, p. 1) or depicted prisoners yelling with their clenched fists raised (*ibid.*, p. 31). A feature story by journalist and observation team member Tom Wicker describing the process of visiting the occupied D-Yard and published the day after police retook the prison

featured a picture taken (and first published) days earlier of prisoners standing in the “no man’s land” area to meet members of the observation team. Holding makeshift weapons and with their faces masked to avoid identification—and with no caption explaining the image—the prisoners appear as a frightening gang, although Wicker’s story describes them as rather genteel (Wicker, 1971, p. 41). (The visual depiction of “the enemy Other” as more actively engaged in violence and more frightening than the state is consistent with Fishman and Marvin’s [2003] findings based on surveying 21 years of *New York Times*’ front-page photographs.)

**Figure 3. Attica Negotiation**



**LISTENS TO PRISONERS: State Correction Commissioner Russell C. Oswald, left, meeting with inmates in Attica Jail**

Prisoners deep in negotiation with Corrections Commissioner Russell Oswald (seated at left). *Credit: New York Times, Sept. 11, 1971, p. 1.*

**Figure 4. Attica Masked Men**

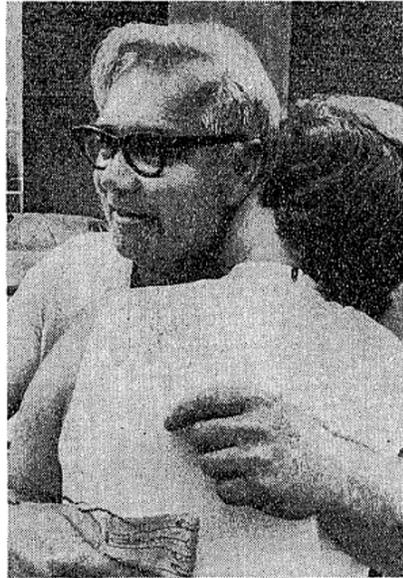
**Prisoners in corridor to Cellblock D, accompanied by TV cameraman, arrange site for negotiations with officials**

The New York Times/Robert Schuff, A.P.

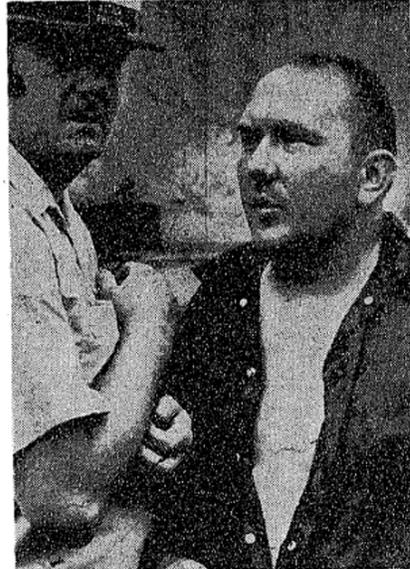
Reprinted with several news stories at the time, this photograph depicts masked and crudely armed prisoners in Attica waiting to transport guests and negotiators inside. The foreboding image even accompanied stories describing the prisoners as genteel. *Credit: New York Times, Sept. 11, 1971, p. 1.*

As state troopers moved in to retake the prison, journalists from print and broadcast media outlets stood outside, recording the audio of the gunfire blasts but largely unable to get visuals of the assault itself. Indeed, police barred reporters from the inside scene until after they had taken control of the prison; then reporters, chosen by lot, and legislators were given separate tours of the facility (Kaufman, 1971, p. 29). It was at that point that journalists were able to take their own photographs behind prison walls (police photographers had the only footage of the assault itself, though these images were not yet released to the public). The images they took included photographs of the tent-filled and trash-strewn D-Yard, complete with a trench prisoners had dug for protection during their occupation of the yard—although in the context of the police assault it more resembled a mass grave. (This image also resembles a photograph from Andersonville, one of the few taken at the prison site itself; see the respective photo sections in Wicker, 1975, and Marvel, 1994.) There were also photographs of state troopers displaying makeshift weapons said to have been seized from the prisoners. The grainy photographs from inside D-Yard appeared on the inside pages of the following day's *New York Times*; the cover images consisted of joyous pictures of guards reunited with their loved ones, smiling and comforting each other after a five-day hostage situation (*New York Times*, Sept. 14, 1971, pp. 1, 29). As Hartley (1992) writes of journalism and visualization more generally, the photos accompanying the end of the Attica rebellion showed the restoration of normalcy—between the government and prisoners, and between husbands and wives of reunited families.

Figure 5. Attica Family



The New York Times  
Elmer Huehn, released hostage, being greeted by his wife



Associated Press  
Guard, who had been held, still dazed after being released



The New York Times/Michael Evans  
Relatives of hostages in Attica prison after being told that at least 15 of the men being held had been set free

These three photographs appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* after the hostages were rescued, establishing a visual trope of relief at the bloody end of the prison riot. *Credit: New York Times, Sept. 14, 1971, p. 1.*

The riot was a brazen rupture of state authority, and thus post-riot images followed this visual trope of order restored. For instance, after autopsy reports showed that, contrary to initial state claims, all of the dead hostages were killed by police and not the prisoners, the images accompanying that story are two headshots on the front page (one of the medical examiner, one of Oswald)—and a large, rather mundane photograph on the inside page of guards changing shift outside of Attica's main gates (*New York Times*, Sept. 15, 1971, pp. 1, 32).

**Figure 6. Attica Guard Change**



Associated Press  
**GUARDING PRISON'S MAIN GATE:** State policemen at passage during change of guard at Attica. A trooper and a guard are leaving at the end of their shift. Troopers continued to work alongside guards inside the compound.

A relatively benign photo of a shift change at Attica following the rebellion serves to visualize the armed, if latent, power of the state. *Credit: New York Times, Sept. 15, 1971, p.32.*

Such images underscored that the government was once again in control—even as the autopsy reports showed that the government's central claim, following its already unpopular military assault, was a lie. The restoration of order was a recurring theme in the images. One of the central images that ultimately emerged from the police assault on the rebellion, taken by the troopers, is of a zigzag line of hundreds of prisoners, naked and with hands on their heads after being forced by state troopers to strip and crawl through mud.

**Figure 7. Attica Naked Democrat and Chronicle**



Taken by the state and released to the media, this photograph shows prisoners at Attica stripped naked—ostensibly to ensure that they were not carrying weapons—before being taken back to their cells. *Credit: [Democrat and Chronicle](#)*

Also visible in this picture are a smaller number of armed troopers, many of whom are still wearing gas masks. (This photo adorned the hardcover edition of Wicker's book about the riot, *A Time to Die*.) Because journalists were barred from the prison during the siege, this picture and others of the police assault were taken by state photographers and released to the public.<sup>3</sup> These images are clear indications of control, of punishment, and of who has the power to exercise either. At the same time, in presenting force as something the government was willing and ready to engage in but only as a last resort—opting instead for a visual trope of the state, while armed, engaged primarily in repairing the

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<sup>3</sup> Several of the state photographs, as well as still photos taken from video footage that government employees filmed during the retaking of the prison, are available online via the Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle's* Web site devoted to pictures from Attica:  
<http://www.democratandchronicle.com/news/extra/attica/gallery/attica000.html>.

situation and reuniting families—the visuals reinforced the “latent violence” of the state (Fishman and Marvin, 2003, pp. 33-34).

And yet these photographs don't necessarily endear the viewer to the state. While those hostile to the prisoners were prone to view the image favorably as putting the rebels in their place, those sympathetic to the prisoners' demands identified the photograph as evidence of abuse and clear proof that the government had gone too far. Depending on how one viewed the rebellion, this photograph and others similar to it either questioned the sanctity of the state, with the prisoner demands highlighting systemic inequity, or reinforced state power to discipline and punish those who would defy it, especially when they've already violated a social norm. Thus, as Perlmutter (1998, p. 5) argues, it is how one identifies with the players in a situation that determines at least initially how one reads even the most visually arresting images. In other words, the polysemic structure of images means that one's joy, repulsion, or ambivalence to a picture of brute force depends on how one defines the context that exists beyond the moment that the photograph freezes in time. Polysemy does not preclude individual or collective shifts in opinion or identification based in part on the images. But it does mean that no image is embedded with an inherent meaning. There is, instead, a dialectical relationship at play between existing beliefs and broader social-political contexts in viewing images.

Unlike Andersonville, the prisoners of Attica were not (at least, not initially) portrayed in the mainstream press as helpless victims of state cruelty. Quite the opposite, in fact; over the four days of the tumult, the few images from inside depicted prisoners as active, emotive, even threatening, figures—negotiating with government officials, caring for their needs, coordinating self-defense measures, expressing anger or joy. At the same time, the prisoners were said to have caused pain and suffering to the families of the guards held hostage—especially since the government initially put forth the fallacious charge, printed uncritically and often without attribution in newspapers, that prisoners had castrated and slit the throats of the hostages (see, for instance, Ferretti, 1971, p. 1). Given all these images, it would be logical to expect little change for prisoners following the rebellion. After all, of the stories surveyed, there were few images of people—in an event already not defined by its visualization—and those that did appear seemingly served to bolster the ultimate control of the state, especially considering that the government released its own photographs to the image-hungry media showing the prisoners as thoroughly defeated and humiliated. The victims in images from Attica are not the prisoners—as they are in other visualizations of prison, whether in Andersonville or more recent iterations (e.g., Jacobson-Hardy, 1999)—but the hostages and their families, whose victim status was at least partially the fault of the prisoners.

And yet, there were real, material changes in prison conditions not only at Attica but at prisons throughout the country following the tumult there (and similar, though less bloody, disturbances at prisons nationwide in this time period). While the insurgent prisoners' demands were not all met, the riot had a palpable, if limited, effect regarding prisoner treatment and access to resources: following the rebellion, prisoners at Attica and some other institutions nationally could now shower twice a week, build (modest) law libraries, eat fresh fruit, have conjugal visits with wives and contact visits with friends and loved ones, spend less time locked in their cells and with less prison overcrowding, deal with more Black

and Latino guards,<sup>4</sup> and experience less censorship in correspondence and reading material (Wicker, 1975, p. 389; Parenti, 2000, p. 166).<sup>5</sup> The warden of Attica, whose removal was one of the prisoners' demands, took early retirement four months after the rebellion.

In addition to some changes in conditions, Attica also yielded broader cultural shifts—including the fact that the word “Attica” instantly became a parable of the failures of U.S. incarceration, a mnemonic device that still finds currency. Within a year of the rebellion, there were not only massive protests inside and outside prison walls against carceral abuse, but there were popular and scholarly books detailing what happened at Attica, what's wrong with imprisonment in the United States, and what changes can possibly be made (see, for instance, Badillo & Haynes, 1972; and Leinwand, ed., 1972). The government's response to the uprising remains a popular reference point in conceptions of prison in this country, catalyzed by the phrase “Attica is all of us” (Hames-Garcia, 2004, pp. 231-234; Prashad, 2003, p. 115).

The uprising there catalyzed social change because it was an expression of dissatisfaction with the U.S. prison system that was fairly widespread at this time among not just the radical Left social movements but also among what Perlmutter (1998) dubs the “discourse elites” of politicians, media, and academics—the people of a variety of political persuasions occupying formal positions of social and structural power. Indeed, the tumult at Attica arose following a series of efforts aimed at changing prison conditions nationally, including better food, less crowding, increased access to educational material, and less brutality from guards. One year before the riot, “two federal judges in New York had demanded that the state change the disciplinary rules in its prisons” (Badillo & Haynes, 1972). A *New York Times* editorial printed in the middle of the Attica rebellion cited a New York state report released months prior, after a nonviolent work stoppage by Attica prisoners and riots at other New York state facilities, in arguing for a systemic overhaul (“Now, Attica Again,” 1971, p. 26). The editorial chastised the government, at both the state and national levels, for not acting on reform measures after repeated disturbances at prisons across the country<sup>6</sup> and said that many of the prisoners' demands “ought to have been provided long ago.”

This reform mood continued after the rebellion was over. While critical of the prisoners and their allies, the *New York Times* editorial on Sept. 14, 1971, dubbed the police response a “holocaust” brought

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<sup>4</sup> As with most prisons in the United States, the prisoners at Attica were largely Black and Latino men, and yet the guard staff was *almost exclusively* white men. Thus, there were complaints about racist treatment from prison officers and calls for hiring more Black and Latino guards.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, with the “war on crime” rhetoric that took hold in the 1980s and 1990s—and helped structure increasingly punitive approaches to sentencing and prisoners—many of these reforms have been consistently eroded. Parenti (2000, p. 163-169) argues that this was a conscious strategy of the elites who, having lost legitimacy by violently suppressing the prisoners, had to offer a pittance of reform to maintain their broader power.

<sup>6</sup> After all, the immediate roots of the Attica uprising was the murder of George Jackson, a prisoner in San Quentin, California, and field marshal in the Black Panther Party who was killed, allegedly in an escape attempt, in August 1971. Attica prisoners held a silent protest, wearing black armbands and refusing to eat breakfast the day after his murder (Wicker, 1975, p. 8).

about by the draconian conditions that had sparked the rebellion—conditions, the paper exclaimed, that were unfair both to prisoners and guards alike, and thus mandated change lest future violence erupt (“Massacre at Attica,” p. 40). Indeed, among the several stories printed in the *New York Times* the day after the rebellion’s closure was an article detailing ongoing legislative meetings aimed at curtailing prison overcrowding (Pace, 1971, p. 35). And the response to the riot immediately brought trenchant criticism from a slew of politicians, corrections professionals, private citizens, and activists—all of whom objected to such a heavy use of force, if not opposed to the use of force at all, and called for sweeping reform in prisons nationwide (Darnton, 1971, p. 33). The images of the police assault on Attica were connected to an ongoing political struggle about prison where different forces in society each offered a convenient villain—either the state or the prisoners were violent thugs (Charlton, 1971, p. 30; Parenti, 2000, p. 166). The issues did not immediately fade after the Attica story was no longer front page news; the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals, a blue-ribbon committee established by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, issued a report in 1973 calling for a moratorium on prison construction; the definition and protection of prisoner rights; and increased pay, professionalism, and diversity among prison staff and officials (Parenti, 2000, p. 165).

News articles about responding to Attica and the crisis of American incarceration were generally unaccompanied by any image; the Attica affair lacked an iconic image (the way the image of emaciated prisoners was for Andersonville), and its significance has never revolved around its visualization. The response to the Attica rebellion and its violent ending was the result of the circumstances of the time—a period when prisoners were involved in widespread social and political movements and when prisoners had been repeatedly pressing for institutional changes (see, for instance, Cummins, 1994; Hames-Garcia, 2004; Parenti, 2000), as well as the broader political movements of the time that were contesting the state’s legitimacy. Given these conditions, and the barriers to prison access for photographers and journalists that prevented the emergence of an iconic image from the affair, visuals were not required for there to be social change. Regardless of how people felt about the prisoners’ actions, there was widespread concern about state power and the response to prisoner grievances.

### **When (Not) Seeing is Complex: Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, and the Ambivalence of Photography in the 21st Century**

American, and indeed world, attention was fixed on U.S.-run prisons in the “War on Terror” when the now-(in)famous pictures surfaced in April and May 2004 of U.S. soldiers torturing Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. That the abuse depicted occurred at Abu Ghraib was significant: the prison once housed some of the most notorious torture under the regime of Saddam Hussein. That U.S. soldiers took the pictures on their own digital cameras and for their own use was of equal significance to the story. While the Abu Ghraib torture photos were particularly arresting, they fed into an existing debate about U.S. treatment of detainees abroad since 2002. Indeed, Abu Ghraib quickly became conjoined with the interrogation camp the United States operates in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Structurally, journalist Seymour Hersh (2004) argues that the roots of the Abu Ghraib tortures are a “Guantánamo problem” (p. 1).

That the two institutions have become linked offers a worthy intervention for conceptualizing the presumed power of visuals. The revelation of abuse at Abu Ghraib rests on images as the centerpiece,

whereas images cannot feature prominently into the Guantánamo story because so few photographs exist of the latter institution and those that do are not as dramatic as the Abu Ghraib images—which have become the standard trope for prisons in the “War on Terror.”<sup>7</sup> And yet, international concern over how the United States treats its detainees involves outrage at both institutions (and others, such as the Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan). When the Republican-controlled Senate of the United States overwhelmingly passed a resolution in the fall of 2005 against the torturing of detainees in U.S. custody abroad, it was clear that treatment of prisoners had become a central issue in the war (Kiely and Diamond, 2005, p. 11A). Thus, despite the wide difference in their respective visualization, Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo can be grouped together when considering questions of U.S.-run prisons in the current period.

On the surface level, it would seem that the Abu Ghraib photographs have had great impact; after all, it is those pictures that are used as a bargaining chip to argue for why there needs to be increased transparency in and accountability to the maintenance of U.S.-run prisons. That is, the Abu Ghraib photographs are said to have brought to the surface abuse believed to be occurring at other institutions, including recent reports of secret CIA-run prisons in Eastern Europe and elsewhere (Priest, 2005, p. A1) and the placing of terrorism suspects in the custody of allied countries with no provisions against torture (Mayer, 2005). Thus, the “out of sight, out of mind” mentality characteristic of prisons in general—already extended with the Guantánamo “gulag” (Cowell, 2005, p. A10)—is being utilized by the United States the world over. The argument for public oversight rests on a need to know what is occurring at these clandestine prisons, with visual access as a presumed requisite step toward knowing.

The interrogation camp at Guantánamo Bay received its first internees Jan. 11, 2002. The prison was opened with the express purpose of housing presumed terrorist suspects, held for interrogation so that the United States could obtain “actionable intelligence” (Hersh, 2004; Rose, 2004). The camp has proven controversial from its inception for two reasons: The people held there have been given the nebulous classification of “enemy combatants” (rather than “prisoners of war,” a designation which carries with it explicit legal provisions) and the camp is encased in secrecy with little media or other access to the facility.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the secrecy and lack of images prompted the International Committee of the Red Cross to depart from its normal method of operations by telling the media about its concerns over what was

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<sup>7</sup> To give a banal but still telling example, two of the five books about Abu Ghraib examined for this paper feature a section of images inside the book and four of them display one of the disturbing torture photos. Danner (2004) and Strasser (2004) have both torture photos on the cover and a section inside with more pictures, and the cover to a study of Abu Ghraib and the media by Rajiva (2005) features one of the famous images of the abuse. Indeed, Hersh (2004) is the one exception: the cover of his book does not feature a picture from Abu Ghraib. While Ratner and Ray (2004) and Rose (2004) both feature images from Guantánamo on the cover of their respective works, neither book has a section of photographs inside. It is also worth noting that, based on searches of the University of Pennsylvania library catalog and of amazon.com, there are more books devoted to Abu Ghraib than there are to Guantánamo.

<sup>8</sup> Those who have had access to the prison—namely, a select group of journalists and politicians—are shown such a limited and distorted view of the camp that Rose (2004) likens it to a Potemkin Village: “a carefully constructed fiction, whose worst aspects were ruthlessly concealed” (p. 55).

happening inside the prison, as allegations of abuse were widespread (Rose, 2004, 66-67). But the secrecy shrouding Guantánamo is not just its lack of visualization but its structure writ large: indeterminate detention of unknown people on undetermined charges for an undefined length of time subject to unmonitored (if not unrestricted) physical and psychological treatment. In that, Guantánamo is an extreme version of incarceration more generally, resting as it does on the ultimate, and undisclosed, power of the state and the invisibility of those it imprisons (presumed, as they are, guilty of transgression and worthy of punishment). It is Guantánamo's exacerbation of features common to incarceration that makes the interrogation prison stand out (ibid., p. 22).

**Figure 8. Guantánamo Bay Fence**



One of the few, and thus widely circulated, images from the U.S. prison camp at Guantánamo Bay. Credit: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4787105/>

Reporters were on the scene when the first detainees arrived in Cuba, and a few pictures did appear: men being taken off the plane shackled to a stretcher and blindfolded or hooded; or men in orange jumpsuits, shackled, masked, and sitting uncomfortably on the ground in a small fenced area. (Such images adorn the cover of Ratner and Ray [2004] and Cole [2003], respectively.) These images, Rose (2004) argues, aroused anger throughout the Muslim world, where they "have become a trope for cartoonists and pamphleteers, a graphic rendition of oppression that speaks to millions of Muslims." Rose goes so far as to say that these images are "turning moderates into fanatics determined to smite the West" (pp. 11-12). Instead, the bulk of the controversy emerged not from the cartoons and pamphlets in the Muslim world, but from eye-witness testimony of visitors or released prisoners, from the prodigious efforts of the prisoners' attorneys to challenge the prison as a "legal black hole" (ultimately resulting in

the June 2004 Supreme Court ruling that said the prisoners had a right to legal representation), and the dramatic actions of detainees (which include numerous suicide attempts and hunger strikes). More than the pictures, these actions have fed repeated calls from people of a variety of political persuasions to fix or close Guantánamo (Rose, 2004, pp. 32-33, 63-64, 77-78).

With Abu Ghraib, of course, the tables are turned—the visuals are the stepping off point for the controversy, not only because the images are so vivid and disturbing, but because the photographs were taken by the abusers themselves. Indeed, the offending soldiers can be seen smiling and posing with their victims. Photography was, Hersh (2004, p. 38) reports, “part of the dehumanizing interrogation process,” where the visual documentation added to the shame embedded in the torture—not only forcing men to masturbate or simulate oral sex with other men, not only beating them or stacking them in a nude human pyramid, but doing it all in front of the camera’s eye.

**Figure 9. Abu Ghraib Pyramid**



Army prison guards Charles Graner and Lynndie England smile at having forced prisoners at Abu Ghraib to form a naked human pyramid.

*Credit: [Guardian Unlimited](#).*

*Originally published in the New Yorker.*

**Figure 10. Abu Ghraib Leash**



Guard Lynndie England drags prisoner by leash in one of many images U.S. armed forces personnel took of abuse imposed.

*Credit: [Guardian Unlimited](#).*

*Originally published in the Washington Post.*

Unlike Guantánamo, where the presidential administration and its supporters could claim that detainees were well treated, that abuse occurred at Abu Ghraib was not in question—it was, in fact, proudly distributed and displayed by those responsible. That is, unlike Guantánamo, the evidence of abuse at Abu Ghraib is not in question, because of the visuals. And yet, for all the ink spilled about it, for how central images have been to the torture becoming a scandal, revelation of the Abu Ghraib abuses has not

yet resulted in widespread institutional change. Instead, there was a fast round of military trials for nine of the soldiers seen in the photos, with most pleading guilty: out of sight, out of mind.

Saying that limited institutional change has resulted from the photographs is not to argue that the images have not helped shift domestic public opinion against the war in Iraq or served to increase Muslim and Arab (or other) anger at the United States more generally. Indeed, the polysemic functions of images mean that various audiences will interpret and act on the photographs differently, based on ideological position and social location. And the audiences of Abu Ghraib photographs are quite varied. The glee evident in the smiling soldiers depicted shows that the intended audience was the military personnel themselves—both those present and others possessing the similarly toxic blend of violence and frustration. Similarly, the quick if limited defense of the abuse by numerous U.S. officials and pundits suggest the existence of an audience that is not particularly scandalized by the photographs, even if it wishes they would disappear. At the same time, various images from Abu Ghraib continue to be adopted globally for artistic expressions of anti-war or even anti-American sentiment. They are proof that the war was ill-advised, has been ill-pursued, or is ill-maintained. Thus, the images not only “interact” with pre-existing ideas (Domke, Perlmutter & Spratt, 2002) but serve as metonyms by which an ever-widening group of people opposed to the war in Iraq can make their argument (see also Perlmutter & Wagner, 2004).

With both Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, there has been excessive *controversy* but limited *change* in policy and structure—or, at the very least, the level of change differs little from the institution defined by its visualization to the one defined by its invisibility. Indeed, the response to the two prisons has been rather similar: the issue of prison abuse has been sharply criticized, and the U.S. government has been pushed into releasing some of the internees. And yet, both prisons remain open and largely unmonitored with strong indications that abuse is still common. Hundreds of prisoners remain at Guantánamo, many of them held without trial or charge since 2002, and Abu Ghraib holds thousands of prisoners (although the prison is ostensibly now under Iraqi control). In some respects, Guantánamo has achieved a more dramatic response, with calls for the camp’s closure—demands few have made of Abu Ghraib, at least in as strident a manner.

Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib both represent opposite poles in terms of their visualization yet the official response has been similar and, indeed, intertwined as correlated facets of a broader narrative about U.S. treatment of detainees in the “War on Terror.” In discussing the pictures that emerged of the Abu Ghraib abuses, noted author Susan Sontag (2004b) predicted that the confluence of an unnecessary war with the widespread availability of visual technology (e.g., digital cameras, cell phone cameras, etc.) will render such abuse photos “unstoppable.” This may be true, but a deeper question remains unanswered: What, if anything, will result from a ubiquity of such images?

### **The Ambivalence of Seeing: Individuals, State Power, and Images**

There are several issues that cut across these case studies, including the role of the state in debates over images, the impact of photographic authenticity and technology on visualizing abuse, and

the role of the body in images. Examining these issues suggest a fundamental ambivalence regarding the role of prison images and social change.

In discussing the secrecy surrounding the Guantánamo interrogation camp, journalist David Rose (2004, p. 109) quotes former military interrogator Patrick McDonald, author of *Make 'Em Talk!*: "The number one mistake interrogators make when questioning others in ways which could be construed as damaging or offensive is allowing witnesses." Clearly, there has been an attempt to limit witnesses to incarceration, especially in instances of prison abuse, as behooves state interests. Indeed, the state is intimately involved in the production and circulation (or lack thereof) of images: The Union brought in photographers to document abuse at Andersonville and then spread the images around to support its broader claims of Southern treachery, New York state barred journalists from the scene of the police assault on the Attica rebellion but selected its own photographs to release publicly, the Bush administration has largely banned photojournalists from Guantánamo and has gone on record as regretting the *images* of Abu Ghraib while at the same time downplaying their significance vis-à-vis the war overall—that is, questioning whether the images really depict *torture* or "just" humiliation, and then blaming the abuse on the pathology of a few individual soldiers (Sontag, 2004b). In many respects, the state is a far more powerful actor in the visualization of prison abuse than the media. Because it technically owns the prison, the government is largely able to control who has access to it—which is why the Abu Ghraib images, taken by soldiers on their own digital cameras, are so dangerous. After all, the government is responsible for most images of Andersonville and Attica, as well as responsible for the lack of images of Guantánamo.

Yet the assumption that seeing is believing, and therefore must be controlled or unrestricted (depending on one's agenda), is not limited to state interests. Reform efforts also rest on the realism of photos to convey their argument, operating on a belief (even if generally left unsaid) that simply seeing abuse or treacherous conditions ought to spark change. Yet the realism and authenticity of the Abu Ghraib images, the most photographed of the models studied, has not been questioned. Instead, the debate has been over the uses and justifications, if any, of torture. Conservative commentators such as Rush Limbaugh defended the soldiers depicted abusing Iraqi detainees as simply "blow[ing] some steam off," likening it to a "fraternity prank" (quoted in Friedman, 2005). It was not what the pictures showed that caused controversy but instead a question of whether such violence is acceptable. (That people, both within and outside government, would engage the question of torture's acceptability shows how the inherent malleability of images—that no image, regardless of what it depicts, carries with it an automatic response [Perlmutter, 1998].) Indeed, questioning the authenticity of abuse allegations has emerged more in Guantánamo, where there are almost no images—and the few that have surfaced do not rival the intensity of the photos from Abu Ghraib—than any of the other case studies examined herein. In Cuba, abuse is still said to be alleged and circumspect, concomitant with the argument heard about Abu Ghraib: that the internees are dangerous people, "enemy combatants" without significant legal rights.

The images at Andersonville arguably had the biggest impact of the models studied here—in that anger over the abuse depicted in images was so great that it led to an execution of the man deemed responsible. But Confederate prisons, if not Andersonville specifically, were already causes of controversy and spite among many Northerners. The indexicality of photography was brought in to corroborate what

was already common by way of slogans about and derisions against the South. The limitations of this success for photography are apparent: the images led to Northern self-aggrandizement rather than self-reflection over Union prison conditions, and acknowledged systemic inequality was embodied in one man. Granted, as head of Andersonville, Wirz deserved his fair share of the punishment for gross human rights violations. Still, when punishment is embodied solely in individuals for what were widespread social and political acts, change is limited. There also remains a need to put ideologies and structures on trial alongside the specific individuals responsible. From its very beginning, then, photography has had a troubled relationship to individual power and to social structures. The verisimilitude of photographs always involves political manipulation or is at least implicated in political agendas. Of the four models, Andersonville is the only place where photographers were called in by the state (the Union side) to prove that abuse occurred—the only time in any of the case studies examined here where the government orchestrated having photographs taken. It was, as Tagg (1988) argued of photography's ascent more generally, used as an investigative device for political ends.

The role of photographic technology also shapes the debate, and is part of the reason Andersonville had such great effect. Because they accompanied the ascent of photography, the images of Andersonville reinforced and were reinforced by the notion that seeing is believing (hence, the photographic evidence was thought to speak for itself and not in need of a caption) whereas much of the ink spilled about the abuse relied on the existence of the images. The Abu Ghraib torture photos also emerged at a moment of technological innovation, this time with the rise of digital imaging. Yet the effect has been much different, even though the Abu Ghraib photos were taken by the abusers themselves rather than at the directive of the state. Debates continue to rage over whether the abuses at Abu Ghraib were ordered by the upper echelons of the military apparatus—and certainly the soldiers are appropriately seen as representatives of the state. But it is clear that the top brass did not order photographs to be taken and distributed; that emerged from the soldiers themselves. Appearing with the rise of photographic technology, Andersonville was believable because the camera was thought generally to be a believable medium. Abu Ghraib, on the other hand, happened at a time of more widespread skepticism over images, especially regarding the digital technology used to document the torture. Andersonville fit the moment of photographic verisimilitude whereas Abu Ghraib does not.

In comparing the Abu Ghraib photos to the profuse images of lynching in the United States a century previously, Susan Sontag (2004c) notes the importance of technology in shaping photographic actions. "The lynching pictures were in the nature of photographs as trophies—taken by a photographer in order to be collected, stored in albums; displayed. The pictures taken by American soldiers in Abu Ghraib reflect a shift in the use made of pictures—less objects to be saved than evanescent messages to be disseminated, circulated" by the individuals involved (as opposed to the state circulation of the Andersonville photographs). Because of the technological developments, Sontag says we live in a "digital hall of mirrors" in which "the pictures aren't going to go away." But the pictures may not have to go away; between blaming only the individuals seen in the photographs and widespread skepticism over digital photography, the images may be able to exist without forcing the government to significantly alter its policies.

These models also illustrate the (complicated) power of seeing the body in images of abuse: Abu Ghraib can be processed as “bad apples” because we can clearly see the individual abusers in the photographs—we can, indeed, make out Charles Graner’s tattoos and clearly see Lynndie England’s smile. Not only are atrocity photographs processed and responded to individually (Berger, 1980), but there can also be a predilection toward ascribing guilt on an individual basis—either with Abu Ghraib, where the torturers proudly pose with their victims, or with Andersonville, where newspaper coverage focused so heavily on one individual as to obscure systemic problems. To be sure, the Bush administration sought to use the high visibility of individual abusers in the photographs as a way of mollifying critique and deflecting a more systemic accountability for the torture—an example of circuitous logic that author Susan Sontag (2004c) deftly criticized in the *Guardian* in a May 2004 article. “The issue is not whether the torture was done by individuals (i.e., not by ‘everybody’)—but whether it was systematic. Authorized. Condoned. All acts are done by individuals. The issue is not whether a majority or a minority of Americans performs such acts but whether the nature of the policies prosecuted by this administration and the hierarchies deployed to carry them out makes such acts likely.” In that, Sontag is not asking that Graner and his crew—or Wirz, for that matter—go unpunished, but that blame lies much higher and calls for a more systematic accountability.

Blaming the Abu Ghraib abuses on particular individuals alone, due to their visibility in now-famous photographs, highlights the contradictory relationship between images and (national) identity. Philpott (2005) notes that photographs can often be used to delineate the boundaries of collective identity, telling “‘us’ all ‘we’ need to know about ‘them’ to reaffirm ‘our’ commitments” or pre-existing notions. And yet when images that are unflattering to “our” side emerge, those in power are quick to deride the individuals seen in the pictures; in the case of Abu Ghraib, the “grinning torturers are represented by the Bush administration as a few bad eggs that have brought disrepute on the U.S.” (p. 239). Under this logic, Philpott argues, the images “tell ‘us’ almost nothing and distract ‘our’ attention from the tasks laid down by the war on terror” (p. 241).

Guantánamo and Attica, on the other hand, show the system, not individuals—even if it is through a relative invisibility that the system is shown. Relegated to the outside of the prison, photographers and television journalists had limited access to what was going on inside. As a result, the medieval exterior of Attica Correctional Facility loomed large in maps, pictures and television coverage. Even if used for its indexical value and simply because it is all journalists had access to, the image nonetheless proved a foreboding example of the site. The image was all the more formidable during the police assault, because photojournalists could take pictures of army helicopters flying over head, dropping CS gas over the prison yards, complete with the audio of machinegun fire. Of course, the lack of individuals to photograph rendered the police retaking of the prison to a higher level of abstraction—anonymous police in orange rain slickers and gas masks are difficult characters to identify with (although the grief stricken family members of hostages surely proved sympathetic figures). Images of Guantánamo, rare as they may be, are similarly anonymous: we see the facility or the fences surrounding it. When there are people in the picture, they remain largely anonymous—masked prisoners in the

distance, guards whose faces are obscured.<sup>9</sup> This relative anonymity could, at least in theory, engender a systemic critique not unlike the one following the end of the Attica rebellion. We see just enough to know that *something* is happening; the relative invisibility allows publics to imagine a range of behaviors going on inside, with no one individual tied to maintaining the prison outside of the administration officials who defend its use.

## Conclusion

Believing trumps seeing; indeed, what is seen often depends on what one believes. At Andersonville images bolstered Northern antipathy toward the South's barbarism, which was regularly skewered in the press. At Attica, images of the state's power restored—which positioned the prisoners' humiliation as a requisite for regaining control—questioned the legitimacy of a state that had gunned down even its own people to quell the rebellion. Significant changes in prison policy transpired with some speed after Attica, despite the subsequent rollback. In the response to Abu Ghraib to date, the individual abusers seen in the photographs were either bad apples or representatives of an immoral war. In each case, pre-existing political beliefs determine what and how one sees.

As a result, ambivalence abounds. There is no clear "ideal" in the models studied because even the "best" example turns out to be more complicated, relying not only on available technology but political machinations, mood and time scale. Images cannot be viewed in a vacuum but instead exist as part of the political contestations and conflagrations of a period. Rethinking the position on photography she developed 25 years prior, Susan Sontag (2004a) argues that perhaps too much expectation is placed on the power of images. "To designate a hell is not, of course, to tell us anything about how to extract people from that hell, how to moderate hell's flames. Still it seems a good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one's sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others" (p. 114). Given that, images of prison abuse raise troubling questions about state power and the media's ability to, as alternative journalist Amy Goodman (2004) puts it, "go where the silence is" (p. 4). The relationship between seeing, believing, and changing remains perennially complicated, troubled, and uneven—where images can seemingly play both major and minor roles.

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<sup>9</sup> This discussion doesn't include photographs accompanying stories about detainees who were released from Guantánamo—although in these instances, the images tend to be headshots of the individuals involved, often at press conferences, and thus follow a familiar visual formula.

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