

WARTIME PHOTOGRAPHY IN CONTEXT



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A High School Learning Resource
Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College
Developed by Henry Wilson, class of 2023, and Marjorie Johnson,
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WELLIN

Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art
Hamilton College

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Overview

This two-part learning resource aims to facilitate education around the Gulf War of 1991 and the Iraq war of 2003–11 using wartime photography in the Wellin Museum collection. The first section focuses on two photographs of the Gulf War, taken in Kuwait by Peter Turnley and Sebastião Salgado. The second part focuses on two photos related to the Iraq War, taken by Peter Turnley in Iraq and South Carolina, United States. The two parts can be used in tandem or individually. These conflicts were part of complicated geopolitical situations that continue to have repercussions on current events. Understanding them can equip students to better decipher the current moment.

Essential Questions

How does photography add to our understanding of stories of war? How might we look at photographs differently without knowing the context?

Learning Outcomes

1. Students will strengthen their skills in using visual evidence to support an interpretation and their ability to compare and contrast images.
2. Students will practice taking on the perspective of someone other than themselves.
3. Students will learn about the historical and political context of the Gulf War and the Iraq War.

PART ONE: GULF WAR

HISTORY OF THE GULF WAR

The Fertile Crescent is a historical area that occupied parts of modern-day Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, and Egypt, which we know today as the Middle East. These countries, among many others, comprise the geographically designated region. The ancient civilizations of Phoenicia, Assyria, and Mesopotamia developed on land along the Nile, bordering the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf. After a period of empirical rule by the Ottoman Empire, the British and French governments partitioned the region into separate countries. The state of Israel was created in 1948.

As technology progressed, residents became aware of vast fields of crude oil below them. They tapped into this natural resource, which quickly became the most sought-after resource in the world, leading to rapid economic growth. The global trade network expanded, and the region started to hold strategic importance on the world stage. OPEC, the Organization of Petroleum-Exporting Countries, was formed in 1960 as a means of controlling the exports of Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela (which also had significant oil reserves).

In 1990, amidst conflicts about the price of oil and Kuwait's production quotas, Iraq invaded Kuwait City. Kuwait's military was unprepared for the attack, and within days Saddam Hussein, the president of Iraq, had control of the country. A coalition of countries responded to defend Kuwait's autonomy, most prominently the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom. Iraqi forces burned the oil fields as they retreated from Kuwait to weaken Kuwait's resources as part of a scorched earth military strategy. At the end of the war, Kuwait regained independence and Hussein maintained control over Iraq, but the politics were forever changed. The U.S. imposed sanctions on Iraq and the United Nations ordered Iraq to cease-fire, leading to disarmament controversies that would play out later.



Peter Turnley

Peter Turnley. Gulf War, Kuwait, 1991. Archival inkjet print, 20 × 24 in. (50.8 × 61 cm). Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY. Gift of Mark Callahan, Class of 1994. © Peter Turnley.



Sebastião Salgado. Kuwait, 1991. Gelatin silver print, 13 9/16 × 19 5/8 in. (34.4 × 49.8 cm). Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY. Purchase, William G. Roehrick '34 Art Acquisition and Preservation Fund. © Sebastião Salgado/Amazonas - Contact Press Images.

Look Closely

Look at each photograph for a full minute.

Focus on different areas of each image. Start with the background, and end with the foreground. Move your eyes from top to bottom, side to side, and then in a circle.

In a group, have students identify at least three differences and three similarities between the photographs.

Journaling Activity

Create a new entry in a journal or on a sheet of paper. At the top of the page, write today's date and your location.

Reflect on what you think is happening in each photograph and identify a few details that support your idea. Write a few sentences about your interpretation of the photographs, including the details you focused on. Write a short headline that summarizes your entry. (8 mins)

Write a few sentences from the perspective of one of the men in the pictures, either the soldier or one of the oil workers. (10 mins)

Group Discussion

The class can share a bit of each part of the journaling exercise—their interpretation of the photographs, and what they wrote about in the perspective activity. The class can also discuss something that they like about each photo. This can be anything—an artistic aspect like composition, or something about the scene or the figures in the images.

PART TWO: IRAQ WAR

HISTORY OF THE IRAQ WAR

In the aftermath of the Gulf War and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the international community began to oppose Saddam Hussein's government. They responded with sanctions and an international disarmament treaty that stipulated that Iraq must submit to periodical compliance checks from the U.N. Tensions mounted as Iraqi officials refused to comply and accused U.S. inspectors of spying. The U.S. made the removal of Hussein a part of their official policy, but nothing happened until the attacks on 9/11 carried out by the group Al Qaeda.

A combination of economic insecurity, public fear of terrorism, political posturing, and Islamophobia led the U.S. to use 9/11 and noncompliance with the disarmament treaty as a justification for invading Iraq and deposing the Hussein regime. There was no evidence that Hussein was collaborating with Al Qaeda, and the evidence that Iraq had clandestinely developed weapons of mass destruction was eventually found to be fabricated. In 2002, the C.I.A. laid the groundwork for the impending invasion. In March of 2003, the U.S., along with the U.K., Australia, and the Peshmerga (the military power of the independent Kurdistan Region in Iraq), surprised the Iraqis by invading Baghdad. They were in turn surprised by the response, which was swift and strong. By April, Baghdad had fallen, and Hussein was in hiding. U.S. president George W. Bush televised a speech with a banner in the background claiming "MISSION ACCOMPLISHED," yet the U.S. would not remove a significant number of troops until 2011. Various insurgency groups surfaced, including the terrorist organization ISIS, which would go on to control over 56,000 km of Iraqi territory until 2017, when they were defeated by organized Iraqi and U.S. troops.

The violence in the country caused widespread chaos. Millions of Iraqis were displaced and hundreds of thousands were killed. In January 2020, Iraq expelled all foreign troops from the country, ending the U.S. presence that had been standing since 2003.



Peter Turnley

Peter Turnley. Funeral for a U.S. Soldier Killed in Iraq, South Carolina, 2004. Archival inkjet print, 20 × 24 in. (50.8 × 61 cm). Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY. Gift of Mark Callahan, Class of 1994. © Peter Turnley.



P. Turnley

Peter Turnley. Mother Grieves the Death of a Loved One, Iraq, 2003. Archival inkjet print, 20 × 24 in. (50.8 × 61 cm). Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY. Gift of Mark Callahan, Class of 1994. © Peter Turnley.

Look Closely

Look at each photograph for a full minute.

Focus on different areas of each image. Start with the background, and end with the foreground. Move your eyes from top to bottom, side to side, and then in a circle.

As a group, identify at least three differences between the photographs and three similarities.

Journaling Activity

Create a new entry in a journal or on a sheet of paper. Date the new page and give it a location, as you did in the first activity.

Reflect on what you think is happening in each photograph and identify a few details that support your idea. Write a few sentences about your interpretation of the photographs, including the details you focused on. Write a short headline that summarizes your entry. (8 mins)

Write a few sentences from the perspective of one of the figures in the pictures—the grieving woman, the dead soldier, the pallbearers, etc. (10 mins)

Ask Questions

Write down any questions that you have about the any of the photos after looking at them and writing about them. What are you wondering? What more would you like to explore?

Group Discussion

The class can share a bit of each part of the journaling exercise—their interpretation of the photographs, and what they wrote about in the perspective activity. The class can also discuss something that they like about each photo. This can be anything—an artistic aspect like composition, or something about the scene or the figures in the images.

Debrief and Check-In

These are heavy topics, and it's important to keep the feelings of the students in mind.

About the Artists

Sebastião Salgado is a Brazilian documentary photographer and photojournalist based in Paris. He started his professional life as an economist, with an M.A. in economics from the University of São Paulo. He was pursuing a Ph.D. in agricultural economics at the University of Paris when his job for the London-based International Coffee Organization brought him to Africa for the first time. He started shooting photographs and, in 1973, switched careers to become a professional photographer.

Working in both black-and-white and color, Salgado followed a tradition of socially concerned photography. With his visually striking compositions, he is considered one of the foremost contemporary photographers, though he also received criticisms of over-aestheticization and sentimentalization. His work earned him numerous photojournalistic awards such as the W. Eugene Smith Grant in Humanistic Photography. Twice he was named Photographer of the Year by the International Center of Photography, New York.

Peter Turnley is an American photographer based in Paris. He has worked in over ninety countries and has witnessed most major stories of international geopolitical and historic significance in the last thirty years. His photographs draw attention to the plight of those who suffer great hardships or injustice. He also affirms with his vision the many aspects of life that are beautiful, poetic, just, and inspirational.

Since 1975, Turnley has also continually photographed the life of Paris, his adopted home. A graduate of the University of Michigan, the Sorbonne of Paris, and the Institut d'Etudes Politiques of Paris, Turnley has received honorary doctorate degrees from the New School of Social Research in New York and St. Francis College of Indiana.

SOURCES: Denise Carvalho. "Salgado, Sebastião."

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Peter Turnley. "About." <https://www.peterturnley.com/about>. Accessed July 16, 2021.