

Traditional Narratives Resurrected: The Gulf War on *Life* Magazine Covers

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Introduction

Dominant ideology must be fixed – and invisible – in order to mask the narrative overlay imposed by hegemonic forces. Such narratives promote a worldview that the non-elite majority absorbs as *common sense*. Popular culture offers a plethora of artifacts and meanings for scrutinizing the inside detailed workings of hegemonic master narratives – the well-traveled terrain of such cultural studies scholars as Storey, Fiske, Hall, and the Glasgow Media Group. [1] These cultural critics have examined implications of invisible dominant ideology among content of television, film, novels, magazines, radio talk shows, songs, and news, for example. What is of particular interest here is the anomaly – instances when dominant ideology is visible.

Inequities in resource distribution are naturalized among those blind to the wide scope of the ruling class's power and influence. Yet, on those rare occasions when an event's magnitude exceeds the bounds of conventions and routines traditionally used to represent it, we may catch glimpses of seams characteristic of manufactured products. Thus, we posit here that an extraordinary event can throw the news media apparatus into a tailspin as news workers are challenged to produce a shared symbolic environment amid chaos. U.S. involvement in the Gulf War is one such moment of temporary disruption; one that found photojournalists covering the Gulf War bound by strict rules imposed by a Pentagon still reeling from Vietnam War-era news media criticism.

This analysis addresses mass media scholars' general inattention to magazines' content and function as a social indicator. In particular, most magazine research lacks theoretical underpinning, overlooks links between magazines' content and forces that create it, [2] and fails to elevate magazines' status to "catalysts of social, cultural, and economic change." [3] Instead, mass media scholars have scrutinized newspapers, books, [4] and television far more than magazines. [5] The current study seeks to fill these gaps by analyzing the ideological forces that affected *Life's* Gulf War covers during 1991.

Review of Literature

Literature that framed this study and facilitated data gathering is divided into four subsets: iconography in magazines, cultural import of cover images, *Life* magazine as

America's family photo album, and *Life* goes to war.

Iconography in news magazines

Magazine photography analysis has become an exclusive “subarea of research,” [6] unique among critiques of other content categories, such as text, headlines, and artwork. It is relevant to briefly examine how images are selected for publication. Overall, news photographers strategically choose shots that will bolster their reputation, having learned what their editors want for publication. [7] Reliance on images to tell a story – photojournalism – has assumed an important role in the manufacture of news in recent decades.

Successful cover photography shapes a magazine's image and elevates images to icon status. Many different literary traditions and conventions are available to photographers and editors to boost the commodity value of a magazine cover shot, such as framing, layout, lighting effects, posing of figures, adding props, and anchoring the photograph with an engaging caption. Based on their experiences with what sells on the newsstand, editor-gatekeepers routinely choose among photographs that will satisfy specific audiences and particular advertisers. The net result affects magazines' corporate profits and level of recognition among the magazine industry. News workers also promote dominant ideology by virtue of such decisions, although they probably are unaware of this residual effect.

Cultural import of cover images

Seminal magazine cover research persuasively has argued for continued analyses of magazine covers as rich resources for mining power struggles among socially-constructed private individuals and public figures. [8] Indeed, a magazine's cover is its most valuable sales vehicle and magazine publishers devote substantial time and financial resources to selecting images most worthy of this premium position.

Magazine covers have been defined as “benchmarks to history” [9] and as “cultural repositories” [10] that reaffirm rituals and attitudes. For mass media scholars, commodified images on magazine covers provide a “ready source of cultural symbols” [11] privileged amidst the manufacture of news. Thus, the favored status of some photographs over others for magazine cover publication and news workers' decision-making processes speak volumes about how magazine news is produced and shaped by dominant ideology.

Life magazine as America's family photo album

Why analyze *Life*'s covers? Since its first issue in 1936, *Life* was extremely successful at both generating sales and winning Pulitzers – earning a respected position among the pantheon of U.S.-defining popular culture. During its existence, *Life* maintained a huge national circulation, offered broad and general subjects, and employed a relatively continuous production staff. *Life*'s commercial success has been attributed to its ability to satisfy readers and advertisers.

It was *Life's* visual component that catapulted it to icon status, positioning itself as America's family photo album, [12] by offering large cover photographs that bled to the edges and were printed on high quality glossy paper stock. Kozol [13] characterized *Life* as one of the most popular American magazines of the 20th century and credited it for establishing a new visual code in the U.S. – news media's attention to visual imagery and the prevalence of images in advertising, education, and politics. Photographs fulfill readers' need for connectedness and familiarity in an uncertain and rapidly changing world. Photographs shape our notions of what is worth our gaze and what we have a right to look at. [14] This mirror world is the socially constructed reality of naturalized inequity which the public has been socialized to accept as the norm.

Under the direction of *Life's* founder and long-time publisher, Henry Luce, photographers were dispatched “to every corner of the globe to act as the eyes of all of us.” [15] Luce referred to *Life* magazine as his “mind-guided camera,” [16] fulfilling camera technology's promise to democratize issues and events by virtue of images produced. [17] For example, in the early 1960s, *Life* sent 12 photographers to 12 different locations – including a Brooklyn hotel swimming pool, a Kentucky horse stable, a Chicago family living room, and a Detroit hospital room – to capture 12 different groups of people laughing simultaneously at the same joke broadcast on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Luce crystallized the significance of the camera to the success of his magazine in *Life's* prospectus:

To see life; to see the world; to eyewitness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud; to see strange things . . . the women that men love and many children; to see and to take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed; thus to see, and to be shown, is now the will and new expectancy of half mankind. [18]

Life's editors did not invent the cycle of promoting dominant ideology. Its manufacturers merely accepted it, reflecting how societies order themselves so that needs “are calibrated to what their society has to offer.” [19] To the extent that a magazine satisfactorily encodes its covers and all pages in between, it is rewarded with huge subscriptions, strong advertising sales, and peer recognition. Indeed, “what it means to be a member of America's family” served as an underlying theme during *Life's* tenure as a mass medium – before today's fragmented marketplace featuring a plethora of magazines produced for diverse, segmented audiences.

Life magazine has received a modest amount of scholarly attention. Although Hamblin's 1977 book, *That Was the Life*, was not authorized by the Time, Inc. parent organization, it chronicled how *Life's* tight company culture of editors and photographers regarded the world and the magazine as “respectful and awe-struck equals.” [20] Kozol's 1994 book, *Life's America: Family and Nation in Postwar Photojournalism*, examined the magazine's “visual portrait of domesticity” in representing the intersection of national

politics and culture. [21] In scholarly journals, *Life's* photographs and advertisements have been scrutinized for ethnic representations [22] and images of the elderly. [23] One study of *Life* covers suggested that covers changed most dramatically during the 1950s with greater use of symbols and commentary on public figures rather than simple identification labels. [24] Indeed, it is the combination of *Life's* cultural salience and its characterization as a "picture magazine" [25] that has attracted scholarly attention.

Life goes to war

Life had established a signature style of blurring news with entertainment and celebrating spectacle on covers since the first issue in 1936. A chronological reading of *Life's* covers reveals that Americans were offered a weekly mixture of movie stars, fashion, great men of industry, and world leaders. The magazine's televised 60th anniversary celebration featured five segments categorizing *Life's* content over the years: "Man walks on the moon," "Aids in the heartland," "*Life goes to the movies*," "1960s and civil rights," and "*Life goes to war*." [26]

Life was only five years old and enjoying tremendous success when Pearl Harbor was attacked in 1941. War photographers played a significant role in reporting events of World War II. [27] Transitioning from popular culture and business icon features to war coverage required little, if any, stylistic change in *Life's* editorial format. The December 22, 1941 back cover featured a black and white photograph of the U.S. flag flying on the sunken *U.S.S. Arizona*. There is no caption, as the historical event was so riveting that any explanation would have been superfluous. The American flag appeared twice more during this period in the few color photographs run during the war. (*Life's* editors traditionally reserved the use of color for photographs of the U.S. flag and for end-of-year issues featuring fine art.)

For the duration of World War II, about half (55 percent) of *Life's* covers featured *heroism* as its theme and distinct camera angles told readers how they should regard objects. The coverage best can be described as a celebration of heroes, including heads of state, generals, ordinary soldiers, wives and children of ordinary soldiers who supported the war effort at home, and machines of war – ships, airplanes, and cannons. Nearly all photographs were shot in black and white and captions were simple two-or-three-word identifiers, but uniformity ended there.

Pictures of men were close-ups, underscoring the sweat, dirt, and seriousness of the conflict as reflected in their facial expressions. Women and children at the home front, on the other hand, were photographed at a distance – long shots of war-related support activities, but more detached than men at the battle lines. For example, one photograph of a woman smoking a cigarette while sitting in an easy chair was a long shot bearing the caption, "Lonely Wife." Also popular were photographs of war machines shot at odd angles and from below in order to accentuate the machines' size and power. If this narrative overlay were to be reduced to one sentence, it would be: *With your support, and with these machines, these men will save the world.* With the war's end, *Life's* covers featured "Welcome home!" shots of

generals, war heroes, and regular soldiers and sailors.

When President Harry Truman entered the U.S. into the Korean War five years after World War II ended, *Life* featured war on about one in five (23 percent) covers during the first year of U.S. involvement and no war coverage on covers during the second year. Over the course of this two-year war, the theme for *Life*'s coverage was a spin-off of the World War II *heroism* theme: *These men will save the world (again)*.

Among covers that did feature the Korean War, photographs were restricted to generals and soldiers in the field as heroic subjects featured in direct address close-ups. War machines and home front activities, popularly featured during *Life*'s World War II coverage, were noticeably absent among its Korean War issues. It may be that the Korean War lost its photogenic drama reminiscent of large battles with conquests and heroes after the Chinese entered the war and conflict was distilled to two static defense lines. Rather than redefine war photography conventions appropriate to a new kind of war, *Life*'s gatekeepers apparently dropped the war from its cover news agenda.

War subjects experienced a 10-year hiatus from *Life*'s covers until October 27, 1961, with a cover close-up illustration of a U.S. Army ranger peering through jungle foliage and the caption, "GI Training for Guerilla War." Another caption at the top of the page read, "Vietnam, Our Next Showdown." In subsequent years of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, *Life*'s war coverage underwent substantial shifts in style and narrative structure. Once *Life* made the Vietnam conflict routine cover material in 1964, the narrative overlay shifted from a Korean War coverage theme of *these men will save the world (again)* to *intrigue in an obscure, faraway country*. Subsequently, themes for *Life*'s Vietnam War coverage shifted twice more.

The first *Life* cover featuring the Vietnam conflict was the June 12, 1964 photograph of a U.S. Marine infantry patrolman walking toward the camera through a rice paddy above the caption, "At War in Vietnam." On November 27, 1964, the cover photograph featured U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers burning a suspected Vietcong hideout. The cover caption read: "A report on the Americans working and fighting here as the crisis gets worse." The soldiers were only partially visible in an eerily lit shot that emphasized an illusion of depth.

By 1965, *Life*'s gatekeepers undoubtedly had to choose cover photographs from a mix of equally photogenic civil rights movement issues and events, the Apollo space missions, and the Vietnam War. In fact, war themes were selected for only four *Life* covers, underscoring a new theme: *An army under siege while pursuing an uncertain military commitment*. One cover featured a close-up photograph of a North Vietnamese postage stamp depicting a soldier shooting at a U.S. helicopter. The next cover that year showed U.S. Marines carrying a wounded soldier to safety with the caption, "Deeper into Vietnam."

Finally, toward the end of the war, the theme seemed to shift again to *good soldiers placed in an impossible situation with dissent at home*. For example, an emotionally charged

photograph of a draft induction center with the caption, “Doubling the Draft,” graced a later *Life* cover. The photograph featured uniformed soldiers staring with hostility at the camera while civilian inductees in the background stare with hostility at the soldiers. The final cover of the year was a close-up photograph of a teenage Viet Cong prisoner with electrical tape covering his eyes and mouth, captioned, “The Blunt Realities of Vietnam.”

In 1967 and 1968, *Life* devoted seven and eight covers, respectively, to the Vietnam War and then abruptly dropped Vietnam from its news agenda in much the same way it had abandoned its Korean War coverage in 1952. Only one *Life* magazine cover in 1969 addressed the Vietnam War, with the story “The Faces of One Week’s American Dead in Vietnam.” The black-and-white photograph showed an extreme close-up of one of the young soldiers killed that week. The story was a tearjerker, showing home photographs of all of the 248 U.S. soldiers who died in one typical week of fighting.

The last *Life* cover of the Vietnam War, appearing on May 12, 1972, was the most stark of all – a black-and-white photograph depicting a U.S. soldier carrying a dead comrade on his back and a caption at the bottom in large red letters, “VIETNAM RETREAT.” Ironically, *Life* folded as a weekly magazine at the end of 1972. It would seem that *Life* and the U.S. military’s tarnished image both were remnants of a long-ago heroic era. Perhaps the fragmented, fast, mass mediated, postmodern world could no longer accommodate the heroic narrative overlay suggested by a weekly oversized glossy cover photograph-format magazine.

War would not dominate *Life*’s covers again until 1991, more than a decade after the magazine re-emerged as a monthly. As the century drew to a close, conflict involving war that demanded nationwide solidarity had become an indisputable criterion among the magazine’s gatekeepers for deciding what was cover-worthy. By 1991, President George Bush’s months-long troop build-up in Saudi Arabia was complete and he began the 100-hour ground war. Such a military move prompted *Life* to dispatch its world-famous photographers to capture images for American readers. What journalists representing *Life* and other news media did not expect upon landing in the Gulf region, however, was to be corralled by the U.S. military and offered little access to real-time events as they unfolded. Such conditions enabled military and political elites to control news flow and news frames in hopes of avoiding the negative coverage experienced during the Vietnam War 20 years earlier. Thus, news media coverage of the Gulf War offers a unique opportunity to examine news censorship; dominant ideology made visible.

This anomaly prompted the current study’s examination of *Life* magazine covers – cultural artifacts rich in shared symbols. Literature that framed the analysis underscored the cultural import of magazine cover images in general, and *Life* magazine’s position as America’s family photo album, in particular. Indeed, the arena of culture is made ideological because it is where meaning is contested between hegemonic elites and subordinate groups naturalized to blindly accept the ruling class’s influence. Gulf War news workers found themselves in a compromised situation, unable to rely on traditional, comfortable

conventions and routines. Examining *Life's* Gulf War covers enables us to catch glimpses of hegemony; where news can be analyzed as a product bearing seams left by elites who controlled how it was manufactured.

Methodology

Life devoted five cover stories to U.S. involvement in the Gulf War during 1991. Each cover was qualitatively examined for patterns, themes, and anomalies. [28] Finally, cover images were examined in toto.

Results and Discussion

Life's editors have lamented restrictions placed on the news media by the Pentagon, calling Gulf War coverage “a sanitized version of the war.” [29] Every reporter was escorted by a military information officer, and where photojournalists could travel was monitored. As part of the text for *Life's* 60th anniversary one-hour CBS-TV program in 1996, narrator Candice Bergen boasted that one *Life* correspondent “managed to slip out with an Army MASH unit unescorted to become one of the reporters who broke the code of silence.” [30] The reporter’s photo – a soldier grieving for his dying buddy in the body bag next to him – was not featured on the monthly cover, however. Instead, *Life* offered readers a close-up color photograph of a soldier as the cover for the regular March 1991 monthly issue and followed this up with a series of four special weekly issues from February 25 through March 18.

Each of these five issues featured the same logo, the usual word *Life* in all capital letters – white on red – plus a black band underneath with reverse type upper-case letters “LIFE GOES TO WAR.” The four weekly issues also featured a diagonal yellow banner, “Weekly,” covering part of the first two letters in *Life*. Thus, *Life* had re-emerged to regain its old glory as America’s showcase for the heroic, resurrecting a grammar of iconography that it had not attempted since the beginning of the Korean War 30 years earlier. At a time when Saddam Hussein threatened “the mother of all battles,” *Life* embarked on a photojournalistic narrative designed to articulate the nation’s sense of its own resolution to impose justice through force of arms.

The first Gulf War photograph on the March 1991 cover is a highly symbolic close-up photograph of Captain David Ray Smith. The cover features neither a caption, nor month of the issue – only the photograph of Smith and the *Life* logo. The lack of a caption and the serious tone of the photograph evokes the emotion of the first *Life* cover published after the bombing of Pearl Harbor – a simple photograph of the U.S. flag waving as a statement of resolve. Fast forwarding to the Gulf War, the photograph of Smith’s gaze serves the same symbolic function. Furthermore, the captain’s common name of “Smith” represents everyman – someone readers can relate to. The photograph is cropped so that it cuts off the top of Smith’s head, left shoulder, and just below the neck. The *Life* logo covers the left third of his helmet and the reader is forced to attend to Smith’s gaze – a steadfast, tense look on a stern face marked with grease. The grease marks allude to two cultural

references: one is Native American war paint and the other is a football game. Movie westerns have popularized painted faces as a potent symbol of bravery and the frontier fighting spirit, while football is symbolic of all-American aggression in the name of sport.

On the one-year anniversary of Pearl Harbor in 1942, *Life* published a cover photograph quite similar to the photograph of Captain Smith during the Gulf War in 1991. It was a close-up of a firm-jawed Marine pilot with the caption, "Marine Ace Smith." This previous incarnation for the resolute warrior with the same last name has the same steady gaze into the distance and the same cloudless blue sky behind him. The 1991 cover could be turned to black and white, the 1942 photograph colorized and then swapped, and the effect would be exactly the same. These two cover shots plucked from different points in time illustrate Fiske's "commutation test." [31] In other words, switches in photographic elements do not affect cultural meaning of the artifact.

The second Gulf War image, published on the February 25, 1991 cover, also neglects to include a caption and features a photograph that makes vivid what exceeds literal representation. [32] The photograph features a little boy clutching a U.S. flag in full frame. He is bundled in winter clothes and has a cherubic northern European face. The setting is unclear; it could be an Air Force base tarmac. A shadow behind the child suggests the large wing of a transport plane. Behind the child, the sky is dark and foreboding. This is an unsettling military setting where a child obviously is out of place – vulnerable, but protected by an American flag. The child is gazing upward, presumably watching his father or mother leaving for war, or perhaps looking toward the heavens for comfort. The photograph's power lies in its symbolic imagery that can be themed: *Even the littlest among us must share in the sacrifice, but he is protected by Old Glory.*

The third *Life* Gulf War cover story, on March 4, 1991, features a medium long shot of a U.S. soldier holding an American flag, surrounded only by desert, with his back facing the camera. The image is devoid of other objects. The soldier easily could be the father of the boy featured on the *Life* cover of the previous week. The caption reads, "Desert Storm Paratrooper." He is striding away from the camera with his pack and gun slung over his shoulder, flag in hand, in an action suggestive of vigilance – personally delivering the might of America to her foe.

The U.S. already had won the Gulf War by the time the fourth *Life* Gulf War cover hit the newsstands with a March 11, 1991 date, and it is the magazine's only cover to feature a contemporary twist on war correspondence. It depicts a victory celebration with General Norman Schwarzkopf dressed in combat fatigues with each arm around an African-American soldier. Another African-American soldier kneels in front of Schwarzkopf's legs and a Caucasian soldier strains to look at the camera over Schwarzkopf's shoulder. All are beaming. Power relationships among those photographed are characterized by *Life*'s logo being partially obscured by the General's cap while the logo covers an African-American soldier's helmet. A sliver of desert backdrop is visible and the sky is clear and blue. Large black type at the top reads, "HEROES ALL." In typical *Life* magazine war coverage,

victorious generals were photographed alone and directly addressed the camera with a severe expression. Schwarzkopf, on the other hand, offers his warm and fuzzy side, parentally embracing his soldiers. This is a fleeting moment of giddy joy on the battlefield in which victory has been won. Only now can the national interest afford to present soldiers of color in the inner circle whilst a Caucasian soldier looks on. During World War II, the Korean and Vietnam wars, and in the tense period before Gulf War victory, Caucasian men were the focus of *Life's* war covers.

The fifth and final Gulf War *Life* cover photograph in the series, dated March 18, 1991, is a stock "coming home" close-up shot depicting a fatigued husband-and-wife soldier reunited. The caption is "Coming Home" in large reverse type. The location is vague since the image contains no descriptive background objects. The woman's smiling closed-eyes face is pressed against the man's shoulder and the back of his head. The American flag patch on her shoulder facing the camera is plainly visible. This is a narratively simple and timeless depiction of personal resolution after the challenge of war. Perhaps representing the parents of the cherubic boy featured on the *Life* cover three weeks earlier, the soldier-couple is a stand-in for all American soldiers who did their duty and returned. This is not a reunion tinged by anxiety over the distancing effect that the war experience may have had on their relationship (in 1966, *Life* featured a story of war's negative impact on marriage) or Americans' doubt about the virtue of U.S. involvement in conflicts abroad. This is a precious, *modern* family moment consecrated by the ubiquitous symbol of American might and protection, the American flag on the woman's shoulder patch.

Implications and Future Research

Each photograph published in *Life* during the U.S.'s involvement in the Gulf War is both a self-contained story and an integral element of a five-part pictorial story. In toto, the Gulf War *Life* covers form a story that can be articulated as: *The American soldier was called to duty in a foreign land. The American family supported him and bravely endured his absence. He took the fight to the enemy and vanquished him through American might. His brave leader gave him a heartfelt thanks and he returned to be reunited with his loving family.* This narrative should have been too trite and sentimental to be taken seriously. Yet, if sales figures are any indication, the Gulf War series was popularly received by large numbers of Americans. [33] It seems that for this brief period of public anxiety over the war, the public's level of sophistication temporarily was suspended, making it highly receptive to a dated, clichéd narrative.

Nationally distributed U.S. magazines have come and gone over the decades. Only magazines able to adapt to a changing society and narrow audiences survive. [34] Magazines develop a flexible cycle that evolves over time to keep up with the ever-changing cultural and pictorial sophistication of the public, while also adapting to special needs-of-the-moment, such as crises. Even though *Life* exercised its flexibility and maximized a sales opportunity by resuming weekly publication for Gulf War coverage, its correspondents were less successful in breaking through the Pentagon's barriers. Without unfettered access to images, elite

sources, and information subsidies, *Life* resurrected its World War II-era style in setting up shots and selecting and editing photographs for its covers. Even *Life*'s 60th anniversary TV program devoted only 40 seconds to its Gulf War coverage as compared to several minutes' coverage of dozens of photographs and video footage from other wars and conflicts, including Vietnam, the Tiananmen Square massacre, and the return of American hostages from Iran.

Moments during which the hegemonic narrative overlay woven into culture production is made visible are fleeting. *Life*'s photo series became almost an ephemeral phenomenon leaving no traces. These weekly issues appeared only on newsstands and at supermarkets – and only in the U.S. They quickly sold out, leaving no issues available to libraries with *Life* subscriptions. Popular culture artifacts such as *Life* magazine covers are vitally important to critical scholars. Future studies might examine a wide range of chaos, disasters, and crises in order to further test the hypothesis derived as a result of this study: “Exposed seams in narratives occur when societies and news workers are placed in extreme situations, but invisibility quickly is restored when a normal state resumes.”

Traditionally, dominant ideology and its narrative overlays are invisible so that subordinate groups accept it without question. This is particularly true when elites use the popular culture components of the mass media apparatus, for the content of texts designed to entertain are perhaps least suspect as tools of persuasion – or propaganda, in the extreme. The current study's cultural studies approach to analyzing *Life* magazine covers unmasked and made visible dominant ideology's trappings. Indeed, analyses of other mass media artifacts may reveal similar findings. However, Americans' reverence for *Life* magazine and the agenda setting power of its covers underscores the salience of this study's findings.

Endnotes

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- [15] DiPersio and Guttentag.
- [16] Connery, 213.
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