

SAFEGUARDING THE ADRENALINE JUNKIES

An Interview with Bill Foley

by Christophe Chung

For the past 25 years, photojournalist Bill Foley has been shooting, publishing and lecturing in 47 countries around the world. He has covered major Middle East stories including the Iran-Iraq War and the Lebanon Civil War. In 1983, Foley won the Pulitzer Prize for spot-news photography for recording the aftermaths of the Sabra and Chatilla massacres in Lebanon.

BardPolitik In your opinion, how do people involved in conflict perceive journalists and photojournalists? For example, when shooting in Lebanon, you were seen as a means to get a message out to the world. Do you feel this has changed?

Foley It has changed greatly. When one of my students asked if I'd be willing to cover Iraq right now, I said that there was no way. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, there were constraints. There was something in somebody's head that said, "This guy is a foreigner. Maybe I should think twice about doing something rash here." Now, those constraints do not exist. Whether you're someone

working for a construction company or Margaret Hassan working for CARE International, if you're a foreigner, you're fair game.

There are no rules between the media and the "bad guys." And this is nothing new. Journalists have been getting killed for years, but now there's simply no rule of law in Iraq.

When I was photographing the Lebanon Civil War in 1984, photographer Bill Pierce and I were arrested by Syrians. And though the Syrians were convinced we were Israeli spies—and beat the crap out of both of us, and crushed my glasses, and tied our hands with wire—we were still brought to a

police station. There, an officer saw us and had us untied, and proceeded to offer us coffee, tea, and cigarettes. We were eventually released. Now, there was a series of circumstances that got us to the officer. Because we were foreigners, the Syrians had done nothing rash. Furthermore, in the 1980s, there was a sense that journalists were telling *their* story. If this were to happen to a journalist today, in Mosul or Fallujah, he's not likely to survive.

The situation in Iraq now is quite different from the first Gulf War. A lot of journalists back then went off on their own. In 1987 during the Iran-Iraq war, nobody was going to shoot you, kidnap you, or behead you, because there was this unbelievable level of rule of law in Baghdad. Saddam

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Hussein was an evil person, but by God there was rule of law. Some were arrested, but there weren't any beheadings, let alone kidnappings. The reason was because in the first Gulf War, there was still an Iraqi government; there was a hierarchy of command

Once the US military disbanded the Iraqi army, which was the only thing left that made Iraq a country, a Pandora's box was open and suddenly all bets were off. Anybody with a gun can do anything he desires without any sort of reprimand or punishment. In the first Gulf War and Lebanon, there was a line that simply wasn't crossed. Now, this line no longer exists.

BardPolitik What do you think about identify-

ing members of the press with a press emblem?

Foley In 1982 we had T-Shirts that said AP, Time Magazine, Reuters, whatever, and on the back in English, French, Arabic and Hebrew it said "Don't Shoot. Press." Some journalists were deeply convinced that this would serve as protection; others were convinced that fighters who didn't like the press now had walking targets. An emblem makes you, the journalist, a target *if* you're working in a situation where there is no rule of law. Without a hierarchy of command, these symbols simply mean nothing.

BardPolitik Then, is the military the only source of protection for journalists in Iraq?

Foley Most of the images that are currently coming out of Iraq are taken by photographers embedded with the military. And the reason is because a photographer must ask himself: If I want to take pictures tomorrow, what must I do today to see a tomorrow? The answer is to be embedded with the military. It's that simple. Before you think of your images, you have to think of your own survivability. If I was in Iraq today, I would definitely not be trying to do documenting alone in Baghdad because of the complete breakdown of rule of law. I would be with an American military group and documenting them.

BardPolitik Could you talk about Terry Anderson, the first high-profile journalist to be kidnapped in Lebanon, and the last to be released in December 1991, after being detained for seven years?

Foley There was a real breakdown of security on the street. There had been a number of kidnappings. Within days of Terry's kidnapping, other members of the press community were out of Beirut. They were afraid that they were now going to be targets—that now they were fair game

because they had an American passport. I stuck around for a couple of months and was the last male American journalist there. I left in June 1985.

When I got back to New York, I got involved with Anne Nelson and David Eichman and started the group called the Journalists Committed to Free Terry Anderson. We were lobbying everyone, from the Americans to the Iranians. When released, Terry Anderson said we did it; he was released alive.

There were people in high levels of government that wouldn't allow the kidnappers to damage their diplomatic work. The kidnap victims may have been treated like dirt, but they weren't going to be killed. There was a sense that the hostages could be leveraged for something, and that was keeping them alive. But to have that, you need control, or a government, or a quasi-government, or someone to say that I'm in charge here. In Iraq right now, you don't have that. Nobody controls anything. You have all these people with their own agendas, their own egos, and they can do anything that they want.

BardPolitik We hear a lot about soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress, but what about journalists?

Foley Two of the toughest stories I covered were the Sabra and Chatilla massacres and the bombing of the Marine compound in Beirut. They took an incredible mental toll. You could record, you could document, put these pictures out in the world, but you ask yourself if you can solve anything. One of the things I do to deal with it is to talk to other

people who had been there, who have shared the same experiences.

For the journalists currently in Iraq, I cannot imagine the level of stress they're undergoing. Think about *Time* photography editor, James Nachtwey, who lost a hand while throwing out a grenade that was tossed into his car. If he hadn't lost his hand, he would have lost his life. That takes a toll on someone. One must imagine that Jim Nachtwey's incident, with subsequent months of rehabilitation, will make him think twice about going back to Baghdad, no matter how good the story is.

BardPolitik Then, what is it that brings a journalist back to the war zone?

Foley I think the reason is different for every person. Some people will say it's the adrenaline. Journalists can become adrenaline junkies. When you're up against a wall with bombs falling, you're just wired. You're so in tune with what's going on. But I think one of the greatest underlying motivations is the desire to really make a difference by fomenting change with your stories and pictures. For myself and others, whether we're kidding ourselves or not, many are really trying to be the ultimate Boy Scout.

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