

## From Afghanistan to Iraq in Media Maps: Journalistic Construction of Geographic Knowledge

*Professor Robert Churchill passed away as this article underwent publication. Though Bob was formally trained as a physical geographer, he eventually became the backbone of Middlebury College's GIS and cartography program, and an irreplaceable member of the geography department. Family, colleagues, students, and the entire Middlebury College Community miss Bob's anecdotes, his kindness, and his easy laughter.*

The last two decades have seen a marked rise in the number of maps in the popular media, yet academic interest in journalistic cartography remains low, though the bulk of the public relies on the media for its geographic knowledge. Because they invoke a sense of belonging, identity, and allegiance, the number of media maps, like flags and other patriotic icons, increases during conflict. From the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan until the proclamation of victory in Iraq almost two years later, three major American news magazines published nearly 200 related maps. Early maps of Afghanistan affirmed U.S. military prowess and promised quick retribution, but with the failure of this promise, pointed to obstacles from terrain to climate. As interest in Afghanistan cooled and rhetoric over Iraq heated up, cartographic attention shifted accordingly. Initial maps of Iraq were provocative, focusing especially on the state's supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction. Maps again depicted American military might, and as the invasion progressed seemingly unimpeded, Baghdad came into cartographic focus. In these compositions the melding of artwork, remotely sensed images, and photography lends even greater veracity to the maps themselves, which not only convey but also construct both political and geographic knowledge.

**KEYWORDS:** media maps, journalistic cartography, political cartography, war on terrorism

After weeks of posturing and ultimatums, the United States invaded Iraq on March 19, 2003. Although the most visible and rehearsed justification for this action was Iraq's alleged and much publicized possession of weapons of mass destruction, some of the earliest rationalization for military action was based on the assertion that Iraq was harboring members of Al Qaeda and the more general allegation that Iraq was a sponsor of terrorism against the United States. Ironically, Iraq escaped notice almost entirely in discussions of global terrorism following September 11, 2001, and in the search for perpetrators of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. That search instead quickly narrowed in on Afghanistan when it seemed certain that Osama bin Laden and high ranking members of Al Qaeda had taken refuge there. Afghanistan continued to receive headline attention in the months that followed until the

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### INTRODUCTION

*“Media maps define place in the mind of the public, but maps impart far more than location, size, shape, place names, and other lessons of rudimentary geography.”*

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*“. . . the number of maps appearing in the print media has increased profoundly in recent years largely as the consequence of desktop mapping and related computer technologies (Monmonier, 1989; 2001) . . . the sophistication as well as the quantity of media maps continues to increase (Herzog, 2003).”*

threat posed by Saddam Hussein—whether or not that threat was real and imminent—reached a crescendo, drawing attention away from Afghanistan and shifting the story to Iraq. A public who had become familiar with Afghanistan was now compelled to learn a new geography.

For the majority of people, this geography was undoubtedly learned (if at all) from the media, most emphatically and effectively through maps (Monmonier, 1989; Vujakovic, 1999a). Media maps define place in the mind of the public, but maps impart far more than location, size, shape, place names, and other lessons of rudimentary geography. Because they are, in a very real sense, creations of prevailing society, maps present a view of the world that is conditioned by social norms and the values and ideologies of their makers (Kosonen, 1999). For the war in Iraq, media maps offer an alternative form of discourse, one that may provide insight into those norms, values, and ideologies and how they change through time, as well as some sense of the function of the map itself in molding and mirroring public perception and beliefs. Our purpose is to examine cartographic representation of the conflict in Iraq and the period preceding the conflict, and to consider what messages were being conveyed, how those messages may have been assimilated and understood by readers, and how and why the messages changed through time.

### Maps, Media, Message

In response to the increased appearance of maps in the popular media that followed the innovations in cartographic production and design of World War II, Ristow initiated an academic dialogue on the role of journalistic cartography (1957). Similar to the increase documented by Ristow in the middle of the last century, the number of maps appearing in the print media has increased profoundly in recent years largely as the consequence of desktop mapping and related computer technologies (Monmonier, 1989; 2001). As these technologies continue to evolve, the sophistication as well as the quantity of media maps continues to increase (Herzog, 2003). Some anticipated that the growing number of maps resulting from technological innovation would stimulate greater academic interest in journalistic cartography (Gilmartin, 1985). Two decades later, however, research has failed to keep pace with the proliferation of media maps (Perkins and Barry, 1996).

This lack of interest is curious and not easily explained. Certainly in the past, academic cartographers were quick to exorcise maps that did not adhere to the prevailing rules of expressiveness (Harley, 1989). Academic cartographers may show little interest in journalistic maps for fear that these non-academically trained mapmakers will ignore their ideas and input (Gilmartin, 1997). The limited study of journalistic maps, in some part, may also be a consequence of the intellectual privileging of text at the expense of image. The historic paucity of maps in newspapers has been attributed to the opportunity costs they exact. Printing a map means sacrificing text, and Ferris (1993) maintained that above all, editors are word people. Momentarily accepting this argument to explain the dearth of media maps in the past, and perhaps the lack of research interest in journalistic cartography as well, it is not clear whether the profusion of maps in recent years reflects an increasingly visual society or an emerging recognition by the media of the power and authority that maps hold.

To the extent that media maps have received any attention, it has usually been to critique their design and effectiveness (Balchin, 1985; Gauthier, 1988). No doubt the choice of projection or how a map is centered or how data are generalized are important questions that influence public

perception of geography, but what may be implicit in these concerns, and of greater, overarching importance, are the messages conveyed by journalistic maps, especially given the acknowledged role of the media in the geographic education of the public at large. Like all maps, those that appear in the media are potent and readily recognizable emblems, icons that can assert territorial dominance and define geopolitical perceptions (Anderson, 1991; Kosonen, 1999). Moreover, because they articulate both a sense of place as well as relations among people and place, maps are instrumental not just in the representation or even the interpretation of geographical knowledge but in its construction (Crampton, 2002).

Based on these arguments, a dramatic increase in the number of maps of Afghanistan following the terrorist attacks of September 11 is not surprising. In spite of the fact that 15 of the terrorists directly involved in the September 11 attacks were Saudis, the responsibility for those attacks was attributed almost solely to Afghanistan by geographical association both with Osama bin Laden and with global terrorism more generally. Media maps provided not only an important geographical frame of reference for this story but, by articulating the enemy, reasserted and perhaps redefined the identity of the United States which momentarily had assumed the role of victim (Churchill and Slarsky, 2004). But as the action in Afghanistan wore on with the failure to find bin Laden, what story did the maps tell? With escalating tensions in Iraq and increasingly bellicose rhetoric, the ostensible importance of Afghanistan began to diminish. As a consequence, a shift in cartographic focus and a corresponding increase in the number of maps of Iraq might well be expected. What may be less obvious and predictable, however, are the arguments embedded in the shifting cartographic representations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

### Maps in News Weeklies

To better understand the dialectic between media maps and society, we examined all maps that appeared in three major news magazines, *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News and World Report*, from October 15, 2001 through September 30, 2003. We elected to focus on these publications for several reasons. First, we were concerned that the sheer number of maps appearing in newspapers of record during this period of time would be too voluminous to permit close scrutiny. Second, while newspaper maps have increased markedly both in quantity and quality (Ferris, 1993), the greater lead time of news magazines, as well as higher print quality, accommodate compositions that are graphically sophisticated and rich in content. Maps displayed on television are disadvantaged by brief exposure time, and although this is not true for the Internet, the comparatively low resolution of display devices continues to limit the content of maps both on the Internet and on television. Furthermore, maps in news magazines are intended not only to provide geographic reference and to draw people into the story but, increasingly, to tell the story as stand-alone compositions (Ohlsson, 1988). Indeed, there is some indication that people often do study the maps without reading the accompanying story (Perkins and Barry, 1996). Finally, even though these magazines may have different editorial perspectives, they are intended to appeal to a broad national readership rather than regional markets, and hence may offer a more comprehensive reflection than newspapers of the interrelations between maps and society.

In all we examined 189 maps that related to global terrorism, the pursuit of terrorists in Afghanistan, and the emerging military engagement in Iraq. Because actions in both Afghanistan and Iraq were predicated on the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, we also included

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maps that involved the events and the aftermath of September 11. Nearly all these maps were printed in color; 54 were double-page spreads; and 19 more occupied full-page layouts. Although no map can be wholly neutral in position, the great majority of those we examined were clearly expository in nature. Many relied on symbols such as flashpoints, targets, and encircling arrows, for example, while many more were embellished with photographs, satellite imagery, and artistic renderings of aircraft, weapons, and soldiers. Only about one-fifth of the maps were sufficiently free of such obvious symbology and imagery that they could be considered simple reference or locator maps. There was not great disparity in the number of maps of Afghanistan and Iraq that appeared over the period of study, but predictably, the geographical focus changed through time, as did the character and tone of the maps themselves, albeit in more subtle fashion.

**Obstacles in Afghanistan**

Although terrorism defies geographic boundaries, the demand for retribution for the attacks of September 11, 2001 necessitated the clear definition of an enemy and conjunctively, the identification of a place on the map—a set of boundaries to geographically define and contain that enemy. With Osama bin Laden reportedly holed up there, Afghanistan filled that need quite effectively, and within a matter of days, media maps made the transition from depicting domestic attack sites and global terrorism in general to representation of Afghanistan and military actions against terrorists harbored within its borders.

Like the composition in *Time* from October 22, 2001 (Figure 1), the maps that appeared initially in the news weeklies were consistently aggressive in tone. Here Afghanistan is surrounded, if not pinned down, by callouts

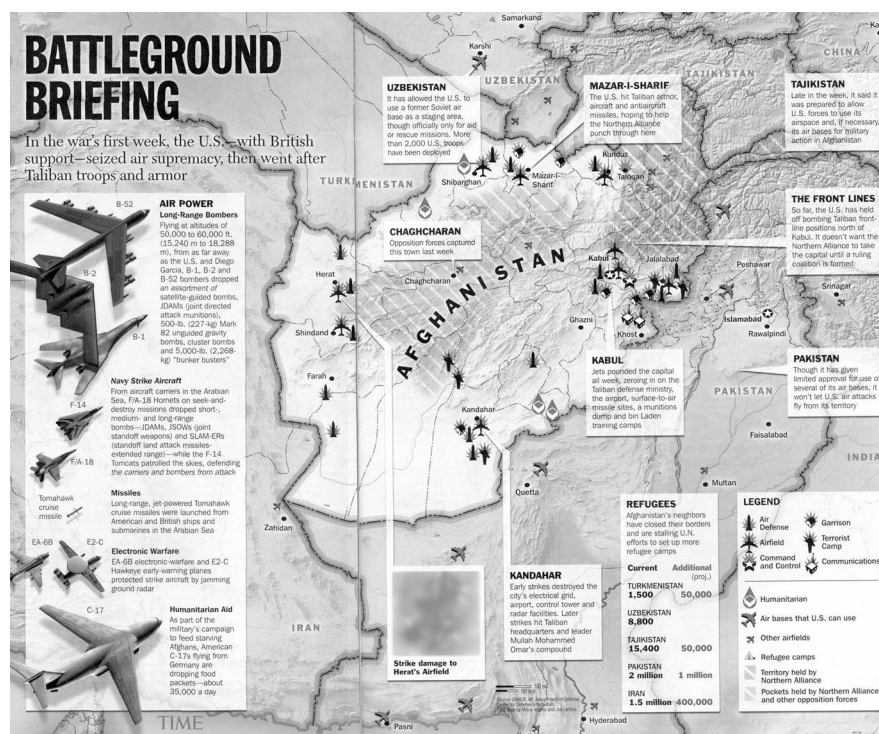


Figure 1. "Battleground Briefing." Time, 22 October, 2001. © 2006 Time Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted from Time Magazine ® with permission. Cartography by Missy Adams and Joe Lertola. (see page 87 for color version)

and contained by a distinct orange line which, together with images of aircraft, a photograph highlighting damage with yellow arrows, and flashpoint symbols, attest to the strength of the U.S. military and provide cartographic assurance of inevitable and rapid defeat of the enemy.

As actions in Afghanistan continued with failure to find bin Laden, the message shifted in subtle but purposeful fashion. Maps began to focus on the physical environment with emphasis on rugged terrain, lack of the most basic infrastructure, and inhospitable conditions. Of 55 maps of Afghanistan included in our study, 48 used shaded-relief or three-dimensional perspectives to depict the terrain, and of the few maps that did not use these techniques, nearly all appeared before the end of 2001. The use of relief shading and three-dimensional perspectives is surely due in part to the fact that off-the-shelf data and sophisticated software make these techniques easy to use. Yet the consistent and often dramatic use of these effects also goes far to explain any failures in the pursuit of bin Laden and Al Qaeda. In spite of the obvious and profound superiority in weapons technology, shown prominently in the offering from *US News and World Report* (Figure 2), intensely rugged terrain devoid of roads, settlements,

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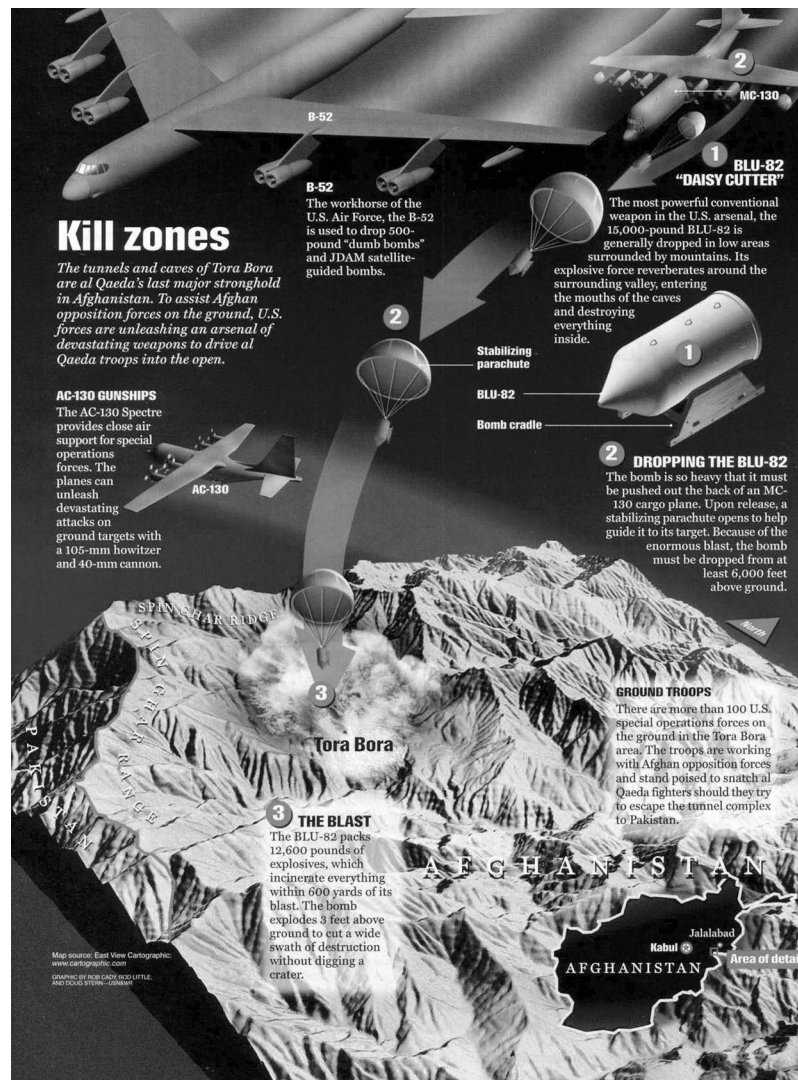


Figure 2. "Kill Zones." U.S. News & World Report, 24 December, 2001. Copyright 2001 U.S. News & World Report, L.P. Reprinted with permission. Cartography by Rob Cady, Rod Little, and Doug Stern. (see page 88 for color version)

and people suggests that actually effecting that damage against the enemy may be difficult given the physical environment.

Barren and bleak terrain, however, was not the only impediment to rapid and unequivocal success. Although readers are not allowed to disregard the rugged, mountainous landscape, climate was dramatically added to the mix in another map from *Time*, "When Winter Comes" (Figure 3). If the title alone is not sufficient to cause a chill, the juxtaposition of blue tones and call-outs with the white-clad soldier erases any doubt that winter conditions will make pursuit of the enemy even more difficult. The reader does not have to look at the caption to surmise that the Taliban can readily tolerate these conditions, even in the face of well equipped and well trained U.S. special forces (although one might question the training of a soldier who would consider firing a weapon with its flash suppressor and barrel plugged with ice and snow). Clearly, superiority in weapons, technology, training, and tactics may not be enough to insure quick and complete success in Afghanistan.

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### Turning Toward Iraq

Although they declined in number, maps of Afghanistan continued to appear in the news weeklies on a regular basis through the opening months of 2002. By the summer of 2002, however, the agenda of the Bush Administration turned from Afghanistan toward Iraq. Maps of Iraq began to appear regularly and in greater numbers, while already dwindling cartographic interest in Afghanistan became negligible with maps appearing only occasionally after the summer of 2002 (Figure 4).

Although the regime of Saddam Hussein would be linked with terrorism soon enough, at least rhetorically, the maps that explored the Iraqi terrorist threat through the summer of 2002 seemed to present somewhat mixed messages. One world map, for example, includes Iraq among states



Figure 3. "When Winter Comes." *Time*, 5 November, 2001. Satellite images courtesy of Space Imaging. © 2006 Time Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted from *Time Magazine* ® with permission. Cartography by Joe Lertola, Missy Adams, and Mitch Frank. (see page 89 for color version)

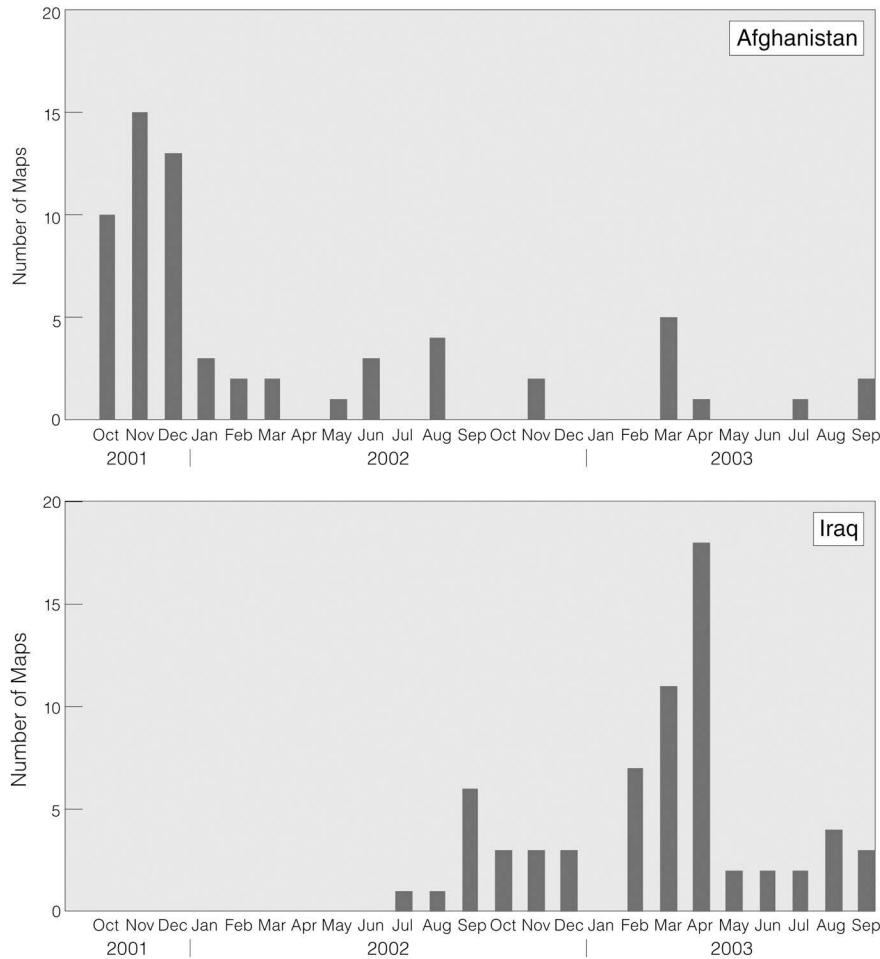


Figure 4. Number of maps of Afghanistan versus Iraq that appeared in three domestic news weeklies—Time, Newsweek, and US News and World Report—from 15 October, 2001 through 30 September, 2003.

where Al Qaeda has operated but visually downplays its significance relative to a number of other countries. Another composition, which explores Osama bin Laden’s whereabouts, links Afghanistan and Iraq with a bright, sweeping arrow but, in the accompanying text, concludes it doubtful that Iraq would provide sanctuary to terrorists. By the fall of 2002, however, these ambiguities seem to have been resolved as illustrated by a map published in the September 2 issue of *Time* (Figure 5). The map not only indicates that members of Al Qaeda may be taking refuge within the Iraq’s borders but also shows a training camp for Iraqi terrorists and “foreign extremist Arabs”. If the association with terrorism is not clear enough from the content and symbology — the red dripping from the Kurdish region at the top of the state, for example — Hussein stands in front of the map with hand across his heart yet looking away with an untrustworthy squint and a sardonic grin. One inescapable irony here, of course, is that fact that alleged Al Qaeda refugees are shown in the Kurdish region of the state, but in spite of Saddam Hussein’s contempt for the Kurds, the mere presence of Al Qaeda within its borders may be enough to suggest Iraq’s culpability in terrorism against the United States.

In light of the message proffered by this map, it bears repeating that Iraq escaped attention in the search for global terrorists in the aftermath of September 11. Nonetheless, the connection with terrorism was presented

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Figure 5. "Saddam's Game." *Time*, 2 September, 2002. © 2006 Time Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted from *Time Magazine* ® with permission. Cartography by Jackson Dykman. (see page 90 for color version)

*"... the connection with terrorism was presented as one of the first transgressions by Iraq, at least cartographically, and one of the fundamental provocations in fabricating a rationale for U.S. attack."*

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as one of the first transgressions by Iraq, at least cartographically, and one of the fundamental provocations in fabricating a rationale for U.S. attack. Other arguments followed quickly.

Oil was discussed often enough in the public discourse, but only two of nearly 200 maps noted U.S. interest in Iraqi petroleum. Weapons of mass destruction attracted far greater attention and were mentioned so frequently, in fact, that WMD became a familiar acronym. Of the numerous maps that took weapons of mass destruction as a principal theme, the one that appeared in *Newsweek* on September 16, 2002 (Figure 6) is representative of the tone and message yet interesting in its own right. Red symbols are used to show the location of nuclear, biological, and chemical installations, as well as sites of ballistic missile production, while military installations and Saddam's palaces are depicted in similar black symbols. Arrows bring the eye back to the large and menacing cluster around Baghdad. The character of the arrows themselves, giving the impression of having been hastily drawn with grease pencil or marker, creates a complementary dynamic, as if the map was taking shape like a chalk talk or a football play, a formative plan of action based on emerging revelation.

Although stylistically distinct, a map that appeared later in *Time* (Figure 7) imparts much the same message. Relying on a substantially larger scale, this map presents a three-dimensional perspective limited to the area around Baghdad, with brightly colored pushpin symbols to suggest an alarming concentration of potential weapons sites. This map includes





the strategic significance of the presidential compounds but offers implicit assurance of the sophistication and reliability of U.S. surveillance and intelligence technologies and goes some distance to assuage any lingering reservations that the threat posed by Iraqi weapons of mass destruction is real.

Like the picture of the al-Sajoud Palace, photographs are often blended with maps, yet it is doubtful that readers could independently identify what is being depicted. Immediately following the Chernobyl disaster, an image of an Italian concrete factory was passed off as the nuclear complex to American television networks (Mitchell, 1992). Like the concrete plant, few readers may be able to identify a presidential palace with certainty, but given the veracity of the visual image, even fewer are likely to question its authenticity. Instead, and especially when used in conjunction with a map, photographs and images emphatically underscore the integrity of the entire composition.

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The public stance of the Bush Administration, as well as much of the public dialogue, on both the war in Iraq and the actions in Afghanistan, involved a distinct dualism. On the one hand, these were military actions that targeted enemies, which were well articulated, both ideologically and geographically. On the other hand, a purported objective of these actions was to liberate the peoples who had been oppressed by these common enemies within. This dualism, however, is not reflected in the maps that we examined. Instead, the enemy is most often delineated by geographic boundaries through maps like that shown in Figure 8. A U.S. soldier equipped with the latest technology literally dwarfs Iraq, which might fit conveniently under the trooper’s boot. If this visual metaphor does not portray adequately Iraq’s hopeless position, the country is encircled by air, navy, and army bases. Text boxes with flags of neighboring states that surround Iraq further tighten the noose, even if the role of some of these states remains ambiguous.

With Iraq quickly overpowered, at least in the maps on the pages of the country’s news weeklies, and with what appeared to be early success

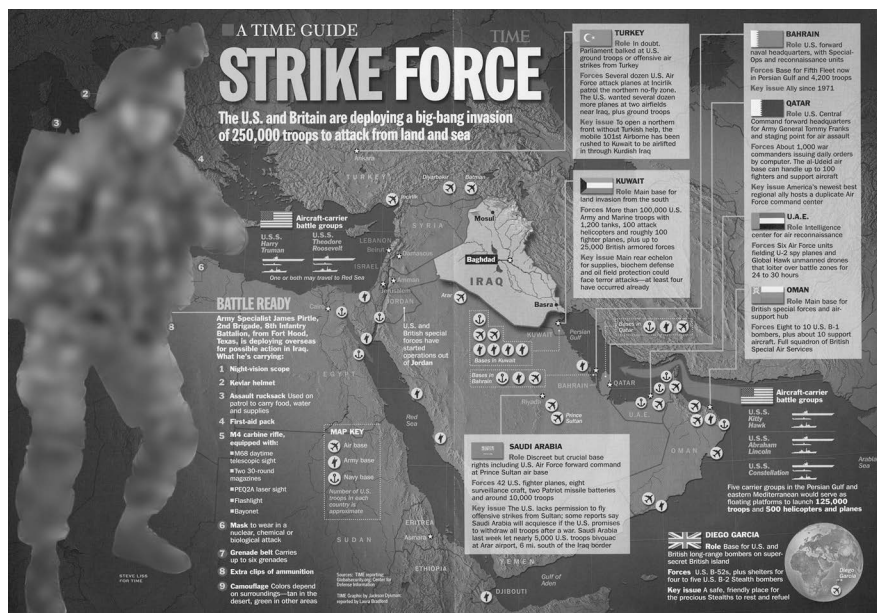


Figure 8. “Strike Force.” Time, 17 March, 2003. © 2006 Time Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted from Time Magazine® with permission. Cartography by Jackson Dykman. (see page 93 for color version)

of the invasion, cartographic emphasis shifted to Baghdad, an important symbolic target and, presumably, the principal strategic objective. Maps with titles like "Targeting Baghdad" (2003), "Inside Baghdad" (2003), "Battle for Baghdad" (2003), and "Pinpointing Baghdad" (2003) speak to the importance of the capital, while assuring rapid and successful occupation of the city. Nearly all these map compositions use satellite imagery of the city in some fashion. Like the photograph, this imagery makes an implicit but strong statement about the United States' technological sophistication, its detailed understanding of the city's geography and crucial infrastructure. In "Pinpointing Baghdad" (Figure 9), these messages are reinforced by ubiquitous flashpoint symbols as well as photographic evidence of the effects of technological and military superiority. Like Iraq as a whole, Baghdad has been occupied and conquered by maps.

**Constructing Geographic Knowledge**

No matter how any particular map is interpreted or deconstructed, a distinct pattern is unmistakable in the news-weekly maps that appeared from the beginning of military action in Afghanistan through the Second Gulf War in Iraq. The earliest maps of Afghanistan boasted visually of U.S. superiority and seemed to promise quick and complete retribution against Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. As the action wore on with, at best, limited success, the maps offered up apologies in the form of hostile physical environment and absence of infrastructure. With little breaking news in Afghanistan, attention began to dwindle as the Bush Administration looked toward Iraq. Maps now provided justification for an inevitable U.S. attack, and although one or two maps explored the possible connections with international terrorism, the real focus was on weapons of mass destruction. The cartographic evidence of these weapons alone offered ample justification for military invasion, and with the invasion, once again, came maps that demonstrated military might of the United States, not unlike those maps that illustrated actions in Afghanistan. Rapid troop movement with seemingly few obstacles redirected cartographic attention

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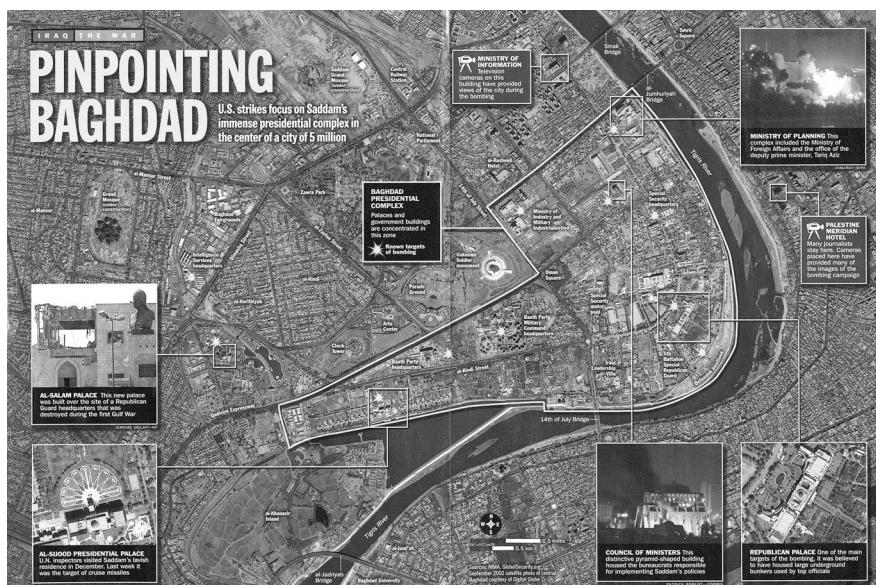


Figure 9. "Pinpointing Baghdad." Time, 31 March, 2003. © 2006 Time Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted from Time Magazine® with permission. Satellite image courtesy of DigitalGlobe. (see page 94 for color version)

*“Because collectively these maps are the creations of private commercial entities, they almost certainly are affected by, and to some degree reflect, a larger social context.”*

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to the acquisition of Baghdad, surely an important trophy, if not as significant as Saddam Hussein himself. Within days of the invasion, until its conclusion some three weeks later, maps of Baghdad became the cartographic lingua franca in reporting the war.

Although the maps in the news magazines that we examined exhibited some distinctive design characteristics and varied significantly in total volume among publications, we observed little significant difference in cartographic perspective and voice. Compare, for example, the representations of actions in Afghanistan that appeared in *Time* (Figure 1) and *US News and World Report* (Figure 2); or contrast the map from *Time* (Figure 5) and *Newsweek* (Figure 6), both of which impugn the intentions of Saddam Hussein. Because collectively these maps are the creations of private commercial entities, they almost certainly are affected by, and to some degree reflect, a larger social context. There seems even less question that these maps affect the perspectives of their readers, yet any effort to precisely and unequivocally associate these perspectives with journalistic maps is faced with difficulty at several levels.

From a methodological point of view alone, assessing empirically how these maps shape and transform geographic knowledge for their audience seems a daunting task, the more so when photographs and images add color, dimension, and veracity to the cartographic message. A credibly designed study that might conclude ‘Such and such a percentage of the public believes that failure to root out Osama bin Laden is due to impediments depicted on media maps’ is clearly impracticable. Because Americans are exposed to an almost countless number of maps and map images daily, because ours is a map immersed society, much of the message conveyed by media maps may be subtle if not entirely subliminal (Vujakovic, 1999b; Gilmartin, 1988). And since the makers of these maps are immersed in the same social fabric and subject to the same values and dialogues, it can not be tacitly assumed that the display of power or strength or technical superiority in their maps is a deliberate and conscious act. Most often, we suspect there is no such deliberate intent (Pugliese, 1988). Some members of the *Geopolitik* school, for example, implored each other to be scrupulously objective in constructing their maps for fear of losing credibility, yet in contemporary context, the resulting maps appear markedly subjective if not blatantly propagandistic (Herb, 1997).

That media maps are likely not conceived to advertently advance a particular point of view but rather are inadvertently influenced by the social context and ideological values of their makers may confound rather than clarify efforts to understand the role of these maps in the public discourse. But the greater irony here is that for the same reasons their effects are difficult to measure, the impact and importance of media maps are undeniable. From print to television to the Internet, maps have become an integral and ubiquitous element of the social dialectic. Because the public accepts these maps as the first line of geographic knowledge, coupled perhaps with a lack of cartographic understanding, maps speak with unquestioned authority, an authority that is almost certainly reinforced by the sophisticated and complexly layered confections in which these maps are often presented.

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