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A Hierarchy of Innocence

The Media's Use of Children in the Telling of International News

Susan D. Moeller

The shift in warfare and in geopolitics since the Cold War has made it difficult for Americans to identify the “good guys” and the “bad guys” in international affairs. The “Evil Empire” is no longer reflexively the Soviet Union or its proxies, for example. Without a clear sense of who needs protection, the media and other political actors have tried to identify who is innocent. In many cases, children have been portrayed as the only “pure” victims. For many conflicts and crises, children, seen generically, have filled up the American empathy vacuum—that void that used to be taken up by the Natan Sharanskys, the Alexander Solzhenitsyns, the Jacobo Timmermans, the Nelson Mandelas: men, typically, who stood for the values of democracy, equality, and freedom. Now, often, conflicts are depicted in the media less as political confrontations than as brutal and ideologically senseless battles, and how better to communicate that than to show a damaged child?

Starving children are the famine icon. An emaciated child is not yet associated with the stereotypes attached to its color, its culture, or its political environment. Skeletal children personify innocence abused. They bring moral clarity to the complex story of a famine. Their images cut through the social, economic, and political context to create an imperative statement.

Time (1992) magazine's cover story on the stands the week that the U.S. Marines landed in Mogadishu in December 1992 included a four-page photo essay titled “Landscape of Death.” It was prefaced by this short column of text:

The harrowing faces of starvation, in inert shapes of death. These are the images that have finally brought the world to Somalia's rescue. Why did it take so long, when some reporters have been telling the story for months? Such is the power of pictures: people are starving and dying in Liberia, Sudan, southern Iraq, Burma,

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Peru, yet no massive aid is offered. Humanitarian concern has no logical stopping point, but the world's attention is hard to capture. It is easy to argue that policymakers should not wait for gruesome television footage before they respond. But if images like these are what it takes to bring mercy to even one people in peril, so be it.¹

The photograph that punctuated the end of that column was a close-up of an infant trying to nurse from a shriveled breast, while flies feasted on its shut eyes.

Somalia started as a famine story. It became a war story. But the signature image of the child remained. And that is perhaps one reason why today children have come to headline so many conflicts—indeed, so many international events of any kind. A story that uses children is seemingly transparent in its meaning. Dead children carried on biers through the streets of war-torn countries, teary toddlers peering out of bus windows, shell-shocked youngsters clutching tattered toys, mutilated preteens struggling on one leg, dead infants still clinging to their dead mothers—all have become too familiar icons at the turn of the millennium. Today's disasters, which are hard to follow even with a scorecard, are made more comprehensible and accessible by the media's referencing of children—even if that focus on children is a false or distorted consciousness, a simulacrum of the event. The American public may care little and know less about many regions of the world, but put a child's face on a crisis and there is an instinctive, even when abbreviated, response (Moeller 1999).²

Children are not only headliners in international affairs. Even apart from policy areas resonant for children, such as public education or abortion, children have become an entry point for the media to discuss any event or issue considered to be overexposed, merely boring, or of only tangential interest to an audience. In today's competitive news environment, children are perceived to be one of the few surefire ways to attract eyeballs—on-line, in print, and on television. In debates over such diverse issues as foreign policy, Internet regulation, health care, the environment, and control of tobacco and alcohol, children have become proxies for all sides.

Children have become projections of adult agendas, a trend all too evident during the winter and spring of 2000 in the case and coverage of Elián González. Elián became the poster child for a public policy debate much larger than his individual case: the debate over U.S. relations with Cuba that has raged since President John Kennedy's administration in the 1960s. That debate had been more or less at an impasse until Elián alone survived a failed crossing by Cuban refugees. Calls to action claiming to be on Elián's behalf engaged the public in the dispute over U.S. relations with and sanctions against Cuba. Both sides in the controversy over whether the six-year-old should have remained in the United States after his rescue at sea constructed images to validate their positions.

Photographs of Elián terrified by federal agents in riot gear were exploited by the anti-Castro forces; photographs of Elián smiling in the arms of his father were employed by those favoring his return to Cuba.³ Anti-Castro partisans framed their position as pro-child and pro-freedom, while those opposing Elián's right to political asylum framed their position as pro-nuclear family, pro-father. A public policy debate that had been stalled, with only minor movement for years, was suddenly and consistently front-page news and the discussion topic on all the talk shows.

Children have long been used as attention grabbers. Recall the lantern slide shows of journalist Jacob Riis that showed the upper class how "the other half" lived, or, three-quarters of a century later, Lyndon Johnson's 1964 "Daisy" ad of a little blond girl counting the petals on a flower, which juxtaposed a picture of childhood innocence with a nuclear blast: "These are the stakes: to make a world in which all of God's children can live . . . or to go into the darkness . . . Vote for President Johnson on November 3rd."⁴ But while the shilling of public policy issues by using images of children is a familiar tactic, the epidemic use of images of children to headline a broad array of both domestic and international issues is a recent predilection (Moeller 1999). Since the feminist movement of the 1970s, women have been replaced by children as the public emblems of goodness and purity. In 1996, feminist Betty Friedan, for example, described in a *New Yorker* column the demise of an "old paradigm of 'identity politics'" and the arrival of a "new paradigm" whose "strongest unifying theme is a concern for children."⁵ By mid-1998, author Ann Hulbert could write in the *New York Times Book Review* that "it has become a bipartisan habit to turn vexing public problems into child-centered causes whenever possible."⁶

Others have suggested reasons for this trend beyond politicians' courting of parents by prioritizing children. The Casey Journalism Center for Children and Families at the University of Maryland has noted that the move toward civic journalism within many news organizations has created a focus on at-risk children; the financial imperatives of many media institutions make them eager to attract women, who are, as a group, considered to be interested in children and children's issues; the baby boomer generation in power in many newsrooms has been attracted toward stories that resonate personally (and since many are parenting young children and teenagers, the children's beat has gained respect); and the many major journalism awards won by stories featuring children have encouraged other journalists to also take up children's issues.⁷

Consequently, in the past decade or so, children have become *the* moral referent. Since the ideological force of abstractions such as "democracy" and "liberty" has been dissipated in the marketplace of ideas in the aftermath of the Soviet Union, children have become a motive for action.⁸ The 1990s saw the end of a world clearly divided into "us" and "them"; the end of the Soviet monolith freed Americans from the shibboleth of the "Evil Empire." But the Cold War's closure

left a vacuum. With whom do we now empathize? In the post–Cold War era, children have filled up the empathy void formerly filled by prisoners of conscience such as the Soviet Union’s Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The *New York Times*, in its “Week in Review” section on October 8, 2000, for example, ran a story about the children who have become symbols of the conflict in the West Bank and the Gaza strip. “Had a cameraman not been on hand when 12-year old Muhammad al-Durrah and his father walked into a firefight last Saturday,” wrote Tom Zeller in his lead, “the boy might just have been another faceless casualty. As it is, the image of Muhammad’s death has become the latest totem in the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.”⁹

The global deluge of internal ethnic, religious, and tribal conflicts in the past decade emphasized the constraints on U.S. power at the same time as the ideological obligation to “save the world for democracy” disappeared. Yet, rather than abandon the moral high ground, there has been a revision, a downscaling of the basic text. The doctrine that the United States must save the world (from communism, say) has shifted to the opinion that Americans should save a child from hunger or from further abuse. A new grammar and syntax of public discussion has become necessary to accomplish these diplomatic, public policy, or programmatic ends, and children have become part of that language. Invoking children lends fervor to an argument for (or against) a public policy position and overlays a moral construct on the debate.

And there are other explanations for why politicians, the media, and their audiences are attracted to stories about children. To speak about children is not just to speak about the literal youth in a place. Children are a synecdoche for a country’s future, for the political and social well-being of a culture. Stories about children are sentimental. They employ the same emotional hooks that “tearjerker” movies do. Stories about children goad adults into a response. The media feature children because, like rubbernecking on the highway, many in the public cannot seem to help but read or watch such pieces. The image of an endangered child is the perfect “grabber.” It is so powerful that it short-circuits reasoned thought. Children dramatize the righteousness of a cause by having their innocence contrasted with the malevolence (or perhaps banal hostility) of adults in authority. Finally, a focus on children serves a logistical function. Since children are ubiquitous in societies across the globe, they are always, and quickly, accessible news pegs. In a “24/7” news environment, perfunctory angles on issues have become inevitable and well-nigh unavoidable.

This article examines both the media-developed and the politically exploited concept of the innocent child and explores the use of children as proxies in public policy debates. Why are children so much in evidence when the American media is covering international news? Why is the question of innocence so pertinent today? Why are there poster children for seemingly every public policy issue and for seemingly every crisis, especially when that crisis is an international one?

The Summer of 1999

To help address those questions, this article investigated the American media's coverage of international news over the course of three weeks during the summer of 1999, from June 21 to July 10.

During that period, Kosovo dominated international news coverage. For example, the *New York Times* ran more than thirty front-page stories related to Kosovo during those three weeks; the *Boston Globe* ran nearly twenty. Other countries that appeared more than once on the front pages of the *New York Times* were China, Israel, and Northern Ireland. Poland, France, England, South Africa, Honduras, and the "Arabs" each appeared once. On the front pages of the *Boston Globe*, China never appeared but Northern Ireland did several times; the *Globe* mentioned Northern Ireland with about the same frequency as the *Times* mentioned Israel—a fact not surprising given the demographics of these papers' audiences. Other countries mentioned on the front pages of the *Globe* were Canada, South Korea, Haiti, Chechnya/Russia, and Italy.

With the exception of the news story—later "corrected"—about a thirteen-year-old Honduran boy who allegedly made a 3,200-mile solo journey to New York City to find his father, there were no front-page or top-of-the-news international events with children as the de facto central characters during those three weeks. Children were not the chief victims or perpetrators of a major international news event (or domestic one) during this period (the shooting earlier that spring in Littleton, Colorado, would have been a domestic version of such a news event), nor were children's issues abroad or at home (such as education, childhood diseases, or child soldiers) a focus of attention.

There were certain international stories that looked specifically at children and children's issues, but these were rare and received little attention:

- an article in the *Washington Post* that discussed the psychological trauma of Kosovo for its child victims was buried in the Health section, on page Z12,
- an article in *Newsweek* that described a book about a fourteen-year-old Japanese killer (written by his parents) was on page 71,
- and a story that aired on both CBS (on its evening news program) and NBC (on the *Today* show) about a fire in South Korea that killed twenty-three children in a summer camp was given ninety words (about thirty seconds of airtime) on CBS and fifty-five words on NBC. (CNNI, Sky News, and BBC World, however, devoted a good deal of time to the children's death, including second- and third-day stories as the cause of the fire was investigated.)

But even though few international news stories focused on children as the central actors in an event, the media seized on children as a way to make a number of indirect points in stories unrelated to specific children's issues. Five

categories of use emerged (somewhat overlapping, of course) during those three summer weeks.

1. Children were used to stand in for the future well-being of Kosovo, to be “torch-bearers,” in effect. So a *Los Angeles Times* story about teaching Kosovo refugee children about the dangers of landmines quoted one of the instructors: “Instead of teaching pupils about things that will be of importance to their lives, I’m in a situation that I have to teach them about land mines and weapons.” The article made a point of saying that the third- and fourth-graders taking the classes were disturbed about their own futures. Reported the article, “Lavdrim Shabani, 10, who was weeping after the lesson: ‘I feel so sad that there are all these things I can’t do because of the Serbs.’”¹⁰
2. Children were cast into “martyr” roles. Death and woundings are tragic in almost all cases, but when the victim is a child, the tragedy seems especially intense, and perhaps even more so when a parent or other concerned adult is present but can do little to prevent it. The drama is heightened still further when the death or injuries are brutal or prompted by callous and random cruelty and then, in addition, described graphically. Readers and viewers are prodded to viscerally recoil from the perpetrators. A *Newsweek* article about “Serb savagery” in Kosovo told this story in its second paragraph:

Shyhrete, 36, tried to hide her 10-month-old nephew Eron under her legs. But the baby cried, and someone fired a clip into him, killing the child and wounding Shyhrete 11 times. Another nephew, 2-year-old Ismet, had been hit in the stomach, and like anyone who’s been gut-shot, he had a sudden, desperate thirst. Water, he called, can you bring me water, Mommy? Firing into the small restaurant from the sidewalk, the Serbs shot him in the head.¹¹

An enumeration of child victims serves to verify the horror or wrongdoing of others. In the virtual album of twentieth-century horrors, battlefield massacres and genocides are memorably recorded through homely images: the unnamed graves stretching to the horizon from the fields of Flanders, the piles of glasses and shoes from the Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen death camps, the identification pictures taken of the Cambodians executed at Tuol Sleng. Simple images become iconic. Photographs of faces, the flotsam of a once-normal life, and graying headstones all have the power to shock, precisely because of their commonness, their realness. For Kosovo, a litany of the names of those children who had been killed (together with their ages) became the newest and most elementary representation of war. *Newsweek*, in a brief story about a massacre that took place on March 26, 1999, in Suva Reka, featured the photographs of those who died, including Majlinks, 16 years; Altin, 11 years; Redon, 2 years; Ismet, 2 years; and Eron, 10 months.¹²

3. Children were represented as “victims to be rescued” and were used to goad outsiders, and adults in general, into a response (humanitarian, political, military, economic, etc.). In NBC’s package on the president’s visit to the Kosovo camps, reporter Martin Fletcher spoke to a thirteen-year-old girl, Saranda, who said on camera (through a translator): “I want to thank Bill Clinton for my freedom.”¹³ Or, more obliquely, tales of horror were used not only to provoke an international response but also to justify the reactions of those within the country. Pulitzer-Prize winning reporter Paul Watson wrote this lead to a *Los Angeles Times* story

about the travails of one Kosovar Albanian: "There were two bullet wounds in her broken shoulder, a dead child in her arms, and still Fatime Kelmendi did not give in to the pain. The lives of three more children were in her hands." Watson quoted the Albanian woman as saying, "Because of these kids, I kept walking. If it was just me, I wouldn't have moved another step forward. I would have lain down there and died."¹⁴

4. Children were portrayed as "angels." Their innocence blackened the villains' evil or misdeeds, especially when the depicted innocent child was an infant. In that case the debauchery of the villain was painted most darkly, for what possible threat is a babe in arms, what kind of human is capable of harming the so obviously helpless?¹⁵ A *CBS Evening News* story about the fate of those in Pristina Hospital had this voice-over from Barry Petersen:

When the Serbs left, they took not just their medical expertise, but also the hospital supplies The innocents are most defenseless here in newborn intensive care. It lacks water, antibiotics, even diapers. Baby Mustafa needs oxygen, another thing this ward doesn't have The war is over, and still the innocents suffer.¹⁶

Sometimes the "angelic" child was older, although still identified as a child. For readers and viewers, the impact of having an older child as a foil for evil is that the audience to the story recognizes that the child will carry the scars of that encounter for life and that the child is old enough to understand that he or she will carry that burden for life (whether that burden is the loss of a parent, the loss of limbs, or the loss of peace of mind).

This was the lead of *Time* magazine's June 28, 1999, cover story, "Kosovo: The Awful Truth":¹⁷

The horror stays locked in Gentiana Gashi's mind. Her eyes are red-ringed holes in a pinched, exhausted face. She came home safely to Cuska last week, but she is still harrowed by the unspeakable memories of May 14, the day she left. Back then, she stood beside her weeping mother, too terrified to cry out, as she watched the Serbs march her father away with the other men, hands clasped behind his neck. He looked back once, tears streaming down his face. Gentiana's mother wept silently too as she watched her husband's retreating figure until laughing Serbs herded the women out of the village, elbowing them with sly smirks, singing obscene songs. That night when the women slipped back into Cuska, it was Gentiana who picked through the charred pieces of bodies inside three smoldering houses to find the remains of her father. She used to give him massages, she said. Ten men had died in that house, but when her fingers touched a familiar torso, "I knew his back, so he was my dad." To save her mother from the hideous sight, Gentiana helped three women gather up the human debris of her father and 34 relatives and neighbors into little bags. They tagged each with a name and buried them in two communal graves. Then all those who had survived fled, some to the hills above the town of Pec, some to Albania, anywhere away from the Serbian brutality. Gentiana Gashi is 11 years old.

5. Finally, children were employed most simply as "targets of opportunity": easy, human-interest news pegs that may have little to do with the main import of the story. A *New York Times* article on the war in Kashmir began with this lead:

The rains came today to this parched Punjabi village, pelting the shiny black hides of water buffalo and the barefoot boys who joyously stretched out their arms to welcome the drenching coolness. But the gaiety with which the villagers greeted the monsoon contrasted with their grim fatalism about the fighting¹⁸ that has raged for two months between Pakistan and India in Kashmir.

In the case of Kosovo, the lives of children were integrally intertwined with the conflict and its denouement. It was seemingly natural and unforced for the media to dwell on their traumas and experiences. But it was not inevitable that the coverage do so, or do so in the particular manner that it did. Ten years ago, twenty-five years ago, and fifty years ago, even when conflict had broken out among civilian populations, children were featured less in the news. Wars were covered from the perspective of the soldiers and the diplomats; journalists were less attentive to the civilian backwash of battles (Vietnam was to accelerate the change in coverage; for example, several of the photographic icons from that war featured children: Ron Haerberle's images from the My Lai massacre, Nick Ut's Pulitzer-Prize winning photo of the naked and napalmed little girl running down the road) (Moeller 1989).

The implication of the frames mentioned above on such a subject as Kosovo was that this was a war in which children were particularly at risk and made particular targets. Another frame, of heroic defenders (a typical frame during World War I and II), for example, would have left a different impression. And a third frame, of technological innovation (a frame prevalent during the Gulf War, for instance) would have suggested a third impression (Goffman 1997).¹⁹

Most of the child frames delineated above were not by themselves harmful or even an exercise of poor news judgment on the part of reporters or media gatekeepers. Children are integral elements of family and community. Omitting news or stories that affect their lives or that shed light on the political well-being of a society would be a gross oversight on the part of the media. But equally, it is important that the media strive to include children in stories when their presence is integral to the accounts. Black velvet paintings of wide-eyed waifs have their high-culture equivalent when the media shill their stories with wide-eyed orphans. Such pictures are riveting in an almost nauseous way because they eliminate the nuances, inconsistencies, and complexities that are essential components of political society. Such pictures choose visceral emotion over perception, signifiers over sense. In a finite world of time and space (still true for the traditional media of print, television, and radio), running facile stories—or simply the news equivalent of eye candy—inevitably crowds out other pieces.

What is needed are nuanced packages composed of incisive stories as well as compelling images. The best stories are those that go beyond the “Oh my God” to discover the context. Marc Charney, international editor of the “Week in Review” section of the *New York Times*, told me in the spring of 1999, “What I’m

looking for, what's new in stories on international affairs, are those on women and children—like the piece we did on rape as a weapon of war or the one on child soldiers.”²⁰ Too often, the aim of the media is not to inform an audience but to deliver an audience to their advertisers. Kids are news, but what is really news is to use them not just as visual or anecdotal come-ons, but as way-ins to understanding a troubling, even if at times, pint-sized political world.²¹

When We Were Very Young

There are a multitude of reasons why Americans are so affected by seeing images of desperate children in the news and therefore why the media may be tempted to use them as headliners.²² Stories about children are ultimately about “us”—“us” as individuals and “us” as a political culture. We evaluate our own circumstances and our own ability to care and provide for our loved ones by comparing them to the lives of the children we read about. We contrast the mythic idyll of childhood as a time spent frolicking in the Hundred Acres Wood with Christopher Robin with the “real”-life Dickensian—or worse—accounts of the children in the news. We judge the character of our leaders and the quality of our government by their responsiveness to the needs (or our perception of the needs) of our own children and the world's children.

The default representation of American childhood is biased in favor of dimpled knees and gap-toothed grins. Americans take about 12.5 billion photographs every year, and their most popular subjects are children.²³ Images of children, photographic ones as well as narrative versions, are sacred in our society. They guard an American ideal of childhood as a time of sunny innocence (Higonnet 1998), a social construct never broad-based in its reality but long comforting in its fictions.

Family photo albums are heavy in their depictions of only some of childhood's watersheds. Snapshots celebrate the halcyon days of birthday parties and trips to the beach and record only by Soviet-style omissions darker passages in childhood, such as the divorces and deaths of relatives.

The same photo albums unduly commemorate children's early years of life. The camera remains near to hand during children's first years. The frequent spontaneous victories of infancy—first smile, first bite, first step—are amply documented. Later years are more sporadically captured on film. By the time children are teenagers, only scheduled events such as holidays, graduations, and family reunions typically precipitate the unearthing of the camera lost deep in the closet (Schwartz 1989, 1992).

Increasingly, it is not easy to describe older children, especially teenagers, as “innocent.” Violent video games, movies with adult content, and pagers and cell phones have all become components of teenage lifestyles. Alongside such defining images of everyday teens are the media's portraits of more problematic

children: youthful killers, gang members, and even the kids from Silicon Valley who are preternaturally smart or wealthy beyond their years. These images of pseudosophisticates or underage delinquents may not lead Americans away from a faith in the intrinsic innocence of childhood. But they do challenge American attitudes about children in two ways. Portraits of children who are perpetrators rather than victims or who are intellectually independent of adults lower the absolute age parameters by which childhood is defined. As a result, nominal children who are depicted as no longer innocent are increasingly being considered as adults; they have to forego the legal protections (and limitations) that have become inseparable from the American conception of childhood. Second, innocence has become most closely associated with infancy and extreme youth. The effect of that has been to redefine the limits of childhood at an increasingly younger and younger age.

As a consequence of these trends, the public image of childhood has come to be inseparable from the depiction of very young children's bodies and faces, blissfully happy. It is a feminized view of childhood. It is a deliberately, if unconsciously constructed Ivory soap concept of childhood as pure and innocent.

Forty years ago, French historian Philippe Ariès argued that the notion of childhood was a "social invention." In research he conducted in France, Ariès distinguished between what he called a premodern understanding of childhood, when children were considered to be miniature adults, endowed with the emotions, intentions, and passions of grown-ups, and the modern conception of childhood, in which children are considered to be emotionally immature, dependent, and innocent (Ariès 1962).

Today, the child who is innocent and under custodial care is a luxury affordable by those within society with both leisure and money. The growth of capitalism—and the concomitant industries of advertising and marketing—has encouraged this luxury. Consumerist culture has sentimentalized the child and vested him or her with an important identity that others value. The innocent child is an ideal ascribed to by Americans as emblematic of the value and importance of the family, and that ideal has accumulated a keeping-up-with-the-Joneses price tag. It has become essential in middle-class American culture, for example, to buy educational toys, name-brand children's clothes, cars in which the primary purpose is to accommodate children, and houses on family-friendly streets and in neighborhoods with good schools.

The idealized image of innocence is exploited thoroughly in advertising campaigns and capitalized on exhaustively in political campaigns. Americans' identification of baby-soft skin and rounded limbs with warm, fuzzy feelings about childhood and family cohesion is exploited to sell perfume, cars, and public policy. Americans subscribe to a cherished notion of child-centeredness circulated and exported in such forms as child rights and child welfare institutions and presidential electioneering in elementary school classrooms (Scheper-Hughes

and Sargent 1998:10). Yet, are children so favored and so protected? Or is child-centeredness a fantasy, a camouflage for other agendas? "A large and willing American audience," said *New York Times* writer Frank Rich, "is all too compliant when children are used as props to sell it something, whether entertainment, prurience or the agenda of a politician."²⁴

Children as Proxies

How a society depicts children and how it articulates the concept of childhood engages a society's core sense of morality, social order, and political integrity. "We're obsessed with children," said Kiku Adatto, director of the Children's Studies Program at Harvard University, "but that doesn't mean the same thing as upholding the idea of childhood. In fact, we're obsessed with it precisely because all the barriers between childhood and adulthood are breaking down, and we're really unsure where this leads."²⁵

"If there is no agreement on what childhood should be," wrote *New York Times* reporter Peter Applebome, "there is agreement that something significant is happening to it." The image of the child is a leading indicator of social change. Applebome argued,

At a time when a Texas legislator can propose the death penalty be extended to 11-year-olds (and be taken seriously), when children commit ghastly murders and adults struggle to get in touch with their inner child, when first graders run on schedules as rigid and focused as corporate C.E.O's and C.E.O.'s go to camp to bond and climb mountains together, the blurring of the lines of commerce reflect the blurring of the stages of life.²⁶

It is not so much, to paraphrase Ariès (1962:9), the child as a reality that is in question as the child as an idea.

How are the social constructs of "child," "childhood," and even "family" defined? The definition of "child" and "childhood," for example, like that of "family," is an act of imagination about people. Within each description of family are presumptions about the relative positions that various members must occupy. There are implicit moral imperatives in those positions. To stray outside those proscribed roles, believe the adherents of that definition of family, is to challenge the notion of family itself.

Essentially, the family is a moral system, a keystone in the building of social and political institutions. Like political scientist E.E. Schattschneider's (1969) definition of "democracy," the family is "an experiment in the creation of a community" (p. 47). And if that core component of family is, in turn, defined by how it nurtures and protects the child, then it is perhaps more evident why the political, legal, and cultural systems skirmish over the definition of "child" and why political and cultural agendas are frequently framed by reference to images of

children. As Henry Jenkins (1998), director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Comparative Media Studies Program, has written, "All of our politics are shaped by the category of the child and the image of the innocent child" (p. 10).

Images of children and the interpretation of that state of being known as childhood speak to a nation's very identity. They are ways in which a nation can confront its own aspirations and values. Back in 1962, Philippe Ariès noted that the family has "perhaps never before exercised so much influence over the human condition" (p. 10). The term "family" connected with both private interest and public welfare and it emerged as a way-in to thinking about the world, poverty, race, war, and health. Today, the preferred connective term is "child." "The old saying to suggest something is a core American value and need, used to be 'Mom, the flag and apple pie,' " said former ABC medical correspondent George Strait. "Now it is just simply 'children.' If you want to do anything in health-care reform, for example, you've got to put a kid up front."²⁷

Family precedes and anchors politics. Images of children and family can be used by those across the political spectrum, as is evident by pro-life protestors referencing the images of fetuses and those counseling intervention in Africa referencing images of starving Ethiopian toddlers—not to mention the ubiquitous parading of husbands, wives, and children by political candidates of all stripes. "Virtually every Clinton initiative is framed, sooner or later, as being in the best interests of the nation's or the world's children, allowing him to portray his political opponents as anti-kids," charged Republican speechwriter Doug Gamble in 1998.²⁸

Because the images of children and the family appear to stand apart from party politics, the images allow those who seize them to stake and claim a moral high ground. But moral arguments are not prominent in public policy decisions; operational decision making rarely draws on moral interpretation. Americans may get moral sentiment from their leaders, but the leaders rarely make policy decisions on moral grounds. In part, that is because the nonideological questions around which the public can rally, such as aid to children, are ancillary to the main concerns, such as why the children need aid in the first place. Yet, in the absence of other points of consensus, politicians searching for mobilizing platforms turn to flabby, Pollyanna-ish calls to action. Is it moral or even laudable to give aid to children? Of course. Only the worst kind of Scrooge could be opposed. But then what? The systemic problems faced by children, which are what has gotten them into the messes they are in, need systemic solutions. And there is little consensus on what those solutions need to be.

Most commonly, images of children emerge in public debate when contesting elites fight each other. "Democracy," said E.E. Schattschneider (1975), "is a competitive political system in which competing leaders and organizations define the alternatives of public policy in such a way that the public can participate in the

decision-making process” (p. 138).²⁹ Elites use the media to jump-start a stalled policy debate. When elites fight each other to a draw, there is a need to involve the public. The most efficient way for elites to introduce sets of issues that are political and polemical is to reframe them outside their political perspective. Turning to human incident and moral sentiment, such as calls to action on behalf of children, can reframe the policy debate so as to engage the public’s imagination and emotions. Doing so makes an end run around the tacit prohibition about further discussion of a stalled or stalemated or intentionally sidelined public policy point. For example, there was Elián González or the photo opportunity described in the lead to a *New York Times* front-page story in October 1999 headlined “Sierra Leone Victims and Rebels Hear Albright’s Message of Peace”:

Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright today cuddled a 3-year-old girl whose arm had been hacked off by rebels, then met with rebel leaders responsible for thousands of such mutilations in this country’s eight-year civil war, urging them to stick to a fragile peace agreement.³⁰

Children are used in such instances as nonpartisan subjects who invoke an audience’s sympathy on a plane that appears apolitical or suprapolitical—“purely” moral. This objective alliance of images may then help reformulate or reframe a policy issue, although most recognize that moving policy elites to action is not typically accomplished solely by shoving children into the spotlight.³¹

A Hierarchy of Innocence

Those players interested in calling attention to a Kosovo or Sierra Leone use stories and images of youngsters to capitalize on the perceived “hierarchy of the innocent”: that operative ordering of who in the world is considered to be most deserving of protection. And right now the first in line are children.

Politically, socially, and emotionally wrenching issues are increasingly headlined by a child, suggested Rony Brauman (1992), the former head of Médecins Sans Frontières, because there is a cultural requirement for “purity of victim status.” Victims must be innocent, rescuers must be heroic, and those thwarting them must be villainous. As a result, argued Brauman, the status of victim is only granted “in cases of unjustified or innocent suffering He must be 100 percent victim, a non-participant” (p. 154).

Only when victims have been identified as “bona fide” are they candidates for compassion. With wars no longer being fought along ideological grounds transparent to Americans—as was the case during the Cold War—it has become problematic to champion, willy-nilly, victims’ rights in general. As author David Reiff wrote,

Humanitarian relief workers have learned to their cost [that] the kind of human empathy and instinctual solidarity with victims has not only proved to be insufficient, at times it has proved to be counterproductive, even destructive. That is because victims, except when they are children, are not just victims. The Rwandan Hutu refugees [suffering from cholera] in the camps in what was then eastern Zaire . . . are a case in point. They were victims all right; but many of them were also guilty of genocide.³²

The de facto hierarchy is expressed in how the media report on war crimes, for example. Crowned by the most innocent, the hierarchy begins with infants and then includes, in descending order, children up to the age of 12, pregnant women, teenage girls, elderly women, all other women, teenage boys, and all other men. The *New York Times* quoted a Scotland Yard war crimes investigator exhuming a mass grave in Kosovo: “ ‘There were 60 bodies, all shot . . . There were seven children under 12, including a 4-year-old. There were three women, one over 60.’ ”³³ Television follows the same precepts as print. All three network evening news programs on July 4 and July 5, 1999, for example, ran stories that included a mention of a “brand-new” discovery by war crimes investigators that “ethnic Albanian children, even infants, were systematically targeted by Serb forces.” NBC’s Jim Maceda reported that “an Albanian eyewitness says he buried boys and girls ranging from ages four to 12, all shot in the head last March, allegedly by Serb paramilitaries.”³⁴ ABC’s Gillian Findlay reported in a voice-over that there were sixty-four bodies found in the warehouse pictured, “seven of them children. The oldest 10 years, the youngest, just 1.”³⁵ And CBS’s Barry Petersen reported that of the sixty-four, the “women and children [were] killed with bullets in the back of the head . . . Eight-year-old Dardane and her six-year-old brother Dardan, were buried side by side.”³⁶ In each of these cases, only a fraction of those killed were identified by name or even by age or gender—the implication being that those who were not referenced must somehow matter less, at least to the media’s audience of outsiders.

There are few other obvious innocents in this world than children. In depicting wars—or famines, for that matter—children (and their mothers) make ideal victims, while men associated with violent political factions can be murdered or can die by the thousands without creating a flutter of interest in their victim status. Adults in similar circumstances as children elicit less concern. The innocent child has become the indicator species. Just as the viability of certain frog species speaks to the overall health of an ecological microclimate, the well-being of children has come to speak to the overall health of a political climate. The American media feature images of Kosovo orphans, young Ethiopian famine victims, Sierra Leone amputee survivors, preadolescent Thai prostitutes, or shantytown urchins in Brazil, for example, because the children seem, evidently, to be innocent victims of situations beyond their control. Their abused innocence implicitly condemns their home political environment.

Such images from abroad are also reflections of the media's sense of American values and American virtues. Such images of other countries' children who need protection reconfirm the American myth of child innocence: These children in danger are too young to be anything but victims. But also, not coincidentally, such images reconfirm American notions of exceptionalism. The problems of children in a Kosovo or a Sierra Leone, for example, appear unrepeatable foreign and not possible here. "We" do not need to ship our children out of the country on a bus or in the trailer of a tractor. No one "here" chops the hands off of infants and small children.

And of course the photographs and verbal portraits of foreign teens who are nominally children but who are self-evidently threats to their communities—youthful Hutu marauders, Tamil Tiger guerrillas who are still kids, Karen child soldiers—even more thoroughly confirm the concept of American exceptionalism. Even in the midst of a deluge of stories about problem American children, the general tone of most of the pieces is that such children are aberrations: "How could this happen?" In contrast, the images of children that come out of Asia, Africa, or the Balkans are assumed to be generic: applicable in content to the whole of that society, even the whole of that region.

Moral Rhetoric, Moral Reasons

Diplomats, nongovernmental organizations, and the media have come to understand that even those stories and images that make us feel guilty (a photo of a child amputee or an ad that states "you can save this child or you can turn the page") make us feel powerful. We have the power of salvation in our hands—even if it is at the micro level of a single child. One area of research on this subject has been direct mail. Direct mail experts have determined that there are very specific types of photographs that elicit the most returns. Save the Children's president Charlie MacCormack detailed that his organization makes decisions about what kind of child to use in an advertising campaign "based on what works." Children in the ads are

5, 6, 7. In that age range. Younger than that and [donors believe] the parents should be taking care of them—or what they need is not financial help, what they need is nurturing. Older than that people feel that they are autonomous and capable of fending for themselves. My impression is [what works best is] a pretty generic child, ethnically and even in terms of gender. It may be a girl, but it may be a sort of an Indonesian child of not dramatic male or female appearance, six or seven years old. I think there's a reason for that. I think people have a kind of generic. Once it gets more specific, it may, for most people, get too specific. But the other thing that is really key is the eyes. More than anything, having the child be looking right at you is the key.³⁷

It is not pictures per se that are important. What is essential is the story that certain pictures tell. It is the moral argument that the pictures make. It is the moral box into which the audience members decide to place themselves by responding or by not responding. It is the moral box into which they decide to place those politicians and those diplomats in a position to act.

What politicians, relief agencies, and the media understand quite well, is that pictures and stories alone do not prompt any response, much less a particular desired response.³⁶ The pictures have to be framed, to be positioned so that they resonate with a demographically important audience. The children have to be portrayed as needing help, for example, not as independent actors. Smiling children do not make people or their representatives in Congress pull out their wallets to help them. "One of the largest dilemmas" those in the donor community face, said MacCormack,

is this one between dignity and success and its benefits and need and call to action and its benefits. If poor children could have a dollar for every time we've had that conversation at Save the Children, we'd be helping more children than we're helping. The indisputable overwhelming, scientific fact is that a call to action is necessary and "need" is the call to action. And that happiness and success do not elicit a donor response. Period.³⁷

Nongovernmental organizations, politicians, and the media all use pictures of children to gain attention for an issue or action; but none of them create an audience out of whole cloth. In each case, individuals are prompted to recognize that they care about the subject under discussion. Framing the news through its effect on children is a no-brainer. With the exception of W.C. Fields and a few curmudgeonly others, most members of the public respond viscerally to news of a danger to children, whether the child is eighteen-month-old Jessica who fell down a well or five-year-old Irma who was injured in a mortar attack in Sarajevo. A correspondent from NBC news, covering the story of U.S. Marines detailed to sweep for landmines in Kosovo, asked one Marine why he "face[d] this kind of danger." He replied, "To me, my main concern is little kids. I got a bunch of little kids myself."³⁸ If individuals discover that they care enough, they may be sufficiently motivated to take action: to donate money, donate time, consciously self-identify with that cause or action, or, as far as the media is concerned, they may be motivated just enough not to change the channel.

Translating the micro into the macro, moving from personal incident to public action, seems like it should be possible. Certainly, the attempt is made every day by activists and lobbyists trying to place issues onto the public agenda. The media, too, routinely use anecdotes to introduce even hard news stories. Sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) identified this collective trend at the end of the 1950s, when he wrote that "personal troubles" could be, and should be translated

into “social issues.” Mills early identified what is now more generally understood (and exploited) by advertisers, politicians, civic journalists, and sociologists: that Americans respond generously when they are engaged by private concerns but that they remain indifferent to public calls for their attention.

Public commitments—even core ones, such as voting—never garner the same enthusiasm and level of selfless participation as private interests. Alan Wolfe discussed this dichotomy in a cover article in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*. “The public and the private constitute two entirely different realms of life, one driven by suspicion, the other informed by love,” he said. “In America, it is not the issue that matters. It is whether the issue is viewed as public or private. The public is what you have to do; the private is what you want to do.”⁴¹

Mills believed that the way to provoke Americans into relating to the social and political landscape surrounding them was to draw connections between their private woes and the public ills. The individual despair that he identified was widespread; there were millions suffering, he argued, because of the moral bankruptcy of society. Show the individual that he was not alone in his unhappiness, believed Mills, and he might act not only on his own behalf but on behalf of society as a whole. Identify a private problem that a person desired to resolve and if that private problem could be linked to a public issue, the public issue would be challenged as well.

Civic behavior is the balance individuals reach between their own self-interests and their perception of their community’s needs and standards. Mills (1959) and his disparate inheritors, from political scientists Carl Oglesby and Richard Shaull (1967) to Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (2000), believed that between the masses and the community-based notions of right and wrong lay a problematic middle zone of institutions: the military-industrial complex, schools, and government. Institutions not only directed how the mass of people could behave, but like scientists controlling rats in a maze, they directed how the public thought. Mills’s (1959) writings and those of like-minded others became part of the required bibliography for 1960s-era activists; their arguments became the reason and rationale for the call to build alternative institutions. But by the 1980s, mergers, the spread of multinational corporations, and the growing economic divide led to individuals’ feelings of powerlessness and a diminished sense of personal control.

Into this environment came such authors as Wolfe, writing about Americans who retreat into their private lives because they feel the public arena gives them no autonomy. The civic domain is suspect territory. As Trudi Schutz, a senior adviser in strategic communications for Save the Children and a former managing director at the advertising agency Burson Marsteller put it, the current attitude is “if I don’t control my life then I don’t control anything.” And so, she says, Americans have chosen to hunker down “around their own individual campfires.”⁴²

One difficulty in moving Americans out from the isolation of their individual campfires has been that there have been few recent themes in the political landscape that have seized Americans' attention and then galvanized them into making a concerted response. In the 1950s and 1960s there were a seemingly limitless number of outside circumstances that threatened individuals and acted to unify them, from fear of the bomb to overt racism.

During the Clinton years, with few general-purpose enemies to attack or values to defend, the concept of protecting children emerged as a core obligation. The argument for employing images of endangered children in public policy debates or in the media then could be made intellectually, politically, morally, and viscerally. But the newfound obligation to children also had the effect of turning images of children into a valuable commodity. In advertising, political campaigns, humanitarian missions, and the media, children have been calculatingly used to shape the public's desires, claim a moral posture, galvanize donors, and capture the attention of an audience.

For journalists, as well as politicians, diplomats, and international relief organizers, the instinct or responsibility to protect children and the compulsion to attract attention by placing children in a central role has become a double bind. As Save the Children's Charlie MacCormack put it, "Actually, for all of us in this field, we can choose between being completely ignored or being paid attention to with a set of messages that are conflicted. It's not a wonderful choice."⁴³ Too often children headline international events because of their "news hook" value rather than because coverage of them illuminates the core of the story under investigation.

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Notes

1. "Landscape of Death," *Time*, December 14, 1992, p. 30.
2. The on-line CNN.com news site featured that effect in a story headlined "Mozambique's 'miracle' baby joins flood appeal" (<http://www.cnn.com/2000/WORLD/europe/08/01/mozambique.baby/>):

The baby plucked from a Mozambique treetop an hour after her birth during devastating floods last March has appeared before London's media. Looking bright and healthy, five-month-old Rositha Chirindza is travelling the world with her mother Cecilia in an appeal for assistance for the African country still crippled by the task of

rebuilding after the floods . . . Mother and daughter became the public face of the Mozambique flood tragedy on March 1 after a television crew captured their dramatic helicopter rescue from a treetop after Rositha's birth."

3. See, for example, the story by Caryn James, "Images Are Everything in Media War," *New York Times*, April 23, 2000, p. A14.
4. Transcript and video of ad are available at <http://www.pbs.org/pov/ad/ads/classic.html>
5. Betty Friedan, "Children's Crusade," *New Yorker*, June 3, 1996, p. 6.
6. Ann Hulbert, "Be Fruitful and Subtract," *New York Times Book Review*, June 14, 1998, p. 11.
7. See the resources at <http://casey.umd.edu/home.nsf>
8. For a book that wrestles with the rhetoric of political debate, see Rodgers (1998).
9. Tom Zeller, "Sticks and Stones: A Deadly Brand of Child's Play," *New York Times*, October 8, 2000, section 4, p. 16.
10. Julie Tamaki, "The Path to Peace," *Los Angeles Times*, June 24, 1999, p. A10.
11. Rod Nordland, "Daddy, They're Killing Us," *Newsweek*, June 28, 1999, p. 22.
12. "The Horror at Suva Reka," *Newsweek*, June 28, 1999, p. 24.
13. *NBC Nightly News*, June 22, 1999.
14. Paul Watson, "Lives of Children Kept Mother Going," *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 1999, p. A10.
15. "The innocence and vulnerability of children were used often to heighten irony, instill moral outrage, or intensify a call to action." Katie Woodruff, Lori Dorfman, and Liana Winett, "Frames on Children and Youth in US Newspapers," delivered at the conference "Media Matters: The Institute on News and Social Problems," September 29-30, 1995, Waltham, MA.
16. *CBS Evening News*, July 10, 1999.
17. Johanna McGeary, "Crimes of War," *Time*, June 28, 1999, pp. 24, 26.
18. Celia Dugger, "In Pakistani Village, Distrust of Indians as Raw as Ever," *New York Times*, July 6, 1999, p. A3.
19. Of course, these were all wars in which politicians desired American engagement. Other crises have been framed so that Americans will feel distance from the events. See Moeller (1999), pp. 21-23, 127-29.
20. Interview with Marc Charney, May 1999.
21. A classic example of a nuanced article, complete with photograph appeared under Charney's watch. See Jane Perlez, "A Chance to Give Evil Its Rewards," May 21, 2000 "Week in Review" section, *The New York Times*.
22. Of course, even pictures of desperate children can trigger compassion fatigue. See Moeller (1999), p. 9.
23. Steve Simon, "There's Quite a Knack to Photographing Kids," *The Toronto Star*, May 31, 1986, p. L2. Simon gives the figure of 14 billion photographs taken by North American photographers. If one subtracts 10 percent of that figure for Canadians, that leaves Americans as taking 12.5 billion pictures.
24. Frank Rich, "America Finds Another JonBenet," *New York Times*, April 22, 2000, p. A27.
25. Quoted in Peter Applebome, "No Room for Children in a World of Little Adults," *New York Times*, May 10, 1999, section 4, p. 1.
26. Peter Applebome, "No Room for Children in a World of Little Adults," *New York Times*, May 10, 1999, section 4, p. 1.
27. Interview with George Strait, September 23, 1999.
28. Doug Gamble, "Democrats: The Party of Hiding behind Kids," *Los Angeles Times*, June 23, 1998, p. B7.
29. See also the writings of Jurgen Habermas and Peter Bachrach.

30. Norimitsu Onishi, "Sierra Leone Victims and Rebels Hear Albright's Message of Peace," *New York Times*, October 19, 1999, p. A1.
31. BBC presenter and media analyst Nik Gowing (1994) compellingly outlined the limitations of moral appeals in his study of the CNN effect.
32. David Reiff, "The Quality of Mercy: Inferno," *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, March 19, 2000, p. 2.
33. John Kifner, "After Scotland Yard Inquiry, A Village in Kosovo Buries 64," *New York Times*, July 6, 1999, p. A6.
34. *NBC Nightly News*, July 4, 1999.
35. *ABC World News Tonight*, July 4, 1999.
36. *CBS Evening News*, July 5, 1999.
37. Interview with Charlie McCormack, April 5, 2000.
38. Many studies have looked at the role of the media in generating responses, including Robinson (1999, 2000), Strobel (1997), Livingston and Eachus (1995), and Gowing (1994).
39. Interview with Charlie McCormack, April 5, 2000.
40. *NBC Nightly News*, June 30, 1999.
41. Alan Wolfe, "The Pursuit of Autonomy," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, May 7, 2000, p. 56 (c.f. Eliasoph 1998).
42. Phone conversation with Trudi Schutz, August 11, 2000.
43. Interview with Charlie McCormack, April 5, 2000.

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