

Letters to the editor
The Washington Post
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The Post's ombudsman column (12/6/92) sorely needs an ombudsman.

In an entire column related to "public killings in the occupied Gaza Strip" and "'Clashes' and street battles and their numerical death tolls," Joann Byrd never once uses the words "Arabs" or "Palestinians", never once says she is writing about Arab/Palestinian fratricide, never once says that the pictures about which she writes show an arab shooting another Arab in the head in broad daylight, and never once cites the available ^{numerical death tolls} "numerical death tolls" of this Arab fratricide or the ostensible explanation for it.

^{by} She gives the impression that, Gaza being occupied by Israel, ~~that~~ it is responsible for the "public killings" and if not responsible for, at least involved in those "street battles."

With this column by an experienced reporter who in addition has the responsibility for reporting ^{critically} on the Post's reporting, that she intended prejudice and intitation of prejudice cannot be ignored.

When the use of only four letters, if only once in an entire newspaper column, could have at least reduced ^{its} the prejudicial nature of the column, what kind of editing was there when, for example, instead of "public killings" ^{it} she could have said "Arab public killings" or instead of "'Clashes' and street battles" ^{it} she could have said "'Clashes' and street battles between Arabs"?

Neither would have required an added line of type. And there was more than enough blank space anyway.

It is incredible that in the writing, the copyreading and the editing the gross, the crude prejudice and unfairness if not the dishonesty of this writing was not perceived and corrected.

This reflects on the Post and raises questions about its own fairness and whether or not it is prejudiced.

An entire column on pictures without ^{once} describing ^{them?} those pictures?

Joann Byrd

Clearer Than All the Words We Know

Post 11/6/92
You saw the sequence of pictures of a man being shot to death in Gaza on the front of The Post's third A section Thursday.

They were shocking images, painful to look at and frightfully at odds with our reverence for human dignity and human life.

And those of us who saw them will understand, in a way we couldn't before, what the stories mean when they speak

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of public killings in the occupied Gaza Strip, maybe wherever they happen. "Clashes" and street battles and their numerical death tolls may never be abstractions again.

A picture's capacity to assault our sensibilities is also its capacity to tell a story directly, swiftly, with enduring impact.

We can be certain, as well, that it is not the newspaper's task to show us the world we want. It is the newspaper's task to show us the world that is. But that isn't the whole of it.

Newspapers don't report every ugly detail, and they frequently decline to print pictures that cross some line of dreadfulness. Publishing gruesome pictures still needs to be a reasonable and understandable choice.

It's the value of the story being told and the effectiveness of this telling vs. the severity of readers' probable repulsion.

If many people are likely to be repelled, and intensely, the paper needs a better reason for publishing than it does if fewer people are liable to be revolted or their reaction weaker. Without a scientific scale for these things, it is finally a judgment call.

The pictures came to The Post Wednesday from Agence France-Presse, with no story and only enough information to compose the caption.

But the pictures were, said Post Executive Editor Leonard Downie Jr., "a startling depiction of what men do to each other" and "evidence of the still unstable, dangerous situation in the oc-

cupied territories."

Readers already knew people are killing each other in the Gaza Strip, and reports of public executions are not unusual. So the story the pictures told was not the Wednesday incident itself, but violence in the refugee camps. It is "extremely rare," says Joe Elbert, the Post's assistant managing editor for photography, to have photographs record a killing.

Mr. Elbert does not hesitate: "Of course we had to use the pictures, just because of what's going on over there. It is our duty to share these things with readers." Mr. Elbert's examples make the point that it's the story being conveyed; he's not saying pictures should be published because they exist.

Ideally, the paper has alternatives for reporting that story, though now and then, Wednesday, for instance, having pictures presents a vehicle that makes the story more clear than all the words we know.

And it's always better if pictures like these run with an article, partly because free-floating horror is somehow more disturbing than horror we can situate somewhere in our concept of the world.

Once editors decide to publish the pictures, the immediate thinking is about where they go. These photos were not on the front page—of The Post or other newspapers I saw. Part of that, said Mr. Downie, was because the context was not clear and couldn't be learned.

The reluctance to put disturbing images on the front page also is the newspaper version of the idea that confronting sensibilities is harder to defend if people can't escape the encounter. The front page is the newspaper equivalent of a downtown intersection or the middle of the train station.

The idea is not to hide the pictures. And maybe people reading well into the paper are accustomed to at least a measure of unpleasant reality. Still, perhaps newspapers should invent something like a warning label. Denver's Rocky Mountain News did it when it published a similar sequence of pictures from Soweto, South Africa, in 1991. The pictures were back in the paper. Readers were warned on Page 3: "The photos are horrific and disturbing."

Even if "horrific and disturbing" also would describe the pictures on Thursday's Page A29, The Post's decision was a defensible one.

Actually, I hope readers were uncomfortable because of the choice. I can say publishing the pictures was right, but in fact, wouldn't it be alarming if readers were not horrified?