Both images are iconic portraits of Afghan women. Yet they serve vastly different narrative purposes based on their context.

Steve McCurry's *Afghan Girl* (1985) is arguably a purely aesthetic view of war. Shot during the Soviet-Afghan War, Sharbat Gula's piercing green eyes dominate the frame, drawing the viewer in with raw intensity. However, the tight focus risks reducing a complex human experience to a symbol of exoticized suffering, curated for a Western gaze. Its power lay in its aesthetic appeal—the vibrant colors and piercing eyes—which allowed Western viewers to connect emotionally with a distant conflict without being confronted by the brutality of it. The fact that McCurry didn't credit the subject until years later has been accused of editting other photo to make them more striking shows how people's views and opinions have changed since 1985.

Conversely, Jodi Bieber's *Bibi Aisha* (2010) is a direct confrontation with violence. The title immediately identifies her, reclaiming her agency. By showing the result of Taliban brutality (her mutilated nose), Bieber forces the viewer to acknowledge the specific, localized consequence of political oppression. This was a direct confrontation with violence. The headlinein Time when it was published, "What Happens if We Leave Afghanistan," explicitly used the image as political propaganda to justify the continued US military presence.

While both photos highlight vulnerability, McCurry's shot creates a poignant, almost romanticized icon, whereas Bieber's image is a documentary indictment, challenging the viewer to engage with the brutal reality rather than just admire the composition.

Deutsche Welle 2016 'Ethical lapse': McCurry's Photoshop scandal. Available at: https://www.dw.com/en/ethical-lapse-photoshop-scandal-catches-up-with-iconic-photojournalist-steve-mccurry/a-19296237
Links to an external site. Accessed 10/02/2026