

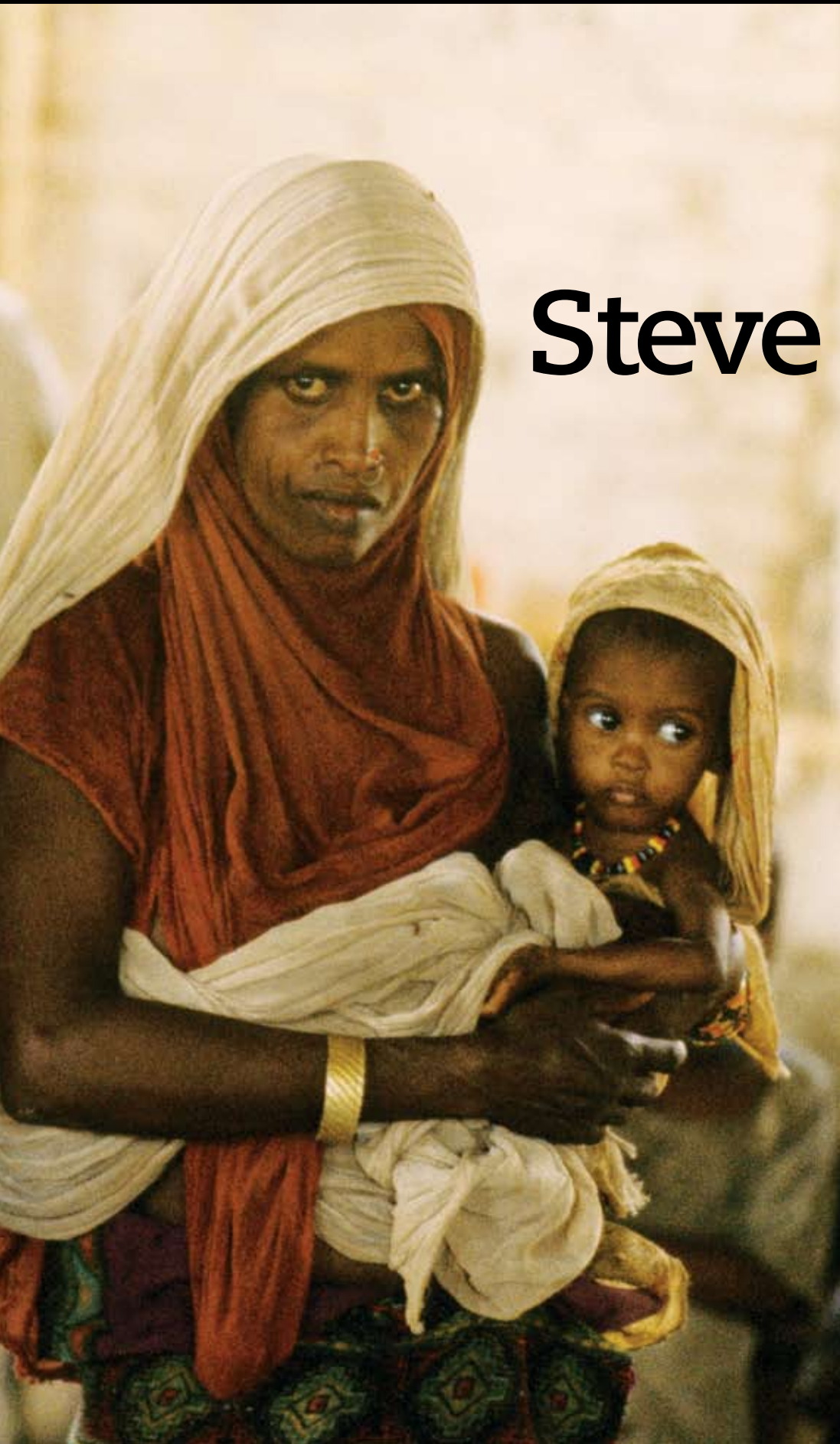
> Famine

Victims of civil war and famine, Ethiopian mothers and their children waited for food at a refugee camp run by the International Committee of the Red Cross. The photo, taken in 1985 during one of Ethiopia's periodic and horrific famines, was part of a worldwide story on the humanitarian work of the ICRC in war zones around the world—an assignment that took me to 13 wars in eight months.



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# Steve Raymer

## The Acclaimed Photojournalist In Our Midst

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By Dale Burg

Steve Raymer, a *National Geographic* photojournalist for more than two decades, has covered famines in Bangladesh and Ethiopia and war stories around the globe, risking his life on occasion to give the world an unsparing, up-close look at human tragedy and suffering.

Seeing his work, you marvel at how his photographs bring the story home. You may also wonder how he summons the will to shoot many of his pictures.

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> May Day 1990

“Even my wife says, ‘I don’t know how you put that camera in people’s faces,’” he recounts. “But it’s your job, your calling. You’re born with certain skills, and that’s what you should be doing.”

For the past 11 years, Raymer has been teaching at the IU School of Journalism. “I tell students that journalism is a great privilege. I saw the end of the Soviet Union, saw them take down the flag in Red Square. You can’t put a price on being an eyewitness to something like that. By the same token, if you believe in social utility, you acknowledge that journalists cause harm to some people at times in the course of trying to do larger social good. Sometimes you’re intrusive. Sometimes it’s not easy. But if you’re going to try to provide some insight and tell that story....” He shrugs; it’s what you have to do.

Seated in his modest office at IU’s Ernie Pyle Hall, he is animated, energetic, and—considering his intimidating resume—accessible and candid. “Still, I look at Mike Wallace, and I don’t know how he could ask

“*Predatel! Traitor!*” cries a flag-waving retired colonel of the Soviet Army as he confronts thousands of pro-democracy demonstrators gathered on Red Square in Moscow to demand an end to seven decades of communism. The confrontation happened on May Day 1990 and marked a turning point in the end of the Soviet empire. Later that day, my wife Barbara and I retired to the bar at the National Hotel with Strobe Talbot, then a *Time Magazine* correspondent and later Bill Clinton’s deputy secretary of state. “The Russians will never be able to put the genie back in the bottle after this,” predicted Talbot. He was right.





> Moscow Synagogue

Russian Jews gather around the Torah in a Moscow synagogue. After former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev lifted Communist Party restrictions on religious liberties in the late 1980's, Jews and other religious minorities became more accessible to Western journalists — and more comfortable with cameras during their prayers.

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some of those questions. As much of a jerk as I am, I don’t think I could go that route, ask one provocative question after another.”

Maybe not, yet Raymer is known for his own remarkable, often provocative, work—pictures that convey beauty, suffering, and compassion all at once. In 1976, the National Press Photographers Association honored him as “Magazine Photographer of the Year.”

## Thirteen wars in eight months

Looking back on his remarkable career, he believes the hardest part was helping to raise two daughters while trotting off to some of the most desolate and dangerous places on earth. “Fortunately, my boss at *National Geographic* was understanding, and I only missed two Christmases in 25 years. But sometimes I’d be gone for six weeks, home for four or five, then off again.” His older daughter—“now a tough reporter and a good journalist”—recently moved to Minneapolis as a TV news producer, his younger is an opera singer.

“The older you get, the more aware you are that your kids need you,” he says, which made the toughest assignment of his life—at 40—that much more difficult.

“I had spent an academic year at Stanford University and was preparing to cover the Soviet Union when my boss thought it would be interesting instead for me to do a story on the humanitarian work of the International



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“It wasn’t like being in the army. You weren’t with Americans. You were in everyone else’s wars. You were with Swiss 20-somethings who, as neutral intermediaries, felt their little Red Cross badges would protect them—even in Ethiopia, where we were bringing food in a convoy and mortar shells were exploding all around us. I was scared, I was old enough to know the risks, and I wound up in wars no one ever heard of.

“I remember driving in the middle of the night to see three POWs captured in a war between Moroccans and Polisario guerillas over control of the Western Sahara. I thought, ‘Am I going to get killed going to see Moroccan prisoners?’” He survived and went on to do extensive reporting in the Soviet Union from 1986 to 1991.

“When you’re not part of the culture,” he continues, “when you’re able to step back and be an observer, it’s easier. Closer to home, things can be a lot more difficult.” He points to a picture on his office wall taken in a New York hospital. “The doctor is telling the patient she has terminal cancer. That was a hard picture to take, since I understood everything. It was my culture, my country. I wasn’t the professional outsider.”

**> St. Petersburg Church**

Fresh from a Baltic storm, snow brightens the neoclassical columns of the Kazan Cathedral, completed in 1811 by Tsar Alexander I, whose ambitious construction schemes transformed St. Petersburg into a European capital whose architectural lavishness rivaled that of Rome.





> Ballet Class

Stars in the making, ballet students limber up at the bar at the Vaganova Academy in St. Petersburg, Russia. Founded in 1738 by Empress Ann as the Imperial Theatre School, the academy has instructed some of Russia's greatest dancers from Anna Pavlova and Vaslav Nijinsky to Rudolf Nureyev, and is named after the pioneering teacher Agrippina Vaganova.

Adjusting to academic life

Raymer, 60, was lured to IU after *National Geographic* underwent a huge downsizing between 1992 and 1995. "Teaching was the only other thing I wanted to do," he says, "though it was difficult at first to understand the culture of the university, coming from a profession where you're on deadline and have no time to be politically correct." In addition to teaching courses on photojournalism, media ethics, and international newsgathering, he is on the faculty of the university's Russian and East European Institute.

Although an academic for more than a decade, he still considers himself a journalist first, having earned two degrees in that profession from the

University of Wisconsin-Madison; as a photojournalist, he's mostly self-taught. A combination of teaching and professional experience gives him the perspective to contrast academic vs. "real life" preparation. "Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, I think there's real value in a journalism education because communications today are so complex; but Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, I

think *The Washington Post* and the TV networks have it right: Just hire the brightest kids and give them on-the-job training."

He has somewhat mixed feeling about the students of today. "If I have one criticism, it's that so many are disengaged. I watch *The Daily Show* like they do—but it's not the only thing I watch. Their student ID cards entitle them to a free *New York Times*, but piles of copies go begging every day. Still, inevitably in every class there are students who are involved and engaged, students for whom I feel I can add something to their education."

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> Islamization

Muslim women in scarves and prayer robes ascend the steps of Malaysia's National Islamic Center in Kuala Lumpur. On assignment for Air Canada during the summer of 1998, I traveled to Kuala Lumpur and was overwhelmed by the Islamization of Malaysia and resolved to do a book about the rise of Islam. *Living Faith: Inside the Muslim World of Southeast Asia* was published in 2001, ironically just a few weeks after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, DC.



Does he ask **permission** to take a photograph? Raymer looks incredulous. “If you ask permission, they’ll say no. But if they object, I stop.”

> Dance Troupe

Punjabi Sikh dance troupe in Kuala Lumpur performing in a contemporary shopping center with a huge photograph of a model in Western garb as background.



He appreciates that IU obligates professors to spend a third of their time on research or creative activity and relishes the freedom of picking and choosing his own projects as a freelance journalist. Recently he traveled to 16 countries to write and photograph a book entitled *Images of a Journey: India in Diaspora* that will be published in August by IU Press.

Raymer’s photos often capture life’s incongruities, the contrast between past and present, traditional and contemporary. There is this perceptive juxtaposition in a photo from the book of a Punjabi Sikh dance troupe in Kuala Lumpur performing in a contemporary shopping center with a huge photograph of a model in Western garb as background. Raymer has caught an instant when the women are all in a similar pose but their expressions and body language convey very different messages. “You just have to have a little patience and be ready for the moment. I tell would-be photojournalists the skill sets are similar to those of a fighter pilot: acute eyesight and quick reflexes, being able to think in a 3-D way, and having the ability to anticipate the action based on your experience.”

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His goal always is to capture “an irrevocable moment” that conveys a certain truth to the viewer. “I tell the kids the hardest thing to achieve in writing or photography is a sense of intimacy—to make someone feel he or she really was there.”



> Agent Orange

Abandoned, misshapen children live at Saigon's Tu Du Hospital, a research center where scientists are studying the long-term effects of dioxin, the active ingredient in Agent Orange that was sprayed across much of south and central Vietnam.

## Bloomington is home now

Raymer considers Bloomington an ideal home base. He ticks off the reasons: the feeling of community; Roberts Camera, “the best camera store in the US, as far as I’m concerned”; and “the free parking!” That Bloomington is small makes preparing for an overseas trip (getting medications, copying material at Kinkos, running other errands) easier than in a big city, a great asset for someone who calls himself “a professional vagabond.” His wife Barbara also travels frequently. A former National Geographic Russian language specialist and now a professor of Russian and Eastern European history at Indiana State in Terre Haute, she conducts research abroad.

“Looking at a world map recently, I thought, ‘My God, except for Antarctica there isn’t a spot I haven’t been to.’ But that doesn’t make me feel like going home to mow the lawn. I still want to go places.”

The disappearance of film and the growth of digital photography—a giant adjustment for photojournalists—has been a mixed blessing, Raymer says. “It’s harder to stay organized because you’re carrying so much equipment and doing so much more. You’re not only the photographer, you’re effectively processing the film and doing a first edit. Then you’re in the hotel downloading and backing up and you decide, ‘Oh well, I might as well PhotoShop this.’ There’s no time to wind down at the bar and learn something about the country or to read a book, because you’ve added four or five hours to the working day.”

But the end result is better. “You can find things even in the shadows. All the tones are captured. You come up with something far closer to reality than film could ever produce.”

Which trumps all other considerations. For Steve Raymer, capturing reality is everything. ✨

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