

## **Honor, Shame, and Iraq in American Foreign Policy**

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On the floor of the Senate chamber, 11 February 2003, not long before American forces invaded Iraq, Robert Byrd of West Virginia lashed out in harsh and prophetic criticisms of the coming war. Among other offenses, he pointed to the arrogance of federal officials, their failure to cooperate with our allies, and the seeming disregard for any postwar planning. "Calling heads of state pygmies, labeling whole countries as evil, denigrating powerful European allies as irrelevant – these types of crude insensitivities can do our great nation no good. We may have massive military might, but we cannot fight a global war on terrorism alone." He continued, "Have we not learned that after winning the war one must always secure the peace?"<sup>i</sup> If only a senator from Massachusetts had been equally farseeing.

A factor, though, which the otherwise prescient Senator missed, was the role that the ethic of honor and the desire to degrade the enemy played in determining the decision to carry out a preemptive war against a militarily incompetent nation, 50 per cent of whose population was under the age of fifteen. The term "honor" is seldom invoked except at the ceremonies for recognizing valor or at funerals of fallen veterans. Yet, in foreign policy, motives of honor may be the primary keys for initiating a war. In our hubris, American war-makers do not recognize how powerful a force that set of principles can be, particularly in the cultural life of the Middle East and Iraq in particular. The significance of the twin concepts of honor and shame, however, can be overlooked only at a national peril. Journalists, State Department and Pentagon experts, as well as the White House staff all seem oblivious to how Middle Eastern cultural values complicate the occupation of Iraq.<sup>ii</sup>

The honor code encompasses a set of sanctions and prescriptions that function most especially in tribal communities but also in many parts of the world, including the U.S. Psychohistorians should consider the violent tendencies inherent in the honor code, which is a set of warrior principles predating Islam and Christianity.<sup>iii</sup> When combined with a powerful ideology like Islamic faith, the honor code (which Mohammed like Christ protested) may be explosive. In all international relations, we must keep a skeptical eye on the traditions--ours as well as others'--that honor constructs. The term is very much alive in two respects. First, United States foreign policy functions under the rules of honor and dread of humiliation like those of other nations with ambitions for aggressive power. If we had failed to answer the events of September 11 with bombs and troops, who would not have felt the shame and squirmed when others called us womanlike and cowards? Americans generally believe that a challenge to our power must be retaliated with greater might. Second, since Roman legions marched across Europe and Asia Minor, no armed services, ours included, has mustered without the discipline, sense of hierarchy for prompt obedience, and indoctrination of comradeship and unit loyalty--all things that the primarily male code cultivates. Even today in this secular world, the sacred elements of honor animate our young men and women in the armed forces to deeds of determination and valor. When the ancient ethic is adapted to "crusade" or "jihad," however, the emotions that the trumpet of honor marshals can be tragic and perhaps self-destructive. When called into play, honor can inspire millions toward some unifying end, and, often enough, the result is "horrible war," to borrow from Senator Byrd's lament.

To deal with so complex a theme as honor and shame, we must consider the various aspects: the search for justice, the causes of warfare, and the effects of defeat. With regard to justice, the honor ethic thrives when firm enforcement of justifiable laws does not exist. Civic institutions function below their

potential or minimally. A chronic sense of mistrust prevails throughout society for the lack of predictable authority. The honor code privileges family over individual, reigning as a form of community law over civil jurisprudence, gift obligation over taxation or tribute. Honor relies heavily upon the need for reputation as a bulwark against a hostile world. The code demands conformity over all alien ideas and represses deviations from the established order of things. So, too, do the more radical forms of religion, both in the West and East, promote the simplicity of a Manichean division, separating good from evil. Above all, loss to an enemy arouses fears of impotence and vulnerability that must be avenged so that good may triumph eventually over wrong.

These rules of a martial ethic are universal but apply to our recent encounters in Iraq. In post-Saddam Iraq, Baathist thugs murder those cooperating with the Americans as a means to avenge their dispossession from power. The foreign Islamic insurgents often choose beheading as a mark of shame and humiliation for the enemy. Often these crimes are carried out against entire families because the foe has already inflicted, in their eyes, the ultimate insult by invasion and exertion of power. Under such circumstances, how can America--a fully secular, debauched and alien state--alter that perception and make Iraqis see the advantages of our system? We claim to represent the principles of impartial rule of law; the value of self-expression over tribal, clan, and familial loyalty and conformity; and the necessity of mediating agencies. The nature of battle, though, leads military forces to act contrary to the democratic principles that we celebrate.

Some commanders in the army, however, learned to appreciate local opinion and cultural ways. Gaining wisdom from hard-won experience, Lt. Col. Hector Mirabile, battalion commander in the Florida National Guard at Ramadi in the famous "Sunni Triangle" in November 2003 learned how to work the honor system when dealing with the surrounding network of powerful sheiks. Doling out patronage favors, eating companionably with his hosts, and veiling threats of retribution with appropriate packets of cash smiles, Mirabile has secured peace and safety for his troops. Now at chieftain gatherings, he is offered an overflowing though still tiny cup of tea. "If it's just barely full, it's a sign of disrespect," he observes. That was how the glasses were filled for the American military before the lessons of honorable protocol were properly mastered.<sup>iv</sup> Whether that amiability has persisted in light of the upsurge of violence is now problematic.

The second point of honor as the very root and cause for the call to arms is a factor not generally understood. Wars are triggered neither exclusively by threats to territorial security nor desire for territorial expansion, nor economic gains or some other concrete, materialist advantage. Instead, often uppermost is the need to prove a point of honor not only to the enemy and to the world-at-large but also to the nation in its own zealousness and need to reinforce self-esteem. Donald Kagan, the Yale historian, notes, "modern politicians and students of politics" view anything except palpable or material motives for war merely "irrational. But the notion that the only thing rational or real in the conduct of nations is the search for economic benefits or physical security is itself a prejudice of our time." Kagan continues, "Honor as prestige has played a critical role" in national rivalries. But equally compelling, he contends, is the dread of dishonor, while assaults on their status prompts outpourings of passion and hatred, not calculation.<sup>v</sup> Pursuing the relationship of honor and American military motives, the example of Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam further illustrates the point. Unaware of centuries of mistrust between China and the Vietnamese, the Johnson administration assumed that the little Southeast Asian country was merely a puppet of international Communism. To throttle that ideological menace in far distant rice paddies would prevent the collapse, it was thought, of the rest of Asia into the arms of the Soviets and Mao. A secular understanding would refer to our "credibility" for living up to international commitments to our friends and allies. But Lyndon Johnson's vindication of his own and his nation's honor was involved as well. This Texas president's public pronouncements were thoroughly drenched in the rhetoric of honor, in the terminology of his native state. As representative of that frontier spirit, Johnson put the matter succinctly: "If America's commitment is dishonored in South Vietnam, it is dishonored in forty other alliances or more ... we do what we must" regardless of consequences. By his perspective, honor had its own logic. Practical considerations and prudence drew out no imperative to cast it aside.

“We love peace. We hate war. But our course,” Johnson announced in 1965, “is charted always by the compass of honor.”<sup>vi</sup> It was the pathway to death and defeat. Yet any other option apparently would have betrayed America’s “word of honor.” In his memoir, Henry Kissinger explains why Americans had to persist in the Vietnam War. “No serious policymaker could allow himself to succumb to the fashionable debunking of ‘prestige,’ or ‘honor’ or ‘credibility.’”<sup>vii</sup> These terms mattered in war and in the seeking of peace without losing face.

We should recall President Bush’s remark about Saddam Hussein’s being the “guy who tried to kill my dad.” To imply that Bush began a war simply in honor’s name to avenge a conspiracy against his father in the fashion of Michael Corleone or the “Sopranos,” might seem too reductionist. But an ex-White House aide argues that this explanation would at least be preferable to the idea that seizing Iraqi oil was the administration’s prime objective: “That’s not why Americans fight wars,” he said. “Usually it’s about honor or pride.”<sup>viii</sup> President Bush’s outlook on life, like Lyndon Johnson’s, really does seem to lie deep in the heart of Texas. While harboring notions of honor as identical with religious faith, his administration fails to understand that honor can be actually stateless—untied to governments but embedded in the culture of family, mosque, tribe.

The great error of the war against terror and its subsequent union in the Administration and public’s mind with the occupation of Iraq lie in this misperception. What we might call primal honor is often antithetical to any governmental institutions, even in a dictatorship or monarchy such as Saudi Arabia. Consider what the Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had to say on 9 November of this year: “Persons live, blood is saved, and honor is preserved only by sacrifice on behalf of this religion. . . . How many brothers have they killed and mutilated, and how many sisters have had their honor defiled at the hands of these depraved infidels?” His denunciation of the Shi’a population and his attempt to begin a holy war against the Governing Council and Ayatollah Sistani is based in part, I would guess, on this general mistrust of governments as well as the anti-Sunni Muslims. Governments have the power to humiliate at will, to inhibit heroic action. “Their hearts, “he writes, “are full of vinegar and ire like no others with regard to Muslims old and young, godly and ungodly.”<sup>ix</sup>

This interpretation of an honor ethic among stateless insurgents leads us to the third aspect: the effects of defeat, or moral disesteem. We can pose as analogy our own civil conflict, 1861-1865. In “The Fruits of Preventive War,” Civil War historian James M. McPherson, thoughtfully reflects on the “preemptive” strategy of Jefferson Davis to save the allegedly threatened institution of slavery and white domination. The seceded states began the war, trusting that the other slave states would answer the trumpet of honor and need to defend their Deep South kinspeople from a common foe. As McPherson notes, they entered the affray convinced that with a few cannon balls, well aimed, “those blue-bellied Yankees” would soon scatter in cowardly retreat. But “the preventive” war, as he concludes, led not only to devastation and ruin but to disgrace, sullen anger, and futile claims to a moral superiority that could scarcely be substantiated.<sup>x</sup>

Like the American South in 1860 and in the years thereafter, Islamic countries today are immersed in the rubrics of both honor and hatred. Agrarian-minded, slaveholding Southern whites customarily railed against Yankee imperialism and economic greed, godless feminism, hypocrisy of mind and spirit, and evil habits of every sort. In their defeat, they developed the legend of the “Lost Cause,” a memorialization of the glorious dead that fed Southern resentments of black freedom and Yankee domination for years to come. Lynching in the name of preserving white women’s honor not only terrorized black communities but also fed the continuing sense of shame that Lee’s surrender at Appomattox signified -- honor and the satisfactions of revenge above all other considerations.

Like the Southern secessionists of 1861 who appealed to their Christian God, traditions of honor, and disdain for unchivalric commercialism, Muslim fundamentalists take similar pride in their piety, purity of principle, and militancy. Despite their technological and military inferiority, they dream that Allah and suicidal valor can restore a military parity or lead to victory--without adopting Western ways to do so. Joyful are the Iraqi mothers who send their sons “off to the realms of honor, the realms of martyrdom,” advised a leader of Hamas just days before the war began.<sup>xi</sup> But, in this encounter with the

West, what could be more morally degrading than the quick American seizure of Baghdad? Still worse were the photographs of tortured and naked prisoners at Abu Ghraib. As reported in the Washington Post Abu Thar (pseudonym), an insurgent from Yemen in Fallujah, confided to correspondent Ghaith Abdul-Ahad that those pictures had sent him from taxi-cab driving in Sana, away from wife and five children, to Syria. From thence he was smuggled into Iraq to fight the Americans.<sup>xii</sup> Evidence of western superiority in technology, education, and ways of conducting modern business deepens anxiety, fear, and ignominy. In April 2003 Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz boasted that “the magnitude of the crimes of that regime and those images of people pulling down a statue and celebrating the arrival of American troops is having a shaming effect throughout the region.” That may be so, but American attempts to exploit that shame are proving costly. Memories of Saddam’s regime inspire little nostalgia, but the more marginalized the Iraqis feel the less welcome will be their so-called liberators. We have now reached that stage in this war.<sup>xiii</sup>

Finally, victory over a weak and vulnerable enemy, no matter how evil, provides the winners with yet another opportunity to refashion the world as we Americans would have it. Pax Americana carries with it a very fervent missionary zealotry. Woodrow Wilson with his ideas of making the world safe for democracy in World War I had shown the way to Lyndon Johnson in Vietnam--but not with much success in either case. Throughout the recent campaign, Bush reiterated his Wilsonian approach to foreign affairs. Even before the war, the American President announced the revived Wilsonian doctrine of forcing the world to accept American-style democracy. “A liberated Iraq can show the power of freedom to transform that vital region, by bringing hope and progress into the lives of millions. America's interests in security, and America's belief in liberty, both lead in the same direction: to a free and peaceful Iraq.”<sup>xiv</sup> But if, to save their sense of honor, the Iraqis choose a different and perhaps undesirable path, what then?

In the West, we identify democracy with liberty. Yet it took even this country from its 17th-century founding to the Emancipation Proclamation and far beyond to achieve that difficult and still imperfect combination. These are matters that cannot be answered as glibly as our leaders propose. Cultures of honor create tremendous volatility with all the complex transactions and sensitivities and violent foundations that one could imagine. Arrogance, naivety, and aloofness in dealing with those abroad and at home who perceive only the cold steel of armies might well prove America’s undoing. Americans must come to an understanding of honor and shame, that the world is not a rational place. Not to do so opens us to enormous risks.

Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> “Reckless Administration May Reap Disastrous Consequences,” Common Dreams News Center, February 12, 2003.

<sup>ii</sup> Columnist Thomas L. Friedman comes closer to understanding Iraqi mentality than most journalists. He points out how the thoughtless decision to disband the Iraqi army left thousands of veterans “bewildered and confused.” Humiliated by coalition occupation, they and others have “wounded pride to restore”—by slitting American soldiers’ throats and exploding roadside bombs under U.S. vehicles. (Friedman, “The Humiliation Factor,” New York Times, November 9, 2003, [nytimes.com/2003/11/09/opinion/09FRIE.html](http://nytimes.com/2003/11/09/opinion/09FRIE.html). But even Friedman arrives at the insight late--after months of occupation. A swifter recognition in the press and Pentagon would have saved lives and eased the burdens of reconstruction. See more recently, Zlatica Hoke, Washington, 11 November 2004, “The Quest for Honor,” Voice of America News, November 11, 2004, <http://www.voanews.com/english/NewsAnalysis/20041111ZlaticaHoke.cfm>

<sup>iii</sup> See Joanna Montgomery Byles, “Psychoanalysis and War: The Superego and Projective Identification,” PSYART: A Hyperlink Journal for the Psychological Study of the Arts, article 040911. Available [http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipa/journal/articles/psyart/2004\\_byles01.shtml](http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipa/journal/articles/psyart/2004_byles01.shtml).

<sup>iv</sup> Yaroslav Trofimov, “To Find Peace in Sunni Triangle, Talk to the Sheiks,” Wall Street Journal November 5, 2003, A1 and A16.

<sup>v</sup> “Donald Kagan on National Honor,” <http://www.cs.utexas.edu/users/vl/notes/kagan.html>.

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- vi Quoted in Ronnie Dugger, The Politician: The Life and Times of Lyndon Johnson, 1982, 146-47.
- vii Quoted in Barry O'Neill, Honor, Symbols, and War, 1999, 85.
- viii Dick Polman, "Suspicions Abound that Bush Wants to Avenge his Father and Seize Oil Reserves," Philadelphia Inquirer, October 20, 2002, in [Philly.com](http://www.philly.com).
- ix "Text from Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi Letter," Liberty Forum 9 November 2004.
- x James M. McPherson, "Preventive War," Perspectives 41, May 2003, 5-6.
- xi "The Enemies of Iraq Crave Life, While Muslims Crave Martyrdom," Middle East Research Institute No. 457, March 9, 2003.
- xii Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "Seeking Salvation in the City of Insurgents," Washington Post, 11 November 2004, p. A-1, a-30.
- xiii Bill Gertz and Rowan Scarborough, "Shaming Effect on Arab World," Washington Times, April 29, 2003, <http://www.washtimes.com/national/20030429-91488338.htm>.
- xiv "President Discusses the Future of Iraq," <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030226-11.html>