

**Honor, Shame, and Iraq**  
© Bertram Wyatt-Brown and Victoria C. Fontan  
December 2004

To win the all important struggle for hearts and minds in Iraq--and for that matter throughout the Middle East--Americans must be more sensitive not only to the Islamic faith but also to the powerful Arab code of honor. Pentagon war enthusiasts argued that, first, deep fears of superior, brute force and, second, dread of being abjectly shamed solely motivate Arab thinking. Based on Bedouin traditions that predate Islam, notions of honor, however, still assure overriding loyalty to family, clan, and tribe, not to nation.

Iraqi social structure consists of at least 150 tribes divided into 2000 clans. Maintenance of group honor requires immediate retribution for insult or deathly aggression whether against another tribe or against foreign foes. With elections looming, U.S. military and civilian officials must work with the full range of values that shape this honor-shame society. Simply to exploit Arabic sensibilities about shame will prove as disastrous in the future as it has in the past. We fail to recognize the extent of Arab humiliation. For Iraqis how dismaying to witness foreign powers overthrow a hated regime, not they themselves. In addition, evidence of western superiority in technology and military competence drives anxiety, fear, and ignominy deeper into the Arab mentality.

Three developments in American occupation help to explain the apparent ingratitude of the "liberated" people for the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime and the rising tide of insurgency. The first was Paul Bremer's abolition of the Iraqi Army and Baathist bureaucracy on May 16, 2003. The process should have been selective. From the Iraqis' viewpoint, the edict grossly violated their sense of honor. Some Baathist members of the police and army lost *sharaf*, by which is meant honor as applied to group cohesion. Though once respected, these well-trained professionals could no longer offer non-Baathist citizens a sense of security. Many more were stripped of *ihthiram*, that is, the element of deference which the holding of coercive might receives. Without weaponry they lacked the means to shield their women from possible assault and rape. Protection of women's honor, *ird*, inflames men to near obsession because women are judged the very center of male ownership rights. To dishonor the woman is to disgrace her kindred. In the Middle East, to restore family honor, relatives feel required to kill the victim of rape, no matter what extenuating circumstances there might be.

Finally, Bremer's blunder deprived hundreds of thousands of the livelihood upon which their families had relied. Joblessness further degraded any self-identity, an emotional state that encourages outrage and violent resistance. When Saddam was captured, Iraqis could then join the resistance against the coalition without fear of Hussein's vengeance.

Although troop numbers are now rising, the initial undersizing of the coalition forces proved calamitous. In post-Saddam Iraq, the inability of the armed forces to control the countryside and furnish basic order still results in bitter hatred. Coalition armed forces are scarcely to blame. They are more courageous and conscientious than one might expect. The nature of battle, though, sometimes promotes military acts contrary to our celebrated democratic principles. When undermanned and overstressed, soldiers may use unwarranted violence against civilians.

The third problem arises from exposure of American intelligence work at the Abu Ghraib prison. Worldwide publicity not only exposed vile atrocities but also put on display Iraqi

impotence under the occupiers. That mortification was compounded when, on November 4, the American people endorsed an administration which had grossly violated international law. Arabs have heightened sensitivities about nakedness and sexuality. Exploiting such fears, the guards photographed the dehumanizing of prisoners with threats to exhibit their shamefacedness to their families. In Middle Eastern societies, a boy caught sodomizing another may be simply ostracized, but the victim could be executed for unmanliness and family disgrace. Thus, forcing men to masturbate or to play a woman's passive role are designed to erase *wajh*, that is, self-respect or "face." Yet, insurrectionary expansion, not information, was the likeliest consequence. As reported in the Washington Post, a Yemeni in Falluja before its fall informed a correspondent that Abu-Ghraib pictures had dispatched him from taxi-cab driving in Sana to the ranks of the insurgents. Doubtlessly others took similar paths.

However justified, army search parties humiliate the heads of households by exposing the men's helplessness to resist invasion of their women's privacy. A reliable Iraqi told one of the authors that in September 2003 troops invaded his house in Falluja and "had no shame. They . . . touched our women, stole our savings and took us away." The publicized slaughter of wounded and unarmed prisoners there created additional reasons for humiliation. Increased desire for revenge ensues.

President Bush envisions a free, democratic Iraq. Yet, to save their centuries-old sense of honor and retaliate against abject humiliation, suppose that fractured assemblage of tribes chooses a different, undesirable path. What then?

Author of Southern Honor, Bertram Wyatt-Brown is preparing a book, "Honor and America's Wars." Victoria C. Fontan has written "Polarization between Occupier and Occupied in Post-Saddam Iraq," in a forthcoming issue of Terrorism and Political Violence.

800 words