

Domestic Political Theater and Responsibility

Photographs from our own prison at Abu Ghraib, augmented by reports from the Red Cross, allegations of secret interrogation operations and an increasing number of accusations from former prisoners in other locations fuel our suspicions about what might have happened in our other prisons in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantánamo, Cuba and in other countries where we may have sent prisoners and conducted interrogations. Across the country Americans are appalled.

Over the last three years, the rest of the world has become increasingly wary and distrustful of the United States. Polls show that confidence levels around the world are much lower than ever before yet, until now, a majority of Americans have been largely oblivious to how others see us. Political theater directed by the Bush administration, has played well here but has alienated our allies and kindled hatred across the globe. Now the prison scandal has made it almost impossible to ignore any longer the impact of our actions on the rest of the world.

The Administration is attempting to portray the abuses as the work of a few bad apples and it seems clear that this is partially true. Experience does tell us though that, in prisons, what can go wrong will go wrong. Any situation where a few people have total control over other human beings will inevitably result in abuses unless there is careful supervision and a clear mandate as to acceptable behavior and the rights of those held prisoner. Every reasonably well educated or experienced person knows this, so what happened does not come as a surprise. In addition, in Iraq our prisons were hurriedly constructed, understaffed, and rapidly filled to overcapacity. Our military police were young, frightened, poorly trained, and under pressure from the enemy outside, the prison population, and superiors who wanted rapid and accurate intelligence information. It is unclear who was in charge of the prisoners. Military intelligence personnel, civilian contractors, CIA and Pentagon employees, some with rank insignia and nameplates, some without, all seem to have had authority. Guards were probably ordered to “soften up” prisoners and possibly even instructed as to how this might be done.

It is tempting to conclude that these guards as reservists from rural areas and, sitting at the very bottom of the military pyramid, were not very smart and were somewhat isolated. This is not the case. These days you have to be of average or better intelligence to get into the army and everyone has access to computers, e-mail, TV, radio, and daily newspapers. Even at the bottom, our soldiers know what is going on and talk about it with each other and in correspondence and telephone calls home. Political theater conveyed to the US public and, inescapably, to our armed forces played a significant part in setting the stage for the abuses. It is unlikely to have escaped many soldiers that the President and the Secretary of Defense had concluded in many speeches and press conferences that the Geneva Conventions did not apply at Guantánamo or with

terrorists generally. Prison guards and military and civilian contract interrogators will have discussed and speculated about techniques rumored to be used at Guantánamo and other places. Everyone at every level knew that the administration was desperate to find intelligence which would point to the existence of weapons of mass destruction. Terror bombings and successful guerilla style attacks on our troops made obtaining information even more critical. Occupying the domestic political stage, President Bush had repeatedly connected 9/11 and Iraq. The war in Iraq has been tied together with Afghanistan and termed “the war against terrorism.”

So, it would be unfair to blame the crisis on “a few bad apples” when those at the top of the chain of command were cutting fine distinctions about how different sorts of prisoners should be treated. Some captives were “prisoners,” some were “detainees.” It is alleged that the Pentagon had a secret, classified, program of interrogation which may have been authorized to use abusive techniques. We may have our own “Heart of Darkness.” Even when knowledge of abuses got to the top in January, no one in the White House or Pentagon thought it important to demand an immediate accounting. In fact, four months later and during the several days after the scandal broke on “60 Minutes II,” already delayed by two weeks, none of the top people including the Secretary of Defense and the President had yet read the Army’s own report or seen the pictures. It is reasonable to assume that, having knowledge of our interrogation activity and techniques at Guantánamo and in Afghanistan, no one at the top was unduly concerned about the early reports from Iraq.

Everyone in the chain of command, top to bottom, should have been extremely sensitive to the way we as a nation treat our captives. One of the most important aspects of a civilization is the rule of law and if we pride ourselves on being the most civilized of nations, we must also be the most circumspect. Cyril Connolly, in his collection of essays entitled The Unquiet Grave, 1944, wrote: *“Civilization is maintained by a very few people in a small number of places and we need only some bombs and a few prisons to blot it out altogether.”*

During the first three years of the Bush Administration, political theater was what it was all about. The Administration played to its far right and business constituency through a series of widely publicized actions. We discarded the Kyoto treaty with disdain rather than doing the intellectually difficult work of figuring out how to make it work. We remain one of the very few nations not to ratify the landmines treaty. High steel tariffs were imposed until we were, predictably, hit with retaliation. The UN was repeatedly trashed in administration speeches. We opted not to sign on to the provisions of the International Criminal Court. The President presented the concept of an “axis of evil” in his state of the union address which complicated our relations with Iran, North Korea and other countries. We opted for full moral and financial support of Ariel Sharon’s policies with only the weakest slap of the wrist at the greatly increased settlement activity.

In forming our “coalition of the willing,” we needlessly alienated “old Europe” and most of our long time allies around the world. And this cost us massive amounts of money. The first Gulf war was financed 85% by other nations, leaving us just 15% of the cost. This time we have all the costs including subsidies to some of the coalition members. The Muslim world sees the President’s mission to bring democracy to the Arab world as a latter day Crusade. We have become known for our posturing, tough talk, and belligerence – all signified by the theatrical Marlboro Man, Top Gun images of the President landing on an aircraft carrier to declare “mission accomplished.”

For the first three years, political theater worked for the Administration domestically while causing us incalculable harm everywhere outside our borders. Even the worldwide support that followed 9/11 was quickly dissipated. The disparity between the positive domestic view of the President and administration and the way the rest of the world saw us became huge as anyone who travels abroad can testify. It has become increasingly dangerous for Americans to travel in many parts of the world.

Now, with the publication of the Abu Ghraib photographs, the painful costs of political theater have come home. Many Americans knew there would be a price to be paid for arrogance, incompetence and insularity, now most Americans can see it too. Responsibility runs right up through the Defense Department to the President. The time for playacting is over. And every day more of our young people, at the bottom of the pyramid, and Iraqis of all ages, pay with their lives and with their torn bodies.

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