

Mirage in the Desert

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It has been a charged and burdened time -- the D-Day commemorations, the death of a president, the daily carnage in Iraq, the pictures from Abu Ghraib prison, a July 4 just over the horizon -- the sublime and the squalid, the decent and the desperate in American life so overlaid upon one another that it is hard to reconcile the high rhetoric of one moment with the terrible reality of the other. As Americans remembered the boys of Pointe du Hoc and the president who immortalized them, they had to read reports of government lawyers telling their superiors that "the infliction of pain or suffering per se, whether it is physical or mental, is insufficient to amount to torture." The discordance between the high sentiments heard at President Reagan's funeral and the lawyers' attempts to justify the unjustifiable left you unable to determine whether the rhetoric of the funeral was a moment of spiritual reaffirmation or just an exercise in organized amnesia.

The memoranda from White House counsel, and from Department of Justice and Department of Defense lawyers, gave new meaning to Robert Lowell's phrase "savage servility." Their argument that "the president's inherent constitutional authority to manage a military campaign" rendered the United States' obligations under the Torture Convention "inapplicable" to interrogations conducted pursuant to his command left you wondering if they had ever heard of the Nuremberg tribunal. You might have thought that after Justice Robert Jackson's great opening speech at the war crimes trials of Nazi leaders in Nuremberg, no American lawyer would ever dare to use obedience to superior authority as justification for inhuman acts of abuse. In the memos that filled the pages of our newspapers, there was more than servility. There was also a terrible forgetting.

You will say: Remember the departed president. Don't stain his memory with painful associations. But this is just not possible. The clash between the rhetoric of American democracy and the reality of American life is eternal. Indeed, it is the very essence of the American story. Ask the plaintiffs in *Brown v. Board of Education* how long they had to wait for "separate but equal" to be overthrown. Ask the teachers of segregated American public schools if the promise of *Brown* has been realized even today. America has never been equal to its rhetoric, and sometimes it can sustain belief in itself only by forgetting.

Only willed blindness could maintain the magic moments of presidential mourning. At the funeral service in the National Cathedral, former Senator John C. Danforth evoked the Puritan vision of John Winthrop: "The eyes of the world would be on America because God had given us a special commission, so it was our duty to shine forth." The eyes of the world these past months would not have been on Winthrop's city upon a hill, but instead on a hooded figure standing on a box in a prison cell. At the funeral, President Bush's father spoke of an America that was made in the departed president's image:

"hopeful, bighearted, idealistic, daring, decent and fair." Iraqis have met Americans like this, but their reputation has been blackened by the grinning few in Abu Ghraib.

To deflect their own accountability, American leaders confidently proclaim that the guilty ones are just a few rotten apples in an otherwise sweet American bushel basket. We are told that the abusers do not represent America. The reality, as always, is more painful. Go out and ask Americans what they think about Abu Ghraib. An ABC News/Washington Post poll recently found that 46 percent of Americans believed that physical abuse short of torture is sometimes acceptable, while 35 percent thought that outright torture is acceptable in some cases.

Again, you will say: Let's not exaggerate. Let's not lose our nerve here. But no other democracy is so exposed by these painful moral juxtapositions, because no other nation has made a civil religion of its self-belief. The abolition of cruel and unusual punishment was a founding premise of that civil religion. This was how the fledgling republic distinguished itself from the cruel tyrannies of Europe. From this sense of exceptionalism grew an exceptional sense of mission. President Reagan's funeral was a high Mass of rededication to that eternal mission. The question is whether these reaffirmations still inspire Americans to be better than they actually are, or whether the nation's rhetoric has degenerated into a ritual concealment of what the country has actually become.

Yet concealment is not altogether possible, because even America's most haunting symbols have a duality that reminds its citizens, at first, of the matchless traditions of American leadership, and then, lest sentimentality take hold, forces them to recall its equally matchless traditions of political violence. Who, thinking back on the week of mourning for Ronald Reagan, will forget the riderless horse, the empty saddle, the boots reversed in the stirrups? In that image, it was so easy to conjure one president, the smiling cowboy in the California sun, and forget the other one, clutching his throat, pitched forward in the Lincoln, death already on his face.

Theodore Sorensen, who as a young man wrote President Kennedy's best speeches, gave a commencement speech of his own recently that was not so much an address as a cry of anguish. He remembered a time when you could go overseas and walk down avenues named after Lincoln, Jefferson, Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy. Hardly anyone is naming streets after Americans in the cities of the world these days. "What has happened to our country?" Sorensen exclaimed. "We have been in wars before, without resorting to sexual humiliation as torture, without blocking the Red Cross, without insulting and deceiving our allies and the U.N., without betraying our traditional values, without imitating our adversaries, without blackening our name around the world."

Sorensen's anguish was genuine, but it was forgetful. He forgot Vietnam, the stain that formed on his martyred president's watch and went on to blight American prestige and power for decades. Iraq is not Vietnam, but still it is salutary to remember Vietnam and to recall that America does not always prevail in the end. It is time to admit that America's story includes defeat and failure. For if the country needs anything as it faces up to Iraq,

it is to put away the messianic and missionary oratory of presidential funerals and learn some humility while there is still time.

At Abu Ghraib, America paid the price for American exceptionalism, the idea that America is too noble, too special, too great to actually obey international treaties like the Torture Convention or international bodies like the Red Cross. Enthralled by narcissism and deluded by servility, American lawyers forgot their own Constitution and its peremptory prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment. Any American administration, especially this one, needs to learn that in paying "decent respect to the opinions of mankind" -- Jefferson's phrase -- America also pays respect to its better self.

Abu Ghraib and the other catastrophes of occupation have cost America the Iraqi hearts and minds its soldiers had patiently won over since victory. To say this is to say that America has lost the power to shape Iraq for the better. Accepting this will not be easy. America has as much trouble admitting its capacity for evil as for recognizing the limits of its capacity to do good.

This does not mean Iraq has been lost, as Vietnam was lost before it. The new interim government is struggling to convince Iraqis that it serves them, rather than the Americans. As the Iraqi government acquires legitimacy, the hateful resistance -- which has killed many more Iraqis than Americans -- will lose its standing. If the interim government, together with the United Nations mission, can guide the country toward a constitutional convention in 2005 and free elections by 2006, Iraq will become what Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani says it should be: a country ruled by the will of the people.

The modish cynics who take failure in Iraq for granted underestimate the people of Iraq. The country is not a failed state, the United Nations adviser Lakhdar Brahimi reminds us, but a powerful nation with a trained middle class and huge potential oil wealth. Even the disasters of the past year have taught all Iraqis a harrowing lesson in the necessity of prudence and restraint. Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds now have objective reasons, even if they distrust one another, to avoid the descent into civil war -- and there now exists at least a path to elections that may lure the gunmen into politics.

Iraqis may not have full sovereignty yet, but America needs to understand that Iraqis, not Americans, are already sovereign over events there. America would be a better nation-builder if it acknowledged this, but its history does not encourage humility. During the D-Day celebrations, the old newsreel footage of dusty G.I.'s riding into Rome and Paris in 1944 burnished America's incorrigible mythology of its own omnipotence. In Iraq, even the locals succumbed to it, expecting that the world's most powerful country must be able to get water, electricity and security running in no time. It was a rude surprise to discover how chaotic, incompetent and downright violent the godlike liberators turned out to be. America had the Bradleys and the Abrams, but it knew next to nothing about Iraq, and soon ignorance -- of the language, tribal alliances and family and clan networks -- left U.S. soldiers ambushed and outwitted in the deadly alleyways of Falluja and Najaf.

Ordinary American ignorance was compounded by the administration's arrogance. Gen. George C. Marshall began planning the postwar occupation of Germany two years before D-Day. This administration was fumbling for a plan two months before the invasion. Who can read Bob Woodward's "Plan of Attack" and not find his jaw dropping at the fact that from the very beginning, in late 2001, none of the civilian leadership, not Rice, not Powell, not Tenet, not the president, asked where the plan for the occupation phase was? Who can't feel that U.S. captains, majors and lieutenants were betrayed by the Beltway wars between State and Defense? Who can't feel rage that victorious armies stood by and watched for a month while Iraq was looted bare?

Someone like me who supported the war on human rights grounds has nowhere to hide: we didn't suppose the administration was particularly nice, but we did assume it would be competent. There isn't much excuse for its incompetence, but equally, there isn't much excuse for our naivete either.

Still, the United States did one thing well in Iraq, and nobody else could have done it -- it overthrew a dictator. Everything else was badly done, and some of what was done -- Abu Ghraib -- was a moral disgrace and a strategic catastrophe.

The United States has only one remaining task in Iraq: to prevent civil war and the dismemberment of the country. Sending in more troops will only turn them into targets and delay the day when Iraqis are required to defend themselves. The troops should be there to train enough Iraqis loyal to the national government to prevent Kurds from turning on Sunnis or Shiites from turning against both. America cannot defend Iraq from its demons of division: it can only help Iraqis do so. When there is a freely elected government, the United States should come home. January 2006 is the date for return set by the United Nations resolution. By then the oil should be flowing, the coffers of the Iraqi state should be filling up and what Iraq will do with the money will be up to the Iraqis, not us. America may not be able to shape Iraq for the better, but it cannot abdicate its responsibility to prevent the worst. Intervention amounted to a promise. The promise - of eventual peace and order -- needs to be kept.

The signal illusion from which America has to awake in Iraq and everywhere else is that it serves God's providence or (for those with more secular beliefs) that it is the engine of history. In Iraq, America is not the maker of history but its plaything. In the region at large, America is not the hegemon but the hesitant shaper of forces it barely understands. In the Middle East, it stands by, apparently helpless, as Israelis create more facts on the ground and Palestinians create more suicide bombers. All this shows that the world does not exist to be molded to American wishes. It is good that the United States has wanted to be better than it is. It is good that the death of a president gave it a week to revive its belief in itself. But it cannot continue to bear this burden of destiny. For believing that it is Providence's chosen instrument makes the country overestimate its power; it encourages it to lie to itself about its mistakes; and it makes it harder to live with the painful truth that history does not always -- or even very often -- obey the magnificent but dangerous illusions of American will.

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