

The Prisons within our Hearts

We have spent much time responding to the horrifying pictures of prison abuse in Iraq. At first, many expressed outrage. Then came the search for blame. Finally, there was an effort to back away from the issue entirely—including Senator James Inhofe's professed "outrage at the outrage" over the scandal. Now may be the time for us to connect this experience to a broader context, namely, the higher values of the war against terrorism itself.

Ethically, the revelations of prisoner abuse pose long-standing questions. One question should not be difficult, namely, whether such treatment could be ethically justified. Among the values that we uphold is that human rights should not be violated in the interest of the majority. If we don't stand up for human rights, we would have to wonder what we are really fighting for.

Outrage over the treatment of Iraqi prisoners, therefore, is not the expression of a liberal political agenda. Those who wish to join Senator Inhofe in expressing outrage at what he called "humanitarian do-gooders" might recall that humanitarian reasons are all that remain of our government's case for going to war. That's what distinguishes us from terrorists, after all.

More difficult ethical issues arise over the judgments we make about responsibility. The simplest move would be to blame only those directly involved. Certainly, we should not deny that individuals—even within a chain of command—remain morally responsible.

But the issue is not straightforward. The abuse at Abu Graib prison has evoked powerful lessons of studies in social psychology. A famous study by Stanley Milgram demonstrated how ordinary people would follow the directions of an authority in issuing what they thought were increasing levels of electric shock to persons who gave incorrect answers to test questions. Some individuals even gave high levels of voltage to respondents who were screaming in pain. In fact, no shocks were given—the study was deceptive. But Milgram concluded that the experiments "raise the possibility that human nature cannot be counted on to insulate man from brutality and inhumane treatment at the direction of malevolent authority. A substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of the act, and without limitations of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority."

Stanford psychology professor Philip Zimbardo conducted the Stanford Prison Experiment, in which volunteers acted as prisoners or guards. In six days, the study had to be stopped. Prison guards—chosen for being citizens of sound mind—had begun stripping prisoners naked, hooding them, chaining them, and forcing them into humiliating circumstances not unlike those in Iraq. His conclusion: "Human nature is much more under the control of situational forces than most of us recognize or want to

acknowledge. In a situation that implicitly gives permission for suspending moral values, many of us can be morphed into creatures alien to our usual nature.”

Such experiments do not allow us to absolve individuals from their moral responsibilities. But, Zimbardo argues, these acts were not primarily about a few “bad apples.” They were about the “bad barrel” that produced the bad apples. And more than anything, the bad barrel is partly our own doing.

Iraq is a war of choice. One of the consequences is the untold psychological damage to those soldiers who are serving. They are as subjects in the grand experiment of imposing democracy by war on a people who themselves have suffered for thirty years within the bad barrel of Hussein’s Iraq.

War also tempts good people to dehumanize other human beings. The excessive patriotism it spawns is a form of self-worship, as journalist Chris Hedges reminds us. And if we are worthy of worship, those who don’t agree can only be evil-doers. That is often the story line of this war, and it is central to the behavior in the Iraqi prison. It is also the story of prisons in Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay, and around the world. To recognize this is not to express sympathy for terrorists; it is to caution us to remain true to our best values.

Abu Graib reminds us that the story we need to tell not only to Iraqis but also to ourselves is a story of our common humanity. For just as President Bush affirms that the desire for freedom is innate to us all, so is the moral imperative to use that freedom for good. And that requires that we set up conditions that do not compromise what is good in every person, including prison guards who once served proudly and now come home in disgrace.

Abu Graib also reminds us that the line between good and evil is a fine line within each heart. And while we ought rightly to defend freedom against tyranny, we must never stop fighting the battles within our hearts to make sure that those battles are never lost.

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