

The Changing Faces of Honor in National Crises: Civil War, Vietnam, Iraq, and the Southern Factor

The Johns Hopkins History Seminar, Fall 2005

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A sweet thing is war to those who have not tried it.
---Pindar

Over the last fifty years or more in American culture, the concept of honor in America has become an endangered species. According to James Bowman, it was in “bad shape” most of the twentieth century. Yet, it is still with us, though hidden away in a subterranean corner. Bowman argues that “the language of honor and shame,” concepts which our forefathers recognized, has all but vanished in this century. With regard to international relations, however, the ancient ethic plays an important role in the competition for power. The term may not be often employed. Alexander Endt, the political-science theorist, for instance, fails to acknowledge its very existence in his elaborate “constructivist” understanding of foreign affairs. Yet, it is the non-rational or emotional factors that keep the spirit of national honor alive. So contends the Yale classicist Donald Kagan. Nations, he points out, react strongly to the fear of dishonor, to assaults on their dignity. “Like individuals,” states “pursue honor in ways that are the product not of calculation but of feeling.”¹

Years ago the Prussian scholar Heinrich von Treitschke elaborated on this theme: “When the name of the State is insulted, it is the duty of the State to demand satisfaction.” If an apology is not forthcoming immediately, war must follow, “no matter how trivial the occasion may

appear, for the State must strain every nerve to preserve for itself the respect which it enjoys in the state system.” Paramount in international relations is the maintenance and enhancement of a nation’s reputation or honor--what is now usually rendered in secular language as national “credibility.” It is a less comprehensive term than honor; it refers primarily to policymakers, not to a nation’s popular will. For instance, the Kissinger Commission of 1984 declared that beyond the issue of American security in Central America, “our credibility world wide is engaged, and any sign of passivity would be read in the Kremlin as “a sign of US impotence.”²

Thus, a passion to retain a state’s preeminence, as Kagan proposes, applies in today’s world no less than it did in earlier American wars even though we no longer hear leaders call for stout defense of “national honor.” In all three conflicts to be discussed--Civil War, Vietnam, and Iraq--similarities in the justifications proposed, the executions of warfare, and the outcomes are tragically evident. Some of these parallels bear the imprint of a sectional culture long noted for its resort to arms and violence. In all three wars, the heads of governments were deeply immersed in the ethos of the South. The three chief executives hailed from the Southwest: Confederate President Jefferson Davis of Mississippi (the “Old Southwest”); Lyndon Johnson of Texas; and George W. Bush, the latter a Southwesterner by adoption. Since the Old West itself was largely settled by Southern whites, the region shared many of that culture’s central concerns for personal autonomy, low taxes, male domination, and familial loyalties.

Under leadership that joined the honor principles of the Old South with the Frontier ethos, the Southern influence, it could be said, helped to hasten the national crises that resulted in aftermaths not at all anticipated. “From the Quasi-War with France to the Vietnam War,” argues

David Hackett Fischer, both coastal and inland Southerners “strongly supported every American war no matter what it was about or who it was against. Southern ideas of honor and the warrior ethic combined to create regional war fevers . . . in 1798, 1812, 1846, 1861, 1898, 1917, 1941, 1950 and 1965.”³ It is now feasible to add 2001 and 2002. After the Civil War, in the hands of national leaders with a southern background, the cause of honor appeared in a number of instances: Woodrow Wilson’s interventions in Mexico and the First World War, the vastly popular response in the South to Franklin Roosevelt’s entry into World War II, and Harry Truman’s call to arms in Korea.⁴

Moreover, the emotional defense of honor’s principles continues with special emphasis in the military culture of the nation, in which the southern presence is quite conspicuous. (The role of honor in both foreign policy matters and martial affairs, of course, applies to nearly all other nations’ armed services and diplomatic staffs to a greater or lesser degree.) Thus, the intensity of the southern inclination toward the “warrior ethic” has helped to shape the meaning of honor even when it is not recognized as the compulsion it is. This code of conduct in political and international relations embraces these elements: that the world should recognize a state’s high distinction; a dread of humiliation if that claim is not provided sufficient respect; a yearning for renown; and, finally, a compulsion for revenge when, in issues of both personal leadership calculations and in collective or national terms, repute for one or another virtue and self-justified power is repudiated.⁵ Bowman explains that while honor may evolve, “the changes in it are glacial.” That is so even in this egalitarian age when honorable distinctions between high and low, male and female, white and black are culturally disavowed--as they should be. What is

honorable is also supposed to be ethically above question, even approaching the plane of a masculine purity of conscience. The rubric of conducting an Augustinian “Just War” is customarily invoked. Yet enlisting this form of honor could well be a means to hide highly questionable reasons. It is a point that the playwrights of Shakespeare’s generation in England and Spain brilliantly explored. “Honor pricks me on,” declared Sir John Falstaff, “Yea, but how if honor prick me off when I come on? How then? Can honor set to a leg? No. . . . What is honor? A word. What is in that word honor? What is that honor? Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. . . .Honor is a mere scutcheon. And so ends my catechism.”⁶

With regard to the outbreak in 1861, honor played a greater role than in any other American resort to arms. In fact, the nature of honor itself was to change in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the Civil War era, the Southern, disunionists, however, based their moral position largely on the righteous necessity of an honorable vindication against what was deemed a baseless assault on their pride, power, and way of living. To be sure, slavery was the central issue over which the sections had long contended. In 1851, for instance, the militant Amistead Burt of South Carolina declared that secession was essential to preserve “the institution of African slavery, unimpaired and unmolested.”⁷ Yet the speech acts of honor were the means to express the fury of the southern soul. As one historian has put it, “The threat to slavery's legitimacy in the Union prompted the sectional crisis, but it was Southern honor that pulled the trigger.” In the language of honor, whites found the best way to express the moral urgency of their cause. At a state convention, Jefferson Davis, the future Confederate President, exclaimed

that Mississippi's "honor was the first consideration before the citizens in the face of Northern perfidy." "The state's honor," Davis pledged, "was his honor."⁸ For thirty years a growing chorus of northern abolitionists and antislavery politicians had denounced the South's planter class as cruel, debauched, and subject to eternal damnation. By the 1850s their verbal knives had stabbed deep into the southern psyche. In 1856 at a convention of radical abolitionists in Syracuse, New York, the great black leader Frederick Douglass summed up the participants' righteous mood. "Liberty," he announced, "must either cut the throat of slavery or slavery would cut the throat of liberty." Others there proposed that slaveholders should be met "at the point of the bayonet."⁹ The ordinarily peaceable abolitionist Gerrit Smith, a wealthy New York landowner and one-time Congressman, resigned his seat to promote resistance to proslavery Kansas settlers. In his valedictory, 1856, he proclaimed in the House of Representatives, "I and ten thousand other peace men are not only ready to have [slavery] repulsed with violence, but pursued even unto death, with violence." Such insults and threats did not go unanswered. In May 1856, Congressman Preston Brooks assailed Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts with his cane on the floor of the Senate chamber. He did so because he considered Sumner's slurs against his homeland too depraved to qualify him for the honor of a duel.¹⁰

Adding to southern outrage was the translation of hot words into bloody deeds. John Brown's Harpers Ferry raid signified a new antislavery strategy of stirring slave insurrection. A Norfolk paper called it "a most insane demonstration by a band of northern fanatics."¹¹ Terrorism--and that is what John Brown intended--was designed then as nowadays not just to kill indiscriminately but to challenge the power of the state and arouse the victimized masses to

heights of violence against their alleged oppression. In a curious twist, Brown became the agent of a violent chivalry about which the Southern planter class prided itself. In a review of a recent Brown biography, Adam Gopnik writes, “Brown triumphed rhetorically and, in the end effectively at Harpers Ferry because the slaveholder’s code of honor . . . was not entirely a sham.” Governor Henry Wise of Virginia was among those who recognized in Brown a fellow spirit, though in the enemy camp. In a speech at Richmond, Wise declared that Brown “is a bundle of the best nerves I ever saw cut and thrust and bleeding and in bonds. He is a man of clear head, of courage, fortitude and simple ingenuousness.” In other words, he was a man of warrior honor, with all the virile attributes so greatly admired in the South. One of Brown’s chief admirers was John Wilkes Booth. In 1864, Booth told his sister that Lincoln was “walking in the footsteps of old John Brown, but no more fit to stand with that rugged hero--Great God! No.” No less ideologically driven than Brown himself, Booth anointed him as “a man inspired, the grandest character of the century!” Clement L. Vallandigham, later a wartime Copperhead (pro-Southern Yankee), praised Brown as a potential Southern gentleman. He might have become a “consummate commander” in a nobler and worthier cause than the freeing of slaves, the Ohio Congressman mused.¹² Yet for all his valor, Brown also seemed to Northern Democrats and Southern whites a terrible portent of sanguinary insurrection and Yankee determination to abolish slavery by force.

No less threatening, as southern militants interpreted it, was the election of the “black Republican” Abraham Lincoln. Even the Constitutional Unionists, who opposed reckless, hasty action, would abandon the federal cause in the name of their states’ honor. An antisecessionist

Virginian confided in his diary that his state “has done all it could do consistent with honour and justice to settle it peaceably in the Union.” After Lincoln’s call for mobilization, however, “she had to cast her fortunes with the South. This she has done and I am with her.” To submit obsequiously to his victory would result in untold disasters, a Mississippi newspaper declared. It would mean the loss of southern self-rule, freedom for the slaves, and “the grossest humiliation, to break down the stubborn pride and manliness native to the Southern breast.”¹³ According to the Mississippi secession proclamation, “Utter subjugation awaits us in the Union, if we should consent longer to remain in it. It is not a matter of choice, but of necessity. We must either submit to degradation, and to the loss of property worth four billions of money, or we must secede from the Union framed by our fathers, to secure this as well as every other species of property.” Maintenance of honor and the right to hold human property were compatible public aims. The historian Anne Rubin writes that, in going to war, Southerners convinced themselves that their soldiers would all be “honorable, honest, moral and virtuous,” whereas the foe had to consist of mere “desperadoes and dangerous men.”¹⁴

In contrast, the Yankees’ version of honor had taken a different turn following the American Revolution. Becoming ever more commercial, industrial, and urban in character, Northerners no longer firmly and exclusively linked honor to homeland, family, and face-to-face community and the reputation of all these entities. Instead, the ethic was joined to the blessings of self-government and to the abstractions and symbols of national sovereignty, the stars and stripes, the virtues of free labor, and the idea of a perpetual Union. Abraham Lincoln’s understanding of honor was inseparable from his conception of national unity.¹⁵ Liberty for the

antebellum southern white male, however, required absolute power over the dark-skinned race. Otherwise, liberty was meaningless. Lincoln had observed, “We all declare for liberty; but in using the same word, we do not all mean the same thing.” For some it signifies a man’s right to do as he sees fit with himself or his labor, the President continued, but others “mean for some men to do as they please with other men and the product of other men’s labor.”¹⁶ Just as honor was posed against shame, so liberty’s opposite was slavery. The likening of their own system of labor to notions of humiliation and subservience meant that Southerners recoiled in revulsion from any implication of being themselves slavish, degenerate, and heathenish.

The second theme concerns honor in the actual fighting. Southern troops were most likely to find “honor” an inspiration in battle. Northern soldiers rallied under the banner of “duty.” In some cultures honor plays a major role in men’s self-conception, out of which an intense warrior spirit develops. Freeman Dyson points out that during the First and the Second World Wars, German soldiers were superior fighters compared with their enemies. “*Soldantentum*” signifies the German fighters’ “spiritual vocation,” something absent from American and British ways of life. Unlike the soldier of the fatherland, his southern counterpart might challenge orders, go his own way, or even vote out an unpopular officer. Yet he was fanatically determined to prove self-sacrificial valor. By and large many did so when expertly commanded. A group of Civil War historians has pointed out that “the tactical ascendancy of the Confederate soldier and his leaders” was far greater than those of the Union enemy. At the Battle of Fredericksburg, for instance, Union General Burnside’s troops “had combat effectiveness of less than 30 per cent of that of the defending Confederates.”¹⁷ Drawing upon similar circumstances during the Civil War, Dyson

finds that there was some truth in the notion that the more industrialized, commercial North produced less militarily inclined draftees and recruits than did the Confederate states. But in all fairness it must be added that S. L. A. Marshall was undoubtedly accurate when he wrote, “Personal honor is the one thing valued more than life itself by the majority of men.” He was referring to American veterans in World War II, but the maxim has almost universal application. (To demonstrate cowardice, indecision, or disregard for the safety of comrades was to incur the revulsion of all others and even prompt court-martial and execution.)¹⁸

Nonetheless, the Union forces prevailed. Overwhelmed by lost battles, lost troops, lost land, Jefferson Davis and his cabinet were even willing to lose slavery as well--the very centerpiece of secessionist goals. They hoped to exchange black bondage for foreign recognition and negotiations on southern terms. On these grounds, they could claim that the dignity of the state and its people had been preserved. No doubt they would have forced the “freed slaves” into some kind of lesser peonage, subject to severe restrictions. Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin had informed his representatives abroad that to gain Confederate sovereignty, “no sacrifice is too great, save that of honor.”¹⁹ That concept seemed to matter more than human bondage itself. A common phrase between veterans and civilians alike was “We have lost all save honor.” (Francis I uttered these famous words after Charles V’s army defeated the French at Pavia in 1525.)

The military loss in 1865 deeply affected the mood of the southern people. Their reaction was quite unlike the resignation of the Germans and Japanese after the Second World War. Under Allied direction, both former Axis powers rediscovered their parliamentary roots and soon received massive financial assistance that assured high employment and economic recovery. In

the post-Civil War years, no Marshall Plan would help the South to accept the victor's demands for a biracial democracy. Rather, the former slave states more closely resembled 1920s Germany, where resentments over economic failure, inflation, and political divisiveness prompted a totalitarian reaction and renewal of warfare. Uppermost in the southern mind was an acute sense of humiliation that had to be repelled as quickly as possible. Most of those who returned to civilian life complied with the requirement of swearing loyalty to the victorious foe—but not without a sense of humiliation and resentment. Belligerent southern women took their country's defeat especially hard. Emma Holmes of Charleston, South Carolina, struck a common theme about the supposedly historic differences between the sections when she declared, "We, the free-born descendants of the Cavaliers to submit to the descendants of the witch burning Puritans, whose God is the Almighty Dollar. Never!" Holmes recorded that a Virginia friend told her that General Hunter's men in the Shenandoah Valley had completely stripped her house of its possessions. They had not spared even "the privies," which were "searched for hidden articles." When she appealed to Hunter himself, he replied, that "he was glad of it . . . the women & children were the very fiends of this war, sending their husbands, fathers & brothers into the army. He meant to humble the pride of the Virginians to the very dust." But, Holmes explained in her diary, the Union general's answer only made her friend more determined than ever. To Holmes's satisfaction the Virginian had declared that "she would be willing to lose 10,000 times as much for the great cause." Like many others, Catherine Edmonston of North Carolina voiced "a deep & abiding resentment towards a nation who thus debases our sense of personal honour. . . .& for all this we hate you!"²⁰

Apart from Sherman and Sheridan's paths of destruction, the Confederates were mildly treated--at least by the standards of more recent wars. The policy of restraint, however, undermined the Republican Party's plans for a new egalitarian, free-labor, free-black society in the former land of social hierarchy and bondage. After assuming office, President Andrew Johnson of Tennessee quickly insisted on a restoration of white rights to self-government, an agenda that heartened the ex-Rebels. As early as the fall of 1865, even William Holden, whom the Southern Democratic President had appointed the Provisional Governor of North Carolina, confided that contempt for the federal government was even greater than it had been during the secession crisis. "In May and June last," Holden wrote, "these rebellious spirits would not have dared to show their heads even for the office of constable; but leniency has emboldened them." Even defeated heroic societies rely on contempt to assuage the shame. It is, writes William Ian Miller, "what the honorable have the right to show for the less honorable"--as those with power perceive it. Indeed, honor can become all too tolerant of the most reprehensible behavior. It can signify gross hypocrisy, cynicism, and sheer prejudice, to a degree far worse than Falstaff's insight into its potential emptiness or at least shallowness. Under such circumstances, it represents excellent public relations, not virtue at all.²¹

Still rebellious despite the great loss, Southern whites began guerilla warfare soon after the bluecoats mustered out. In May 1865 one million Union veterans were still at arms, most located throughout the conquered states. By November, though, only 200,000 remained in service. By June 1866, the army had returned nearly to its pre-Civil War size. Most troops were stationed in the Western forts facing Native American tribes. Only a pathetic remnant of military personnel

was left to police the countryside. The resulting vacuum of power was soon filled by the ex-Rebels themselves.²² Political assassinations and murders, lynchings, beatings of both white and black Republican state and local officials, and lesser forms of intimidation made true, two-party democracy impossible in the former slave states. The other two wars would reveal the same tragic consequences. With the Civil War and the Iraqi situation in mind, the historian Edward Ayers writes, “Reconstructions are races between change and reaction; they cannot last long before they become another form of oppression. Reconstructions must make their changes quickly or they are not likely to make them at all.” That failed to happen in all three cases.²³

Faced with a persistent southern insurgency through both the Johnson and the Grant administrations, the Civil War victors soon wearied of the expenses and the complications of creating a bi-racial party system under a Republican policy of “nation-building.” By 1876, the North welcomed an end to the democratic experiment. It was the first of many failed attempts to impose egalitarian principles on a culture and a conquered country unwilling to accept them. Yankees even adopted the southern view of black inferiority and alleged inability to meet the responsibilities of universal manhood suffrage. In a real sense, the South had lost the war but won the war of words.²⁴ The rhetoric of racism and reaction became all too common in northern circles. 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.” The memorialization of the glorious dead fed southern bitterness about black freedom and Yankee domination for years to come.

In their angry frustration, southern whites found a handy scapegoat—the black male. Ku Klux members, mostly former Rebel veterans, formed a paramilitary army of sorts to honor the Confederate dead in the “Lost Cause,” intimidate freedmen, and restore the Democratic party to power.²⁵ The claim of black rape of white women to justify a burning or hanging was no less horrible than the contemporary stoning of women for alleged sexual misbehavior by Arabic communities. The Virginia-reared journalist Thomas Nelson Page applauded the “old-fashioned gallantry” and the “knightly” impulses which drove southern males to employ mob torture and murder as the means to retaliate for a white woman’s loss of honor. The abolitionist dream of a nation completely freed from the influence and mentality of the old “slavocracy” vanished from Lincoln’s party and from the nation as a whole.²⁶

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In this comparative analysis, the argument moves from the battlefields of Virginia to those in the Mekong Delta. The leap across time does not negate an underlying continuity in which a southern mentality played a considerable part in American military ventures. But its meaning became problematic, at least for those in the ranks of a war that seemed to the troops in the swamps of Vietnam as traumatic, pointless, and incompetently led. The British veterans of trench warfare in World War I repudiated the old-fashioned gentlemanly aim to achieve patriotic glory. The poet Wilfred Owen denounced “The Old Lie: Dulce et decorum est/ Pro patria mori.”²⁷ In similar fashion, Americans in Vietnam felt alienated not only from the higher-ups but from the antiwar public at home.

At the head of the United States government was Lyndon Johnson, a Southerner steeped in the ideals of his region. Next to Jefferson Davis and possibly another Southerner, Woodrow Wilson, no American President was as dedicated to the principles of the code as Lyndon Johnson. Throughout the Vietnam War, he was determined to sustain his popularity by showing strength, determination, and a manly outlook. The exercise of power in behalf of an intense self-regard was not only an obsession but a means to receive the gratitude of the public which alone can ratify the claim to honor. Instead, as the war went on, the collapse of his public reputation drove him to despair and shame. According to the biographer Doris Kearns, “with each year in office, Johnson lost one supporter in ten.” By 1968 he held only 26 per cent of those polled.²⁸

To be sure, honor was not the sole cause of the Vietnam War, less than it had been in the Civil War. Nonetheless one must ask, did Johnson’s engagement in Southeast Asia meet the criterion of “rational” motives to pursue a “just war”? According to a Gallup poll in 2004, nearly 62 per cent of those asked concluded that the Vietnam War was not a “just war.”²²⁹ By Donald Kagan’s standards as mentioned earlier, North Vietnam scarcely posed a threat, immediate or distant, to the security of the United States. On the other hand, as Undersecretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, Dean Rusk in 1951 had articulated the commonly voiced “domino theory.” Rusk was born in Cherokee County, Georgia, educated in Atlanta and at Davidson College in North Carolina. As he saw it, the Communist thrust had to be countered in Indochina by preemptive action. Otherwise, Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, India, and other nations would fall to the Soviets. As Secretary of State under Kennedy and Johnson, Rusk remained true to his early convictions.

By 1962, the spread of Communism was allegedly to reach as far as Australia and even Africa unless checked in Vietnam.³⁰

In advice to President Eisenhower in 1954, Admiral Arthur Radford, Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, however, had concluded that “Indochina is devoid of decisive military objectives.” For America to get involved would “be a serious diversion of limited U.S. capabilities.”³¹ Ten years later, Senator Richard Russell of Georgia was equally skeptical. He counseled Johnson that the North Vietnamese posed no threat to vital national interests. But after the Tonkin Gulf incident, Russell joined the patriotic chorus for war, no doubt on learning about its popularity in his home state. He announced that America’s national honor was endangered along with “the respect of other nations.” Likewise, Senator John Cornelius Stennis of Mississippi initially doubted the need to assume a cause that France had abandoned. Once the commitment to war was made irreversible, though, he rejoiced that Johnson’s Great Society programs would have to “be relegated to the rear” in order to destroy the Viet Cong and gain “peace with honor.” Johnson was aware that the southern conservatives “hate this stuff. They don’t want to help the poor and the Negroes . . . But the war, oh, they’ll like this war.”³²

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, governed not in Hanoi but in Beijing and Moscow. Such a distortion of reality was bound to be disastrous. Behind the scenes, President Johnson expressed his chief worry. A hasty escalation of the war that Stennis and others were promoting on behalf of the Pentagon could well initiate World War Three with China and Russia. Johnson was wrongly

convinced that the Communist powers would unite to begin that conflagration. For that reason he had adopted the incremental approach, embracing the delusion that each increase in commitment of men and materiel would bring victory.

At the same time, Johnson's public pronouncements were thoroughly drenched in the rhetoric of honor. Concern for reputation had always figured in his calculations. As a young serviceman in World War Two, he had somehow managed to receive official recognition for bravery in the Pacific theater of World War Two. A journalist later wrote that Johnson's medal was "one of the least deserved but most often displayed Silver Star in American military history."³³ In retirement, speaking of his former Senatorial colleagues, Johnson told Doris Kearns, "You've got to understand the beliefs and values common to all of them as politicians, the desire for fame and the thirst for honor, and then you've got to understand the emotion most controlling that particular Senator when he thinks about this particular issue." He was actually describing himself. Personal honor can become merely a matter of sheer vanity. While maintaining national "credibility" punctuated the pronouncements of other politicians, this President relied on the terminology of his native state. With his Texan bravado, Johnson put the matter succinctly almost exactly a century after Lee's surrender at Appomattox. "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."³⁴ In the Rose Garden he told the members of the National Electric Cooperative

Association, “Our national honor is at stake in Southeast Asia, and we are going to protect it.” A week later he dispatched hundreds of thousands of American soldiers to meet that goal.³⁵ We are engaged in Vietnam, Johnson declared on another occasion, “because we have a promise to keep . . . To dishonor that pledge, to abandon this small and brave nation to its enemies, and to the terror that must follow, would be an unforgivable wrong . . . We will not be defeated. We will not grow tired. We will not withdraw.”³⁶

Johnson was no prophet. The nation eventually did all those things. For a ruler to distinguish between the cause of national honor and the desire for personal vindication may require uncommon wisdom. Johnson was most sincere about his faith in the ancient virtue. Yet that distinction between the good of the country and the wielding of personal power eluded him. Years later, he told Doris Kearns that in his fear of rejection during the Vietnam conflict, he often dreamed that “I could hear the voices of thousands of people. They were all shouting at me and running toward me: ‘Coward! Traitor! Weakling!’ They kept coming closer.” He also explained that Harry Truman and Dean Acheson “lost their effectiveness” when China went communist. Their problems, though, were “chickenshit compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam.” He predicted that he would be called “a coward. An unmanly man, a man without a spine.”³⁷

In 1968, when Johnson’s Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford asked a task force of Pentagon authorities if the enemy showed any signs of diminished will, he got an emphatic no.³⁸ General Lee had hoped to win by the same means as the North Vietnamese Communist dictator Ho Chi Minh—wear down the enemy’s will to fight by prolonging the war beyond its apparent

utility. Ho once declared, “You will kill ten of our men, but we kill one of yours and in the end it is you who will tire.”³⁹ Lee, however, was most unlucky when Sherman seized Atlanta just before Lincoln was about to face electoral defeat in 1864. Such a victory was hard to come by in the swamps and jungles of Vietnam against an elusive enemy. When bombing North Vietnam produced no results, Johnson persisted despite his own doubts. He told the Cabinet on August 22, 1968: “We want peace now worse than anyone in the world—but with honor, without retreat.”⁴⁰ To admit loss was no more in Johnson’s character than it had been in Jefferson Davis’s.

In the fighting, honor played an inspiring role in the lower ranks (but only at the start). For instance, units with substantial numbers of Georgia natives petitioned home for Confederate flags to represent them. The army, however, prohibited display of the banner in deference to the 1968 tragedy of Martin Luther King’s assassination. As a result, the Georgia General Assembly spent thousands of dollars to provide the state flag, which included the emblem of heroism from a different war.⁴¹

In the upper ranks both the symbols and the practice of the ethic were in short supply. For the sake of promotion, commanders lied about body counts, the atrocities committed by U.S., South Korean, and ARVN troops, the incompetence of the abysmally corrupt South Vietnamese army, and increasing problems of morale. General Paul Harkins, William C. Westmoreland’s predecessor, falsified intelligence reports about the number of guerillas killed, and he greatly distorted the realities of the war. Douglas Kincaid describes another major problem that was officially presented in a 1970 report to General Westmoreland. The general learned that “the lack of professional skills on the part of middle and senior grade officers” was a serious obstacle in the

war effort.⁴² Despite this handicap, gradually the initiative shifted from the civilian to the military with its heroic traditions. David Halberstam explains that the officer cadre has “a stronger hold on patriotic-machismo arguments (in decision making they proposed the manhood positions, their opponents the softer, or sissy, positions).” Thus, Westmoreland, a ramrod-straight West Pointer from a Spartanburg, South Carolina, textile mill-owning family, insisted that he needed massive reinforcements. By and large he got them. The more Allied troops sent to the theater, however, the more resentment and disaffection grew in the native population and the greater sense of meaninglessness in the demoralized ranks. General Charles DeGaulle had warned George Ball as early as 1964 that the more America invested in the conflict, “the more the population would turn against it.” Nonetheless, Johnson escalated the conflict because, as a political psychologist framed it, “his honour and dignity were too intimately tied to avoiding the appearance of failure or cowardice.”⁴³

Nearly sixty thousand Americans and three million Vietnamese were casualties in this needless struggle. 16 per cent of all U. S. combat troops there were killed, and 24 per cent had to undergo psychiatric treatment for post-traumatic syndrome or “battle fatigue.” Save for the Southern side a hundred years earlier, it was the only war in which Americans were essentially driven out and chose defeat over the defense of national honor. Eric T. Dean points out that the Civil War soldier endured much greater misery than the American veteran in Vietnam. The latter soldiers were well-fed, well housed, well clothed and blessed with much better medical attention than his Union or Confederate counterpart. Dean does not, however, mention that Civil War servicemen at least understood the enemies’ tongue.⁴⁴ Also, they found slaves and sometimes

Unionist whites willing to assist. The soldiers in Vietnam and Iraq were equipped with neither language skills nor trustworthy native friends. In Vietnam that intelligence limitation created great anxiety and imperiled morale.

In the best of circumstances, verifiable intelligence data prior to warfare and a thorough weighing of risks, costs, and probable outcomes should decide the issue of war or peace. As Kagan observed, however, passion and honor often govern foreign affairs. In the Vietnam War, George Ball had offered a rational if unpalatable alternative in 1965: get out before it gets worse.⁴⁵ Robert McNamara, Kennedy and Johnson's first Secretary of Defense admitted only years later how catastrophically wrong he had been in promoting a policy that never had a chance of success. But he was only partially correct. According to Peer DeSilva, a West Pointer and former CIA Vietnam chief of station, such Washington leaders as McNamara himself had no clue about how to manage the war. "Fundamentally we lost because we were arrogant, prideful, and dumb." According to the Reader's Companion to American History, "The Vietnam War taught Americans a humbling lesson about the limits of power."⁴⁶ The lesson, however, was soon forgotten.

Moving to the final topic, Iraq and honor, one discovers many of the same attitudes and outcomes encountered in the two previous wars. First, the decision for war against Saddam Hussein was based not on rational conclusions about perils ahead but on assumptions and passions. British memos, lately revealed, indicate that eagerness to remove Saddam had begun at

the White House and Pentagon at least weeks before 9/11.⁴⁷ A preemptive war soon followed the Al Qaeda attack.

The decision was quite unlike the policy of Abraham Lincoln in April 1861. The president had placed the responsibility for a preemptive strike upon Jefferson Davis. The Confederate leader feared losing respect for the new nation in the eyes of the world, and he was impatient to establish Confederate sovereignty over all its territory. The subsequent bombardment of Fort Sumter placed the responsibility for the outbreak of war on the Rebels. Preemption also was a failure in 1965. President Johnson forced Congress to agree to war on the basis of an alleged assault on our Navy in the Gulf of Tonkin. It was not a fact at all, but national honor was supposed to require vindication from the alleged insult.⁴⁸ In 2002 Iraq was assumed to have an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. Hans Blix and the UN inspectors reached the opposite conclusion and were later proved right. The British Foreign Office officials were also highly skeptical about the capabilities of Hussein's weapons program.⁴⁹

Something in the psychology and motivations of the southern leaders who had earlier plunged the nation into wars arises in the Iraqi situation as well. Before the United Nations Assembly on 12 September 2002, George W. Bush mentioned the car-bomb plot against his father, then on an official visit to Kuwait. Saddam Hussein's intelligence team had instigated the conspiracy that the Kuwaiti police had thwarted. According to the Philadelphia Inquirer, at a Houston, Texas, ballroom, Bush was addressing an "audience that suddenly grew very quiet." He had said, "After all, this is a guy who tried to kill my dad." Peter Ricketts of the British Foreign Office had informed 10 Downing Street that the "U.S. scrambling to establish a link between Iraq

and al-Qaida is so far frankly unconvincing . . . For Iraq 'regime change' does not stack up. It sounds like a grudge between Bush and Saddam.” Ricketts suggested that Bush should “depersonalise the objective” and collaborate with UN weapons inspectors while working for European support.⁵⁰

A book recently published by a Hoover Institute specialist and his wife, a media consultant, explores the dynamics of the Bush family. They claim to uncover oedipal factors underlying the current president's determination for war. The son would succeed in toppling the Iraqi dictator when the father had failed to do so and thereby prove his greater sense of honor. The psychological approach, however, cannot be verified by any normal historical standard.

In any event, General Brent Scowcroft in 1991 had opposed any effort to overthrow Hussein during the Gulf War. He recognized the history of anti-colonial sentiment in that often occupied but proud country, the volatile tribal divisions, the probability that Iran would fill the political vacuum, the enormous financial cost, and the danger of repeating the Vietnamese debacle. All these were rational and pragmatic reasons even though it meant a shameless betrayal of the Shiites' rebellion. The administration had urged them to rise up but then permitted Hussein to slaughter them without allied reprisal. In following Scowcroft's advice, the first President Bush could have been charged with dishonorable policymaking. In 1991 hardly anyone objected until the subsequent Shiite, swamp Arab, and Kurdish massacres became a casus belli in the second Bush administration. (This self-serving and dishonorable act followed the example of Richard Nixon. He and Henry Kissinger left the South Vietnamese to their fate by signing a cease-fire agreement with Le Duc Tho and the North Vietnamese delegation in Paris, January

1973. Kissinger proclaimed it proudly, “Peace with Honor.”) As war approached in 2002, Bush senior apparently worried privately about his son’s seeming attempt to complete the Gulf States expedition that he had prudently restricted.⁵¹

Another factor has been the Administration’s sense of an omnipotence that required neither the help nor approval of the major powers, a major departure from the Cold War’s international alliances to counteract Russian advance. “It is always a bad idea to confuse power with wisdom, muscle with brains,” writes John Lewis Gaddis.” He adds, “The toppling of Saddam Hussein humiliated at least as many Arabs as it pleased.” Moreover, Gaddis, like others, has found a most astonishing degree of indecisiveness in the actual execution of the Pentagon’s strategies. As James Dobbins observes, “no population will support a force that cannot protect it,” a situation all too evident in Baghdad and the Sunni enclaves. Democratization is not a strategy but a goal. Militarily, to have Iraqis stand up so that the coalition forces may step down is a wish, not a strategy, and not a particularly promising one any more than it was in Vietnam. As mentioned earlier, in the post-Civil-War era, the strategy of the United States government should have been forcibly to secure the peace for Southern whites and blacks alike, without which protection democracy could not and did not flourish. Ku Klux violence won under the banner of Redemption. In Iraq, the urgent need of predictable, local security has become secondary to the Search-and-Destroy mission with misleading body counts, as in Vietnam, and dubious claims of near victory. As a result, the likelihood of ultimate failure persists.⁵²

Like Lyndon Johnson’s single-mindedness and hubris, George W. Bush’s incurious approach to international complications comes out strongly in his public statements. Rather than

explain how national honor required the invasion of Iraq as Johnson might have done, Bush employs the rhetoric of evangelical faith. The president and his Defense establishment translate the Middle Eastern situation into their own language--the generic violence of so-called bad guys who hate us because they hate democracy and virtue as the West defines it. What they fail to see in the motivation of the insurgents is bloody revenge, not sheer anger, a reaching out for honor, not terrorism for its own sake. Out of their desire for fame and immortality, the young, middle-class, educated, Islamic militants are, to borrow the insightful words of George Fenwick Jones, are "passionate, hot-tempered, and carried away by impulse" and "owing to their ambition they cannot endure being slighted." Jones was describing primitive honor as the ancient Franks understood it, but Osama Bin Laden would have understood.⁵³

Under these conditions, the substitution of evangelical conviction for the rubric of American national honor does not and cannot take account of the emotional impulses of those opposing Western occupation and imperial domination. That set of godly ideals requires no resort to fact and reality. President Bush told the journalist Bob Woodward that he is "casting his vision and that of the country in the grand vision of God's master plan."⁵⁴ With a confidence that is apparently unshakeable, he has replaced the issue of national honor with a different basis—religious conviction.

In Bush's calculations, the Christian God is judged a dependable source of revelation for guiding government leaders in the planning and implementation of war policies. That inspiration also informs foreign relations. Unconditional support for the Likud party in Israel is based not only on the American pledge to meet its longstanding economic, military and political

commitment but also on the Old Testament foundations of evangelical fundamentalism. “Good must stand up to evil. We must stand up to terrorism. There is no middle ground or moral equivalence; no ‘moderate’ position worth taking,” Republican Congressman Tom Delay of Texas told the Knesset in 2003.⁵⁵

Politically the proclaiming of a holy mission to banish evil and bring a God-ordained enlightenment to unbelievers here and abroad paid off handsomely at home, at least for a timely re-election. In addition, repeated references to the 9/11 tragedy served as the political equivalent of the post-Civil War Republicans’ endlessly dwelling on the assassination of Lincoln and the wartime sacrifices. Democrats mocked the theme as “waving the bloody shirt.” Ironically, that style of message plays well below the Potomac in a way it did not during Reconstruction. Even as doubts arise about the administration’s handling of the Iraq war and other problems, Bush retains southern support. As of 26 June 2005 the only section of the nation to hand him a favorable majority (54 per cent) was the South, though down from 60 per cent a few months earlier. Recruiting troops fares best in the South, not only because of calls to honor resonate but also because employment and possible advancement are guaranteed for the less well equipped young people, whether white, black, or Hispanic. What the recent hurricane Katrina will do for his ratings in the Deep South remains to be seen. For now, though, in a region where the imperatives of evangelicalism and honor are both cherished, the Iraqi engagement has yet to lose its appeal.⁵⁶

The Manichean style separating the world into the polarities of good and evil applies in both the domains of honor and evangelicalism. At a press conference shortly after the 9/11

tragedy, Bush translated the response in a way that incensed the honor of the Muslim world but revealed his military goals. “This is a new kind of--a new kind of evil,” he announced. “This crusade . . . on terrorism is going to take a while.”⁵⁷ Of course, it would be quite wrongheaded to claim that Bush made Osama Bin Laden a secondary target and concentrated on Saddam Hussein's overthrow simply for honor's sake. There was more involved than vengeance in the style of Michael Corleone or Tony Soprano. 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.”⁵⁸ President Bush has New England roots, but his perspective on life, like Lyndon Johnson's, really does lie deep in the heart of Texas.⁵⁹

In the case of Iraq, however, the question of honor takes on as much significance as it did in generating the Southern rebellion. As David Pryce-Jones points out, “Promoting hierarchy and obstructing trust, shame-and honor values appear to be the main obstacle to democracy in the Arab world.” It is not the dictates of the Qu'ran, which preaches equality and justice in many passages, but the more ancient code of primitive honor that prevents the Americanizing of the Middle-East.⁶⁰ The Iraqi insurgency, in this case, has been more intensely preoccupied with the ethic and its stress on bloody retribution than even the Cavaliers of the Old South. In this encounter with the West, what could be more morally degrading than the quickness of American seizure of Baghdad? The speed of the coalition's triumph left the Iraqis free of tyranny, as the United States promised. But they are now subject to Arab neighbors' scorn for alleged cowardice in the briefest war imaginable. Relishing the opportunity to humiliate the followers of Hussein,

Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz announced, “I think that already . . . 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.”⁶¹ In the fall of 2003, Thomas Friedman, the New York Times journalist, declared, “If I’ve learned one thing covering world affairs, it is this: The single most underappreciated force in international relations is humiliation.” Even at the beginning of the “liberation,” Iraqis were largely relieved that Hussein was overthrown. Yet many, including Shiites, were dismayed about yet another colonial occupation. The journalist Anthony Shadid, conversant in Arabic, had accompanied the invading troops marching through the streets of Baghdad. He stopped to talk with Mohammed Ibrahim, a young adult, wearing a white dishdasha, a flowing Arab robe. The Iraqi seethed with resentment: “We’re against the occupation, we refuse the occupation--not 100 percent, but 1,000 percent,” he exclaimed. “They’re walking over my heart. I feel like they’re crushing my heart.” Others were kindly disposed but his remark reflected the sense of humiliation that many felt. In making a film about suicide bombers, Hany Abu-Assad, a Palestinian filmmaker, detected little sign of religious dedication--“just a ceremony.” Instead, he explains, “The daily humiliation is so big that people agree to it. The biggest motivation is the feeling of impotence. You are captured in your own city; you can’t do anything about it; you are nothing.” Likewise, Robert A. Pape points out that the suicide bombers in Iraq, as well as elsewhere in the Middle East, largely come from countries where the American presence has been greatest. With thousands of troops stationed in Saudi Arabia from 1990 to 2001, “suicide attacks [by native Arabs] became five to twenty times more

likely. Hence, the longer American troops remain in Iraq and in the Persian Gulf in general, the greater the risk of the next September 11.”⁶²

In light of Iraqi sensibilities about matters of honor and shame, several developments in American occupation help to explain the military problems in suppressing the insurgency. The first was President Bush's assignment of postwar policy to Donald Rumsfeld and the Pentagon authorities. The consequence was that a limited number of troops, chiefly American, were to be deployed. In contrast, in the British takeover of Iraq in the 1920s, the imperialists did not utilize their home troops but chiefly sent units from colonial India to crush the rebellion. The exclusive use of troops from some colonial subsidiary had been possible neither in the post-Civil-War situation nor in Vietnam—nor in Iraq. The Iraqi population in the 1920s was only three million, which permitted a ratio of one Indian soldier for twenty-three civilians. The measure was very far worse in the Civil War. But for the twenty-five million in Iraq today, the scale is 174 Iraqis to every coalition soldier.⁶³ Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that insurgents in all three of the wars discussed found comfort in American disillusionment with efforts to rebuild the occupied countries by military coercion.

Meantime, continued, but really only partial, occupation actually undermines the very idea of democratization in a land where primary loyalties are to family, clan, tribal leader, and mosque, not to a truly national entity. Moreover, unlike postwar Japan and Germany, the populations of which had become disenchanted with totalitarian ideologies, the Iraqis have only their fidelity to Islam and sense of individual and collective honor upon which to rely. In post-Nazi Germany, for instance, local leaders—teachers, community leaders, clergymen, newspaper and radio

publicists--collaborated with an effective media campaign to adopt the occupiers' democratic ways. In contrast, according to post-Saddam opinion polls, the coalition forces "are widely hated," to use the words of Edward Luttwak, "as the worst of invaders, out to rob Muslim Iraqis not only of their territory and oil but also of their religion and family honor." Even the coalition's Kurdish allies, with their history of autonomy, have held no elections but depend upon the traditional sources of power in mosque and tribal sources.⁶⁴

The problem of occupation and governance was grossly bungled from the very start. Ambassador Paul Bremer's initial act as the replacement for General Jay Garner, the first coalition commissioner, was his worst misstep. The abolition of the Iraqi Army and Baathist bureaucracy took place on May 16, 2003. Suddenly 450,000 soldiers and officials in Saddam's bloated military and security forces lost status and incomes, with perhaps one million of their dependents left unsupported. The prospect of a violent backlash did not deter the new American ruler. The Pentagon and Bremer's government were afflicted with what David L. Philips, a former official in Baghdad calls "naivete, misjudgment and wishful thinking."⁶⁵

From the Iraqi viewpoint, Bremer's edict grossly violated a common sense of honor. Some Baathist members of the police and army forces lost *sharaf*, by which is meant honor as applied to the dignity of Baathist loyalists. (Its original meaning was high birth, nobility of blood.) Though once honored, these well-trained professionals could no longer offer non-Ba'athist citizens a sense of security. The film clip that showed the inspection of Hussein's beard for lice was a surely a deliberate effort to shame him. Even lightly touching another's beard

signifies deep disgrace in Arab culture. That humiliation would also sear the memory of the foreign Islamists, Sunnis and Ba'athists who saw the clip.⁶⁶

Many more were stripped of *ihitiram*, that is, the element of deference and respect which the holding of coercive might demands and receives. The disbanding of these agencies of the former government denied their leaders the weapons needed to protect their families, clans, and tribes. (Iraq has over 150 tribes and approximately 2000 clans.)⁶⁷ Already the unemployment rate under Hussein was well over half the population, but it grew much higher after the coalition conquest. The loss of economic power compounded the social declension of lost honor. Third, the abrupt dismissal left an even greater power vacuum than the one in the Reconstruction South.

On another level, Bremer had not only humiliated considerable numbers of men but also denied them the ability to shield their women from the possibility and infamy of assault and rape. Protection of women's honor, *ird*, inflames Iraqi males to near obsession. That is because in Middle Eastern cultures women are judged the very center of male ownership rights. Whether true or not, rumors that American soldiers take Iraqi women into their tanks and Humvees for lovemaking or rapes are pervasive in Baghdad. Whoever the rapist may be, to dishonor the woman in that fashion is to disgrace her and her kindred. In much of the region, to restore family honor, relatives feel required to kill the victim of rape, no matter what extenuating circumstances there might be.⁶⁸

Bremer's peremptory orders were based on the false premise that most Iraqis hated Saddam to a degree that the Americans would be hailed as saviors. The blunder was not new in American history. During the Civil War, as a nationalist Whig, Abraham Lincoln had greatly

overestimated the vitality of Unionist sentiment as it had once been expressed in the Constitutional Unionist, anti-secession party of 1860. The northern armies were to liberate these silent loyalists from the toils of a rebellion they earlier had disapproved. Yet, having sworn allegiance to the Confederacy, the former southern Whigs did not rally to the stars and stripes in the numbers needed to sustain a postwar government. Likewise, during the Vietnam conflict, Marine Corps General Lewis W. Walt and others promised to win the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese. It was supposedly a double strategy—to confront the enemy aggressively but only after obtaining good intelligence, and second, to liberate the ordinary peasants under Viet Cong control so that they could be free to rally behind the anti-Communist effort.⁶⁹ Such feckless plans for nation-building after the Civil War and during the Vietnam conflict were doomed to failure. The same lack of diligent preparation appeared in the second Gulf war.

One reason for this failure, of course, is the absence of experts in the country's languages. A. Kevin Reinhart, an Arabic speaker sent to Iraq, explained in a January 2004 address at Vanderbilt University that in the entire time he was assisting the development of political structures, he had encountered only one other American who had any knowledge of Arabic at all. "The U.S. civilians," he said, "increasingly have almost no contact with any Iraqis aside from the handpicked elite. They live in a bunker--and this is seen as symbolically significant--in Saddam Hussein's palace and, literally, they never go out or if they go out, they go out in big convoys, in huge white SUVs that might as well have big targets painted on them." That distancing means that both Iraqis and Americans have too little or knowledge of each other, their respective cultures, and their objectives. In addition, the American troops are increasingly overstressed,

dealing with insurgency, sometimes 133 degree heat, Iraqis clamoring for help or making complaints about the slowness of reconstruction, and a host of other problems.⁷⁰

The result is a deep sense of Iraqi mortification. That state of mind, however, was what the Pentagon officials and the interrogators at Abu Ghraib, Guantánimo, and elsewhere have counted on. While details that demonstrate the U.S. exploitation of Arabic shame are too well known to be repeated, one point is worth mentioning. Captain Ian Fishback of the 82nd Airborne Division has publicly denounced the confusion about detainee treatment. That failure in the upper command, he argues, has led directly to atrocities not just in Iraq but elsewhere in U.S. prison camps. The lack of clear guidelines so disturbed Captain Fishback that he urged the matter be investigated. His commanding officer, however, warned him to “remember the honor of the unit is at stake.” While the disingenuous reply indicated that no action would ensue, the West-Point trained officer believed that the practices grossly violated the Honor Code at the military academy. He considered that set of rules as one providing the highest standard of conduct for everyone in the armed services.⁷¹

The Civil War armies certainly offered a cleaner record than Americans at war today. To be sure, Nathan Bedford Forrest had ordered the massacre of black Union troops at Fort Pillow. Andersonville and the Union’s Point Lookout camp in Maryland were disgraceful. The murder of civilian Vietnamese at My Lai and the ARVN “tiger cages” for detainees on Con Son Island were only a fraction of many such abominations in that engagement. But officials in Washington in these earlier conflicts did not create such confusion about what was permissible and what was not.

The result was unrestrained license in some quarters. American mistrust of international law has prompted more Arabs to join the Iraqi insurgency than will ever be known. Insurgents have retaliated for such abuses with bombs, as reported in the press. The photographs of Abu Ghraib prisoners published worldwide have been a most effective recruiting device as well.⁷² For instance, a Yemeni in Fallujah before its fall told a reporter that the Abu Ghraib pictures had dispatched this family man from taxi-cab driving in Sana to the ranks of the insurrectionists. Insurgency, writes Steven Metz, is “not won by killing insurgents; not won by seizing territory; it’s won by altering the psychological factors that are most relevant.”⁷³ There is truth in the comment. Surely the imposition of genuine order to replace anarchy, though, requires a massive degree of force as well—but always under careful restraint. That is something a small—and beleaguered—number of coalition troops cannot supply.

To fill the gaps in army needs, private contractors and mercenaries, many of them ex-servicemen, have been enlisted but have also become another source of Iraqi suspicion. Sixty companies, with 20,000 employees, are so engaged by the Pentagon today, along with 6,000 non-Iraqi contractors in armed tactical functions. Lacking discipline or experience, over half the interrogators at Abu Ghraib, for instance, operated in behalf of two private companies, Titan and CACI. Most of the agents had no training for the assignment. Thirty-six percent of the total number of contracted interrogators at Abu Ghraib committed the atrocities that outraged the world and momentarily embarrassed the American government. With Iraqi courts chiefly inoperable and no regulations required of the contracted companies, these functionaries carry on with near immunity. American courts are also far from seizing jurisdiction. Thus, the autonomy of the

private entrepreneurs furnishes dubious license to do things that the coalition authorities and military cannot legally do. Along with the inevitable corruption and bribery that consorts with war and lawlessness, none of this manipulation enhances coalition standing with the Iraqi people.⁷⁴

Other factors such as American cultural expansiveness over which policymakers have had no control also has played into the hands of the terrorists. In his determination to purify Islam and the Arabs from the corruptions of the Saudi royal family and the West, Osama bin Laden successfully combined the two emotional forces—resentment of imposed disgrace and religious zealotry. He and others of fanatical mind recollect centuries-old provocative incidents of defeat and betrayal to justify current hatreds. As in all honor societies, myths and memories of ancient wrongs figure in current politics and rationales for violence. (Such a situation appeared in the Ku Klux Klan's combining of religion and myth in their rituals and priest-like robes.) Bin Laden warned, "If the Americans refuse to listen to our advice . . . then be aware that you will lose this Crusade Bush began, just like the other previous Crusades in which you were humiliated by the hands of the Mujahideen, fleeing to your home in great silence and disgrace."⁷⁵ He assumes that modern Westerners still relish chivalrous victories over those medieval Saracens. But for Hollywood films, most Americans would scarcely know anything about the feudal wars against Islam. Certainly the installation of the forty-eight substantial military bases throughout the Persian Gulf and Central Asian regions over the past twenty years and the presence of 130,000 service personnel in Iraq—along with sizable diplomatic and troop support agencies—are bound to quicken Middle-Eastern rancor, necessary though these undertakings have been.

Two months before 11 September, Arab viewers fawned Al-Qassem, the television host in Qatar, these sentiments about Osama: “In light of the terrible Arab surrender and self-abasement to America and Israel, many of the Arabs unite around this man, who pacifies their rage and restores some of their trampled honor, their lost political, economic, and cultural honor.” Under President Bill Clinton, the United States withdrew from Islamic Somalia, giving heart to the terrorists. “We found [the Americans] had no power worthy of mention,” Osama declared and added, “America exited dragging its tails [sic] in failure, defeat, and ruin, caring for nothing.”⁷⁶

Pax Americana carries with it a very fervent missionary zealotry—to spread the idea of democracy worldwide. It was a fundamental tenet of Woodrow Wilson after World War One. The current administration follows the same policy. In the past, however, the attempt to remake the world in the American image has been often very selective and short-lived. One reason for its brevity is the absence of a full sense of honor, one that requires an intense memory of past wrongs—sometimes very ancient wrongs. That form of honor and avoidance of cowardly shame would stimulate a desire for revenge as a higher goal than life itself. Arab terrorists treasure life so little that suicidal assaults guarantee these “martyrs” eternal fame in the memory of their people, an immortality long associated with the ethic of honor.

One thing is clear, however. Once it is donned, the armored visage of national honor is not easily removed. American leaders do so, however, more frequently and readily than the patriotic rhetoric suggests. The public speedily wearies of war. With ambivalent consequences at best, the result in the Civil and Vietnam wars was abandonment of both cause and allies—the Southern black community and the South Vietnamese anticommunists.⁷⁷ Perhaps soon Iraqis,

already suspicious of America's true intentions, will discover the same fate. A Gallup poll released in mid-June 2005 reveals that 57 per cent of Americans now think the invasion and occupation of Iraq was a mistake down from 70 per cent in favor of the war at the start.⁷⁸

In a sense, however self-serving it appears, an American willingness to desert hopeless situations can make pragmatic if brutal sense—when costs in lives and treasure outweigh the dictates of honor.⁷⁹ Moreover, a degree of prudence suits a nation in which the benefits of freedom, individuality, and democratic practice are highly treasured. Who would have it otherwise? Americans prefer minimal wars, quick, cheap engagements in which soldiers are not casually sacrificed. (The Barbary pirate engagement, the Spanish-American War in 1898, the various incursions into Latin America in the 1920s, the more recent Panama and Granada takeovers, both bloodless, and the brief Gulf War of 1991 spring to mind.)

Disadvantages, however, can arise from hopes for a quick end. Lyndon Johnson's decision to use limited means serves as a case in point. He sought to save the country from a possible Third World War. Tragically he found, however, that the political, economic, and human costs were much too high for whatever was the ultimate and always vaguely conceived goal. Likewise, Bush sought a cheap, quick conflict with minimal troops as if the objective were simply a shrewd political maneuver to display a posture of heroism. Among the three wars discussed, only Lincoln's strategy was based from the start on reality and necessity. To be sure, the price of his persistence was very high. Nonetheless, it was worth all the blood and anguish in the long run.

In conclusion, it must be recognized that honor will always be useful as a national device for collective and military protection. Yet, to summon citizens to unsheathe swords to protect national honor would seem ludicrous to all but the most dedicated Civil War re-enactors. Referring to the brave men in the Gulf War under his command, for instance, General Colin Powell described how army morale rested on one's comrade in arms being "clean. . .dedicated . . .motivated. . .selfless, patriotic, loyal. . .respectful, tolerant, and caring." He did not use the term "honor," but he could have. A secular society finds nothing "sacred" about this essential path to battlefield survival. Yet, Powell titled his memoir Sacred Honor.⁸⁰

Dishonorable betrayal of principle may result in outrage and mockery, but one seldom encounters honor's polar opposite, shame, in public discourse. Certainly shame is the proper accusatory term for the handling of Al Qaeda, Taliban, and Iraqi prisoners at Guantánimo, Abu Ghraib, and other sites for detainees. Anti-Americanism, already on the rise, continues to grow so enormously that it complicates the work of the military far beyond whatever useful information the excesses may have gained.

Perhaps honor is no longer seen in this nation as being such an indispensable factor in the affairs of state as it was during the Civil War. But in the world today it remains powerful, even commanding. Ambitions to attain honor ought to be an indispensable stimulus for noble action on the battlefield as well as in the seats of civilian power. Humanity is most unlikely to forgo its imperatives altogether. We are engaged in a war against Islamic extremism and ethnic and religious insurgencies in countries where honor and shame have the greatest intensity imaginable. Yet, our distance from even the more restrained and less vengeful aspects of the honor code are

foreign to everyday thinking. That remoteness makes the work of intelligence operatives and policymakers even more difficult.

However that may be, a sad conclusion emerges. As early as 1966, at the height of the Vietnam crisis with its protests and violence, the poet Robert Lowell voiced what he feared lay ahead. In a letter to the Partisan Review in 1966 he cannily prophesied, “I have a gloomy premonition . . . that we will soon look on this troubled moment as a golden time of freedom and license to act and speculate. One feels the steely sinews of the tiger, an ascetic, ‘moral’ and authoritarian reign of piety and iron.”⁸¹ While still surprisingly diffident about the distant Asian wars, the American public could discover that Lowell’s prediction was all too accurate. As a guiding principle in political relations, honor may well prove misleading and futile. At times it becomes tragically so.

Endnotes

1 I thank John Jeffries, Chair, and Anne Rubin of the History Department for making the occasion an honor and pleasure and thanks also to Randall Stephens, Anne Wyatt-Brown, and George Fenwick Jones for patient and invaluable readings of the text. James Bowman, “The Lost Sense of Honor,” Public Interest (Fall 2002):32. Alexander Wendt, Social Theory of International Relations (1999; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Thomas Hobbes, on whom, along with John Locke and Emanuel Kant, Wendt relies, argues in De Cive, Chapter 1, “We do not therefore by nature seek Society for its own sake, but that we may receive some Honour or Profit from it; these we desire Primarily . . . Glory is like Honour, if all men have it, no man hath it, for they consist in comparison and precellence.” What is true of individuals in the honor scheme is also true of nations. Unfortunately, neither he nor the political scientists in Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), make any reference to the role of honor in foreign affairs. On the other hand, Barry O’Neill connects his analysis of honor cultures with constructivist and game-theory political science, a very promising fusion of ideas. See Barry O’Neill, Honor, Symbols, and War (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 261. Donald Kagan, “Honor, Interest, and Nation-State,” in Elliot Abrams, ed., Honor among Nations (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1998), 5; Donald Kagan, “On National Honor,” <http://www.cs.utexas.edu/users/vl/notes/kagan.html>.

2 Quoted in Henry W. C. Davis, The Political Thought of Heinrich von Treitschke (London: Constable, 1914), 177. See Avner Offer, "Going to War in 1914: A Matter of Honor?" Politics and Society 23 (June 1995):213-41, esp. 220; John Keegan, The First World War (New York: Knopf, 1999), 48. Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America [Kissinger Commission, 1984, 93], as quoted in O'Neill, Honor, Symbols, and War, 106.

3 David Hackett Fischer, Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 843; Andrew J. Bacevich, "The Real World War IV," Wilson Quarterly 29 (Winter 2005): 26-61, 37 (quotation).

4 See Joseph A. Fry, Dixie Looks Abroad: The South and U.S. Foreign Relations, 1789-1973 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 140.

5 Julian Rivers, "Honor," in International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, ed. David L. Sills (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 6:506; William Ian Miller, Humiliation and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 84; Leon Würmser, The Mask of Shame (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).; Martha C. Nussbaum, Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 43, 63.

6 Bowman, "Lost Sense of Honor," 36. For a concise and elegant survey of Augustinian "just war" theory, see Michael Gannon, "Is This Just a War: Using History to Help Define a Just War," in Anniston Star, 16 March 2003, p.1E. Sir Max Hastings comments that "What caused some of us to say before the Iraq war began that we were skeptical about going in was that we were fearful that it would compromise the case for using force in a better cause." Donald A. Yerxa, "Armageddon: an Interview with Sir Max Hastings," Historically Speaking 6 (March/April 2005), internet. William Shakespeare, Henry IV, Part I, Act 5, Sc. I.

7 Burt quoted by Joseph P. Reidy, in review of James L. Huston, Calculating the Value of the Union: Slavery, Property Rights, and the Economic Origins of the Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), in American Historical Review 110 (June 2005): 792. See also Alexander Stephens, "Speech Delivered on the 21st March, 1861, in Savannah, Known as, 'the Corner Stone Speech,'" in Henry Cleveland, Alexander H. Stephens in Public and Private with Letters and Speeches, Before, During and Since the War (Philadelphia, Chicago, Ill., National Publishing Co., 1866), 721.

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²⁷ Wilfred Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est," in War Poems and Manuscripts of Wilfred Owen, <http://www.hcu.ox.ac.uk/jtap/warpoems.htm#12>. "I sincerely hope we will not doom our children to fight senseless battles as did we, shackling them to similar fates suffered by their fathers. There is no glory in war...only death and misery!" writes Gary Jacobson, a wounded infantryman in Vietnam. "His country called he took its stand And fell. For what? And why? /Was it right that he should die?/ So young, so unfilled, such tragic waste, His youth and promise lived in haste./ Now lost, destroyed, forever gone. Forever boys they slumber on Beneath hushed white crosses stark and still. . . ." Curt Bennett, "War Poetry," <http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/vietnam.htm#Poem%20Titles>. The poetry is not as skilled or moving as that of Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, but it expresses the same despair and disillusionment.

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- 37 Kearns cited in Dugger, *The Politician*, 151; Kearns cited in Steinberg, *Shame and Humiliation*, 98.
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78 In 1965, the Vietnam war had become about as unpopular as the Iraqi conflict has **grown to be** more recently. Gallup record these figures with nearly two-thirds ready to approve the pull-out of American troops from the theater: "Question: qn6, Questionnaire: The Gallup Poll #716 Questionnaire Field Date: 08/27/1965-09/01/1965; Questionnaire Sample Size: 3525: Continue the war 19.15%; **Withdraw 62.84%**; No opinion 17.62%; No answer 0.40%.

79 O'Neill, Honor, Symbols, and War, 92-99.

80 Powell quoted in Bowman, “Lost Sense of Honor,” 35. For an example of a failure to appreciate Middle Eastern notions of honor, consider Jimmy Carter’s mishandling of the hostage situation in Iran. William J. Daugherty, “A Look Back: Jimmy Carter and the 1979 Decision to Admit the Shah into the United States,” American Diplomacy (Chapel Hill: American Diplomacy Publishers), 16 March 2003 and James A. Bill, The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

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