

## **The Honor Factor**

Opinion op/ed

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### **IF IT'S TOO LATE to win Iraqi hearts and minds.**

The purpose of Saddam Hussein's overthrow was to modernize and democratize the Middle East. Instead, we have disillusioned those whom we "liberated."

One of the major mistakes of Americans, especially national leaders, is their ignorance of the cultures and ethics of foreign peoples. We assume that people abroad should possess the same ideals that we acknowledge. Indifference about social, political and religious differences have led to tragedies in Vietnam, Iran and elsewhere. Before engaging in further illusory adventures, we had best understand the societies we seek to reform. Otherwise, nuclear-prone Iran or Baathist Syria might furnish new scenes of disaster.

Pentagon war planners have argued that Arab countries only respect brute force and that they supposedly shrink from being abjectly shamed. That assessment is only partly true.

Rather, traditions of honor undergird loyalty to family, clan and tribe, not to secular nation. The opposite of honor - shame - is to be avoided. An unwillingness to take account of the psychological depth of such convictions has already cost us dearly in lives, treasure and worldwide reputation.

The honor ethic, long disregarded in the West, is ancient and sacred. It predominates in Islamic countries. A man's reputation - not inner precepts - determines not only his place in the social order but also his self-image.

Maintaining prestige for virility and personal, familial and group honor requires immediate retribution for insult or deathly aggression, whether against another tribe or foreign foe. Iraq's social structure, for example, embraces 2,000 clans within 150 tribes. If they occur, the Jan. 30 elections will reflect the fragmented tribal constituencies.

Yet U.S. officials chiefly rely on weapons, both ours and those of Iraqi forces, to ensure a nationwide, not a piecemeal, provincial and

patrimonial election result. A major motive for suicidal assault, such as the mess hall bombing in Mosul that killed 22 Americans, is the fierce desire to re-establish a vital sense of tribal honor.

Self-sacrifice against hated Western invaders becomes an act of supreme heroism. Only occasionally do we learn that U.S. Army officers or Marines use diplomacy to preserve the honor of local sheiks and citizens. An example: At Mosul, Capt. Bill Jacobsen of the 24th Infantry Battalion quickly learned to show respect for Iraqis' honor, saying he learned in three months that diplomacy mattered more than military force, according to a news report. As a result, U.S. forces received more vital anti-insurgent information, and better U.S.-Iraqi relations were stimulated. Tragically, he died in the mess hall explosion.

Three blunders in which indifference toward Iraqi honor played a role in creating the current chaos:

# The now universally discredited Pentagon disbanding of Mr. Hussein's army and bureaucracy May 16, 2003. The edict grossly violated the Sunni tribes' sense of themselves. Some Baathist members of the police and army lost sharaf, or honor, as applied to group cohesion. Though once respected, these well-trained professionals could no longer provide a sense of security.

Many more were stripped of ihtiram, or deference. Without weapons, they lacked the means to shield their women from possible assault and rape. Throughout the Islamic region, protection of women's honor, ird, inflames men to near obsession because women are judged to be the center of male possessiveness. In the Middle East, to re-establish family honor, relatives may kill the victim of rape, regardless of extenuating circumstances.

# The anti-Baathist edict deprived hundreds of thousands of people of incomes needed to support their families. Continuing joblessness further degrades self-identity, an emotional deprivation inciting outraged, violent resistance.

# The Abu Ghraib prison scandal. Not only Iraqis but Middle Easterners generally learned how our government can humiliate the helpless. Shaming men sexually erases self-respect.

A Yemeni in Fallujah before its fall confessed that photos taken at Abu Ghraib had propelled him from driving a taxi in Yemen's capital, Sana, to the ranks of the insurgents.

A reliable Fallujah householder told one of us that invading soldiers "had no shame. They ... touched our women, stole our savings and took us away." By showing little regard for Iraqi honor, we have annihilated Middle Eastern respect for us and our values.

President Bush envisions a free, democratic Middle East, with Iraq as the first attempt to change age-old cultures there. Yet to save their sense of honor and retaliate against abject humiliation, that fractured assemblage of Iraqi tribes - and those in neighboring countries - might find other means to reinvigorate their self-image. They could promptly reject middle-class, secular democracy and embrace an intolerant Islamic theocracy.

Occupation armies seldom impose democracy on any unwilling nation, least of all one that adheres to the truculent honor code.

American lives, money and reputation should be better spent on more-promising, humane efforts toward peace.

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