

"Abu Ghraib: An Instance of America's Exercise in Revenge" by Zeid Omran

July 5, 2004

The civilian death toll from the U.S. incursions into Iraq stands, conservatively, at 10,000. We are supposed to rationalize that these deaths, although regrettable, were the necessary consequence of ridding the world of terror, whose reach and sophistication became all the more apparent after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center which was responsible for the death of 2,726 Americans. This account is not very accurate for it leaves out such adjectives as horrendous, barbaric, unimaginable, etc., that would normally precede "the death of 2,726 Americans"; necessary adjectives, it seems, to make up for the 7,000 discrepancy in the death toll. But adjectives aside, one should seriously wonder why it took us so long, with all the deaths, destruction, and humiliation that the Iraqis had to endure, to start shifting our opinion on the war. I believe the answer has to do with our perception of revenge.

Many different reasons have been given for the Iraq war: weapons of mass destruction, terror link, democracy, Saddam, power, oil, etc. Still, the one that is most convincing, at least from the perspective of the American people's acquiescence to the war, is the one invoked by the biologist Richard Dawkins, which mainly explains it as revenge for 9/11. According to Dawkins, this is not only strange but pure racism and/or religious prejudice, especially so because no credible link was ever given associating Iraq with the events on 9/11. Dawkins's argument goes like this: "It was Arabs that hit the World Trade Center, right? So let's go and kick Arab ass. Those 9/11 terrorists were Muslims, right? Right. And Iraqis are Muslims, right? Right. That does it." But then why not settle for 2,726 Muslims and/or Arabs? Why only after so many deaths and billions worth of property destroyed would we start swaying away from the war? Actually, the key to that question has nothing to do with the level of destruction; numbers, however large, do not fascinate, as was well demonstrated by the death of more than half a million Iraqi children in the 1990s as a consequence of the U.S./U.N sanctions. Rather, the change we are presently experiencing towards the war has to do with a change in the level of our proximity to our victims.

In response to a terrorist act such as that of 9/11, American citizens, as a collective, have the power to pressure their government to unleash their country's unsurpassed military power in all directions, bombing countries and inflicting horrors that as individuals they couldn't fathom in their wildest dreams. It would seem then that they have much more leverage in satiating their need for revenge than the terrorists from the Arab Muslim world. But, for most US citizens, other than the soldiers enacting the war, their revenge is one of a collective, here in the form of a State turned terrorist, which can never provide the proximity needed to satiate one's urge to settle the score. On the other hand, individual terrorism, although generally less destructive, levels the playing field in that it provides the terrorist a level of proximity with the victim that satisfies the hunger for revenge.

The Nobel laureate Konrad Lorenz writing on aggression claimed that in human evolution, quick killing was impossible because the potential victim had plenty of time to trigger pity in the aggressor through submissive gestures and appeasing attitudes. Hence, no inhibitory mechanisms were necessary to prevent such acts. Modern weaponry does away with that proximity. Moreover, as Lorenz explained, it contributes to our inability to satisfy our aggression drive. "The man who presses the releasing button is so completely screened against seeing, hearing, or otherwise emotionally realizing the consequences of his action, that he can commit it with impunity - even if he is burdened with the power of imagination." This applies more so to ordinary people living thousands of miles away, who, thanks to a government's aggressive censorship, vaguely have knowledge of their own dead, let alone the number of the dead from the other side.

Suddenly, come the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse pictures. Now the trigger is there for all to experience. At last, our drive for revenge finds its release and we are faced with the failure of our own morality. It is ironic what a dozen pictures can do. Suddenly, a deafeningly silent mass media is all aghast, questioning the motives behind the abuse, its extent, and even questioning its own clumsy coverage of the war, as did the New York times, although the questioning comes buried on page A10. It is also ironic what a dozen pictures cannot do. The focus in most cases is limited to the prisoners abused, whether our military is adequately trained to follow the Geneva conventions — as if, as Slavoj Zizek has noted, one needs to be trained not to torture and humiliate prisoners — and how all this reflects on our claims on freedom and democracy. Still, not the least adequate mention of the more than 10,000 dead Iraqi civilians, no pictures of the murdered and slaughtered Iraqis, no names, and no weeping mothers to haunt us. All these seem to be instances that continue to fall under the rationale of the "necessary, although regrettable, consequence of the war on terror."

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