

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

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THEY SAID IT

“History shows that Empires rise as they turn away from religion to science, but then decline because without an underpinning of religious belief, the morality that holds society together inevitably falls away. In the West today the triumph of materialist philosophies has transformed living standards, but declining moral standards are destroying what has been achieved, as crime escalates and personal relationships (especially between the sexes) turn sour, encompassing the inevitable spread of sexually-transmitted diseases and the breakdown of families. In a secular society the arts turn increasingly to sensationalism, until violence and explicit sex coalesce in the amalgam of pornography. Despair and disgust ride rampant, and in a final feature of evolutionary futility, communities cease even to reproduce themselves.”

-- From the dust jacket of the book *Holding Up A Mirror, How Civilizations Decline*, Anne Glyn-Jones, Century Books, 1996.

IT'S THE CULTURE, STUPID. There is no question that *the* story throughout the world last week was the one involving the revelations of abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. This is, to put it mildly, a very big story, bigger perhaps than any other in recent memory, if for no other reason than it holds the potential to bring down an administration that had previously been remarkably free of scandal.

While the vast majority of Americans will never blame President Bush directly, the revelations and attendant pictures could well sour the majority of Americans on the Iraqi mission, thereby tainting the centerpiece of Bush's reelection platform, namely his decisive response and follow-up to the events of September 11, 2001.

As is often the case with rapidly changing stories of this importance, a weekly publication cannot hope to provide fresh analysis geared to day-to-day events, such as the on-going campaign to force Don Rumsfeld to resign, the daily efforts by the White House to mitigate political damage, and the push by Democrats to gain as much political mileage from the situation as possible. So I thought I would offer a few observations regarding what the scandal says about America today, and what it might mean for its future.

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For starters, I would note that while there has been a great deal of talk from analysts, pundits, and politicians about how the Abu Ghraib revelations highlight the “breakdown” in various aspects of the military culture, no one yet, to my knowledge at least, has noted that the real significance of this event is that it opens another major front in the on-going cultural war, which has been raging in this nation since Vietnam. And what makes this even more interesting is the fact that this front is being opened just at the time when a presidential campaign that is being fought almost exclusively on cultural issues is about to swing into high gear.

Now, President Bush may either fail to recognize or deliberately ignore the broader cultural implications of the recent events in Iraq. But there can be little question that the profound cultural changes that have occurred in American society during the past several decades have made such heinous acts not only more imaginable and more possible, but also much more likely.

Now I don’t want to launch a lengthy discussion of American attitudes about sex and sexuality, but it is clear that there is a problem here that goes beyond a mere disregard for human rights. To look at the pictures of abuse or to read the graphic descriptions of that abuse and not to recognize that what happened at Abu Ghraib is significantly different than run-of-the-mill prison torture is to be willfully blind. What American soldiers and contractors did to their prisoners in Baghdad is more than merely wrong. It is, to put it bluntly, creepy.

In addition to asking questions like “who was in charge?” or “what did we know and when did we know it?” anyone serious about determining what exactly happened, how to prevent it from happening again, and what it says about the modern U.S. military should be asking “who thought it would be acceptable, interesting or amusing to watch a naked Arab men masturbating, simulating sex acts on each other, or being tied up like something out of a Marquis de Sade porn movie? Who thought it would be a good idea to take pictures or, as Rumsfeld has hinted, videos of such depravity? What pray tell is wrong with people who would want to do such things? And what kind of society produces these people, and then lets them serve in its military?”

Last week, onetime Labor Secretary nominee and columnist Linda Chavez suggested that the sexual nature of the torture may stem in part from sexual tension in military ranks, from the fact that men and women now serve together, doing the same jobs, in the same units, with little distinction between the two. She was, of course, pilloried by the usual suspects for giving voice to such horribly anachronistic ideas. But as the week dragged on, and as we learned more and more about the soldiers involved, Chavez’s musings seemed less and less preposterous.

There is, for example, the woman (girl?) who has appeared in the most infamous of the pictures, pointing at naked Iraqi men and holding one on a leash. Her name is Lynndie England, and late last week, she was charged for her role in the abuse. What’s funny (if that’s the appropriate word) about Ms. England is that she is not a prison guard or intelligence officer, and had no reason for being anywhere near the prisoners with whom she was photographed. She was, as her family claims, a “paper pusher” who just happened to be “in the wrong place at the wrong time,” visiting her boyfriend and the prospective father of her expectant out-of-wedlock child, who served in the same 372nd military police company and was a guard at the prison. Am I wrong to think that Generals Marshall, MacArthur, Eisenhower, Bradley, and Admirals Nimitz and Halsey

might have concluded that a mixed-sex military in which dating and work routinely overlap might not be conducive to good military discipline, especially in the middle of a war zone?

There is also the example of Capt. Leo Merck, commander of the 870th military police company, which is also at Abu Ghraib prison. Merck has been relieved of his command and is under investigation for taking pictures of female soldiers while they showered. One wonders if it has ever occurred to those liberal members of congress, who were the most indignant about the atrocities at Abu Ghraib, that a society that has allowed pornography to become one of its largest money making industries should produce such men and women in abundance?

Now, I don't personally believe that the tension between the sexes in the military accounts for all of the issues that surfaced in Abu Ghraib. But I don't doubt that Chavez was right when she said that sexual tension played some role. What is clear is that sex and sexual deviancy are themes that run through the entirety of this scandal, and the failure to discuss this fact is a failure to address the primary underlying causes.

And while the sexual depravity involved in the revelations are certainly the most striking, there are other aspects of America's societal breakdown that are at play here. Related to the breakdown in sexual civility is the breakdown in society's attitudes about prison and incarceration in general. It should shock no one that a number of those accused of participating in these unspeakable acts are also prison guards in civilian life. Naturally, I don't mean to impugn the character of all prison guards, the vast majority of whom are undoubtedly decent, law-abiding citizens doing difficult work, but it is unsurprising that a culture that tolerates and even snickers at the sexual torture of domestic criminal prisoners would produce guards all too willing to perpetrate sexual torture on prisoners of war.

Not to sound too much like a bleeding heart here, but the tolerance for sexual violence in America's prisons is epidemic. When, for example, Martha Stewart was convicted this spring, the culture was rampant with discussions of and jokes about how she would be forced to become someone's "girlfriend" on the inside, and how the roving gangs of lesbian convicts would be excited by the idea of "fresh meat." Now whether one likes or dislikes Martha Stewart, the fact is that no one in a position of authority seems either outraged or surprised that she will likely encounter abuses in prison well beyond that meted out by the court. And this, in my opinion, provides a clue to the cause of the events in Abu Ghraib that is worth exploring. As *National Review's* Andrew Stuttaford put it, "It never does any harm to ask again whether jailhouse brutality ends up brutalizing the society that condones it. The answer, I would think, is clear."

Another front in America's four decade long cultural war is the nation's attitude toward its military and the use of the military as a tool of foreign policy. It is true that in the several days since the revelations concerning Abu Ghraib have been made public, Democrats, Republicans, conservatives and liberals have all expressed shock, dismay, and deep regret about the atrocities. Yet, despite this near conformity in their superficial reaction to the abuses, beliefs about the causes and the long-term implications of the abuse vary drastically, and quite clearly break along the great fault line of the culture war.

For the most part, Republicans have been quick to defend the military, to argue that the actions documented on film are aberrations committed by a handful of maladjusted soldiers and tolerated

by an equally small number of their officers, and to suggest that now that Americans are aware of the problems, the military will quickly put things right. Underlying this train of thought is a belief in the exceptionality of both the American mission in Iraq and the nation itself. There is, in this camp, a belief that torture and abuse may be part of the human condition and a failure attributable to the frailty of man's nature, but that apologizing for, taking responsibility for, and remedying such weakness is what distinguishes American values from those of the regime the Americans ousted.

There is, in short, a general belief on the part of those on the conservative side of the cultural fault line that the atrocities in Iraq are aberrations that do not change the fact that the American military is a highly disciplined and morally upright institution, led by men and women of good will and rectitude, whose actions generally reflect the best qualities of American society.

On the opposite side of the fault line, the morality of the system itself is under fire. I will attempt to tread very delicately here for fear of "questioning the patriotism" of those on the political left, but the general sentiment on that side of the debate is that the American system itself is in some ways deeply corrupt, that war in general is indicative of moral failure, that this war in particular is indicative of the moral failure of the political right and most specifically George W. Bush, and that the scenes from Abu Ghraib are merely symptomatic of these greater failings.

In his column last Friday, conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer suggested that the images from Abu Ghraib were precisely those that would most fuel the fires of the anti-Western jihadists, confirming their worst charges against America. Specifically, he wrote:

The torture pictures coming out of Abu Ghraib prison could not have hit a more neuralgic point . . . It was gratuitous sexual abuse, perversion for its own sake. That is what made it, ironically and disastrously, a pictorial representation of precisely the lunatic fantasies that the jihadists believe – and that cynical secular regimes such as Egypt and the Palestinian Authority peddle to pacify their populations and deflect their anger and frustrations. Through this lens, Abu Ghraib is an "I told you so" played out in an Arab capital, recorded on film.

What Krauthammer didn't mention is that these images appear to have had a similar effect on the American political left. The protests against the current actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, from Democrats in Congress, the left-center mainstream media, and the radical anti-warriors in the street, have centered on moral arguments, and the incidents at Abu Ghraib have confirmed for many of the objectors that this war is, indeed, morally flawed. As with the jihadists cited above, for the political left, Abu Ghraib is very much an "I told you so" recorded on film.

This is, of course, hardly the first time that the left has questioned the morality of the U.S. military, as well as foreign policies that make use of this military. Indeed, in the nearly four decades since Vietnam, the left in general has thought of the military as an entity of suspect morality at best. Indeed, one of the very first public signs of friction between conservatives and the Clintons after they moved to Washington were a series of reports concerning Hillary's disdain for and objections to the presence of uniformed military personnel in and around the White House. In one widely reported instance, the young Chelsea Clinton was said to have

refused to ride in a limousine in which a military officer was sitting. “There is a military man in here, and I don’t ride with military men,” she is said to have remarked.

Currently, of course, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee is perhaps best known for his anti-military activism and his condemnation of the “immorality” of American action in Southeast Asia. And while Senator Kerry may differ slightly from most of the rest of the anti-warriors in that he actually spent time in uniform and fought in the war he later decried as immoral, there is no question that he owes his political stature in large part to his anti-war activities and the fact that he provided first-hand “testimony” to the “atrocities” committed by the U.S. military in its pursuit of its “immoral” war.

How aggressive Kerry will be in personally attempting to draw parallels between what happened in Iraq and the Vietnam atrocities about which he testified so many years ago is unknown. But there is little question that this theme will be an integral part of both the formal and informal Democratic campaign to rally the left to the Kerry cause. In fact, the prison abuse scandal is made to order for a party that routinely compared nearly every military initiative undertaken since the defeat in Vietnam to the Vietnam experience. From Grenada to the first Gulf War to Afghanistan and back to Iraq, factions on the left have labeled every military mission “the new Vietnam” and have slammed every action as “immoral” or “imperialistic.”

This is, in part, a function of the left’s intrinsic distrust of aggressive foreign policy actions. But it is also a function of the left’s “Vietnam obsession,” a condition whereby aging liberal baby boomers relive the glory days when they protested a war and “changed the world.” In other words, the left calls everything “Vietnam” because it wants for something actually to be Vietnam all over again. Abu Ghraib makes it possible to believe they have finally found this Holy Grail.

It should come as no surprise then, that one of the key names in the discovery and dissemination of the information about Abu Ghraib is that of Seymour Hersh, the writer for *The New Yorker* who essentially broke the prison abuse story in print and whom CBS tried to hire as a consultant for its television version of the same story. The *New York Post*’s John Podhoretz had the following to say about Hersh and CBS in his column last week.

Hersh and CBS are leading the media pack with graphic and lurid coverage of the disgusting atrocities committed at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. The tone they are adopting is a tone of moral outrage. But beneath it you can feel the thrill, the excitement of being back on the old familiar turf of standing in opposition to the foreign-policy aims of the United States - using the most despicable actions of a few criminals as a stand-in for the overall effort in Iraq.

Describing the military’s internal investigation of Abu Ghraib as “an unsparing study of collective wrongdoing” - which Hersh does in this week’s *New Yorker* - is code language. It suggests that the failure was not the moral lapses of the few but the collective actions of the nation in Iraq.

It should be noted that Hersh is a key player in this “Iraq as Vietnam” theme because he was also one of the forces behind the “Vietnam as national disgrace” story that has since become part of the nation’s folklore. Again, in Podhoretz’s words:

For Hersh, this is quite literally an effort to return to old glory: He made his career almost 35 years ago by uncovering the Vietnam-era massacre at My Lai.

Just as William Calley, the monster-in-charge of the My Lai atrocity, tried to defend himself by suggesting he was only doing what he had been told or trained or taught to do, so too are the thugs of Abu Ghraib blaming their superior officers and the U.S. war effort in general for failing to train them in the rules of the Geneva Convention . . .

The anti-war Left bought into Calley's self-serving excuse because it wanted to discredit the Vietnam War as a whole rather than blame Calley in particular. By indulging in the "systemic failure" line, Hersh and others are making it clear they fully intend to use Abu Ghraib to do the same thing in Iraq.

Now, this is not to say that the entirety of the Democratic Party is "anti-military," or believes that the cause in Iraq is morally suspect. Indeed, in Friday's Senate hearing, onetime vice-presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman gave a stirring defense of the United States and its efforts to defeat terrorism and bring freedom to the Middle East. Nevertheless the Democratic Party apparatus is fully committed to the task of electing John Kerry, who is using the events in Abu Ghraib as a rallying cry for a "regime change" in America, and there can be little doubt where the party establishment falls on this matter.

It is too early to say with any certainty how this issue will impact the November election. Much depends on whether the story "has legs," as the saying goes, and that generally depends on whether fresh revelations keep coming out on an ongoing basis. With this important consideration in mind, the Bush administration will want to get everything out into the open as quickly as possible, including all pictures and films that they determine are destined eventually to get into public hands. Knowing this will be the Republican strategy, Democrats will, after the shocking revelations have lost their shock value, change the subject to whether Don Rumsfeld should be thrown out of office.

Bush could, of course, quickly cut the legs out from under this story also by simply firing Rumsfeld. But it is doubtful that he will do this. For one thing, President Bush is exceptionally loyal, loyal to a fault one might say. As we've noted before, he has yet to make any significant personnel changes at the intelligence agencies despite ample evidence that individuals within those agencies did not do their jobs terribly well, if at all, both prior to September 11 and in the buildup to war with Iraq. So if Bush can't bring himself to boot George Tenet, then he is not likely to boot Donald Rumsfeld, unless and until it becomes absolutely necessary.

Second, Bush may determine that the ham-handed way in which Democrats such as Senator Edward Kennedy and Congressman Charlie Rangel are going after Rumsfeld actually benefits his cause, given that neither of these two men is particularly popular with middle America, and that both are deeply despised by the conservative voters. Thus, Bush well may feel that conservative voters, who don't particularly like him, could use a little anger-incentive to get out and vote for him next fall, and that Kennedy and Rangel provide such an incentive.

The one man on Capitol Hill whose opinion probably does carry considerable weight is John McCain. He is a media darling with a reputation for “bipartisanship.” He is also a man with considerable credibility on military matters, being not only a former naval officer, but also the son and grandson of Navy admirals. And he is the one person in this government with particular insight into the question of torturing POWs. Thus, on this issue, he likely has greater influence than anyone else on the Hill, perhaps more than all 534 other members of Congress combined.

If Secretary Rumsfeld, who is a Navy veteran like McCain, can satisfy or at least placate McCain, then he’ll likely not have anything to fear from outside 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. But if McCain turns on Rumsfeld calls for his resignation, then the Pentagon may well get a new chief.

The third thing to keep in mind when considering Rumsfeld’s future is the mess he would leave behind if he were to go. In an election year, the last thing the president wants is a contentious confirmation hearing, and contention would be inevitable given that the U.S. is at war. And while the Deputy Secretary would, under most similar circumstances be expected to step into his boss’s job at least temporarily, this seems entirely unlikely this time. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz has become the all-purpose bogeyman for the political left, and there is exactly zero chance that the Democrats would allow him to be promoted without raising holy hell. And that means Bush would have to look elsewhere for a Defense Secretary.

To avoid the afore-predicted contention, Bush would likely be able to name only one man to the job, current Secretary of State Colin Powell. And as much as President Bush likes, respects, and values Colin Powell, he also likely realizes that there is a reason why folks like Ted Kennedy have already signed on to moving him from State to Defense. Powell is the administration’s most “dovish” cabinet member, and if he were to take over Defense, State would likely fall to his current Deputy, Richard Armitage. And then both State and Defense would be under the control of men who are, by and large, opponents of the President’s current policies. That would, of course, be Ted Kennedy’s dream. But it would also be Bush’s nightmare, and unlike Kennedy, Bush actually has the power to impact these matters.

I’m not saying that Rumsfeld is guaranteed to keep his job unless John McCain asks for it. But I am saying that Bush will ask his Defense Secretary to go only as a last resort. And if he does, that will be a sure sign that the Abu Ghraib scandal has turned grim for the administration.

In the near term, the immediate reaction to the Abu Ghraib events will wreak havoc on both President Bush’s personal approval ratings and on the “right direction/wrong direction” measures that so often provide early insight into the outcome of elections. But if the Democrats are not careful, and if they get too excited by the smell of blood in the water and push this too far, they may well suffer a significant backlash.

George W. Bush, like Bill Clinton before him, is generally well liked by the public and connects with voters on a very personal level. And while Bush’s charisma may not be quite as magnetic as was Bill’s, the intensity of the Democrats’ loathing for him, which is far greater even than Republicans’ loathing for Bill, more than compensates for this difference in overt charm. So if the Democrats go overboard in their criticism, they could suffer blowback as the Republicans did when they relentlessly went after Bill.

In addition to the public's willingness to want to like and believe this President, there is also the public's general fondness for the brave men and women who serve in the armed forces. If Americans could come to view Democratic efforts to push the Abu Ghraib scandal as a crass attempt to capitalize politically by sullying not just the President's reputation but that of the U.S. military and of the nation as a whole, then John Kerry and his fellow Democrats will have serious public relations problems on their hands. American voters may not particularly like the idea of fighting a difficult and complicated war, but they like those who exploit such wars for political gain even less. Recall that despite the Vietnam protestors' self-proclaimed "victory" in changing the world, the commander-in-chief during much of that war, Richard Nixon, won re-election in the greatest political rout in this nation's history over an anti-war opponent.

In the final analysis, if the mess at Abu Ghraib is going to become the type of thing that can destroy a presidency, then it will likely do so without a whole lot of goading from the opposition party. If it is not, however, and the Democrats continue to play it like it is, then they may not be too terribly thrilled with the outcome, and come November, John Kerry may well join the likes of Newt Gingrich, Bob Livingston, and Al D'Amato, muttering "what the hell happened?" over and over to himself as he ponders his prospect-less future.

In the meantime, as I said above, this controversy is, in my opinion, best seen as a new front in the cultural war; indeed a highly important new front because it happens to be on view throughout the world.

The dark side of this new front is that its existence confirms what many people in other nations, including some of America's closest allies, have known for a long time, something that most Americans would rather not acknowledge, but which is nevertheless true, namely that American society is suffering from a decline in moral standards, a breakdown in some of its most cherished traditions, and a rot that is spreading through its culture and its government.

On a brighter note, this front is an opportunity to show the world that there are two sides in this on-going culture war, a side that won't give up without a fight; a side that still believes in justice and freedom, still views every human being as a child of God, and that thinks Teddy Kennedy is dead wrong when he says that the Statue of Liberty is no longer the symbol of America, having been replaced by the picture of a naked Iraqi prisoner.

God bless this great nation.