

# Smiling face of evil that shames us

**By Iain Macwhirter**

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I don't often find myself using the word "evil". I've never even been sure quite what it means. But it is hard not to regard what is happening now in the Middle East as inhuman, bestial, degrading. There has been a breakdown of civilised values, of respect for life itself. And we are all collectively responsible for it.

The dead children were the worst. On Thursday we saw the bodies of 40 Iraqi wedding guests, including women and children, killed, almost certainly, by a trigger-happy American helicopter crew near the Syrian border. There was something unbearably tragic about the makeshift body bags, improvised out of carpets, curtains and sleeping bags. The mutilated and headless child corpses – killed at what should have been a celebration of the family.

However, the Israeli massacre in Rafah was in some respects worse. At least the American pilot appeared to believe the Iraqi wedding party was being held in a terrorist safe house. Rafah was an act of cold-blooded barbarity. The Israeli tanks fired directly into a crowd of Palestinian demonstrators protesting at the demolition of their homes.

In the end, even Tony Blair was forced to condemn the Israeli action as "wrong and unacceptable". But the almost apologetic way in which he delivered this censure, at Prime Minister's Question Time, undermined any impact it might have had. George W Bush initially applauded the Israeli action in Rafah as a legitimate part of the "war on terror", but by the end of the week confessed to being "troubled".

As well he might be. Black Thursday also brought us more pictures of atrocities in Abu Ghraib prison by American forces. Not as brutal perhaps as the picture of hooded prisoners with electrodes on their fingers; not as weird as the turnip-faced Lynndie England getting them to masturbate. But, to me at least, far more serious.

One picture depicted a fresh-faced young American woman, with a graduation day smile, giving the thumbs up to a dead Iraqi prisoner wrapped in plastic. This is one of the most shocking pictures of war I think I have ever seen. Why? Because of what it betrays about the attitude of the occupying forces to the value of human life. The disregard for the dignity

## Smiling face of evil that shames us all / 2

of this person, who had almost certainly lost his life through US action, was worse than appalling – it was evil.

That anyone can smile in the face of death is disturbing, pathological even. But it is clear from the relaxed demeanour of the camp guard that what we were seeing was nothing out of the ordinary. She was saying, in effect: “Hey look, Mom. Another less Iraqi to worry about.” The picture may even have been taken, like the ones of sexual abuse, for interrogation purposes; to show other Iraqi detainees just how disposable they are.

We have been exposed to so much bestiality in Abu Ghraib that we are losing our capacity to be shocked. The latest atrocities included prisoners being paraded in excrement; being force-fed pork and alcohol against Muslim beliefs; being beaten systematically by guards. But we are in danger of becoming de-sensitised. I have even found myself saying that, in war, these things happen.

But do they? What kind of army behaves like this? Well, the answer is that our army behaves like this. I do not mean British soldiers individually – though it would be naive to think that “our boys” have not done some “nasties” on Iraqi detainees. But even American forces are “our boys” in the sense that they are there with British support and cooperation. We have legitimised this illegal war. Without Tony Blair, George W Bush would have been even more isolated from the international community than he now, rightly, is.

We cannot just blame America. We are active collaborators in one of the most foul and degrading conflicts of modern times. Serbian military commanders are being hunted down even now for crimes not dissimilar to those we know have been committed by the coalition forces in Iraq.

And there is more to come. The Washington Post, which released the latest images, clearly has a whole library of video nasties under lock and key. The Red Cross is seeking access to the Guantanamo Bay interrogation centre in Cuba to investigate abuses there and in similar camps in Afghanistan and Iraq. We shall be seeing more shame-faced four-star generals appearing before Senate hearings.

Apologists for the war say that all this proves that we are in the right, even as we are so manifestly in the wrong. Would any of this torture have come to light in Iraq under Saddam? Would the torturers have been brought to justice? Would the press have been allowed to report it?

The answer is no. Under dictatorship crimes against humanity take place in secrecy, at least while the regime remains in power. However, this makes the Iraq abuse scandal even more shocking. How could this happen at all in a democracy? We have persuaded ourselves that such behaviour is impossible in a free society because the people would never allow it. Well, here it is happening under democratically-elected politicians who – like Donald

## Smiling face of evil that shames us all / 3

Rumsfeld – seem to suffer no obvious remorse.

Rumsfeld should have resigned long ago. George W Bush and even Tony Blair should be considering their positions. That may sound excessive, unreasonable even. But imagine if this war had been launched, in defiance of the international community, by another Western power, such as Germany. Would Gerhard Schroeder still be in office? The entire Dutch government of Wim Kok resigned in 2002 over the behaviour of Dutch armed forces in Bosnia in 1995. In Britain, Anthony Eden resigned over Suez without a murmur.

The really shocking thing about the Iraq disaster is that neither Bush nor Blair seem to think they should even be contemplating resignation. This is, I fear, because the British and American public opinion have not yet reacted with sufficient force. We seem to be able to live with it – abuse and all.

Hopefully, George W Bush and his right-wing clique will be hurled from office by the American people come November. They have shown themselves unfit to govern a banana republic, let alone the most powerful nation in history. But the defeat of the Republicans is by no means certain. It would be truly terrible if a government responsible for war crimes were to be voted back into office – but that isn't impossible.

It is imperative that those democratic countries which have been party to the Iraq war now mount a searching self-examination. We cannot simply carry on as normal. Tony Blair's failure to condemn the actions of the American military has brought shame to this nation and to our own fighting forces.

But the days when leaders fell because their peers withdrew respect are gone. Anthony Eden went because the British establishment withdrew its support. But we live now in an age of opinion poll democracy. We, the people must find some way of communicating our disgust and contempt for what has been allowed to happen in Iraq. Nowadays, for evil to triumph, it is only necessary that the people do nothing.

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