

A Scandal in Iraq

We must follow President Bush's lead in asking forgiveness for inappropriate actions in this war.

In recent years, televised footage of various military strikes has become commonplace. I have watched entire cities destroyed while munching on popcorn in the comfort of my home. I must admit that I have gradually become desensitized to the high price of war.

I never watched the news accounts with the grizzly ardor of a gladiator fan, yet I took comfort in our superior military strength. I simply wanted us to win decisively.

Suddenly, things changed with the Abu Gharib prison scandal. The war became personal for many of us. Even our most hardened political pundits became consumed by the idea that America had lost her aura of heroism and integrity.

The Holy Spirit must have used the pictures from the prison to smite our collective conscience. Americans intuitively understand that we have been given a noble role to play in international affairs. We are not like everyone else. We can either live up to the high calling given us or diminish it by our actions.

I personally became intrigued with the question, "How did we get here?" The answer for me was very simple: National indignation and a legitimate need to protect ourselves caused us to create an atmosphere in which these abuses could take place.

This is not unlike what happens in the life of an individual

Christian when faced with tough choices. We can slowly rationalize our behavior and dull the voice of our individual conscience. The great 20th century teacher G. Campbell Morgan once said, "Conscience is that thing which calls things by their right name, refuses to allow any evil thing to be baptized by a name that robs it of its real meaning and significance."

Let me explain how we slowly violated our corporate consciences. The terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, shocked us at every level. We all felt something had to be done and done quickly.

In response to the imminent threat of violence from the Middle East, many U.S. legal minds began their war with the pen. The New York Times asserts that Justice Department lawyers created a 42-page document setting forth several legal arguments for avoiding the jurisdiction of the Geneva Conventions. These papers told us that we could still be "legal" while aggressively pursuing important information. This legal wiggle room was fully utilized in the Afghanistan conflict.

By the time the Geneva Conventions were set aside we had already stepped onto a slippery slope. I am not really surprised that things escalated beyond our original intentions.

By the time the interrogation teams had been reassigned to Iraq, they had mastered the art of bending the rules to achieve results. The regular army simply got out of their way and let them work. But why did the people who actually took the infamous pictures get involved? They obviously chose to participate.

How does this relate to our national conscience? Psychologist Philip G. Zimbardo arrived at the following conclusion, "Most evil is the product of rather ordinary people caught up in unusual circumstances that they are not equipped to cope with in the normal ways."

This assertion also reflects the conclusions of a groundbreaking behavioral research study conducted by Stanford University nearly 23 years ago. Seventy male college students volunteered to participate in a two-week experiment based on prison life.

After just two days Abu Gharib-like action erupted. Only a clear commitment to God's Word and the inward restraint of the Holy Spirit can help people in these kinds of situations remain sober and responsible.

We must follow President Bush's lead in asking forgiveness for inappropriate actions in this war. We are not apologizing for defending ourselves. Nor are we condoning the barbarous retaliation of murderers and torturers. We are simply asking God and the offended parties to forgive us, while we forgive the suicide bombers for their attacks upon our citizens.

Has America disgraced herself? I don't think so. She has simply qualified herself to give and receive the grace of God.

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