

Hubris vs. reverence in Iraq

By [Paul Woodruff](#)

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Hubris is easy to spot in other people, harder in ourselves. Volunteers for the First Crusade shouted “God wills it!” in various languages, thinking they knew the mind of God well enough to be sure that God wanted them to kill people. That’s hubris. Reverence—the opposite of hubris—feels that God is beyond full understanding by human beings.

Nouri al-Maliki, prime minister of Iraq, thought he could get away with mistreating Kurdish and Sunni citizens of his country. That was hubris, and the country is paying for it now. Here at home, some voices are calling for us to engage in Iraq with weapons or planes or soldiers. That too is hubris.

The force of arms will not heal the conflict between Sunni and Shia. Religious issues do not go away when an army moves in—as Euripides showed in [the *Bacchae*](#), 2,500 years ago. In the play, a king tries to drive out a new religion by force of arms. It is hubris, and he dies for it.

Where there is a religious war, there is always hubris and a failure of reverence. But war of any kind usually betrays hubris. In 2003, many Americans thought that by war they could bring democracy to Iraq. We had to learn the hard way that this was hubris. Reverence has a better sense of what human beings can and cannot do.

One nation can perhaps transform the character of another, but not through force alone. Character is not that sort of thing. Japan took the opportunity of its defeat by the Allies to make great changes. Some pundits thought only force would bring Syria to divest itself of chemical weapons. They were wrong. The weapons are gone, and the nations that insisted they be gone have not resorted to force.

I wrote [a book on reverence](#) in 1999. At that time, religious wars seemed to be winding down—but I predicted that, absent reverence, such wars would break out anew. I repeat now what I wrote then: “If you desire peace in the world, do not pray that everyone share your beliefs. Pray instead that all may be reverent.”