

War comes home: The dark side of what soldiers do in our name

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The myth of American innocence dies hard. It resurfaces even as it is being punctured by reality. President Bush, faced with evidence that American soldiers have tortured Iraqi prisoners, declared that the photos do not show “the true nature and heart of America.” Somehow, according to such rhetoric, the true heart of America remains pure, untouched by the actions of actual Americans. America is to be defined by ideals, not behavior.

Were Bush to draw on Christian theology rather than American mythology, he would say instead that the photos reveal one part of the heart of America and of Americans—and of every human heart. Christians have no illusions about what humans are capable of, especially under the stress and provocations of war. “The inclination of the heart is evil from youth,” laments God in the Book of Genesis. Or as Protestant confessions of faith put it: “We are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.” It could even be argued that the abusers at Abu Ghraib prison were typically American in the way they delighted in sexual humiliation and pornographic display. It was a frat party turned vicious.

The abuses at Abu Ghraib remind us that war spreads not only death but moral corruption to those who engage in it. Mindful of this, Christian theologians who have regarded war as sometimes a necessary evil—from Augustine to Reinhold Niebuhr—have always stressed that soldiers should conduct themselves soberly, going about their deadly business with heavy hearts, resisting the temptation to hate the enemy or lust for revenge. It is that moral sentiment that professional soldiers have attempted to codify with rules about the terms of engagement, the protection of noncombatants and the humane treatment of prisoners.

The investigation into the violations of prisoners’ rights is likely to be long and complicated, accompanied by much fingerpointing and bureaucratic obfuscation. The perpetrators themselves, it appears, will claim to be acting under orders.

Pentagon officials will deny ever endorsing the abuse of Iraqi prisoners. Mid-level officers will find their own modes of plausible deniability. As laborious as the investigation may be, however, it is crucial to the nation's moral health and moral credibility.

At some point during the Vietnam war it was said that the "war had come home"—that the battle was no longer only for the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese, but also for the hearts and minds of Americans. Now, too, the challenge is not only to encourage democracy in another country, but also to practice it at home. The pressing question is whether Americans can honestly face the dark side of what soldiers do in their name, and whether the political process can reform those practices. With the photos from Abu Ghraib, the war has come home.