

Double vision: Missing in the Newsweek fuss: historical perspective

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [June 14, 2005](#) issue

When photographs of Saddam Hussein in his underwear were printed in the *New York Post* and the *London Sun*, President Bush told the Associated Press: “I don’t think a photo inspires murderers. These people are motivated by a vision of the world that is backward and barbaric.” Then he added, “I think the insurgency is inspired by their desire to stop the march of freedom.”

Before the next news cycle began, the White House rushed to clean up the president’s candid remarks, express regret about publication of the pictures, and promise an investigation. The new reaction replaced the “backward and barbaric” version, which disappeared from subsequent news stories. Unfortunately, the ideology of this administration does not go away. The president’s remarks echoed an earlier observation—he would punish the enemy by launching a “crusade,” a term highly provocative to Muslims, who equate Crusades with Western colonial domination.

In March the White House decided it was time to improve its overseas image and named Karen Hughes as director of public diplomacy at the State Department. Her mandate, when she assumes the job later this summer, will be to “promote U.S. values and improve America’s image abroad.” Hughes has no foreign-policy background and no discernible experience in Islamic matters. But never mind—she is Bush’s longtime political strategist and close friend.

On learning of the appointment, *Business Week* columnist David Kiley issued this caution: “One of the reasons America and George Bush’s image is so damaged abroad is that the Administration’s policy and rhetoric is so devoid of truth and historical perspective.”

It was clear that the lack of historical perspective stood in the way of a proper response to the media flap that surfaced when *Newsweek* claimed that one of its sources had seen an army report indicating that U.S. interrogators had desecrated a copy of the Qu'ran at the prison detention center at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. After that story led to rioting throughout the Islamic world, *Newsweek's* source changed his mind and said he was not sure where he had seen the report. He still maintained that he had seen it—only the place was uncertain in his mind. *Newsweek* acknowledged the error and offered a retraction.

Overnight the Qu'ran desecration story became a story about journalism: it was about *us*; never mind the damage done to others, to *them*. As Human Rights Watch concluded, the *Newsweek* retraction story “has overshadowed the fact that religious humiliation of detainees at Guantánamo and elsewhere has been widespread.”

Meanwhile, a movie arrived just in time to offer a much-needed correction to the ongoing tension between us and them in the “war on terror.” President Bush’s reference to the “other” as barbaric suggests a parallel call sent out in the 11th century by Pope Urban: “infidels” must be removed from the Holy Land. The resulting Crusades generated enormous response among restless European armies eager to find salvation and earthly glory.

Kingdom of Heaven tells the story of battles between the Second and Third Crusades in the early 12th century. Director Ridley Scott mixes a fictional love story with a surprisingly accurate account of Islamic warrior Saladin’s defeat of the European Crusader army, first at the Battle of Hattin on July 4, 1187, and then in the capture of Jerusalem a few months later.

Scott says he hopes his film will help correct the imbalance that has led too many in the West to brand 1.2 billion Muslims as the “evil other” in a “clash of civilizations.” He turned to Muslim scholar Hamid Dabashi, a film expert from New York’s Columbia University, to advise him on the making of the film. Dabashi read the script, made comments and then saw the film in its final stages.

Dabashi describes his experience as Scott’s adviser in the British film magazine *Sight and Sound*. Dabashi has a good grasp of Scott’s other films, which include *Gladiator*, *Black Rain*, *Alien*, *Blade Runner* and *Thelma and Louise*, all of which depict a major character or characters on a journey to find answers for a troubled spirit. Dabashi emerged from his *Kingdom* film experience with a deeper appreciation of

Scott's work, which he believes is fair to Islam.

Kingdom of Heaven displays more sensitivity to Islamic religious and cultural practices than I've seen in any other Hollywood-funded film. (Some moments assume a knowledge of Islamic rules of warfare that may be lost on Western audiences, as in the fact that a warrior may not kill an enemy to whom he has given food or drink. Saladin honors this rule at a critical turning point in the film.)

Students of the Crusades will appreciate the sympathetic treatment of Christian King Baldwin IV, the "leper king" who tried to build a "kingdom of heaven" in Jerusalem where followers of all faiths would live in peace together. It is a vision that only a hopeful idealist would pursue, but surely a better vision than one that views the "enemy" as "backward and barbaric."