

Bush, Iran and Selective Outrage

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One of the least endearing features of Washington's political/media hierarchy is its propensity for selective outrage, like what is now coming from George W. Bush about the "inexcusable behavior" of the Iranian government in holding 15 British sailors whom Bush has labeled "hostages."

This is the same President Bush who often mocks the very idea that international law should apply to him; he's fond of the punch line: "International law? I better call my lawyer." But Bush becomes a pious defender of international law when it suits his geopolitical interests.

The major U.S. news media predictably follows along, getting into an arms-crossed harrumph over foreigners trampling on the inviolate principles of international law, the same rules that should never constrain U.S. actions.

So, when British sailors were captured on March 23 after they may or may not have crossed over an ill-defined demarcation between Iraqi and Iranian waters in the Persian Gulf, the assumption in the U.S. media was that Iran must be wrong. After all, Bush has listed Iran as a charter member of the "axis of evil"; its leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is a notorious hothead; and everyone knows the Brits always play by the rules.

Of course, left outside this narrow frame of reference was the gross violation of international law - the bloody invasion of Iraq in 2003 - that put the Brits there in the first place.

Back then, international law was deemed little more than a nuisance getting in the way of what President Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair wanted to do, i.e. conquer Iraq, install a compliant government, "privatize" its resources, and threaten other countries in the region to get in line.

Bush regarded the United Nations Charter and its ban on aggressive war as some goofy experiment in multilateralism. Blair actually knew better. Though he recognized that the Iraq invasion would violate this fundamental tenet of international law, Blair went along anyway.

From a longer-range historical context, there were other facts that would need forgetting if one wanted to get worked up into a moral frenzy. These include British colonial domination of both Iraq and Iran, and the CIA's role in overthrowing Iran's elected government in 1953 and reinstalling the brutal Shah of Iran on the Peacock Throne.

The combined interventions by the United Kingdom and the United States may have cost the lives of hundreds of thousands - possibly millions - of Iraqis and Iranians over the past

century, but somehow Blair and Bush have positioned themselves as the innocent victims – at least as far as the Western press corps is concerned.

Iranian Detentions

So, in December and January, when Bush ordered raids against Iranian government offices inside Iraq and had five Iranian military officials detained indefinitely, there was barely a peep in the Western news media about violations of international law. Though the Iranians weren't formally charged, their plight elicited little sympathy.

There were expectations that the Iranians might be released on March 21, the start of the Iranian new year. After that date passed, some observers believe Iran may have opted for a tit-for-tat response in seizing the 15 British sailors.

If that is the case, the Iranians apparently don't understand the rules of the game: that President Bush has the unilateral right to do whatever he wants in the world and any reaction is unjustified, if not an invitation to an American military retaliation.

Escalating the war of words with Iran during a press conference at Camp David on March 31, Bush dismissed out of hand any possible "quid pro quos," such as a swap of the two sets of detainees.

"The Iranians must give back the hostages," Bush declared. "It's inexcusable behavior."

Regarding the captured British sailors, Blair and other U.K. officials have taken particular umbrage over videos released by Iran showing the sailors eating or being interviewed. This complaint references the principle of the Geneva Conventions against subjecting captured soldiers to public humiliation.

This same Geneva provision also was an issue – and another example of Western double standards – in the early days of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

In the southern Iraqi city of Nasiriya, five American soldiers were captured and their images were broadcast on Iraqi TV. Bush administration officials immediately denounced the brief televised interviews as a violation of the Geneva Conventions.

"It's illegal to do things to POWs that are humiliating to those prisoners," declared Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Rumsfeld's charge was repeated over and over by U.S. television networks as the American people were agitated to a fever pitch. But American TV reporters stayed silent about the obvious inconsistency between the outrage over the footage of the American soldiers and the earlier U.S. broadcasts of Iraqi prisoners of war.

The Iraqi POWs had been paraded before U.S. cameras as "proof" that Iraqi resistance was crumbling – and no U.S. journalist working for a major news outlet raised any question about a Geneva violation. Some Iraqi POWs were shown forced at gunpoint to kneel with their hands behind their heads as they were patted down by U.S. soldiers. Other Iraqis were bound by plastic handcuffs and shown with bags over their heads.

Beyond the hypocrisy implicit in the double standards, CNN and other U.S. cable networks

apparently saw no irony in the fact that they presented these scenes of kneeling and bound Iraqis over the title, "Operation: Iraqi Freedom."

Guantanamo Bay

In protesting alleged Geneva violations by Iraq in March 2003, the U.S. news media also was silent about the fact that Bush had drawn worldwide condemnation for his decision to strip many POWs captured in Afghanistan of their Geneva Convention rights.

Bush ordered hundreds of these captives to be put in tiny outdoor cages at Camp X-Ray in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The prisoners were shaved bald and forced to kneel with their eyes, ears and mouths covered to deprive them of their senses.

The shackled prisoners were filmed shuffling about in leg irons or being carried on stretchers to interrogation sessions. Their humiliation was broadcast widely.

In early 2002, U.S. allies, including some British officials, objected to the treatment of these prisoners and to Bush's unilateral assertion that they were "unlawful combatants" outside the protection of international law.

Legal experts noted that "unlawful combatant" was not even a category recognized by international law. The Geneva Conventions also required that detainees whose status was in any doubt must be accorded all enumerated rights until a "competent tribunal" was established to determine each individual prisoner's legal status.

Instead, Bush insisted that he had the sole right to declare which prisoners were POWs (with protections under the Geneva Conventions) and which ones were to be considered "unlawful combatants" (with no protections under the Geneva Conventions). Even Bush-designated POWs only received the Geneva rights that Bush saw fit to grant.

Human rights groups charged, too, that the U.S. treatment of some prisoners crossed the line into torture, which also is forbidden by international law. According to a variety of public accounts, prisoners have been subjected to water-boarding, a practice that simulates drowning, and to painful stress positions for long periods of time.

For its part, however, the Bush administration has denied engaging in torture and insists that all prisoners have been treated humanely.

Though these controversies about Bush's disdain for international law are well known to the U.S. news media, the context disappeared again when press interest turned to the captured British sailors in late March 2007.

Suddenly, it was a new day with Bush and Blair fully committed to international law. Even a relatively minor Geneva transgression, such as filming captives eating, became a justification for unrestrained outrage.

Without any acknowledgement about their own abrogation of international law, the British and U.S. governments lifted these principles from the gutter, dusted them off and put them on a pedestal. The grand human rights defender, George W. Bush, lectured other countries about "inexcusable behavior" - and no prominent Western journalist called him to account for his contradictions.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Secrecy & Privilege: Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq*, can be ordered at secrecyandprivilege.com. It's also available at Amazon.com, as is his 1999 book, *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth*.

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