

Book Review:

Humiliation, Abu Ghraib and the Failed Peace in Iraq

Reviewed by Richard Van Heertum

In her book *Humiliation, Abu Ghraib and the Failed Peace in Iraq*, Victoria Fontan offers a fascinating perspective on the Iraq War and War on Terror, arguing that humiliation plays a key role in both. She starts with the premise that humiliation was instrumental in the shift from liberation to counterinsurgency in Iraq and, more generally, serves as the central rallying cry for fundamentalist terrorism across the globe. This is particularly true of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, who base their discourse on the humiliation and injustice the Western world has imposed on the Middle East and Muslims everywhere from the crusades forward. Using the voices of Iraqis and other stakeholders, she provides a compelling argument for the need to refocus our attention on cultural differences and humiliation resulting from Bush Administration policies post-9/11; particularly related to the War on Terror, the occupation of Iraq and current debates around torture.

Fontan argues that the Iraq War and aftermath have only amplified the saliency of humiliation discourses that have galvanized terrorist organizations across the globe, leading to the a whole new generation of terrorists recruits in wait including former supporters of the overthrow of Hussein. The most compelling case comes near the end the book when she interviews Haijji Mahmoud, a hard working middle-class married man with kids who is on a waiting list for suicide bombing to redeem his country and oust the liberators turned occupiers. He is not an overly religious man, but feels a personal sense of humiliation at the hands of American occupiers who he wants to repay for what they have done to his country and its people. Fontan believes this shift is the result of an inability to understand or respect the culture of the Iraqi people, the nature of relations between the three main groups (Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds) and, at its heart, gender roles and relationships in the country. Key in this misunderstanding is how honor societies work and the importance they give to the honor of their women and families.

Abu Ghraib is the most obvious example she provides of how humiliation turned many Iraqis against the occupation, but she starts earlier with Fallujah and the de-Baathification policy of Paul Bremer. In Fallujah, the hyperreality of perception mixed with huge mistakes by American forces, led the local population to organize against the “occupiers.” Fontan bases her notion of hyperreality on Baudrillard, positing that perception can transcend reality and that we

should have been more careful about how we framed the perception of the aftermath of war. Her point is that rumor soon became fact in a society that was ripe for al-Qaeda infiltration. This was particularly true as soldiers shamed families with raids that undermined our role as “liberators.” Carefully culled images were effectively used by al-Qaeda and insurgents in videos and other propaganda tools to build support for their cause. And Abu Ghraib only furthered the sense that Americans had supplanted Hussein as a force that sought to use humiliation of both women and men to control the population. The images that emerged from the scandal were interesting in two senses, as they first led to questioning of the invasion and then, in an odd twist, became a powerful force to avert broader debates on the war, torture and American foreign policy in general.

It is in this at times acute social analysis that the strength of the book lies. Here she argues that Abu Ghraib was reframed by the media as a story about two “bad apple” female soldiers. The two women, Privates Sabrina Harman and Lynndie England were publicly vilified and essentially humiliated to both misdirect the public away from other images of rape and murder from the prison and a broader debate about torture and the war on terror. But the condemnation of these women also served to absolve the country of its blame in the actions. Just as a few “bad apples” were to blame for the corruption scandal that plagued the corporate world a couple of years before the financial crisis started, a few “bad apples” were behind the horror of Abu Ghraib – not the administration and its position on torture. In fact, it appears humiliation was at the very heart of our torture strategy – shaming women through their sexuality and sometimes outright rape and using verboten proximity to homosexuality to shame men.

An interesting subtext of this discourse is that two women were chosen to be the major scapegoats, just as Martha Stewart was absurdly chosen as the scapegoat of insider trading on Wall Street a few years back, and just as French women after World War II became the scapegoats for pretty widespread French complicity and cooperation with the Germans during World War II (see Verhoeven’s underrated *Black Book* for a wonderful filmic treatment of this dynamic at play). Fontan makes the point that this is simultaneously the case on both sides of the ideological battle over Iraq. Those against the war and occupation used the situation of Iraqi women to fortify their argument, while often simultaneously supporting those that make women second class citizens and worse (ironically Hussein improved the position of women in Iraq dramatically during his reign) and by conservatives to misdirect attention from the failures of the Bush administration and the aforementioned debates on torture tactics.

She also points out the flawed elections of 2005, which served as a powerful propaganda tool for the administration, but undermined and alienated Sunnis in the country by marginalizing their participation in the process. This was also true of women, who were either told who to vote for by husbands or disallowed from participating at all. And this was the case with the deBaathification effort, as Sunnis were marginalized and ostracized, complicit Shiites were rewarded and experts in all areas were shunned and expelled from the Iraqi infrastructure. The book uses these examples to outline in detail how American policymakers inside and outside Iraq squandered a real opportunity for peace in the wake of Hussein’s overthrow and capture. It frames this analysis in a well-articulated case for social justice that transcends simplistic leftist or

humanist arguments to capture the complex interplay of factors that came together to make Iraq the disaster we are still dealing with today. As she argues toward the end of the book, “The basic right of a people to sovereignty, integrity, and dignity ought to be a universal human right.”

One of the dangers of writing contemporary history is that events will change between the time the author finishes their book and the time it is actually published. To some extent, this is one problem with Ms. Fontan’s otherwise persuasive account of the underlying dynamics that in Iraq. This shortcoming does not undermine the story overall, though, as Fontan brings a fresh perspective to the war based on her heterodox focus on humiliation and gender as key factors in the birth and success of the insurgency in Iraq. While some semblance of peace has finally been restored, based in no small part on some of the strategies Fontan suggests, and as financial chaos undermines our concern with Iraq and Afghanistan, we also find her prescience.

In fact, in the final pages of the book, Fontan predicts the financial crisis that now plagues us and how it relates to one of Bin Laden’s key strategies – to cause economic unrest in the West that will force a more isolationist policy and thus leave the Middle East less tethered by American interference, and ultimately allow for the establishment of fundamentalist Muslim governments across the region. We see this very real danger reemerging in Afghanistan and more perilously in Pakistan. Without sensible policies to address the realities of terrorist thought and discourse, we endanger our future stake in the region and the lives of the innocent victims caught in the political tempest that surrounds them.

Fontan starts the book by recounting current scholarship on humiliation and how it relates to the profound cultural differences between Iraqis and Americans. She then moves on to explain how Osama bin Laden used the theme of humiliation and the restoration of human dignity as the very *raison d’être* of al-Qaeda. Bin Laden bases his ideology around the humiliation of defeat Islam has suffered at the hands of the West, from the Crusades and establishment of Israel in 1948 to more recent intrusions into Middle East social, political and economic life that culminated with the 2003 Iraq War. Bin Laden, in fact, started talking about the potential of centering the struggle in Iraq as early as 1994, recognizing the powerful mobilizing effects of American military invasion of a sovereign Arab country.

The theme of humiliation is well-developed throughout the book and she offers compelling evidence of its profound impact. As with other magic bullet arguments though, it does lack a more complete picture of the conflict and the ways that other factors like racism, ulterior motives and religion play a role in the insurgency. An interesting article in the *New York Review of Books* by Helen Epstein (“America’s Prisons: Is there Hope,” June 11, 2009) however drew a similar conclusion regarding violent criminals in the United States and the shame that seems too often accompany their violent behavior. Efforts are underway in some prisons to address this deep sense of social shame and humiliation that was at the heart of violent behavior, as essentially emasculated men acted out to restore pride and honor (and undercurrent of the internal prison social organization). The ties are clear and show the ways shame can be at the forefront of violent behavior – whether it be the shame of poverty, academic underachievement,

inability to support a family, childhood abuse or the loss of the sense of national pride and respect for social and religious norms.

In the final chapters, Fontan offers a series of policy changes that could help restore peace in Iraq. She starts with the successful Sunni Awakening Initiative (Sashwa movement) that helped bring Sunnis to the counterinsurgency and more of the population against al-Qaeda. This initiative centered on restoring pride in the population by paying them and allowing them to actively participate in the security effort. She then argues that we must abandon the notion of quick fixes (a common problem in American politics), ensure that we include Iraqis in all aspects of the political and security work, reestablish basic human rights and respect the Geneva convention, ignore our own propaganda (by recognizing its role inside the country) and placing the needs of the Iraqis above our own. This last suggestion provides an example of another problem with the book, which is an idealism about war and its purposes. While I commend her call for human dignity and human rights, it conflicts with the underlying goals of the Bush Administration in Iraq and American interests in the Middle East in general. Obviously she concludes by arguing that we must institute humiliation awareness in the military and among politicians making decisions. Throughout the book, she makes the point that American soldiers in Iraq during World War II appeared to have more knowledge of the local culture than we did 60 years later. However, she also provides a perspective you will rarely hear on the left – namely, that we have a responsibility to stay in Iraq and finish the work we started. Her argument is that now that we are there, we must realize the fragile and chaotic moment present and not abandon the people of Iraq and their future for political expediency. With this position, she again shows her ability to transcend simplistic arguments that fail to recognize the reality on the ground post-invasion.

There are other problems with the book. For one, I believe it may take an overly sympathetic perspective on some aspects of Muslim culture that the West is fair in critiquing. The patriarchal nature of many Islamic societies, subjugating half the population, is one even if there is an underlying hypocrisy as regards the West; and postcolonial critiques of these perspectives are legitimate (see, for example, Chandra Mohanty's work). In a similar light, the question of repression is largely ignored – and its relationship to the very humiliation of which she speaks, though Fontan does offer the ironic finding that women gained increased freedom under Hussein they have since lost. Does the repressive nature of the society play into both the feelings of humiliation and its resultant push toward violent retribution? Further, does the desperation of the general population play a significant role in their willingness to give their lives for the very freedom we promised them? Finally, I find her position on terrorism untenable. While we might consider some elements of the counterinsurgency legitimate freedom fighters, this cannot, in my mind, extend to al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups that believe it is okay to kill innocent civilians. I understand the claims that the U.S. and other countries engage in “state-sponsored” terrorism and I am firmly against those actions as well, but to use innocent civilians to make a political point is beyond the scope of acceptable practice. Just as I am against the death penalty and the right of any individual to take the life of another for their political ideology, I

will never suborn terrorism as either understandable or justified based on the direness of circumstance or the fervency of belief.

Overall, I found the book an engaging read, filled with crisp cultural critique, strong supportive evidence and a cornucopia of first-hand accounts that strengthen the central argument. Humiliation did seem to play a profound role in the escalation of violence after the initial siege and really serves to define so much of the “clash of civilizations” the discourse itself helps frame. While things have stabilized in Iraq (to some extent), a story making news this August detailed a potential change in strategy in Afghanistan where General Stanley McChrystal plans to organize a more local effort that relies on building trust with local communities and vastly increasing the number of Afghan security troops. While this is not humiliation awareness per se, it does hint at a growing recognition that respecting and working with local populations is a better way to wage war in the Middle East (and probably beyond). One hopes that Fontan’s message is disseminated widely and that humiliation studies insights proliferate in the public sphere. Its relationship to violence seems relatively obvious and widespread. At the heart of the problem are the roles we ascribe to women, both in Iraq and at home.