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Afraid to look in the moral abyss

By James Carroll | December 7, 2004

WHY DON'T we Americans look directly at the war? We avert our gaze, knowing that the situation in Iraq grows more desperate by the day. Vaunted "coalition" efforts to "break the back" of the "insurgency" have only strengthened it. The violence among Iraqis would surely qualify as civil war -- except that only one side is fighting. The structures of relief and repair are gone. Whole cities are destroyed, populations displaced. The hope of Iraqi elections is mortally compromised. "Coalition" members are dropping out. The mission of American force is to secure the country, but it can't secure itself. The performance of US intelligence has been consistent: Its strategic failures caused the war, and its tactical ignorance of the enemy is losing the war.

Meanwhile, in America, this, the gravest foreign policy crisis in a generation, source of a crisis of conscience for tens of millions of citizens, is not a subject of political debate. For many months, overt opposition to the war was sublimated in the effort to defeat George W. Bush in the November election. John Kerry's fatal ambivalence about Iraq sealed the war off from the great quadrennial decision, with the result that the voices of those who hated the war were muted, and the uneasiness of those who were troubled by it was never addressed.

Astoundingly, the Democrats cooperated with the Republicans in assuring that the war in Iraq -- the one thing that might have defeated Bush -- was not an issue. That marginalization of the anti-war impulse continues in the suspended animation of a period after the American election and before the Iraqi election.

The new Bush administration has moved to reconfigure itself in most ways but one. The president's affirmation of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, in combination with his naming of Condoleezza Rice as secretary of state, reflects a blind determination to "stay the course" in Iraq, never mind that the course is heading off a cliff.

The main US news media treat the "story" of Iraq as if it is a morality tale about 20-year-old Americans -- a few of whom are shown making bad choices, but

most of whom are lionized as heroes. When their deaths are mourned on television each night -- that heartbreaking silence under those smiling commissary snapshots -- the effect is to deepen the paralysis of the American public, which can only look away.

The barbarity of the Iraqi insurgency has been a particular source of repugnance. First it was hostage-taking, and beheading -- low-tech "shock and awe" assaults aimed at "foreigners," precisely to terrorize their sponsoring populations. The apparent murder of the admirable Margaret Hassan, war-opponent and humanitarian worker, was especially deplorable.

Then it was systematic attacks on Iraqis themselves, anyone daring to cooperate with the "coalition" occupiers. The execution-style murders of Iraqi police recruits and soldiers in recent weeks has been chilling, and now workers on a bus are massacred. What makes these tactics so appalling is their intensely personal character.

But it takes a disciplined imagination to acknowledge that the less personal savageries of bombs, missiles, artillery, and heavy weapons are, to those blown to smithereens, also barbaric. The main horror of what the "coalition" is doing is not a matter of the occasional soldier who, in the heat of battle, commits a war crime, but the steady destruction rained on cities, villages, the Iraqi people. This violence is wreaked calmly, from a distance, within the rules of engagement.

The war itself is the American war crime. But that is lost in the "normalcy" of the news.

On the other side, it is the proliferation of suicide-bombing that has come to seem normal. Soldiers commonly risk their lives for nation, honor, or buddy -- but they will not kill themselves with forethought, in large numbers, except for the most transcendent of reasons. The United States has given itself an enemy that shows by its central tactic that it is fighting for God.

Americans, meanwhile, are so confused about religion that we have just been through an election in which "religious values" were defined as key, but precisely in ways that kept the war out of the discussion. America's purpose in Iraq is a compound of such deflection, self-deception, half-measures, and shallow thinking. The opposition, meanwhile, is absolute and unblinking. That difference partly answers the question with which this column began, but

mainly we avert our eyes because the war is a moral abyss. If we dare to look, as Nietzsche said, the abyss stares back.

James Carroll's column appears regularly in the Globe.

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