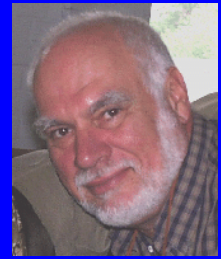


Bellicose Veins—the roots of violence in US culture

**BOYS WILL BE BOYS—
& SOMETIMES GIRLS WILL BE BOYS**

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The scandal of US military abuse and torture of prisoners in Iraq and related activities at Guantanamo continues to be explored, exploited, and interpreted in the media, and it seems this will continue for some time.

Recently, a colleague in Finland emailed me suggesting that this activity came from the same mentality that created military and frat house initiations. Shortly afterward, On Fox Network, former Army Sgt. Tony Robinson was not disputed when he claimed that what took place at Abu-Ghraib wasn't any different from "fraternity hazing." Subsequently another friend Kate Berardo provided me with a spoof on this from the *Washington Post*, which purported to be a letter from an Iraqi Sheik apologizing to Paul Bremmer and suggesting that the Iraqis be given cultural sensitivity training to US culture...

"We had no idea that this was an initiation ceremony for the pledge class of the Baghdad University chapter of Tau Kappa Epsilon fraternity," said Sheik Boutayoo. "In the past the only fraternal organizations at our universities were the College Suicide Bomber Coalition and the Saddam Scouts. We're awfully sorry about the confusion and we sincerely hope that nobody has gotten into trouble about this."

Rush Limbaugh took advantage of this same theme as a way of avoiding the seriousness of the accusations in the public eye—at least in the USA. In other words, he is asking USians to wink at this behavior as something normal and a generally understood if not fully accepted part of US culture—"Boys will be boys!" In his case of course we may add that "Girls will be boys," since apparently Janis the "frat house mother" gave tacit approval and Lynndie, the sweetheart of Fort Ashby played a leading role. (Will the girls take the brunt of this scandal first as did Martha Stewart in the corporate scandals?)

Given the facts of what took place, it seems that many in the US are in active denial of both the actions of military police and intelligence officers as well as of the meaning of fraternity hazing. Deeply rooted in US culture seems to be a propensity to condone violence if done for a semblance of the "right reason." Apparently, the right reason may be anything from "turning boys into men" to dealing with inferior people or enemies (inferior by definition). If you want a full picture of this, others have already given it on this site. Just click on: <http://www.menstuff.org/issues/byissue/hazing.html>.

While British schools are known for problems of bullying, and imitations may verge on the violent in many cultures, the hazing culture seems specifically US in its structure. The disappearance of effective male initiation rites that existed in many cultures and their replacement by cruel caricatures seemingly fueled by pure meanness provide the men's movement with a challenge that continues to beg attention. The dynamic of a measure of fear of the unknown, a challenge to act that provides enlightenment into the self and to the society

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of men is a very different thing from violent and dangerous hazing as we know it in many college societies. It is certainly different from what is occurring in prison contexts.

Madhukar Shukla, an Indian colleague reminded me of the Stanford studies conducted by Philip Zimbardo some three decades ago on the dynamics of prison life. Zimbardo simulated a prison situation and had to terminate the experiment because of the danger to the students involved. The wardens become sadistic and the prisoners were victimized. Power over others quickly corrupts. When one can say, "You're my little puppy, now", restraint goes out of mind and actions quickly follow. This is not unique to the USA, but is perhaps particularly apparent here because of the size and mentality of our prison culture. That some countries will not extradite prisoners to the USA because they saw the US domestic penal system and the death penalty as "cruel and unusual punishment" occurred long before Guantanamo and the Iraqi prison scandals.

What key US values are involved here? Apparently individual imitative and taking control, which is often useful and virtuous parts of the US culture, can overshadow and subvert equally important values of fairness and law and order. Fortunately some military operated out of these latter values, as well as out of the value of speaking out when they blew the whistle on these operations. This is the way the US works when it works. Unfortunately, this usually brings an issue to the public, results in discipline to some individuals, but rarely changes the systems substantially, whether we are talking about hazing or torturing prisoners.

Despite politically motivated efforts to "get this behind us and move on", it is not behind us, nor will moving on make it so. As men we do need to keep talking about it in order to surface and remain conscious of whatever elements of meanness and sadism it have become unconscious parts of our male formation.