

The Courage of Violence, the Cowardice of Violence

Loyola Anti-War Teach-In

March 18, 2005

- I. Prologue: Gunner Palace (Landmark Century 2828 N. Clark , Century CineArts 6, Evanston)
 - A. A reporter with a video camera, two months in Iraq: daily life, fear--and courage: while the camera rolls, a young soldier approaches what may be a dreaded IED (improvised explosive device), kicks it. It's only a plastic bag full of trash.
 - B. And anger:
 1. "We're just entertainment."
 2. "You'll forget me by the end of this movie. You'll forget all of us."
 3. "For y'all this is just a show, but we live in this movie."
 - C. No violence shown, no dead bodies, no torture--so the movie is a half-truth, though an important half-truth. This war is incredibly violent; it has claimed the lives of perhaps 100,000 Iraqis, more than 1500 Americans--and left thousands irrevocably wounded.
 - D. Who are the men (and women) who are doing the killing? Why do they do it?
- II. The courage of violence
 - A. The "native"--Sartre's Preface to Fanon

“When the peasant takes a gun in his hands, the old myths grow dim, the old prohibitions are one by one forgotten. The rebel's weapon is the proof of his humanity. For in the first days of the revolt you must kill: to shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone, to destroy an oppressor and the man he oppresses at the same time: there remains a dead man and a free man.”
 - B. The soldier who believes in his cause
 1. Watching ROTC films as an undergraduate at University of Dayton, early 60s
 2. I didn't go to war--though I didn't use my connections to get out of it, as our "Commander-in-Chief" did
 - C. The suicide bomber (kamikazes; Palestinians, Iraqis)

- D. Almost any act of physical violence takes certain courage--since it opens you up to retaliation. You have broken a fundamental prohibition. The first kill, especially, is hard--as one of the gunners notes. (Buck fever.)
- III. But this is too simple--for there is fear lurking in this courage, and not just fear of the enemy. The latter fear one must master, and doing so is no small thing. But there is also another kind of fear operating here, one that is almost never acknowledged, never spoken about: fear of one's own kind, peers, superiors--of what they will do to you if you don't commit violence.
- Courage and cowardice are not polar opposites, but are dialectically related. Almost all violence, at least the physical violence that one human being inflicts on another, is a mixture of courage and cowardice.
- A. Shame, ostracization: one is a coward; deserters used to be hung; families are disgraced
- B. "The Making of a Torturer"--early late70s; the Loyola Chapter of Amnesty International had just been formed. Some of us went to see it.
1. Torture was making a big come-back in the world, in almost all cases committed by U.S.-backed governments or paramilitary groups to stamp out "communist insurgencies" in Greece, Chile, the Philippines, Argentina, El Salvador, Nicaragua, etc., etc., etc.
 2. But it's not so easy to turn a normal human being into a torturer. He himself must be dehumanized to a degree, made to fear authority, made to fear what could be done to him by what he sees his peers doing to others.
 3. But no man wants to admit to this kind of fear, so you transcend it by embracing the project. You cannot admit to yourself that you are being intimidated into doing something horrible. So you persuade your superiors and your peers--and yourself--by doing your "job" with steely resolve, sometimes even with enthusiasm.
- IV. The proportions of courage/cowardice are not the same however.
- A. At one extreme--the person who, out of a deep sense of moral outrage, engages in violence against a far more powerful oppressor.
- B. At the other--the torturer: inflicting pain with impunity on someone who cannot defend himself (or herself)
- C. In between, in descending order of sympathy

1. The person who believes in the cause, but would not put his life at risk without the fear of reprisal from one's own.
2. The person who does not really believe in the cause, but who must now follow the orders to kill. The cowardice is greater here, and so to conceal it effectively, one is more enthusiastic about violence. ("This is great!" says one of the gunners, when asked about life in Baghdad. "There's nothing like it.")
3. The person who kills when risk to self is minimal.

V. A third element: the thrill of violence, the thrill of domination

- A. The sadist--who tortures and kills, not out of conviction or out of fear, but for the thrill of it
- B. It may well be that there is a bit of the sadist in everyone
- C. The utility of the sadist--to the commanders, including "Commander-in-Chief"

VI. All armies contain people of each type

- A. Most soldiers (most humans) a mixture of the three elements: courage, cowardice, sadism. Some examples of the latter:

1. Ramadi madness: (Reuters, Mar 7)

U.S. Army soldiers in Iraq filmed themselves kicking a gravely wounded prisoner in the face and making the arm of a corpse appear to wave, then titled the effort "Ramadi Madness" after the city where it was made.

One section of the video showed a bound and wounded prisoner sprawled on the ground, and showed his bullet entry and exit wounds. At one point, a U.S. soldier kicked the prisoner in the face.

Army documents quoted a soldier at the scene as saying he "thought the dude eventually died. We weren't in any hurry to call the medics."

In another part of the video, a soldier grabs the arm of a truck driver who had just been shot dead and makes the corpse wave to the camera.

2. Extreme Cinema Verite (LA Times, March 14)

BAQUBAH, Iraq - When Pfc. Chase McCollough went home on leave in November, he brought a movie made by fellow soldiers in Iraq. On his first

night back at his parents' house in Texas, he showed the video to his fiancée, family and friends.

This is what they saw: a handful of American soldiers filmed through the green haze of night-vision goggles. Radio communication between two soldiers crackles in the background before it's drowned out by a heavy-metal soundtrack.

"Don't need your forgiveness," the song by the band Dope begins as images unfurl: armed soldiers posing in front of Bradley fighting vehicles, two women covered in black abayas walking along a dusty road, a blue-domed mosque, a poster of radical cleric Muqtada Sadr. Then, to the fast, hard beat of the music, "Die, don't need your resistance. Die, don't need your prayers," charred, decapitated and bloody corpses fill the screen.

3. "G.I. Punished in Tigris Incident" (Chicago Tribune, Mar 16)

An Army platoon leader was sentenced Tuesday to 45 days in a military prison for his role in forcing three Iraqi civilians into the Tigris River. Army 1st Lt. Jack Saville pleaded guilty Monday to the charge of forcing two curfew violators into the river at gunpoint. One of the men allegedly drowned.

Earlier Tuesday, former soldier Terry Bowman testified that before the Balad incident Saville had laughed and said it was part of a bet with another platoon over who would do such a thing first.

4. "Death and Dishonor," Playboy Report, May 2004

Alleging that soldiers of the 115th Infantry Battalion, 3rd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division (Ft. Benning, GA), committed numerous war crimes. The article reported that soldiers assigned to the Brigade raped Iraqi women, shot an unarmed Iraqi and stuck their fingers into a prisoner's wounds.

5. Mike Ferner's report for Voices in the Wilderness—TO (Feb 20, 2004)

B. Certain factors tilt the proportion of each

1. The justice (or righteousness) of the cause
2. Leadership

VII. The cause was not just

- A. No weapons of mass destruction
- B. No links to Al Qaeda
- C. No justification for killing thousands (100,000?) to eliminate one tyrant

- VIII. The current administration has quite clearly encouraged the sadism, which feeds the cowardice
- A. Here's John Yoo, one of the Administration's "torture lawyers," former deputy to Alberto Gonzales, now a professor of law at UC Berkeley:
1. Arguing that the U.S. is not bound by the Geneva Accords or even US law that prohibits torture:

"Why is it so hard for people to understand that there is a category of behavior not covered by the legal system? Historically, there have been people so bad that they were not given the protection of laws. If you were an 'illegal combatant,' you didn't deserve the protection of the laws of war." [The category "illegal combatant" is one made up by the Bush Administration, to cover those it wants to torture.]
 2. Arguing that not even Congress has the power to stop the President:

"Congress does not have the power to tie the hands of the President in regard to torture as an interrogation technique. It's the core of the Commander-in-Chief's function. Congress cannot prevent the President from ordering torture."
- B. Here's Dick Cheney:
- "A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion, using sources and methods that are available to our intelligence agencies if they are to be successful. That's the world these folks operate in. And so it's going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal to achieve our objective. We may have to work through, sort of, the dark side." (Counterpunch 12/3, March/05)
- IX. Not all soldiers are affected--but probably more are than we would care to admit
- X. What is to be done: delegitimize this war, this administration. The call has to be, "Bring the troops home! Bring them home now!"
- A. For the sake of the Iraqi people--85% want the Americans out
 - B. For the sake of our own soldiers--lower class kids so shamefully used
 - C. For the sake of our own souls