

America's Founding Principles in Peril:

What Profits A Nation?

Tag: Is George Bush willing to ignore our founding values to protect our nation? Are we willing to let him?

By Michael Coblenz

“For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?”

Jesus of Nazareth, as quoted in the Gospel of Matthew, 16:26

And what profits a nation? The United States stands astride the world. We are far and away the richest nation on earth. Our ideas and ideals (political, cultural, economic, social) dominate the world. Our military, despite the strain of Iraq, is unsurpassed. And we are leading the worldwide fight against ‘terror.’

But in the fight against ‘terror,’ have we lost our soul? Does the widespread abuse of prisoners indicate that we have abandoned our moral standing in the world? It would be one thing if the abuse were the work of “a few bad apples” as President Bush claimed when the pictures from Abu Ghraib first came to light. But subsequent reports show that the Administration purposefully changed the rules for torture not long after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, over the objections of both the State Department and the Pentagon. There are also reports that abuse has been ongoing since the first prisoners were captured, and have occurred in virtually every U.S. facility worldwide.

The Bush Administration justifies the harsh tactics as necessary to protect America. But in protecting the nation physically, is he destroying it morally? To answer this, we must first ask: What is the soul of America? What is America about?

Conservatives like to talk about “American Exceptionalism;” the idea that the United States is unique in the world. But how does this jibe with the soul of America? Conservatives talk about family values, but are those unique to the United States of America? Certainly not. Conservatives talk about love of flag, and love of country, but are those feelings unique to America? Patriotism – love of country – is a feeling embraced people throughout the world.

Are we superior because we are the richest nation on earth, or because we are one of the most religious? I would suggest that our superiority comes from our foundation upon and adherence to certain political principles.

Abraham Lincoln once said that this nation was “conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Our Founders sought to create a nation unique in the world. They hoped to create a country where no man is above the law. They wanted a country that aspired to the ideal (which took over a century to fully fulfill) that all humans are created equal. They believed in a nation that honored the idea that justice and liberty are universal human aspirations (if not a human right). Read the Declaration of Independence and Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Neither limits these ideals to American citizens. People the world over have long admired the U.S. for these principles. Sure they covet our wealth, but the real admiration is for our founding principles.

As we seek to create a new free and democratic Iraq, we hear it asked, ‘who will be the Iraqi Washington, or Jefferson, or Lincoln?’ No one asks ‘who will be the Iraqi J. J. Astor or John D. Rockefeller, or even Bill Gates.’ The desire is for someone who can translate the founding principles of the United States to the Iraqi nation, not someone who can translate our ability to innovate or create wealth.

Torture flies in the face of these foundational beliefs. Torture is against the international rule of law. The Bush Administrations willingness to play cute with legalistic definitions puts to shame the idea that no man is above the law, and muddies the idea of justice in hair splitting legalese.

When a soldier in Iraq abuses an Iraqi he is doing so for a number of reasons, but certainly one reason is the sense that he (the American soldier) is somehow superior to the Iraqi victim. To the American soldier, his country is unique, while the Iraqi prisoner is probably a terrorist who seeks only to destroy our country. It is not surprising to learn that almost every prisoner in Abu Ghraib was labeled a ‘terrorist,’ even petty criminals.

How far are we willing to let Bush go to protect ‘the homeland?’ Are we willing to let him abandon our founding principles?

Jefferson once said, “he who permits himself to tell a lie once, finds it much easier to do it a second and third time, till at length it becomes habitual; he tells lies without attending to it, and truths without the world’s believing him. This falsehood of the tongue leads to that of the heart, and in time depraves all its good dispositions.”

It is an open question whether or not Bush knowingly lied about weapons of mass destruction and ties between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda, but a number of news reports lately show that his administration is not above bending the truth. The Department of Health and Human Services ran bogus television ads promoting Bush’s proposed Medicare prescription drug card. The Department of Education paid conservative columnist Armstrong Williams to run paid columns supporting Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” law, and create bogus news stories. And the Department of Defense studied the possibility of using “disinformation” (commonly used on the battlefield to confuse an enemy) in international news reports to fight the war on terror.

Truth, justice, rights, liberty, are all words that have no meaning with the Bush Administration. It makes me heartsick to say this, but I have come to the unfortunate conclusion that George Bush neither understands, nor believes in, the principles upon which this nation was founded. In his zeal to protect 'the homeland,' he has personally abandoned the core beliefs of this nation. Now I am afraid that he is destroying the soul of America as well.