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President's Comment

Joseph Baldacchino



False Morality Induced Iraqi Cruelty

As reports coming out of Kuwait in the early days of the Iraqi occupation told of wanton cruelty and destruction, most decent people wondered how Iraqi troops could be so inhumane toward a small nation that had done them no harm.

At one level, the answer is simple. Kuwait, with its small population and vast oil wealth, was like a bank—and a not very secure one at that—just waiting to be robbed. When such temptation is present, there will always be brigands ready to take advantage.

Yet there must have been more at work than that. While the desire for ill-gotten gain may explain why Saddam Hussein and his minions acted as they did, a more troublesome question concerns the widespread support—indeed, adulation—that Saddam continued to enjoy in some countries such as Yemen and Jordan despite the atrocities inflicted by his forces with apparent full authorization from the top.

It was not enough in many instances for the invaders to take people, including women and even teen-aged girls, from their homes and subject them to unspeakable forms of torture followed by death. To compound the horror, these unfortunates often were hauled, after the torturers had inflicted their worst on them, back to their homes to be murdered before the eyes of their children and other loved ones. Property—including irreplaceable cultural and religious treasures from museums—was destroyed, not as an unfortunate side-effect of war, but out of sheer malevolence and vandalism.

How could support for Saddam continue, many asked, in the face of such brutality, which, as one expatriate Kuwaiti noted, was so horrible that it could not have been done by animals but only by man? As a possible explanation, some commentators cited the existence of a controlled press in the countries involved. According to this explanation, Saddam's sympathizers simply did not have access to the

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News from the World of Books and Publishing

David Walsh, *Humanitas* contributor and Chairman of the Department of Politics at Catholic University, has published an important new book entitled *After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom*. Walsh describes the book as "the story of how modern human beings rediscovered their oneness with God at the limit of their despair. When the cup of misery of the twentieth century had been drained of its bitterest dregs, the miracle of life and hope sprang forth anew. The possibility of resurrection has dawned for modern civilization now that the abyss of evil contained within it has been confronted and surmounted."

NHI Notes . . .

James M. Miclot, David A. Scott Scholar in Political Theory at NHI, recently lectured at George Mason University's Institute for Humane Studies on the subject of "Politics and Markets." He also presented a paper entitled "The Rhetoric of the 'Political' in Ancient and Contemporary Theory" at a symposium sponsored by the Catholic University of America's Department of English. . . . NHI Chairman **Claes G. Ryn** has written an extensive introduction to the new edition of Irving Babbitt's *Rousseau and Romanticism*, which will appear in April from Transaction Books. Ryn has been named to the four-member Awards Committee for the Henry Salvatori Fellowship Program at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. He also has been appointed to the Editorial Board of the scholarly journal *This World*. . . . **Michael P. Federici**, former Executive Assistant at NHI, is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Concord College in Athens, West Virginia. He is author of a book, *The Challenge of Populism*, dealing with postwar American populism and the American Constitution. The book is

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Walsh suggests that a catharsis is possible amidst the chaos of modernity; however, we must make an effort to return "to the primary experiences and symbols of order." In a sense, we must transcend modernity to establish a fuller understanding of our predicament. He chooses Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn, Camus, and Voegelin as the guides for facilitating such an understanding.

After Ideology is a welcome relief from the discussions about the end of history that have received so much attention in the last year. It is available from HarperCollins Publishers (10 East

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information that the rest of us enjoyed; had they had the facts, their attitude toward Saddam would have been different.

But this explanation is only partial at best. Since it is common in those countries to listen to foreign news broadcasts from the Voice of America, the BBC, and others, it is probable that many of Saddam's admirers did have knowledge of events in Kuwait but chose either to close their eyes to the reality there or to support Saddam's depredations with full knowledge of the particulars.

The source of such perversity is to be found not in ignorance but in some unpleasant truths about human nature. Most important is the widespread tendency to think of morality as a kind of emotional caring for those who are seen in some way as the underdog. As explained in depth in Claes Ryn's book *Will, Imagination and Reason*, such sentimental "morality" is a dangerous parody of traditional or genuine morality.

Real morality requires difficult character development and self-restraint. We learn it from our day-to-day dealings with those close at hand, such as family members and neighbors, and then project it outwards to mankind at large. Only persons who have developed good character are able to perceive life as it really is; others have a distorted sense of reality.

In contrast to the striving for self-improvement required by traditional morality, the sentimental counterfeit lets us feel good about ourselves merely

by virtue of our emotional identification with some favored group and our hatred for those categorized as "oppressors." Instead of a check on self-assertion, sentimental morality is an incitement to aggression.

Unfortunately for the Kuwaitis, their oil wealth made them easy prey to this false morality. While Iraq was by no means a poor country—it, too, was a major petroleum exporter, though much of the resulting income was squandered on weaponry—Saddam was able to portray the "rich Kuwaitis" as decadent and to suggest that, if their wealth were in his hands, he would distribute it to those who saw themselves as "have-nots." After the U.S.-led coalition came to Kuwait's aid, he was able similarly to capitalize on the resentments of many toward the industrialized West.

While we properly condemn the Iraqi atrocities, we should not think that these cruelties are mere aberrations characteristic of a particular culture. In fact, people in the West have committed comparable crimes motivated by egalitarian righteousness. A notable example is the French Revolution, in which hideous acts were committed against traditional elites in the name of human rights and equality—"ideals" that are by no means extinct in our own society today.

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forthcoming from Praeger. . . **H. Lee Check, Jr.**, editor of *Humanitas*, presented a paper on Francis Graham Wilson's contribution to American political thought at the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Associa-

tion. He also participated in a symposium on the Bush presidency held at Western Carolina University.

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53rd Street, New York, NY 10022, \$24.95).

As the editor of the Library of Conservative Thought series from Transaction Publishers (Rutgers-The State University, New Brunswick, NJ 08903), NHI Treasurer and Academic Board Chairman Russell Kirk has reprinted several important works, including *Orestes Brownson: Selected Political Essays* (\$19.95), a collection of five shorter efforts by the New England man of letters.

The most recent volume in the series is *The Case for Conservatism* by Francis Graham Wilson (\$19.95). Wilson's contribution to modern conservative thought was substantial, and this republication allows a new generation the opportunity to encounter one of the great conservative minds of the postwar era. Unlike many of his generation's conservative critics, Wilson was not of a libertarian persuasion. His work augmented the traditionalist assessment of modern America provided by Russell Kirk and Richard Weaver, who expressed disdain for the "dissolution of the West" and attempted to renew the cultural and political associations that had long served as the basis for American political and social life.

In this slim book Wilson surveys the great American conservative thinkers, including Paul Elmer More, in an effort to elucidate a historical conservatism.

— H. Lee Check, Jr.

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