

# Iraq Goddamn: A public morality play

JOHN WHITLOW

**A**LABAMA'S got me so upset Tennessee made me lose my rest and everybody knows about Mississippi Goddamn."

--Nina Simone  
In the past two weeks, we've been privy to a public morality play of dizzying proportions. Just as the prison abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib gathered momentum, threatening to bury a newly contrite but still crotchety Donald Rumsfeld, news broke that an al Qaeda-connected website was displaying footage of a young American getting beheaded by his captors.

Meanwhile, outside the war zone, the US Justice Department announced that it had reopened the case of Emmett Till, the 14 year old African-American murdered by a gang of white Mississippians in 1955. These events, disparate though they may seem, say a lot about America's collective self-perception -- its urge to simultaneously view the other with compassion and disgust, all the while avoiding serious discussion of its own sins.

Immediately following the publication of photos of American military personnel posing enthusiastically with their Iraqi victims at Abu Ghraib, reaction from the US media intelligentsia was swift and -- in important respects -- unequivocal: we'd been shamed as a nation by these soldiers, whose acts -- by virtue of their departure from our sense of shared morality -- had undermined our standing in the world and our sense of ourselves.

Thomas Friedman, in a May 6th op-ed piece in the New York Times titled "Restoring our Honor," wrote, "We are in danger of losing something much more important than just the war in Iraq. We are in danger of losing America as an instrument of moral authority and inspiration in the world." CNN's Lou Dobbs opined that we need to apologize to the world for Abu Ghraib "because those few soldiers ... offended American values of decency, fairness and propriety."

In perhaps the richest comment of all, New York Times columnist David Brooks, speaking on the PBS NewsHour, summed up why the Abu Ghraib incident so shocked America's collective conscience: "We assign ourselves higher standards and we portray ourselves and think of ourselves as higher. We are not a

people that's well versed in the dark side of human nature."

From statements like these, one can only infer that the only sentiment more powerful than American contrition is American arrogance: we're genuinely sorry for what happened, but the real reason we're so sorry is that we're better than that -- and better than you in fact.

As if on cue, this sentiment was given grist by the ghoulish image of Berg's murder, Abu Musab Zarqawi: "[He] has reminded his enemies that, unlike him, they are at least capable of shame." Senator John McCain said, "It's terrible. It's tragic. It also shows the stark difference between America and these barbarians."

Ah, the difference between America and the barbarians. This purported difference is at the heart of the reportage of recent events, whether it be the prison abuse/torture scandal at Abu Ghraib or the horrific murder of Nicholas Berg. In fact, it's at the heart of our sense of national belonging in the US. But what about this difference? Or, more to the point, what do popular representations of it tend to say about the way we look -- or choose to look away from -- ourselves?

Now, lest anyone get the wrong idea, I'm not saying that what was done to Nicholas Berg shouldn't be classified as an act of barbarism. Slicing someone's neck and literally ripping his head off pretty much speaks for itself as an act of sheer depravity. What I am saying is that it's utter hypocrisy for US commentators to use this as occasion to take the moral high ground.

**Note:**

*I returned from a month in Dhaka to find a New York going through various levels of outrage over the Abu Ghraib torture photos. Unlike the hypocrisy on display on CNN and other major networks, the average New Yorker seems to have a better sense that this sort of thing has happened before. These sentiments are aptly summarized by civil rights lawyer John Whitlow, in his article "Iraq Goddamn." The title is a reference to Nina Simone's famous song "Mississippi Goddamn", about the brutal lynching of black men in Mississippi in the 1960s. Those who forget their history are condemned to repeat it.*

--Naeem Mohaiemen, New York Correspondent, The Daily Star

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# Sonia's predicament

GHALIB CHOUDHURI

**S**ONIA Gandhi has declined the top job: Was this an act of supreme sacrifice, a leaning towards caution, or one of the shrewdest moves in Indian politics? Unfortunately, only future history can tell us the truth. For now, just a few conjectures. It certainly looks like a supreme sacrifice. Sonia Gandhi felt the pulse yet again, as she had read the pulse of the rural masses and conveyed the right message that gave her party the victory. She recognised deep deep down she will not be accepted as one of "us" -- in the sub-continent. This sentiment, however bigoted it may be, is for real and Mrs. Gandhi had the humility to accept its relevance and permanence in the broader social context. Ultimately the fact remains that she came as a foreign bride, and only adopted her husband's country as a fait accompli. Her "inner voice" consciences" can be said to have guided her extremely well. She succumbed to that voice overriding perhaps her ego. A sacrifice indeed which few ordinary mortals are capable of making.

It could also perhaps be a leaning

**Hypothetically, if today a member of the Indian diaspora is elected to the highest office of any other country, Sushma Swaraj, with all her hair in place, and her cohorts would be one of the first ones to knock at the door and congratulate the person. All of India will also celebrate. The question that will haunt the nation then is that, if it works in this case why doesn't it work in the case of Sonia Gandhi?**

towards caution. She didn't want Rajiv to enter politics after his mother's tragic death. Her own family members in Italy were not exactly euphoric about her victory. They never liked her decision to enter politics, not because they wanted to protect their daughter from the rough and tumble of a political life, the earlier deaths in the family were enough of a reason.

Also, she knows she would divide the country despite the recent victory, and would have to withstand personal criticism from certain sections of the population, irrespective of her being successful as prime minister or not. More so if she messed it up, and surely then she would be nothing but an open target especially from the BJP cohorts -- her origins and ancestry would then

be fair game for all. She has already withstood a fair amount of personal criticism, all harking back at her origin, part of BJP's election platform was just that. The dramatic declaration of Sushma Swaraj threatening resignation from parliament, let alone shaving her head, was a taste of future things to come. Weighing all this up, Sonia Gandhi must have felt she really doesn't need to take that big step. She has achieved more than probably she has ever thought she would, she seemed content with her decision.

Or perhaps it is the shrewdest move Indian politics is yet to see. By declining the highest office she has risen above ordinary mortals of Indian politics, where (as elsewhere) greed and avarice are an integral part of politicking as any-

where else. She will be revered perhaps now forever, and wield more power and authority than she ever did. She ensured her own crowning -- the dowager queen with complete and absolute authority. She will hold all the keys to power and patronage and use them when needed. And as history relates, like past dowager queens bow out when the time is right after securing the throne for her chosen heir. Not before ensuring hereditary and dynastic rights to the future Gandhi progeny -- the mantle will pass to either of the two siblings -- Rahul or Priyanka.

Everything said and done and whatever may be the reason for Sonia Gandhi to decline the top job, India cannot absolve itself from the guilt of pushing her to make that

decision. India also cannot absolve itself from the double standard it employs in its judgement. Hypothetically, if today a member of the Indian diaspora is elected to the highest office of any other country, Sushma Swaraj, with all her hair in place, and her cohorts would be one of the first ones to knock at the door and congratulate the person. All of India will also celebrate. The question that will haunt the nation then is that, if it works in this case why doesn't it work in the case of Sonia Gandhi? Perhaps to prove to the contrary Mrs. Gandhi needed to take the Tebbit test. Lord Tebbit had made this famous in Britain, by questioning the British Asian diaspora, namely Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshis, their true allegiance to their adopted country by testing their support in cricket. Demonstrably the majority failed -- it was never England, despite the passport. Fortunately Sonia Gandhi would have passed hands down, as Italy could never be a serious contender in cricket.

Ghalib Chaudhuri, a former CEO of a European Investment Bank in India, is currently managing partner of Octavian Associates, an independent consulting practice based in Singapore.

# Plight of Carmichael College

RAFIQUE SARKER

**T**HE name and fame of Rangpur's Carmichael College is degrading day by day. Gripped with a number of problems, the college authority cannot run academic activities properly.

Carmichael College is one of the biggest colleges in the country. The campus has an area of 800 bighas. No other college in the country has such a spacious campus. About 18,000 students across the country, mainly from the eight northern districts, are studying at this college for graduate and post-graduate degree in fourteen subjects.

Almost one hundred years old, the college is one of the national heritages of the country. It also boasts a nice campus with big buildings constructed according to the Indo-Saracen architectural design. The then Governor of undivided Bengal, Lord Thomas David Baron, laid the foundation stone of the college on November 16, 1916. Calcutta University permitted the college to offer graduate course in 1917. Students from distant places including Assam and Jolpaikuri in India came here to study. Later Calcutta University permitted the college to offer honours and masters courses in different subjects. Insufficient teaching staff and an inadequate number of student hostels and teachers' quarters are the main problems of the college. There are two hostels for female

students and four for male students in the college. These hostels can accommodate only 1,100 students. The rest of the students, excluding those who are residents of Rangpur town and its adjoining areas, live at mess houses at different places in the town.

To stay at these mess houses is costlier than to stay at the college hostels. Therefore, many students remain at home. They only come to the campus to appear for their exams. The suffering of the female students knows no bound. Having failed to arrange beds at the hostels, about 5,000 female students stay at the mess houses. Due to the lack of security there, they often find troubles in these mess houses.

Abdus Salam, a JCD leader of the college said that a proposal to set up two more hostels at the college was made to the concerned minister of the district, Alamgir Kabir. The minister also assured the college that more hostels will be built.

The ratio of students to teachers in the college is 144:1. No department of the college has sufficient teachers. Forty posts of teachers are now lying vacant in the college. Well placed sources say that five posts in political science and three in philosophy are lying vacant.

The condition of the other departments is similar.

The dream of the people to see Carmichael College as a university is yet to come true. Different governments during the last twelve years have made commitments to turn the

college into a university, but no government has taken a sincere initiative to follow up on this commitment.

There has been a movement in Rangpur and its adjoining districts for many years, demanding that Carmichael College be turned into Carmichael University. Though commitments have been made, no government has taken any steps to turn the college into a university.

Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, ignoring the demands for Carmichael University, in 2000 declared her intention to set up Rangpur Science and Technology University. Her government decided to set up it on 300 acres of land of Carmichael College. Accordingly, she laid the foundation stone at the eastern side of the college, despite people's volley of objection.

The people of Rangpur and its adjoining districts could not accept the decision to set up Rangpur Science and Technology University. They termed it a mockery and raised the demand for Carmichael University once again. Although a project director for the science and technology university has been appointed and an office was rented temporarily in Rangpur town to run the project works, the BNP-led coalition government cancelled the project immediately after they came to the power in 2001.

In answering session in parliament, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has said that Carmichael College will be turned into a university in the course of time. She did not mention when it will be done. BNP and Chhatra Dal of the district brought out a victory procession in Rangpur town following her statement.

It has been six months since the prime minister made this statement in parliament. No initiative has been taken to follow up on her statement. People have begun to criticise the prime minister's statement regarding Carmichael University. The people expect that the government to fulfill its pledge to turn Carmichael College into a full-



fledged university. Unless this demand is met, thousands of students in the northeastern region of the country will continue to be deprived of the opportunity to

receive higher education.

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