

[The Falklands War versus the Iraq Intervention](#)

Paris, September 29, 2005 – The British official history of the Falklands war has just been published in London, reawakening the argument over just what that war was all about. Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine writer, called it “two bald men fighting over a comb” (as the Times Literary Supplement reviewer recalls).

Many in Britain condemned the Falklands campaign as an irrelevant gesture of an outmoded imperialism (as much of the world saw it). Few, either then or now, have understood it as a defense of international law and the order of nations, and in that respect a peacemaking or order-making action -- a just action.

The military junta that had governed Argentine since 1975 was projecting disorder as a deliberate distraction from the murderous disorder it imposed within its own society. It made an unprovoked invasion of the Falkland Islands, doing so because Argentina has an historical claim to the islands (which it maintains today). The aggression was condemned by the UN Security Council, 10 to one. Britain’s claim to the islands goes back to 1765. It has governed them as a Crown Colony since 1832.

The Argentine invasion can be compared to Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, also based on history. Kuwait had been part of the same province as Iraq under the Ottoman Empire. It was recognized as an independent government by Britain only in 1914. However its sovereignty had been internationally confirmed in 1961.

In the Kuwait case the United States formed an international coalition, endorsed by the UN Security Council, to liberate Kuwait. This too was an order-creating action.

However the important part of the Falklands story is what happened after Argentina’s military defeat and withdrawal from the Falklands.

In the course of the Argentine military dictatorship’s rule, it caused some 13 to 15 thousand people, whom it considered internal opponents, to “disappear.” They usually were tortured, and subsequently were often dropped into the sea from aircraft, sometimes still alive.

The Argentine generals participated in the so-called ‘Condor’ alliance with General Augusto Pinochet’s Chile and a corrupt Brazilian military regime, a cooperative project to pursue and kill political dissidents throughout the region.

The generals’ total and costly defeat by a brilliantly organized and commanded British military expedition to the South Atlantic precipitated their fall from power. Argentina held a presidential election in 1983, and civilian rule was restored.

Twenty years of increasingly corrupt rule and economic mismanagement had already undermined the generals in Brazil. Military rule gave way to civilian government in Chile in the mid-1980s. The Falkland war’s supporters in Britain, not to speak of its opponents, have underestimated the extent of its liberating political effect in South America. Military governments no longer were acceptable. It seems curious that the younger President Bush’s administration has never mentioned the Falklands precedent for what it says its intervention in Iraq is meant to accomplish. It wants to change the political climate in the Middle East.

One obstacle, however, that few in the region fail to understand, is that the basic Bush motive was to take control of Iraq and its resources, and put in place a government friendly to American interests. This automatically undermines the democratization argument.

The second obstacle is that the war and its aftermath were bungled. The “liberation” of Iraq plunged

the country into a nationalist and sectarian upheaval whose continuing consequences are misery and poverty, with tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians killed. It will be a generation before Iraq recovers. The third obstacle to the intervention's having a positive political effect in the region is that (for incomprehensible reasons) the model of conduct the administration has imposed on the United States Army resembles that of Argentina's military dictatorship, rather than that of the British army that liberated the Falklands.

Bush administration practice of torture recalls that of the Latin American military dictatorships. So does its flair for totalitarian logic.

Few understand why American forces now practice torture, sometimes torture to death, and systematic abuse of prisoners and 'detainees.' This is conduct for which the western allies hanged Gestapo and SS officers, and Japanese prison camp commanders, in 1945. Do not the Bush people, and American army commanders, know even that much history?

A totalitarian logic also exists, just revealed by former deputy White House counsel Timothy E. Flanigan (who has been nominated by the Bush administration to become the United States' deputy Attorney General).

Asked by two senior Republican senators, John Warner and John McCain, to describe the standards governing U.S. prisoner treatment, he replied that there are no standards.

The senators were responding to the concern of American soldiers who have attempted to determine the rationale and norms set for prisoner interrogations in which they have been involved, or which they have witnessed.

The indirect meaning of Flanigan's statement that there are no standards is that nothing is forbidden. This seems a deliberate choice by the Bush administration.

There can be no abuse when there is no standard of abuse. If you define abuse you create it. There is no torture so long as you have not defined torture.

This is why the United States is not a force for justice and order in the Middle East. It has become the opposite, a creator of disorder and injustice. Does the American public understand this?

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