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Abuse, Abroad and at Home
by Rushworth M. Kidder

> "It's not exactly that America has a shrugging acceptance of abuse. Instead, it's an unconscious failure of nonconsent—a refusal of the culture as a whole to rise up against what the poet Robert Burns called 'Man's inhumanity to Man.'"

The frenzy of finger-pointing that followed the revelations of abuse at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison have targeted U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, a handful of military police on the ground, and nearly everyone else in between. Blame has been leveled also at extended overseas assignments and even Iraq's hot weather.

All of that may be relevant. But if the task is to explain how ordinary U.S. citizens can become party to repeated, deliberate, and smilingly organized acts of sadistic violence, another potential cause needs investigating: the dark and abusive underbelly of U.S. culture itself.

Consider the following facts:

- Nearly one-third of U.S. women (31 percent) report being physically or sexually abused by a husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives, according to information from the National Domestic Violence Hotline.
- State and local law enforcement agencies reported 7,462 hate crime incidents to the FBI for 2002, involving 8,832 offenses -- the latest numbers available. Racial bias accounted for nearly half of the incidents, while religious bias motivated one-fifth.
- A major U.S. study in the mid-1990s, cited by the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center, found that more than 60 percent of television programs contain some violence; that 43 percent of violent scenes involve humor either directed at the violence or used by characters involved with violence; and that nearly 75 percent of violent scenes feature no immediate punishment for or condemnation of violence.
- Pornographic web pages, according to ProtectKids.com, topped 260 million as of 2003 -- nearly a 20-fold increase from 14 million in 1998. Meanwhile, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children estimates that more than 20,000 images of child pornography are posted on the Internet each week.

To be sure, these problems are not uniquely American: Some other nations have similar or higher figures. But a Martian observer, having only these facts, could be forgiven for imagining that U.S. citizens were violent and abusive, racially and religiously intolerant, and fixated on coercive sex. Arab observers, looking at the Abu Ghraib issues, unfortunately come to the same conclusions.

That doesn't mean that U.S. military, intelligence, reserve, or contract personnel routinely display abusive tendencies. Most do not. But this outbreak of abuse should remind us that

these tendencies have uncomfortable prominence in U.S. culture. It's not simply that the statistics noted above suggest a subculture in which definable groups behave in these recognizably repugnant ways. More important, these tendencies lurk in liquid form as a mélange of violence, hatred, and coercion lying beneath the surface of daily experience and creating a general haziness of thought. How do we typically respond? To call it a shrugging acceptance of abuse is too strong. More exactly, it's an unconscious failure of nonconsent. It's a lack of courageous rebellion against the acceptance of evil -- a refusal of the culture as a whole to rise up against what the poet Robert Burns called "Man's inhumanity to Man."

When that failure of nonconsent falls below a certain threshold, the evils it should help suppress burst through into visible action. That, apparently, is what has happened in Iraq. Somewhere in the conscience of the perpetrators, an alarm must have been turned off, a trip wire cut, a warning device overridden. Would these same perpetrators have marched Iraqis off to gas chambers or lined them up against a wall and shot them in cold blood? Probably not, because such acts already are etched deeply into public thought as epitomes of evil. Then how can we etch the horrors of abuse so deeply into conscience that no American, in or out of uniform, can ever contemplate doing such things in public life or in the privacy of his or her own home -- whether under orders or not?

That's a large task. It involves a massive shift of popular culture. But it can start with education and training. It's increasingly clear that the reserve units sent to Iraq to staff the prisons were woefully undertrained. After this scandal, that will change. But unless their training covers a lot more than prison-warden techniques -- unless it squarely addresses the low-grade background radiation of inhumanity within which so many recruits have unconsciously been raised -- it will miss its mark. The training must be ethical in nature, character-building in outcome, and ubiquitous in practice. It must reinstall the triggers of conscience that can be set off by unethical orders. Ultimately, it must help us all shift the failure of nonconsent into a determined and proactive outrage against every kind of abuse, both at home and abroad.