

COMMENTARY

Learning about hubris and humility in Iraq

BY JEREMIAH A. DENTON III

It is a subject most Americans never have to think about, but a good part of my formative years were spent worrying about whether my father, then a prisoner of war in North Vietnam, was being tortured by his captors. It wasn't long after his capture that we learned he was. When I served my tour in Viet-

Jeremiah A. Denton III is an attorney in Virginia Beach.

nam, in 1969-70, I regularly flew my helicopter over an American-run prisoner of war camp, and I strained my eyes every time to see if we were guilty of torturing Viet Cong and North Vietnamese prisoners as they were torturing my dad. I never could see any evidence of that, but then I couldn't really see much.

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tic impulses of some low-level functionary. It certainly has no military value in a block-to-block war against irregular bands of radical zealots. It is the sort of thing good old-fashioned firing squads are best suited to deter and redress.

If the president and various general officers are sincere when they say they are horrified, and that this conduct does not represent the America they know, a string of courts-martial will ensue. This is not a case where

less than honorable — or even dishonorable — discharges will suffice.

Prisoner abuse is a war crime deserving, at a minimum, serious penitentiary time.

There's a larger lesson too. Much was made of Saddam Hussein's torture chambers when we went into Iraq. Now poor President Bush, who already has a plate full of problems in that country, is reduced to distin-

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guishing his administration's handling of prisoners from Saddam's by saying that, unlike Saddam, we investigate our torturers. So much for superior Western democratic values.

We Americans have a lot to be proud of, but we need to learn a lot about hubris and humility. We need to realize we don't have all the answers and that our own house is not entirely in order.

It is one thing for us to punish another country or regime for *apparently* sending terrorists to our shores and manufacturing WMDs to use against us. The French et al. notwithstanding, any nation obviously has the right to ensure its basic survival.

It is entirely another matter, however, for us to linger on after accomplishing our military objective in a vain (meant in both senses of the word) effort to remake that society in the image and likeness of ours. We simply don't have the credibility or standing to pull that off — certainly not in Iraq and not right now.

Our military mission was accomplished when we entered Baghdad or at least when we captured Saddam. Our nation-building mission, at least this particular one, is beyond our ken.

Let's face reality and extricate our troops and contractors before we do any more damage to the Iraqis and ourselves.