



Six Degrees of Contrition

With bountiful largess, the English language provides a variety of formulations for the commonest of expressions: I'm sorry. The offending party can beg pardon, apologize, express regrets, or voice remorse, after which the culprit can confess error, fault, or guilt while vowing to repent, atone, and/or financially compensate. In our age, official contrition has virtually become a cottage industry in much of the world. But not in the land of the free.

In a twist few could have imagined a year ago, a Bush administration hitherto allergic to conceding error of any kind now swims uncertainly in the semantics of apology. It is not just that the Iraq War has spun out of control, nor that a fractious and occupied nation persists in harassing its would-be benefactors. Worse, it is the horrors of Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison, whose satanic imagery has not only shamed the United States but also managed to affront a majority of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims.

A core problem lies in the White House's shifting rationale for its war-of-choice. Unable to showcase a stockpile of weapons of mass destruction or persuasively to link Saddam Hussein to Osama bin Laden, George W. Bush has made the creation of a democratic Iraq at peace with its neighbors the redemptive goal for a chaotic occupation. This necessarily sets a high bar for American virtue. It will therefore take something more than boilerplate apologies to contain the damage. Indeed, the very vocabulary of atonement has changed. States and their leaders are now held to heightened standards of moral responsibility, even for wrongs long past. Pleading ignorance or obeying orders no longer suffices to excuse perpetrators, nor does the fog of war immunize combatants from rudimentary decencies.

Indeed, one can accurately speak of a millennial washing-of-the-spears as peoples and their leaders grope to confront their collective sins—not least in Washington, where a still-baffled White House and Pentagon continue to scramble through the ambiguities of apology. To my mind, there are six degrees of contrition:

Mistakes Were Made. This is the lowest rung: the passive acknowledgment that unspecified, disembodied lower-rankers, persons wholly unrepresentative of the United States, were responsible. Here is President Bush in his initial May 5 interview with Alhurra television, censuring as abhorrent “those practices” at Abu Ghraib jail: “It is also important for the people of Iraq to know that in a democracy, everything is not perfect, that mistakes are made.” The invariable corollary is that Washington's many positive deeds must not be overlooked. But faced with disbelief, the apologist climbs a second rung.

Spread the Blame. Guilt yearns company, and for an egregious example of diluting repentance, the prize goes not to Bush but to his predecessor. In March 1998, Bill Clinton visited bloodied Rwanda and saw for himself what machetes had wrought. All over the world, the president ruefully recalled, “were people like me sitting in offices, day after day, who did not fully appreciate the depth and speed with which you were being engulfed by this unimaginable terror. The international community, together with the nations of Africa, must bear its share of responsibility.... We did not immediately call these crimes by their rightful name: genocide.”

Well, yes. But it was the mighty United States that effectively blocked even debate by the Security Council when it mattered most. In fact, the State Department even weaseled on the use of the term “genocide,” for fear it might be asked to take some action. No surprise, therefore, that the Bush administration’s defenders were quick to remark that torture was pandemic in Islamic lands, with little outrage expressed by their media or leaders. Fair enough, but unlike the State Department, no Muslim foreign ministry annually publishes a human rights report whose most common censure is the abuse and secret detention of political prisoners.

Let the Truth Be Told. Creditably and justly, in his May 5 interview George W. Bush did contrast America’s willingness to unveil the horrors of Abu Ghraib with the secrecy cloaking far more sinister atrocities committed at the same prison under Saddam Hussein. Disclosure has become an essential test of contrition, and on this the United States helped lead the way with Watergate and the Iran-contra hearings. Latin America followed suit with truth commissions, and before such a forum in South Africa former president F. W. de Klerk apologized for apartheid while erstwhile torturers confessed their crimes in exchange for amnesty. Whatever their ambiguities, these commissions begin to establish what really happened, and to whom. In Washington, declassified documents confirmed that African Americans were once treated like medical guinea pigs at the Tuskegee Institute, evoking a formal apology by Bill Clinton.

The question yet to be answered is whether the Bush administration will truly shine the searchlight on its offshore penal colonies in Afghanistan, Cuba, and Iraq, and in the various lockups where suspected alien terrorists are detained in these United States. So egregious have been the major abuses that even the Rehnquist Supreme Court has now found them unconstitutional.

Conscience Money. Truth established, reparations can be a salve. But not a solvent. Timing is paramount. It took Switzerland many decades to address the justifiable claims of Jews and non-Jews alike who naively placed their assets in Swiss banks to avoid Nazi confiscation. Eventually, an American team led by former deputy secretary of the treasury Stuart E. Eizenstat secured settlements for survivors and their offspring totaling some \$8 billion from Swiss and other European banks. But Bern resisted disclosure. West Germany, by contrast, began in 1947 paying generous compensation for Nazi crimes to Israel, Jewish organizations, and formerly occupied lands. Concerning Iraq, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has already hinted that compensation is possible. The problem for Washington is that remorse via the purse can bear the stigma of lavishing cash for atonement, implying infidel condescension by a consumerist overlord.

Find a Scapegoat. When Secretary Rumsfeld faced his first fierce week of questioning about the Baghdad prison, he was greeted by this startling cover line in the *Economist*, a pro-war British weekly: “Resign, Rumsfeld.” By so doing, the magazine contended, he could demonstrate “one of the true American values: that senior people take responsibility.” Put more bluntly, leaders seek scapegoats, with the caveat that the higher the office, the riskier the beheading. For the Bush administration, circling the wagons has been the preferred means of defense. Thus the swift admonition, reinforced by a presidential visit to the Pentagon, that Rumsfeld’s departure would deprive America of its greatest secretary of defense and confuse or demoralize the fighting forces in Iraq—a judgment that the man on the spot seemed to share. In the event, the sacrificial goat proved to be George Tenet, the long-serving director of central intelligence, who resigned for “personal reasons.” This drained his departure of political meaning. By contrast, in Britain, cabinet resignations are an accepted form of penance for failure or to express principled disagreement with the

government's policies. Hence, the *Economist* headline; in this respect, the advantage is Britain's.

The Bareheaded Bow. We arrive finally at the sixth degree of contrition, and the least common. On occasion, the lords of power bow their heads, a posture of humility and repentance so unusual as to be remembered for centuries. Such was the case when the Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI quarreled with Pope Gregory VII over lay investiture and was duly excommunicated. Alone and barefoot, Henry turned up on a snowy day before the pope's castle in Canossa, an image of penitence immortalized in art and folk memory. The emperor's gesture found its modern parallel nine centuries later, in 1971, when another German leader fell on his knees in the Warsaw Ghetto to apologize for what the Nazis had done. The gesture was the more striking since Chancellor Willy Brandt as a Social Democrat had opposed Hitler from the start. His wordless act of atonement counted more than a thousand speeches.

For President Bush, a comparable Canossa would be to send every Iraqi known to suffer in American custody a personal invitation for a prepaid visit to the Supreme Court, Congress, and the White House, the very temples of American freedom.

With a gesture of this magnitude, Bush could draw the world's attention to the little-known fact that America has led the way in striving to leash the dogs of war. The articles of war were first codified by Francis Lieber, a Prussian-born immigrant who as a teenager fought in the Waterloo campaigns and later taught law at what became Columbia University. They were promulgated as Executive Order 100 by Abraham Lincoln in April 1863. And out of the Lieber Code grew the successive Hague and Geneva restrictions, the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal, and the Genocide Convention. How welcome as well if the president reminded Americans that these codes serve U.S. interests, that they are reciprocal, and offer protection to our own GIs, no less than enemy combatants.

Granted, these codes are oft violated, and the present slaughter of civilians in the Sudan underscores the frailty of U.N. conventions. But popular awareness of these norms is nowadays reinforced by graphic media accounts of atrocities present and past, ranging from the African slave trade and the Irish famine to the killing fields of Cambodia, from the Holocaust to the massacres in Bosnia and Rwanda. By responding imaginatively to this new global awareness, by showing the humility he once vowed to evince in office, George W. Bush would leave his worst critics aghast with shock and surprise. ●

—Karl E. Meyer