

EXCEPTIONALISM AND TORTURE

Is our so-called exceptionalism a valid excuse of torture? In his NY Times article of 12-9-14 "We're Always Still Americans", Thomas Friedman comes perilously close to suggesting just that, beginning with: "...these foreigners know in their bones that we do things differently from other big powers in history...". Then following with a pat on our own collective back: "...one of the things we do we did on Tuesday: We published what appears to be an unblinking examination and exposition of how we tortured prisoners and suspected terrorists after 9/11...this act of self-examination is not only what keeps our society as a whole healthy, it's what keeps us a model that others want to emulate, partner with and immigrate to..."

What comes next is the excuse: "...In wartime, civil liberties are often curtailed and abused, and then later restored. Lincoln suspended the writ of habeas corpus during the Civil War. During World War II, we imprisoned more than 127,000 American citizens solely because they were of Japanese ancestry. ..Fear led us to tolerate some terribly aberrant, dishonest and illegal behaviors that needed to be fully exposed, because big lies being tolerated lead to little lies being tolerated lead to institutions and trust being eroded from the inside..." Followed by a reaffirmation of our exceptionalism, this time with a quote from John McCain: "...we are always Americans, and different, stronger, and better than those who would destroy us..."

Where has our exceptionalism taken us over the years? In his book "The Brothers" (2013), Stephen Kinzer recounts the sad litany of our post-WW II secret interventions, orchestrated by the brothers J. Foster and Allen Dulles and, invariably, prompted by visceral fear rather than enlightened self-interest. Here are just a few nuggets: Iran 1953; Guatemala 1953-54; Egypt 1953-56; Indonesia 1956; Congo 1960; Cuba 1961; Vietnam 1954-1974; Chile 1973. Most Americans are blissfully unaware of this record that left a trail of death and misery across the globe. This is perhaps why it has been so easy to keep adding on: Lebanon 1978; Nicaragua 1980s; Somalia 1998; Afghanistan 2001; Iraq. 2003; ISIL 2014. Is there an end in sight? More to the point, is there a pattern?

Here is how Kinzer describes our secret post-WWII foreign mis-adventures: "...Americans often find it difficult to imagine how other people see the United States, the world, or life itself. Foster and Allen [Dulles] exemplified this national [myopia]...Sympathizing with the enormous complexities facing leaders of emerging nations would have required them to consider those leaders [as] independent agents, rather than instruments of Soviet power. Their compulsive oversimplification of the world prevented them from seeing its rich diversity. In this, too, they were quintessentially American... [the] fundamental assumptions that guide American foreign policy have not changed substantially since the era when they were in power. Many Americans still celebrate their country's providential "exceptionalism..." (pp. 325-28).

Does acknowledging our repeated 'mistakes' and apologizing for them absolve us of our sins? Would apologies to the Native Americans ever erase the near-genocide we inflicted upon them? Have repeated apologies to African Americans wiped out the lingering misery of their past enslavement? How much have German apologies, tendered again and again, expiate the horror of the Holocaust? How much would an Israeli apology, not likely forthcoming, transmute the lingering pain of the Naqba? Did Khrushchev's speech of 1954 blot out Stalin's murderous gulags? Will truth-and-reconciliation commissions in Argentina and Chile ever bring back the Generals' victims, *los desaparecidos*? Did the Church's apology to--and later canonization of--the Maid of Orleans bring her back to life? And how many apologies would resurrect the Spanish Inquisition's countless

victims--exiled, tortured, burned at the stake? Where torture and mayhem are concerned, it seems we are hardly exceptional.

Our exceptionalism in confessing, apologizing and getting absolved indeed seems mundane. It reminds me of how the Church lets us confess and get absolved, then bids us to go forth and sin no more--again and again and again. Sometimes I wonder whether the proverbial exhortation to *Imitatio Christi* would be more meaningful if we did *not* seek absolution, but rather continued to bear--like Him--the weight of our ever-accruing sins, if not the world's then at least our own.

Judeo-Christian religion is founded in sin--the Original one. Sure, we are supposed to love each other too, but sin is so much more effective a means of whipping us into line. What is more, once you have convinced us we are all sinners, you can then make us better haters and fear-mongers--so that we can then go forth and sin some more. Is Thomas Friedman right, then? Is it that easy, and yet somehow exceptional, to just confess our sins and get off the hook? Again?