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“Treat Them With Humanity”

By Thomas J. Raleigh

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Ooh Rahh! Kill them all and let their god sort them out.

This is one of many disturbing comments (in this case from someone who identifies himself as a Marine named Clay) that have appeared in an online petition that will eventually be sent to Congress in support of the Marine involved in last month's shooting of a wounded insurgent in a Fallujah mosque.

Many who signed this petition (more than 340,000) are, I'm sure, reasonable people concerned about a military man in a tough situation. But sadly, there are also those -- like the author of the sentiments above -- who believe that the deviousness of our enemies would justify us in abandoning our values and principles on the battlefield. This is a dangerous view, for both moral and practical reasons.

Clay's comment, and others like it, prompted me to recall the advice I once heard from a battalion commander I served under nearly 20 years ago. Lt. Col. James S. Gribshaw Jr., a highly decorated Vietnam veteran, was known among those in his platoon as "The Magnet" -- a reference to the peculiar attraction his body seemed to hold for shrapnel. One day in 1987, he and I were observing a training exercise at Fort Lewis, Wash.: a platoon setting an ambush. It was a textbook operation, save for one glitch. After the assault, when the prisoner-search team returned to the kill zone, a soldier shot a wounded enemy role-player, calling him an "[expletive] gook."

Gribshaw was to lead the discussion reviewing the lessons learned from the exercise. I expected him to focus on the sound tactics the platoon demonstrated during the operation. He didn't. Instead he said some things that have stuck with me to this day. I'm reconstructing his talk here from memory, but I'd vouch for its being about 95 percent correct:

A soldier in this platoon shot a wounded man today. You cannot do that.

You will find yourself in combat someday. And then you are going to go home, where you will have to live with what you have done -- to accomplish your mission, to stay alive, to keep your buddy alive.

When you assault across a kill zone, you do so violently; if you hesitate, you die. However, later, during the search -- different story. If an enemy soldier is wounded, you can't kill him. If the tactical situation does not permit you to evacuate him, do what you can to relieve his suffering, and continue the mission.

Your enemy is a combatant, a human being. He is not a "gook" or a "slope." If you dehumanize your enemy, you will dehumanize yourself, and you will do things that you will regret. And you won't go home with honor. We made a mistake today. That's why we train. Learn from this. Questions?

Silence. Gribshaw looked the platoon over, nodded and walked away, in a mood I couldn't quite figure out. His loyal command sergeant major later told me that Gribshaw acted this way when something bothered him and he wished -- just for a moment -- that he hadn't given up smoking Lucky Strikes.

Every soldier, at some point in his career, hears similar advice. Sometimes it comes from someone like Jim Gribshaw, who faced an enemy that -- not unlike the insurgents in Iraq -- intimidated civilians, booby-trapped corpses and engaged in other practices that were beyond internationally recognized rules of war.

Abu Ghraib aside, U.S. soldiers in Iraq have consistently demonstrated that they fight with honor and with due restraint. As a nation we can accept nothing less, because an army in the field derives its moral authority as much from the values and principles of the nation that sent it to fight as it does from the conduct of each soldier.

Shortly after the horrific attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, we as a nation channeled a righteous rage into a firm resolve to take the fight to our enemies. Regrettably, rage and resolve now appear to be turning, ever so surely, to blind hate -- in its typically irrational and self-destructive form. This transformation deepens and widens with the death of every U.S. servicemember in battle -- or in a mess tent in Mosul. You can see it in comments on the petition I mentioned ("This Marine deserves a medal, not the boot! Nice head shot!" read one.). You can hear it on talk radio; you likely sense it in fragments of passing conversation as you go through your day. And when we nod our heads in approval, make no mistake, we dehumanize ourselves.

I write as someone who lost an Army comrade on Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988 and a nephew and a cousin in the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. That does nothing to alter my belief that should we abandon our values and allow ourselves to be overcome by hatred because of our revulsion against those who kill children, or office workers, or a woman working to alleviate suffering, such as Margaret Hassan, we risk losing our own humanity and undermine the moral authority of our troops overseas. And we risk losing this war.

Don't take my word on this -- ask Jim Gribshaw.

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