

HONOR

An excerpt from the book,
Honor: A History
Written by James Bowman

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“We don’t have civilian casualties,” says Sergeant Randy Davis, a sniper who has served in Iraq with the Army’s Stryker Brigade out of Ft. Lewis, Washington. “Everything you hit, you know exactly what it is. You know where every round is going.” Sgt. Davis doesn’t use the word “honor.” Not many people, civilian or military, do nowadays. But whether he knows it or not, his pride in being able to kill only enemy combatants while sparing the innocent makes him the heir of a long Western tradition of honor going back to ancient times. This history is unique. Honor exists in every society known to man and is of the highest importance in most of them, but only in the West does it have a history — and a history which has always tended in the direction of greater humanity towards our enemies and stricter protections afforded by the strong to the weak, especially women and children.

You only have to compare Sgt. Davis’s approach to war with that of his jihadist counterparts, who deliberately target civilians. Or compare the outcry in the West that greeted news of the non-lethal abuses that took place in secret in Abu Ghraib prison with the enemy’s public display of, and public rejoicing over, the beheading of their American prisoners. Among the head-hackers, the idea of “honor” is still a familiar one, though not the idea that it ought to include humane treatment of non-combatants or prisoners. That’s because, in their culture, honor remains what it has been for thousands of years: an elaborate system for men of keeping up the appearance of strength and ferocity towards their enemies — which often include anyone and everyone outside their own small family or tribal group — and of control exercised over the family itself, especially the women and children. For the same reason, women in that culture who are thought to be guilty of immodesty can still be murdered in the name of honor by their own husbands, fathers or brothers, just as they were centuries ago.

Why are Western ideas of honor so different from those elsewhere in the world? I believe it is because of the legacy of Christianity in the historically Christian countries of Europe and America. Unlike Islam, or others of the world's major religions, Christianity has a history of hostility to the native honor cultures in those lands where it became the dominant religion. When in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus explicitly repudiated on his followers' behalf the rule of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" — which was itself a progressive development in Jewish culture over the more savage honor codes that it superseded — he set them a puzzle that it took millennia to work out. For many centuries, the Western honor culture existed side by side with Christianity, and the two things were thought not to have much to do with each other. As Viola in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* put it when, posing as a man, she was challenged to a duel, "I am one that had rather go with Sir Priest than Sir Knight." Montesquieu, writing in the 18th century, said that there are three tribunals that are never in agreement: the law, honor and religion.

But over the centuries the influence of Christianity gradually forced the Western honor culture to evolve. The first point of intersection between religion and honor came with the idea of the Christian knight which developed out of the crusades in the Middle Ages. Although this ideal figure took on a spiritual dimension in the later French romances that dealt with the legends of the Holy Grail, for the most part he was a warrior on behalf of Christian symbols and rituals whose ethical side was not of much interest, apart from the highly developed forms of courtesy with which he was expected to treat both his lady and his enemies. Chivalry, as these codes of behavior came to be known, remained class-bound and of limited relevance to most people for centuries until it was re-invented by the romantics,



Unknown World War I soldier with visible honor



Sir William Scott

especially Sir Walter Scott, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Inspired, in part, by the ideas of honor held by George Washington and others of the American Founding Fathers, the Victorians reimagined chivalry for a democratic

age and for the first time merged it with Christianity in the idea of the Christian gentleman.

Honor and chivalry were of great importance to all the combatants in World War I, but they could also be said to have been among that war's many casualties. Afterwards, it began to seem to large numbers of Europeans, especially, that the war with its millions of dead had been for nothing — or "only" for honor, which was coming to look like pretty much the same thing. The long Western tradition of skepticism about and even debunking of honor that goes back to Shakespeare's Falstaff or Cervantes's Don Quixote became the dominant one, and "honor" was rarely mentioned by the soldiers of World War II, at least on the Anglo-American



Honor clearly evident by the actions of this WWII soldier

side. They liked to think of themselves as “just doing a job” and even, to an extent, fighting against the ideas of honor as expressed in the self-conscious primitivism of the Nazis or the code of bushido among the Japanese. By the time of the Vietnam war, honor itself seemed to many to have become dishonored. When President Nixon claimed to seek “peace with honor” in Vietnam, it was widely understood to mean nothing but a fig leaf to cover an ignominious American retreat.

In the three decades since the fall of Saigon, we in the West have been living in what the Pakistani scholar Akbar S. Ahmed calls a “post-honor society.” Though local honor cultures continue to exist — especially that of the armed forces, without which the services could not continue to function as fighting units — society-wide honor has been replaced by self-esteem, heroes by celebrities, self-sacrifice by self-indulgence, loyalty by the individual conscience and distinction by ever-greater pressures for equality of outcomes. The gulf between military and civilian cultures grows wider as military veterans, who once were the principal bridge between the two, grow older and fewer in numbers. Young men, especially receive no education in what it means to be a man, unless it is on the streets where the world of gangs and their hip-hop troubadours represents a re-emergence of a primitive honor culture unaffected by the thousands of years of Western civilization which created and finally destroyed the official honor culture that’s now all-but forgotten.

Yet Sgt Davis’s words remind us that it is not altogether forgotten. Unofficially, at least, we can still call someone a “gentleman” and mean to compliment him by it. It is still a scandal when our soldiers kill or injure civilians, or mistreat enemy prisoners, even though we have never learned to expect any similar standards of chivalry and humane treatment to apply to the enemy himself. We still admire strength wedded to modesty and sportsmanship in spite of the absence of very many examples of it — at least that I can see — among the popular heroes of our “winning is the only thing” sporting universe. Even those old-fashioned courtesies once taken for granted by ladies as their due from gentlemen still tend to be appreciated by all but the most hardened feminists. But in our public and political life, where honor was once a central — if not the central — consideration, it’s now become something to be ashamed of. We remember the old honor culture every time we refer to our public servants as “the honorable” or to judges as “your honor.” But honor itself is deeply suspect.

That’s why Paul Wolfowitz explained the reason for the Bush administration’s emphasis on the Weapons of Mass Destruction in justifying its decision to go to war there by saying that “it was the one thing we could all agree on.” What he really meant was that it was the one thing they believed they could sell to the American people. It’s not that they didn’t believe in them themselves, but they needed them because they also believed that the honorable reasons for going to war — in this case as revenge for 9/11 — wouldn’t have been persuasive with the public. We saw the same thing happen in Vietnam where the honorable consideration was 70 percent of the reason for going to war — that is, “to avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor)” — while bringing freedom to South Vietnam was only 10 percent. But the Johnson administration made the same calculation as the Bush administration and more or less reversed these proportions for public consumption. This made our leaders look mendacious and corrupt when the fact later came out in the Pentagon Papers.

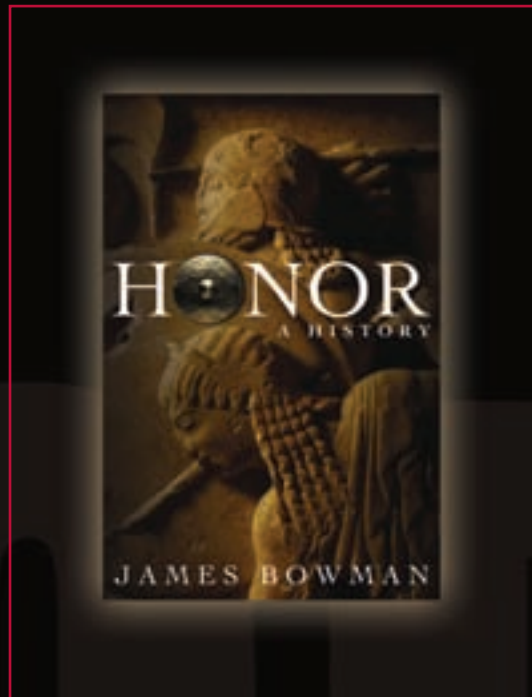
Why were they ashamed to appeal to Americans' sense of national honor? Why are they still? There are many reasons. Feminism, with its rejection of honor's conception of manliness, is one. Psychotherapy and its derivative in the "self-esteem movement" teaches that honor is an entitlement and not something that has to be earned. More generally, the consumerist and individualist ethos in the post-war West is suspicious of anything involving self-sacrifice. But the main reason is that we have persuaded ourselves that national honor no longer exists, or should exist. Even as early as the First World War, the horrors that the troops at the front were called upon to endure made it seem as if only the most high-minded moral principles could possibly justify a government in subjecting men to them. Thus we were told that we had to "make the world safe for democracy" — or even that this would be "the war to end wars." Honor was coming to seem too small and selfish a consideration. Though the need to strike back when we were attacked at Pearl Harbor would have been manifest to any honor culture, we were once again told that the war was all about "democracy versus dictatorship" — this even though we ourselves were allied with what was at the time the world's largest dictatorship.

Yet all the while, the demands of honor have continued to lurk in the background and to be kept (mostly) out of sight. They are these: When hit, you have to hit back harder; When you try to impose your will on potential

enemies, you must make them believe that you are willing and able to use force; When you have committed your troops to battle, you must back them all the way and never settle for anything less than victory. These principles, like the honor culture itself, have been so



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long out of use that by now they seem to many people to be not only unenlightened but the reason why there are wars in the first place. Those who have known something of war may still believe in them, but even they may also be ashamed to admit it. The one thing we know for sure is that our enemies, still living in an honor culture untouched by 2000 years of Western enlightenment, still believe in them and aren't ashamed to say so. Though out-thought and out-shot and massively outgunned by our side, they achieve their aims every time they kill and maim — soldiers or civilians, Americans or Iraqis, it doesn't matter to them — and don't pay a price for it. To make them pay that price, I believe we have to re-acquaint ourselves with what we once meant by "honor."

Always buy good shoes, and a good bed. Because if you aren't in one, you're in the other.