

## Come-As-You-Are Wars

When the United States joined the Second World War in December 1941, it did so with racially segregated armed forces. Ubiquitous, cruelly irrational discrimination against non-white soldiers was legal and largely taken for granted. Little of this had changed by the time the United States led the Allies to victory in 1945. It began to change only in 1948, when President Truman ordered the desegregation of the US Navy.

Therefore, if Hitler had only postponed his attack on Poland, and if the Japanese had only postponed theirs on Pearl Harbor, for a decade or so, the Allies would have been able to field armies incomparably more worthy to take up a fight against racist tyranny.

Of course, by then they would have been facing nuclear weapons and intercontinental missiles.

In the event, the enemy was not so prudent, and in 1941, Americans did not have the option to wait until they themselves were without sin before going to war. Though there were appeasers and pacifists and outright enemies among them who urged further phoney peace initiatives and concessions, the Second World War was not an elective war any more than the present war is. The West had already waited far too long. Fifty million lives too long, as it turned out. A blighted generation too long. A Holocaust too long.

The summons could not be refused and it could not be procrastinated. It said: come as you are, ready or not. For it is usually the aggressor, not the victim, who gets to choose when and where a war will break out. And so sixteen million young Americans, who had not been ready, rushed into the war with all their hangups and their shameful flaws and their parochialism and rough edges on display for all to see and sneer at. They had not asked for this to happen, and some of them made terrible mistakes. And some committed crimes – for among any sixteen million human beings chosen at random there will be thousands of murderers and tens of thousands of rapists and criminals of every kind. And that is how America saved the world.

They had the moral high ground. Yes, thousands of American criminals in uniform committed crimes in the liberated countries (and for that matter in allied countries). American bigots in uniform daily committed what would today be called hate crimes. American antisemites in power sent Jewish refugees back to their deaths and

refused to attack the Auschwitz death camp from the air. Yes, they all shamed themselves and their country. But for all that, America did not lose an inch of the moral high ground that it had claimed when going to war. The idea that it could is insane.

Imagine that someone at the time had written about any of those shameful acts in the way that **Andrew Sullivan** has about the Abu Ghraib scandal:

But I cannot disguise that the moral core of the case for war has been badly damaged. It would be insane to abort our struggle there now because of these obscenities. But ... what this ... nightmare has done is rob us of much of this moral high ground – and not just symbolically or in the eyes of others. But *actually* and in the eyes of ourselves.

Of course it hasn't. Crimes have been committed: those responsible will be punished. Apart from that, what has happened here is that a sophisticated weapons system of which we were rightly proud, turned out to have a flaw and has harmed people against whom it was not aimed. Regrettably, this happens sometimes in war. Remember, this was a come-as-you-are war. Of course it must be investigated urgently, and the level of the system at which the flaw occurred must be identified, and improvements must be made so that it does not happen again. But there is no more significance to the affair than that. Most people understand this. Those who were morally opposed to the war of course still oppose it. Some (not all) of them are engaging in the same orgy of *Schadenfreude* and self-vindication as they do every time anything bad happens to America – including the occasions when American bombs, despite all the care that is taken, go astray and kill innocents. But very few who have believed until now that the liberation of Iraq and the broader war on terror are morally right, will be convinced by the Abu Ghraib affair that America is now a bad guy.

Fortunately, not everyone has a weakness for wallowing in completely imaginary guilt. Go flagellate yourself if you must, Andrew, but leave America out of it.

Sun, 05/09/2004 - 23:56 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permlink](#)

## "Flaw" or bad policy?

Crimes have been committed: those responsible will be punished.

Let me ask you this: do you think what happened at Abu Ghraib is the logical outcome of a US policy decision to use abuse - and in some cases torture - as a tool in the fight against terrorism? And if this is the case, can we bring those responsible (eg. Donald Rumsfeld, assuming he is responsible) to justice without compromising the war in Iraq?

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This so-called sophisticated weapons system imprisoned thousands of innocent Iraqis at Abu Ghraib, many for months on end, and inflicted abuse on many. It has done the same - and maybe worse - at other prison complexes in Iraq and Afghanistan (see eg. [this](#)). How can you say it was not aimed this way? It seems to me that the flaw of which you write is really bad policy and it won't be corrected until this policy is put under scrutiny.

BTW I accept your general argument that the scandal does not affect the moral case for invading Iraq. I just don't share your faith that all those responsible will be brought to justice.

by a reader on Mon, 05/10/2004 - 05:15 | [reply](#)

## Moral, but impelling?

The coalition forces may have the moral high ground. But did they really have a impelling reason to be in Iraq? What has been gained for people in the US, British and other coalition countries? Aside from the moral joy of helping liberate some Iraqies from the misrule of other some Iraqis?

by a reader on Mon, 05/10/2004 - 09:35 | [reply](#)

## How can educated people say such ridiculous things?!

Like "United States led the Allies to victory in 1945", "And that is how America saved the world". Everyone around the world loughs at it. It is very similar to French way of educating people. They, in France, say in schools: There were three fronts in WW2 - French resistance, some British help and a number of other countries. In a very similar way Egyptian thinks that they continuously won several wars against Israel (1967, 1973 etc.). Looking at how people re-tell historical events I sometimes think that there is no such science as history - it is only education that matters.

by a reader on Mon, 05/10/2004 - 09:51 | [reply](#)

## The Difference

Mr A. Nonymous wrote that the World was talking rubbish when we said:

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historical events I sometimes think that there is no such science as

history - it is only education that matters.'

The French surrendered in World War Two and only a few thousand of them mounted a resistance. The French government willingly shipped Jews out to the East to die. The Americans, on the other hand, produced most of the weapons used by the British and the Russians to defeat the Nazis. They played a very large part in planning the Allied invasion of Europe and they provided millions of troops. The British after becoming the first country in Europe to refuse to surrender to the Nazis helped the Americans to liberate Europe. The Russians fought and died in their millions against the Nazis; despite the fact that Stalin was also an evil man they deserve a large helping of credit for helping to beat the Nazis. So to wrap up - the French sat back and ate croissants; America saved the world.

The Egyptians in fact didn't win wars against Israel. Their aim, as clearly stated before every such war, was to kill all of the Israelis. They never succeeded in this war aim and they usually lost territory, which Israel later gave back as part of a peace deal.

History is not a science. However, there are good historical arguments like 'America saved the world during World War Two' and bad historical arguments like 'France saved the world during World War Two'. The only way we can get closer to such truths is by arguments like the one above rather than blank assertions.

Oh, by the way, we're British, not American.

by [Alan Forrester](#) on Mon, 05/10/2004 - 23:32 | [reply](#)

## Re: The Difference

ouch!

by [Tom Robinson](#) on Tue, 05/11/2004 - 04:53 | [reply](#)

## It is not French, who saved the world at all

I was just giving examples, how education perverts the truth in different countries in different ways. Saying that French saved the world is at the same level of truth as saying it about Americans, who got themselves involved only after Pearl Harbour (half-way through). In fact, several countries together delivered the victory - Russia (who defeated majority of all German troops even if losing badly millions of people due to mistakes etc.), UK and America. But US takes the top-from-behind of this list. If they only arrived earlier than the war wouldn't be such a disaster for everyone, but they didn't. What we all agree now is that blind pacifism (which prevented many nations from fighting Nazis from the beginning) very often leads to BIG problems.

by a reader on Tue, 05/11/2004 - 08:20 | [reply](#)

## Separating issues

It's sad to see people so unable to separate issues. I am against the

invasion of Iraq; it is a pointless battle. But none the less, condemning the war on the grounds of what *\*some soldiers\** have done in Iraqi prisons is an argument I will not side with. IF the war had been a good idea, THEN what happened in Iraqi prisons serve only to stain those with responsibility and knowledge. They should of course be court-martialled and publicly executed (which for my own sake means I hope this goes all the way up to Rumsfeld). But I am ashamed to see those who - on the surface - agree with me resort to any cheap argument.

by a reader on Wed, 05/12/2004 - 07:02 | [reply](#)

## Re Separating issues

*"what happened in Iraqi prisons serve only to stain those with responsibility and knowledge. They should of course be court-martialled and publicly executed"*

I wonder. Do you think that all Iraqis who were responsible for this level of human rights violations should be publicly executed too, or is it just Americans you fantasize about killing?

by a reader on Wed, 05/12/2004 - 12:10 | [reply](#)

## Both

I see no reason to spare those who committed atrocities under Saddam. It puzzles me a bit that Saddam himself has not been executed yet, too. For though invading Iraq was a bad idea, the US has been very ambivalent about whether they really have taken over or not, when it comes to truly bringing responsible individuals to justice. IF you fight a war, do it whole-heartedly. That also forces the question upon you: "Is this war worth fighting whole-heartedly?"

Best: No war.

Second: A whole-hearted war.

Worst: This war.

by a reader on Thu, 05/13/2004 - 11:17 | [reply](#)