

Strike the Black Flag (2004)

Brian Abel Ragen

What will we think if thirty years from now cemeteries and public buildings in Iraq fly a flag recalling what Americans have done at Abu Ghraib?

I wondered that as I drove past several cemeteries and public buildings this week and saw the familiar black and white flag with the silhouette of a bowed head and the watchtowers of a prison camp. Those banners first appeared when people were wearing identity bracelets with the names of the missing and buying bumper-stickers saying “POW/MIA: ONLY HANOI KNOWS.” Then we could hope that some of those missing in Vietnam might still be held there-- and that they might come home. Thirty years from now, will Iraqis be flying red, black, and green flags with the profile of a man with a leash around his neck, and will they be marking their cars with bumper-stickers that read, “ABU GHRAIB: ONLY RUMSFELD KNOWS”?

Our nation has lost the chance to set an example to the world by declaring that it will always follow the Geneva Conventions, even if the letter of the law might not require it. We have used any legal excuse to ignore the rules when it suited us. We have lost the chance to show that a nation at war can treat its prisoners with humanity and decency. Instead, we have certainly tortured and perhaps killed them. We have lost the chance to show we are not cruel when the battle is in progress.

Perhaps we need not lose the chance to show we can forgive the wrongs we have suffered after three decades. So this Memorial Day, let us look at the black flag that reminded us of the missing one last time. We have known for years that Hanoi is not hiding anyone. Let us recall the lost with sorrow. Let us honor all those who hoped and prayed that they would be found.

After that, let the stars and stripes, the flag that stands for our unity, our pride, and our ideals, fly alone. The black flag that marked our anger should come down.

And let us hope that in thirty years Iraqis will not be flying a banner that reminds them of the atrocities men and women who betrayed the stars and stripes have committed or countenanced.

Brian Abel Ragen, Professor of English at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, can be contacted at inquiries@briableragen.net. He retains copyright to this essay.