Who Will be Scapegoat in Iraq Abuse Scandal?

By Keith Epstein
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WASHINGTON - In Old Testament times, general atoning for transgressions involved two goats. One would be slaughtered so its remains could be burned. A second - the "scapegoat" - would be led into the desert, symbolically carrying the sins of the people into the wilderness with it.

In the version of events related by the Talmud, the ancient book of Jewish law, a red cord tied to the neck of the scapegoat would turn white as it left the city, suggesting the cleansing nature of the act. The use of goats is no longer common, but the societal need for a clean slate is.

"Scapegoating is one of the most common features of human life," says Simon Crosby, a psychotherapist who founded The Scapegoat Society near London in 1997.

"Exporting our bad feelings onto others - finding someone to whom we can attribute blame - enables us to point the finger and create a scapegoat," Crosby says. Like the goat's cord, "we whiten ourselves." It remains to be seen whether the stain of prisoner abuse by the U.S. military in Iraq will be treated the same way. If it does, where will the scapegoat be found?

In some cultures, the buck truly does stop as far up the chain of command as President Harry Truman famously implied.

"I keenly feel an unlimited responsibility for the scandal," Japan's Yogi Yamada declared two years ago when he stepped down as chief executive of consumer credit firm Nippon Shinpan, where managers had paid gangsters.

"For the Japanese and Europeans, it doesn't matter if the guy at the top has anything to do with the event or even knows about it. He takes responsibility," says Larry Sabato, a University of Virginia political science professor. "There's none of this, 'What did he know and when did he know it?' "

Americans, on the other hand, "are more pragmatic," Sabato says. The individualism that undergirds the culture leads Americans to examine more closely who must pay when something goes wrong. Hence the current Newsweek, with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on the cover, asks: "Is He To Blame?"

Did Rumsfeld know about the photographs that in recent days appalled the world, or the corrosive internal report in February of U.S. reservists beating, stripping and sexually humiliating Iraqi detainees? Rumsfeld's explanation that he hadn't seen or heard about the photos until they aired on TV - but still considered himself responsible - may have helped him in Congress and elsewhere. Critics' calls for his removal can be portrayed as election-year strategy.

"The reason is that he was able to show he was not an individual directly involved in what happened," Sabato says.

Valerie Frederickson cautions that it's not enough to plead ignorance.

"It's easy to excuse yourself from responsibility by saying, 'I didn't know,' " says Frederickson, a California-based consultant who coaches corporate boards and management teams for companies such as Genentech and SAP.

"In business it's, 'I didn't know my CFO and head of sales were shipping empty boxes,' and in government it's, 'I didn't know what those 20- year-olds were doing to prisoners in Iraq,' " she says. Frederickson emphasizes a "responsibility leadership model."

"A good leader can prevail and not take the fall," she says, "if he or she acknowledges the problem quickly enough, takes responsibility, and says what they're going to do to change it."
The problem, in her view, is that many executives are unwilling to much more than equivocate, cover up and blame others.

"The problem with not taking responsibility is it ruins your corporate culture," she says. "It trickles down. And if you blow that, and you blow it publicly, you might as well bring in a new leadership team."

Of course, the mere presence of a new team does not necessarily fix everything, either. The list of whitening-by- leadership-shakeup is lengthy in the business world. At Janus Capital Group, Mark Whiston stepped down as the mutual fund's chief executive in April amid a trading scandal and a looming settlement with securities regulators. His replacement, Steve Scheid, quickly wrote shareholders that problems were "largely behind us" and the organization could "look to the future with optimism."

Boeing Corp. has struggled amid a scandal involving the nation's fleet of refueling tankers, some based at MacDill Air Force Base. The company's turbulent skies haven't cleared despite the two highest-ranking executives leaving in December 2003, and former CEO Harry Stonecipher returning to the cockpit from his retirement in St. Petersburg.

In government, Frederickson argues, managers serving at the whim of elected officials may not be held accountable like their private-sector counterparts, and they often worry more about politics than solutions.

Yet blame can be affixed even in government.

One recent example is the computer system intended to improve efficiency at veterans' hospitals. Instead, it increased risks to veterans awaiting surgery and exposed severe management failures in Washington and at Bay Pines VA Medical Center in St. Petersburg.

Action surely was accelerated by the fact that Bay Pines is in the congressional district of Rep. Bill Young, chairman of the powerful House Appropriations Committee. Young began an investigation and publicly chastised the Veterans Affairs Department. Bay Pines' chief of staff was transferred, and the VA announced the departure of the undersecretary who had decided to test the computer system at Bay Pines - one of the busiest veterans hospitals in the country.

Rumsfeld, with experience at the helm of both corporate and government cultures, is not what The Scapegoat Society's Crosby calls a natural scapegoat. Crosby, in fact, contends the defense chief has handled himself adroitly.

"Saying what he did, and the way he said it, made people feel somewhat better about what happened," Crosby says. In essence, "he was apologizing for not knowing, so by apologizing in that way, he fulfills our need to have someone to point to rather than face our own pain. Through the process we get something out of it."

The pain, in Crosby's view, is our collective responsibility for what has happened in Iraq, starting with his own country's formation of Iraq from irreconcilable cultures in 1920.

"Rather than look at the bigger picture," he says, "it's so much easier to say, 'Well, the real problem this week is the pictures. The problem the next week is an American with his head chopped off.' The focus keeps shifting.

"You could say TV is the problem, but it's also an out from a lot of the pain - having to deal with the underlying issue of what got us where we are and what we're doing there."
Digging deeper seems unlikely.

"What happens in Washington or corporate boardrooms really is like ancient human behavior, in which you have to sacrifice other human beings physically to keep the evil gods at bay," says Sabato, the Virginia professor. "We're 50,000 years removed from that behavior, and yet we still exhibit some pieces of it."

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