

Shameful images stir painful reflections: Abu Ghraib

News in the [June 15, 2004](#) issue

Vietnam veteran John Smathers and his wife, Judy, knelt at the altar rail at the Falls Church, a 272-year-old faith community at which George Washington once prayed, just outside the nation's capital in Virginia. Holding a microphone, they bowed their heads before worshipers struggling to come to terms with disturbing photographs of American soldiers sadistically abusing Iraqi prisoners.

Thirty-eight years ago, Lieutenant Smathers had watched through binoculars as his navy ship gunned down Vietnamese villagers huddled helplessly on a beach. He had always regarded his country as a force for good; the incident distressed him. Now, history was repeating itself. "Lord," Smathers said, clasping his wife's hand, "we acknowledge this revelation of our nation's dark side."

The Abu Ghraib prison scandal is not the first occasion, nor likely the last, that has forced the U.S. into taking such a sobering look at itself. The nation that presents itself as a champion of the rule of law and an exporter of democracy at times fails to live up to its own ideals. Slavery, Wounded Knee, My Lai—history is replete with examples.

But some thinkers say these revelations, however painful, present opportunities for Americans to reexamine what they collectively believe about their country, to embrace old values while considering new standards that might better serve them—and perhaps the world. In the prison photos, much of the world sees not only the faces of domineering Americans, but the face of America.

It's a false image, the Bush administration insists, again and again. "We have presented ourselves as a values-based country, and we are," Secretary of State Colin Powell told National Public Radio on May 18. "This [scandal] does not reflect the America that we know. This does not reflect the America that is."

This vision of a uniquely qualified America setting captives free worldwide is embodied in a belief historians call “exceptionalism.” Its roots are in the 19th-century doctrine of “manifest destiny” and Puritan preacher John Winthrop’s “City upon a Hill” sermon, delivered in 1630 and based on a biblical metaphor in the Book of Matthew.

Critics here and abroad see exceptionalism in a faith-based foreign policy that provided the moral justification for invading Iraq. They hear its echo in an oft-repeated passage from President Bush’s 2003 State of the Union speech: “Americans are a free people, who know that freedom is the right of every person and the future of every nation. The liberty we prize is not America’s gift to the world; it is God’s gift to humanity.”

Polls show that the idea resonated with most Americans—at least until Abu Ghraib. The photos from that dark place are so jarring they just might challenge what many Americans so confidently believe about themselves, said Amy Kaplan, author of *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*. “How, on the one hand, can you claim to have superior moral values . . . yet on the other hand behave in such brutal ways that conform to the way any other occupying power has historically behaved?” asked Kaplan, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

Kaplan said she hopes the contradiction leads to new values rooted in “common humanity” and international standards. But she’s not optimistic. The current of American exceptionalism runs deep. Some explain the images from Abu Ghraib as the darker side of humanity, not of America. “This has everything to do with being human. There is a capacity in all of us to do evil,” said Rabbi David Blumenthal, who teaches a class about the social psychology of evil at Emory University.

America’s greatness may best be demonstrated in how it deals openly with its sins. “Except God, nobody is perfect, so goodness is measured only in relative terms,” said Tashbih Sayyed, editor of *Muslim World Today* and *Pakistan Today*, both based in Alta Loma, California. “America is still the best, noblest nation on the face of the Earth. Yes, there was a My Lai massacre, but when it happened all of America condemned it. Today, when an Abu Ghraib prison scandal is revealed, all of America is suffering. That distinguishes us from those Muslim communities who kept quiet when Osama bin Laden attacked on September 11, and it distinguishes us from those who have kept quiet when prisoner abuse in their own countries is so rampant that it has become acceptable.”

John Smathers, after praying in the Virginia church that Sunday in May, rose from his knees and went home with his wife. On Monday, he returned to work as a federal attorney, convinced “this is still the greatest country in the world.” Contradictory deeds, he reasoned, can flow from the same nation or person. “Life is not a series of absolutes,” Smathers said. “It’s more of a spectrum. The good dogs and the bad dogs are barking at the same time, and our responsibility is to feed the good dogs to make them bigger.” *-Mark O’Keefe, Religion News Service*