

MINORITY REPORT.

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Watching the latest in L.A. video—whereby you may recline in your own home and view a selection of white policemen as they put the leather (and the billy club and the stun gun) to Mr. Rodney King—I thought, by God, the L.A.P.D. has really kicked the Selma syndrome once and for all. Yes, *sir*. Conversation among enlightened friends has tended to focus on the essential part played by the rear-guard cops, those who formed a thoughtful audience for the beating. Apart from the fact that they seemed to confirm the essential normalcy of the crime, in that the pounding officers knew that they need fear no informer or critic, these chaps evidently cared nothing for the good name of the white male. They were unaware that moralists from Dante to Sartre have stressed the culpability of those who are complicit by silence or inaction.

Or for that matter, complicit by applause and enthusiasm. In a deadpan report from Los Angeles dated March 18, *The New York Times* accidentally provided the perfect metaphor:

Surrounded by yellow ribbons hung on his behalf at police headquarters, Chief Gates told a crowd of cheering supporters that he would not heed widespread calls for his resignation following the beating on March 3 of Rodney G. King.

This could scarcely be bettered as an illustration of the latent symbolism of the yellow ribbon: a celebration of the essential cowardice and bluster that accompany a chauvinistic confidence in overwhelming brute force. Evidence of this general coarsening can be found on all sides. It was present in all the arguments about the “softening up” of Iraq by saturation bombardment. It was an education to hear liberals express their qualms about a ground war, phrasing those qualms in the language of restraint. This artifice didn’t always serve to disguise the reality. I began to get seriously worried when Eliot Cohen argued for a continued air war in *The New Republic* of February 11:

It is conceivable, if unlikely, that a ground battle could turn into a bloody fiasco. More likely, however, it would succeed, in that we would liberate Kuwait, although that might not end the war. But would a quick win be a cheap one? Consider a model blitz, the German attack on Poland in 1939.

I see what you mean, Professor Cohen, though I think you might feel on reflection that it belongs in the category of things that could have been better put.

Over the past several weeks I have been intrigued by the nonexistence of the phrase “the Mutlaa massacre.” Mutlaa (see “Minority Report,” March 25) is the site of the funkily named “Highway of Death,” where American pilots caught a convoy of fleeing Iraqis, bombed the vehicles at both ends and then returned to shred and dismember the resulting traffic jam again and again. Everybody sat and watched *those* pictures. Yet for public and historical purposes, no memory or consciousness of the incident exists. And Saudi “mortuary platoons” made haste to inter the evidence, so we have no clear idea of how many bodies were Iraqi and how many were Asian guest-workers joining the rout. (On

this unexamined question, Stephen Sackur of BBC Radio reported grimly that the charred bodies were often to be found holding suitcases with pathetic labels from the Indian subcontinent.)

Without particularly looking for a fight on this point, I’ve been impressed by the number of people who have mentioned it in hushed tones, almost as if Mutlaa were a distinct private grief to be discussed under the breath. An admiral at a Washington dinner party said that he was amazed by the absence of revulsion. A German television crew, interviewing me, was politely incredulous at the stoic fashion in which American viewers had “taken in” the scene. Correspondents from as far away as Australia and as near as Canada have asked me the same question. So have individuals in bars and bookstores, each of them half-apologizing for his or her apparent squeamishness. If everybody who marveled at the absence of a protest had protested, there would have been a protest.

Of course, the circumstances aren’t completely normal. The “peace movement” had in effect demanded an air war in order to keep the “body bag” number low, and the Democratic leadership had done the same. Thus the White House and the Pentagon were executing the wishes of their liberal and pacifist critics. There are some problems, after all, which do yield to a technological fix. A demand that all casualties be of Iraqi or Asian parentage, when made by public opinion, is a demand that can be easily met. Those who will the end must not quibble about the means.

Not one voice is being raised to inquire what the United States Army is now doing in Iraq. The borders of Kuwait have been restored to their former integrity, which means, incidentally, that the provision of U.N. Resolution 660 that calls for intensive negotiations between Iraq and Kuwait on their longstanding territorial dispute has been casually set aside. Meanwhile, Palestinian agriculture on the West Bank has been all but destroyed by a curfew that has prevented the tending of fields or animals, and good reports have it that residents of the West Bank who leave for any purpose are being denied the right to return. In an attempt to split the P.L.O., Saudi and Kuwaiti envoys have met in Damascus with Ahmed Jabril and Abu Musa, two mercenary puppets with rejectionist records. Iran is gloating at the Lebanonization of Iraq, a process that the U.S. occupation is apparently not designed to retard. All the tactics of divide-and-rule, of the sort that led to the war in the first place, are being pursued with great vigor. And we . . . look on.

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Speaking of divide-and-rule, I was much interested to see the full-page, full-color “thank you” advertisement taken out by the Kuwaitis in *The Washington Post* of March 11. The accompanying regional map showed Lebanon as part of Syria, the West Bank as part of Israel, Yemen as re-partitioned between North and South and Cyprus as having sunk into the sea. This cosmology makes one quiver in anticipation of the new regional order.

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