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The kind of freedom that makes others pay the price

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During the stifling heat of summer, the al-Qubaisi brothers liked to sleep on the flat roof of their Baghdad home. Twins Mustafa and Muhammad, at 12 years old, the youngest in the family, were carrying the bedding onto the roof one hot evening in June this year.

It was 10.30pm and bad timing, because the United States Army's 82nd Airborne Division was on night patrol. They shot Muhammad as Mustafa screamed for help. The army said they mistook the bedding for an AK-47 assault rifle.

Neighbours bundled the bleeding boy into a car and tried to reach hospital. However, the 11pm curfew was approaching and they were stopped by another group of soldiers at a checkpoint. They were made to wait 15 minutes, by which time Muhammad was dead. The US military later offered his father \$500 (£295) to cover funeral expenses.

We know about Muhammad because his case has been carefully documented by the charity, Human Rights Watch, along with dozens more: a 19-year-old girl blown to pieces when soldiers lobbed a grenade into the kitchen where she was attempting to take shelter during a house raid, and the family whose old Volkswagen Passat was riddled with 28 bullets at a checkpoint, killing the 42-year-old father, three of his children and badly injuring their heavily pregnant mother.

Iraqbodycount.net, another independent organisation, estimates there have been between 7878 and 9708 civilian deaths in the country since the start of the war (the figures are based on media reports). The US military keeps no tally of these casualties, despite insisting it has the best interests of Iraqis at heart. These dead Arabs were all unique human beings, whose precious individuality should be honoured with an investigation into their killings. Yet their deaths go unacknowledged in much the same way as a motorist in this country who hits a domestic cat is not obliged to tell the authorities (dogs fare better than both felines and Iraqis, their deaths must be reported). Yesterday, George Bush justified the war by evoking the rights of individuals. If the president were a Scots scholar, which of course he is not, he might have been tempted to quote some of John Barbour's *The Bruce* in his speech at London's Banqueting House.

*Ah, Freedom is a noble thing
Freedom makes a man content
Freedom all solace to man gives
He lives at ease that freely lives.*

Six centuries on, Bush evoked similar sentiments to Barbour, who was praising the noble cause of Robert the Bruce. "Great responsibilities have fallen once again on the great democracies. We will face these threats and we will defeat them." This duty to defend democracy and human rights, he said, sometimes required the measured use of force, and the violent restraint of violent men . . .

He said nothing about 12-year-olds, but that's the danger in idealism. Whether you look back to Scotland's Wars of Independence, the Christian Crusades, Islam's Arabian conquest or the expansion of the British Empire, you discover atrocities that compromise the righteous – or perhaps, we should say, the self-righteous principles which promote conflict. Holy Wars, whether they are fought in the name of God or democracy, are often a cover for old-fashioned greed and cruelty. Bruce used the language of proto-nationalism to inspire his men at Bannockburn, but his personal motivation could equally be attributed to desire for land and royal title.

Writing in the *New Statesman* this week, the American radical, Professor Noam Chomsky reminded us of John Stuart Mill's nineteenth-century essay on humanitarian intervention. Mill argued that Britain should conquer more of India to defeat the aggressions of barbarians and perform a service to others. Chomsky points out Mill's vital omission: that by extending control of India, Britain tightened its grip on opium production which in turn gave it access to the coveted Chinese market.

Victorian Britons honestly believed they had a duty to civilise the world. They could morally justify their actions, pointing to Britain's key role in the abolition of slavery and the sterling work of missionaries such as David Livingstone. That they also established themselves as the most dominant economic and military power on earth was seen as divine justice – perhaps just as the Iraqi reconstruction contracts awarded to US firms are seen as reward for Uncle Sam's self-sacrifice.

Are we right to compare the cause of modern democracy to the imperialism that declared Victoria empress of a land whose dust had never skimmed the skirt of her crinoline? We find the same double standards at work today as we did in the nineteenth century, when radicals campaigned for an extension of suffrage at home while denying it to the colonials. Today, our domestic law enshrines the Human Rights Act, while coalition troops shoot to kill in Baghdad.

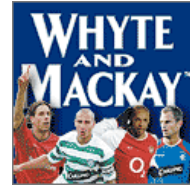
Have we learned nothing from experience? Britain eventually prosecuted its own soldiers for firing at young joyriders in Northern Ireland. Republicans were dissatisfied with the outcome, but at least an attempt was made to apply to the rule of law. Tony Blair's government is currently funding the most expensive public inquiry ever mounted: to

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discover why paras gunned down demonstrators in Londonderry more than three decades ago. Some complain the Bloody Sunday inquiry is pointless, but it sends out an important message that strengthens the peace process – Catholic, Irish lives are as important as British, Protestant ones. What message do we send the Muslim world? The freedom for which we fight is compromised, even at home. A report in the Washington Post last year quoted US officials describing how they beat confessions out of al Qaeda suspects, forced them to stand in awkward positions for hours, and caused considerable stress through sleep deprivation. Far from shocking the nation, many Americans felt it a price worth paying. The notable criminal lawyer, Alan Dershowitz, argued that post 9/11, non-lethal torture is sometimes acceptable, providing judges issue warrants first.

The US says it wants Iraq to adopt a model of the American constitution. Yet it has already betrayed the spirit and letter of that famous document through the Patriot Act, which limits freedom of association, freedom of speech, the right to a speedy trial, and even legal representation.

The democracy we seek to defend is in a pretty ropey state anyway: widespread apathy, the rise of right-wing extremism, the manipulation of public policy by powerful corporations. Freedom is indeed a noble thing, but the world still waits to taste it.