

# Moral Imperative of Bradley Manning

**Exclusive:** Official Washington still glorifies George W. Bush's "successful surge" in Iraq while ignoring the wanton slaughter inflicted on Iraqis. So, there remains a high-level desire to harshly punish Pvt. Bradley Manning for exposing the horrific truth about that and other war crimes, writes ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Although we had to swelter in the Maryland sun on Saturday, I found the pre-trial rally at Ft. Meade to support Bradley Manning particularly spirit-filled. It seemed there was an unspoken but widely shared consciousness that Manning is as much Biblical prophet as Army private.

I think Manning can be seen as a classic prophet in the Abrahamic tradition. Such prophets take risks to expose injustice and challenge the rest of us to do the same. They also are a very large pain to those who oppress and a pain, as well, to those of us who would prefer not to have to bother about such things.

Prophets will neither acquiesce in injustice nor hide wrongdoing; they answer to a higher chain of command with very different "rules of engagement." Take Isaiah, for example, who is described as an eccentric, walking around for three full years "naked and barefoot." (Hat tip here to Rev. Howard Bess, for his recent reminder in "[Rethinking the Genesis Message](#)," that, whereas Bible stories are largely myth and cannot be read as history, they often witness to truth in a way that mere history cannot.)

What was Isaiah trying to say by his nakedness? Biblical scholars conclude that he sought a vivid way to demonstrate to the Israelites that, if their oppressive practices did not stop they too would be "naked and barefoot, their buttocks shamefully exposed." (Isa. 20:2-4) Or, more simply: It is not my nakedness that is shameful. It is yours those of you who have stripped yourselves of the vision with which you were blessed, a vision of justice and shalom.

Can we borrow Isaiah's eyesight to see and acknowledge that the abuse uncovered and revealed by Bradley Manning including the torture and slaughter of Iraqi civilians exposes the buttocks of us Americans? (And I refer not simply those in the chain of command, but the rest of us too. Are you starting to feel a draft on your derriere?)

In suggesting we all need to examine our consciences, I take my cue from a more recent prophet in the tradition of Isaiah, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, who insisted

that wherever injustice takes place, “few are guilty, but all are responsible.” Rabbi Heschel drove home the point, adding that, “indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself.”

### **Responsible If Unaware**

Those of us Americans who have seen and heard the U.S. Army Apache helicopter gun-barrel video showing the killing of a dozen civilians (including two Reuters journalists) in Baghdad on July 12, 2007, (during President George W. Bush’s much-heralded “troop surge”) can appreciate how that video, which has been given the apt title “Collateral Murder,” leaves our buttocks “shamefully exposed.”

The premier German TV program *Panorama*, unlike its American counterparts, replayed the most salient parts of the gun-barrel footage, but also put context around the incident in a short 60 Minutes-type segment. Those of us who had some role in the German version begged the producers of *Panorama* to “undub” the program. They acknowledged the need, made an exception to their corporate policy against “undubbing,” and what emerged is a 12-minute English version titled “Shooters Walk Free, Whistleblower Jailed.”

Lacking any real competition, the 12-minute English version is, in my view, the most straightforward depiction of what happened, including the war crime of murdering the “Good Samaritan,” who stopped to help one of the wounded.

War crime? Yes, war crime. “Justifying” the killing of a dozen people, including two journalists, based on the claim that a camera was mistaken for a gun and that therefore the killing was in keeping with the “Rules of Engagement,” as Defense Secretary Robert Gates claimed at the time, is already a stretch. But killing someone trying to help the wounded stretches that “justification” well beyond the breaking point. It is a war crime.

As Bradley Manning commented later, “The most alarming aspect of the video to me, however, was the seemingly delightful bloodlust they [the Apache helicopter shooters] appeared to have.”

### **What Moved Manning?**

As I see it, Manning’s motivation was not necessarily religious, but rather a profoundly human reaction of the kind described in the Cain and Abel story in Genesis. I think most of us understand the imperative to be our brother’s keeper, but I do find the Genesis story helpful in sorting through these thorny issues.

What we need to bear in mind is that Genesis is not the first book of the Bible’s Old Testament that was written; it is one of the last. It was composed

during and after the Babylonian captivity (587 to 538 B.C.E.) as a counter-story and repudiation of Babylon's religion of empire.

That kind of "religion" was based largely on the concept of redemptive violence as the way to defeat evil and stave off chaos until the next time violence would be seen as unavoidably necessary. (How fortunate that we 21<sup>st</sup> Century sophisticates have long since risen above that primitive concept!)

Counter-stories are often tools designed to repair the damage inflicted on people by abusive power systems. That's what Genesis was all about. The Israelites desperately needed to teach their children a narrative that would negate the influence of the violence-prone, opulent Babylon their home for half a century. (Have any of you noticed how seductive the redemptive violence ethos can be, even or especially in nations that claim "city-on-the-hill status?")

One story in Genesis is key to this understanding: Abel meets a violent end at the hands of his brother Cain. When God asks Cain where his brother is, Cain gives a Babylonian-empire-type response: "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

In his *Come Out, My People: God's Call out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond*, Wes Howard-Brook highlights the impact of this passage, pointing out that with this question and Cain's response, "Genesis undermines Babylon's claim to divinely authorized violence."

The murderer has no escape when faced with this question because there is someone who hears the victim's blood crying out. These words, valid for the whole history of humankind, protect the person as a creature of God from other people. No cover story, no rules of engagement, can justify Cain's act. God hears the cry of victims even from the bloody ground. And, we can add, even from the bloodstained streets and sidewalks of Baghdad.

Howard-Brook makes the point that biblical "myths" can shed light on human behavior and misbehavior even today. I am not suggesting that Bradley Manning was consciously motivated by the "Am I my brother's keeper" story in Genesis. It would be a good question to ask him. I do think this story/myth can provide both guide and warning as to how we humans are to treat one another.

### **Manning and Goliath**

Having just begun his fourth year in prison, the "speedy trial" that is every citizen's right starts today when Bradley Manning's actual court martial gets under way at Ft. Meade.

Indignities galore have tainted the pre-trial proceedings. Perhaps the most

egregious travesty of justice occurred on April 21, 2011, with what must be the “mother of all command-influence” assertions. At a fundraiser in San Francisco, Commander-in-Chief Barack Obama was videotaped claiming that Manning “broke the law.” Taking their cue from their commander, zealous Army prosecutors down the chain of command are throwing the book at Manning, even accusing him of “aiding the enemy” and demanding a life sentence.

The objective of the Obama administration is transparent. It has little to do with the law, but rather is designed to make an object lesson of Manning. The administration wants to deter others truth-tellers who might also be tempted to reveal information that is labeled secret to hide oppression and abuse including, in this case, U.S. war crimes.

Despite all this, Manning has kept his cool. Readers may not have learned the following from the “mainstream media,” but on Feb. 28, 2013, when Manning was finally given a chance to speak, after countless “pre-trial” Army court sessions, he said this:

“The video [of the July 12, 2007, Apache helicopter attack] depicted several individuals being engaged by an aerial weapons team. At first I did not consider the video very special, as I have viewed countless other war-porn type videos depicting combat. However, the recording of audio comments by the aerial weapons team crew and the second engagement in the video of an unarmed bongo truck troubled me. ...

“The fact neither CENTCOM or Multi National Forces Iraq or MNF-I would not voluntarily release the video troubled me further. It was clear to me that the event happened because the aerial weapons team mistakenly identified Reuters employees as a potential threat and that the people in the bongo truck were merely attempting to assist the wounded.

“The people in the van were not a threat but merely ‘good Samaritans’. The most alarming aspect of the video to me, however, was the seemly delightful bloodlust they [the weapons team members] appeared to have.

“This dehumanized the individuals they were engaging and seemed to not value human life by referring to them as ‘dead bastards’ and congratulating each other on the ability to kill in large numbers. At one point in the video there is an individual on the ground attempting to crawl to safety. The individual is seriously wounded.

“Instead of calling for medical attention to the location, one of the aerial weapons team crew members verbally asks for the wounded person to pick up a weapon so that he can have a reason to engage. For me, this seems similar to a

child torturing ants with a magnifying glass.

“While saddened by the aerial weapons team crew’s lack of concern about human life, I was disturbed by the response of the discovery of injured children at the scene. In the video, you can see the bongo truck driving up to assist the wounded individual. In response the aerial weapons team crew ... repeatedly request authorization to fire on the bongo truck and, once granted, they engage the vehicle at least six times.

“Shortly after the second engagement, a mechanized infantry unit arrives at the scene. Within minutes, the aerial weapons team crew learns that children were in the van and despite the injuries the crew exhibits no remorse. Instead, they downplay the significance of their actions, saying quote ‘Well, it’s their fault for bringing their kid’s into a battle’ unquote.

“The aerial weapons team crew members sound like they lack sympathy for the children or the parents. Later in a particularly disturbing manner, the aerial weapons team verbalizes enjoyment at the sight of one of the ground vehicles driving over a body – or one of the bodies. As I continued my research, I found an article discussing the book, *The Good Soldiers*, written by Washington Post writer David Finkel.

“In Mr. Finkel’s book, he writes about the aerial weapons team attack. As, I read an online excerpt in Google Books, I followed Mr. Finkel’s account of the event belonging to the video. I quickly realize that Mr. Finkel was quoting, I feel in verbatim, the audio communications of the aerial weapons team crew.

“It is clear to me that Mr. Finkel obtained access and a copy of the video during his tenure as an embedded journalist. I was aghast at Mr. Finkel’s portrayal of the incident. Reading his account, one would believe the engagement was somehow justified as ‘payback’ for an earlier attack that led to the death of a soldier. For me it’s all a big mess, and I am left wondering what these things mean, and how it all fits together. It burdens me emotionally. ...

“I hoped that the public would be as alarmed as me about the conduct of the aerial weapons team crew members. I wanted the American public to know that not everyone in Iraq and Afghanistan are targets that needed to be neutralized, but rather people who were struggling to live in the pressure cooker environment of what we call asymmetric warfare.”

### **Dangerous Information**

A final comment or two before I leave for the start of Manning’s trial. Is it not transparent what our government wants to keep hidden from us? Is it not a safe bet that the court proceedings will be orchestrated such that what remains

hidden will not be revealed? But truth has a way of seeping out. I trust that it will.

Friends in the Los Angeles Catholic Worker have given this very serious issue a light touch with bumper sticker: "Jesus Loves WikiLeaks Mark 4:22." Here's the verse from Mark: "Whatever is hidden away will be brought out into the open, and whatever is covered up will be uncovered."

Which prompts the question: Where are the leaders of Christian institutions on all this? Deafening silence.

Sometimes it takes a compassionate but truth-telling outsider to throw light on our country, its leaders, and its policies. After the attacks of 9/11, Bishop Peter Storey of South Africa, a long-time fearless opponent of the earlier apartheid regime, offered this prophetic word:

"I have often suggested to American Christians that the only way to understand their mission is to ask what it might have meant to witness faithfully to Jesus in the heart of the Roman Empire. ...

"American preachers have a task more difficult, perhaps, than those faced by us under South Africa's apartheid, or by Christians under Communism. We had obvious evils to engage; you have to unwrap your culture from years of red, white, and blue myth.

"You have to expose, and confront, the great disconnect between the kindness, compassion, and caring of most American people and the ruthless way American power is experienced, directly and indirectly, by the poor of the earth. You have to help good people see how they have let their institutions do their sinning for them.

"This is not easy among people who really believe that their country does nothing but good. But it is necessary, not only for their future, but for us all. All around the world there are those who believe in the basic goodness of the American people, who agonize with you in your pain, but also long to see your human goodness translated into a different, more compassionate way of relating with the rest of this bleeding planet."

### **A Charism Moment**

Bradley Manning has given us a chance to reflect on all this. It is up to us now to unwrap the red, white and blue myth and ask ourselves if we are up to taking the kind of risks required by the times, if we really believe we are "our brother's keeper."

As we did our best on Saturday to wave our Veterans for Peace flags, I thought back to the President's May 23 speech on drones and on Guantanamo. With eight American flags behind him and one on his lapel, Barack Obama referred to the "ruthless demagogues who litter history." He then added that "the flag of the United States will still wave from small town cemeteries ... to distant outposts abroad. And that flag will still stand for freedom."

And I thought of the late Howard Zinn's observation: "There is no flag large enough to cover the shame of killing innocent people."

Obama concluded his long speech with his customary: "And may God bless the United States of America." If there is a God of Justice (and I believe there is), we run the risk of forfeiting that blessing, unless and until we stop playing the role of violence-prone Cain; that is, if we fail to recognize, as Bradley Manning did, the mandate to be keepers, not oppressors, of our brothers and sisters.

God will not be mocked or fooled by flag-waving.

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