

Big Bad Iran

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JUST HOW BAD was the recent Iranian 'Hostage' crisis for the British armed forces?

Firstly, regardless of where, just how were they captured? To be fair, I'm not a military strategist or master tactician. However I would have thought a battleship of the Royal Navy (Britannia rules the waves and all that) should be able to offer some protection against a couple of inflatable dinghies no matter how 'heavily armed' they were.

Whatever the logistics of the situation the simple fact was that 15 armed service personnel were left in a situation where they couldn't feasibly protect themselves nor could a Royal Navy battleship. It seems they were operating on a 'fingers crossed and hope for the best' basis. In conflict situations this kind of attitude usually comes back and bites you. Add in the factor of the Iranian personnel 'Detained/kidnapped' in the Kurdish region of Northern Iraq a few days previously and the general shaky UK Iranian relations and you have an 'incident' waiting to happen.

I don't want to dwell too much on the performances of the personnel during their 'stay' in Iran as they were exploited mercilessly and callously. However in keeping with the incident as a whole they didn't seem to cover themselves in any particular glory.

What is in need of comment is how the government inspired media covered the situation. It was cynical, exploitative and quite obviously 'agenda led' reporting. From day one we were bombarded with insidious demonisation of the Iranian captors. It was as if we were expecting the imminent public execution of the prisoners, or their heads on spikes in front of a baying mob of religious zealots. How the government/media must have been hoping and praying to be able to show pictures of battered and bruised captors (such as

the ones of the two airmen shot down during the first Gulf War). The disappointment was palpable as images of the men and women came out looking well fed and relaxed. Naturally showing those images was labelled cruel and manipulative. There was always the proviso as to what must be happening when the cameras were not on. "Who knows what hell they must be going through?"

The phrase 'pots and kettles' immediately springs to mind. One wouldn't have to delve too deeply into the coalition's track record to be shamed (If this government knows the meaning of the word) into silence. The appalling record of treatment of detainees has been well documented so there is no need to revisit that in depth now. Though, needless to say, given the choice I would prefer 'the hell' of being called Mr Bean and laughed at, than some of the treatment coalition forces have dished out to prisoners in their charge.

The UK has a far from pristine record on this front. One can't help but think of the Iraqi detainee who (in the words of an independent coroner) died while in custody from injuries 'consistent to those seen in a road traffic accident'. I'm quite sure he could have coped with any amount of 'media circus' exploitation, or being called 'Abdul' and laughed at to his captor's hearts content. Unfortunately he didn't get that option. Our highly trained, well disciplined, efficient, and above all defenders of a 'civilised' society saw to it that a different fate awaited him. In addition to this, shamefully our 'wonderful envy of the world' justice system conspired to release with 'no case to answer' the main perpetrators of the crime, save one sacrificial 'scapegoat' given a year's custodial sentence for 'mistreating prisoners in his charge'. His commanding officer who had ordered the 'robust interrogation' was apparently blameless.

This is entirely consistent with the



government agenda (so readily followed by some of the media) which is summed up in an easy to remember phrase: "**WE ARE GOOD, THEY ARE BAD**".

The Iranians say we were in their waters, but that MUST be a lie. They have our personnel in detention, so they MUST be mistreating them. Every opportunity must be exploited to reinforce the mindset that the Iranians are uncivilised, untrustworthy, mean, callous and cruel. Even to the unprecedented extent of allowing some of the personnel to 'sell' their stories to the media on their release. This must have been seen as a final chance to incense the general public with tales of horrific treatment at the hands of evil captors. Thankfully this plan for the most part backfired and served only to increase the embarrassment of the Government and armed forces in equal measure.

This final debacle was completely in keeping with the ham fisted way the government approached the whole situation. The threats and the tough talking, the demands and insinuation of dire consequences were presumably aimed at impressing someone (though it was not quite sure who). This approach was doomed to failure. Anyone with even the most basic grasp of Middle Eastern diplomacy would know that.

This raises a very important question. Why did Blair's government adopt this wilful and obviously wrong stance? There are a lot of things that can be said about this present government (the vast majority uncomplimentary). However, 'stupid' certainly isn't one of them. Could it be that far from wanting a speedy settlement to the affair, this opportunistic, amoral, superficial, spin-orientated bunch of chancers saw a golden 'Heaven sent' media coup. ➤