

Iran - and Civility

It was good to see Americans get angry at Iran's barbaric behavior. Some feared that Americans had lost the capacity, along with their national self-respect.

The high-jacking of the American consulate in Teheran had less to do with the mob's desire to get the Shah back, than with its desire to attack the U.S. After all, when the Shah was in Mexico, they didn't kidnap the Mexican officials in Iran to demand the Shah's return.

So that's the name of the game: twist Uncle Sam's tail. All of the desperate little countries are doing it, with or without the help of the Soviet Union. Why?

The U.S. has engaged in some highly questionable foreign policy, at times, but it is really not responsible for Iran's poverty, nor, obviously, for its persistent state of oppression. And we are even less responsible for the deplorable conditions in many of the other new countries which are making us their pin-cushion. But the U.S. is singled out for the blame.

The fact is that the U.S. has become "the Jew" for the Third-World set. We serve as the scapegoat for their various political purposes. Now with the U.S. and Israel as the joint villain for much of the Third World, there are unparalleled scapegoating possibilities.

Of course, the scapegoating victim always invites more attack when he acts like a helpless victim. The U.S. has had a tendency to do that in recent years. President Carter reversed that trend on Monday when he announced

that the U.S. was going to refuse to accept Iranian oil. A lot can happen between Monday and Friday, but all things remaining equal, it would be important for every citizen to write the President supporting that action.

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You will have an additional chance - on the night of November 21 - to come out for general civility in our lives.

What is civility? Well, it is not terrorizing helpless hostages in a foreign embassy. Nor, indeed, is it mugging old people in the streets or beating up passengers on a Muni bus.

Civility is a matter of most Americans wanting to deport some Iranian students but not wanting to beat them up in the street. Civility is represented by American policy not to extradite any person to a country where he is unlikely to get a fair trial, no matter how much we may dislike him or his crime.

Civility describes a prevailing state of politeness; it means normally having a certain basic respect for other people's lives. Civility is the fundamental building block of any decent society. It precedes justice or law. It prevails in a society because it first prevails among the people of that society. The apparent breakdown of civility in our cities, and in the world, is the single most frightening thing that is happening.

Civility starts with the sense that each of us, while important enough, is not the center of the world. Self-soaked people are not capable of civility. It is in fact the religious impulse which stands opposed to the self-centered impulse - not the perverted impulses of a Khoumeini, or of cults which are closed and built around self involvement; but the open impulses of the root Judaic religion.

That is why the Jews and Catholics are sharing an unprecedented prayer service at 7:30 p.m. on November 21 at St. Mary's Cathedral, on Gough Street.

It will be held simply to give testimony to "the spiritual dimension of human existence." At the least, your presence will be a vote for civility.