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Humiliation and Herd-Think

By Dan Sanchez
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Libertarian stand-up comic Doug Stanhope has said:

I would only quibble with the “nothing but” part. The collectivist herd-think that is nationalism also teaches you to take offense at imagined insults that have absolutely nothing to do with you personally.

Take for example the outrage of American nationalists over President Obama’s dealings with Iran. They denounce the nuclear deal that his administration negotiated (which on Saturday led to the lifting of international sanctions on Iran) as a total capitulation that makes all of America look weak.

Never mind that the entire Iran nuclear scare is, as Gareth Porter has thoroughly demonstrated, a phony, manufactured crisis in the first place. Never mind that the peace deal actually makes individual Americans more secure by decreasing the likelihood that their sons and savings will be sucked into yet another disastrous war in the Middle East.

For the nationalist, what is imperative is that “muh herd” must come off looking, not rational and wise, but intimidating and domineering. If not, he grumbles about “national humiliation.”

This attitude toward Iran is most vividly displayed in the political cartoons of Michael Ramirez at *Investor's Business Daily*. Many years ago, Ramirez got into hot water over a cartoon deemed offensively critical of Israel. Now he seems to be performing penance by pouring from his pen an endless stream of propaganda against Israel's nemesis Iran. Ramirez's innumerable Iran cartoons invariably depict the leaders of Iran as hard-nosed, implacable America-haters, while Obama is drawn as a pin-headed, pusillanimous appeaser.

Days ago, Ramirez and his fellow anti-Iran humiliation-mongers gleefully found their most usefully symbolic image when photographs were released of U.S. sailors being arrested by Iranian soldiers. They had been briefly detained by the Revolutionary Guard after illegally (and mysteriously) entering Iranian territorial waters. After the Obama administration apologized (horror!) for the encroachment, the sailors were freed without injury.

Ramirez then drew a cartoon captioned "The Obama Iran Policy" depicting Uncle Sam surrendering alongside the sailors, all kneeling with their hands on their heads. The photograph that the cartoon was based on spread throughout the conservative reaches of the internet, accompanied with howls of indignation.

Never mind that the sailors had no business being in a foreign country's territorial waters. Never mind that Iran has cause to be wary, having for decades been targetted by the US and its allies for sabotage and assassination. Never mind that for a *quarter of a century*, the U.S. imposed a brutal dictatorship over Iran after overthrowing their government in a C.I.A. coup. Never mind that in 1988, from the same waters where the sailors were stopped, the U.S. Navy blew an Iranian airliner out of the sky, killing 290 passengers, including 66 children, for which the U.S. has never apologized. Shortly afterward, in a separate context, Vice President George H.W. Bush warmed the hearts of nationalists by saying, "I will never apologize for the United States — I don't care what the facts are... I'm not an apologize-for-America kind of guy."

And most fundamentally, never mind that the sailors are individual persons whose overseas adventures are their own affairs undertaken at their own risk, and whose run-ins with foreigners have no bearing on whether you or I have been "insulted" while over here minding our own business.

And while we're discussing humiliating positions, how about the obscene poses that U.S. troops and C.I.A. agents forced Iraqis to assume in Abu Ghraib prison? As leaked photos revealed, prisoners were stripped naked and then leashed like dogs, piled into human pyramids, forced to assume sexual positions and perform sex acts, and smeared with human excreta. And then there is the infamous photo of a hooded Abu Ghraib prisoner standing on a box with arms outstretched and wires extending from his hands. The U.S. never apologized for those ghoulish humiliations, and American nationalists don't seem to mind. In fact conservative talk show hosts defended the abuses. Rush Limbaugh said, "You know, these people are being fired at every day. I'm talking about people having a good time, these people. You ever heard of emotional release?" And Michael Savage said that, "we need more of the humiliation tactics, not less."

According to herd-think, none of the hypocrisy highlighted above matters. because herd-think has no use for universally applicable moral principles. All that matters is identity politics. The troops are in the fold, while Iranians and Iraqis are not. Case closed.

Moreover, the troops hold a special place in the fold. They are not sheep, but sheep-dogs, as Chris Kyle was instructed as a boy in *American Sniper*. Never mind that sheep-dogs work not for the sake of the sheep, but for the sake of the shepherd's wool and mutton. And when it comes to the humiliation of sheep at the hands of shepherds and sheep-dogs, the herd mind is extremely tolerant.

U.S. sailors briefly on their knees in foreign territory is intolerable for the herd-minded right. Yet, according to the same cast of mind, every citizen of the "Land of the Free" is obliged to meekly "prone out" whenever a jumpy cop gets a case of the nerves, and to readily submit to cavity searches and blood draws, on pain of summary execution.

A photo of government employees with their hands on their heads is "humiliating" to a nationalist. Yet, at the airport, when he himself, his wife, his son, and his daughter are forced to put their *own* hands in the air while employees of that *same* government grope their genitals or snap irradiating nude photos, it is all just a matter of "national security" to be obediently and impotently endured.

As Tyrion Lannister mordantly said in *Game of Thrones*, "Your loyalty to your captors is touching." Such "capture-bonding," as psychologists call it, is yet another thing Doug Stanhope might have added to his enumeration of what nationalism teaches. The nation-state is the Stockholm syndrome institutionalized.