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Driving SUVs and flying B-24s in times of reverence

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman recently noted that 10th-graders in Saudi Arabia are taught that Muslims must consider the infidels their enemy. This distorts the fundamental tenets of Islam and reflects a schism between the sophisticated pro-western attitudes of the Saudi ruling elite and hostility to the west among the masses. We have here a failure



of reverence: Religious belief is twisted to promote hatred of fellow human beings.

Friedman also reported that in 1988 the United States acceded to Saudi diplomatic pressure to remove our Arabic-speaking ambassador. Why? He was engaging in dialogue with Saudis outside the ruling class. We have here two failures of reverence. Saudi rulers fail in reverence by denying their citizens freedom of thought, American policy-makers by agreeing to act un-American in favor of American economic and strategic interests.

Friedman concludes that we cannot depend on Saudi rulers to control their underclasses, so we should get rid of our

gas-guzzling SUVs. Friedman's logic is impeccable, but it is nothing new.

We already heard it from Jimmy Carter's low-thermostat White House. We already saw it popularized in Sydney Pollack's post-Watergate intelligence thriller "Three Days of the Condor." In Pollack's film, a renegade organization within the CIA systematically murders employees within its own network so that oil will continue to flow from the Middle East to the United States. In the final scene, intelligence officer Cliff Robertson explains that if heating fuel were suddenly cut off, citizens of the United States would not question the morality of the means by which oil was obtained, they would just tell the government to go get it.

The sad thing about Friedman's equally "realist" analysis of our current situation is that our choice is defined entirely in terms of expediency and not of any moral responsibilities we might have long ago felt as citizens of the most powerful country in a world of limited resources. We have here another failure of reverence.

I take my terminology from my friend Paul Woodruff, head of the Plan II Honors Program at University of Texas at Austin. In his highly readable new book "Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten

Virtue," Woodruff explains that reverence is "the well-developed capacity to have feelings of awe, respect and shame when these are the right feelings to have." Reverence, so defined, should permeate our social relationships and guide our actions, individually and collectively.

Woodruff sees that reverence "has more to do with politics than with religion. We can easily imagine religion without reverence; we see it, for example, wherever religion leads people into aggressive war or violence. But power without reverence — that is a catastrophe for all concerned. Power without reverence is aflame with arrogance. . . . Politics without reverence is blind to the general good and deaf to advice from people who are powerless."

A scholar friend in the relatively powerless and long-divided country of Cyprus sent me a small clipping from the Greek Cypriote newspaper *Kypros Semera*. The headline screams "Mavre Lista Demosiographon Made in USA." It reports that the American embassy at the direction of ambassador Donald Butler and the station-master of the CIA in Cyprus has drafted a blacklist (*mavre lista*) of Cypriote journalists (newspaper, radio and television) who "have not held the necessary position" on anti-U.S. terrorist

attacks, the U.S. response to them and U.S. military actions in Afghanistan. My friend wondered how the United States expected to rally support for its cause by acting so contrary to espoused American values. In other words, she detects yet another failure of reverence.

Stephen Ambrose in "The Wild Blue" writes about the brave boys who flew and died (at 50 percent casualty rates) in B-24's over Europe in World War II. The very act of flying one six-to-eight-hour mission in these aluminum-skinned bomb-deliverers was physical torture and psychological hell. It was also a supreme act of courage — "peacenik" presidential candidate George McGovern flew 35 missions. In Ambrose's opinion, "[i]t would be an exaggeration to say that the B-24 won the war for the Allies. But don't ask how they could have won the war without it."

It is hard to believe that these reverent men risked and sacrificed their lives so that we could now help put our world at risk by driving SUVs and arrogantly subverting our own democratic values in small foreign countries.

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