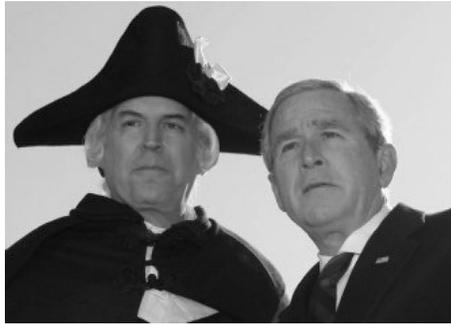


## **TWO PRESIDENTS NAMED GEORGE AND THE GOLDEN RULE** **The First Follows it; the Second Doesn't**



"What does that mean, 'outrages upon human dignity'?  
That's a statement that is wide open to interpretation."

--George W. Bush

By Nick Gier, Professor Emeritus, University of Idaho (ngier@uidaho.edu)

The Golden Rule is a basic moral principle for most of the world's civilizations. It is found in ancient Greece, India, China, and the New Testament. With regard to the rules of war, I praise George Washington on his 275<sup>th</sup> birthday for embracing the Golden Rule, and I condemn George W. Bush for not following it.

After a skirmish at Drake's Farm in 1777, seven revolutionary soldiers lay wounded. They offered to surrender, expecting humane treatment. The British response was horrific. Here is an eye witness account: "they dashed out their brains with their muskets. They ran them through with their bayonets, and made them like sieves."

The British could have justified their actions by the same reasoning that some today rationalize the mistreatment of terror suspects. The British criticized Americans for not following the rules of military engagement. Specifically, the British lost many men because of American tree snipers, whom the British called terrorists.

To the British, the Americans rebels were insurgents; they were unlawful combatants. Most important, they were not a sovereign nation under international law; so American soldiers deserved no special protection.

Returning to the massacre at Drake Farm, there were American soldiers who wanted revenge. Washington calmed their angry emotions with a principled argument. He declared that "we are fighting for a cause and our cause requires that we behave with honor." There was to be no retribution: captured enemy soldiers were to be housed, fed, and clothed and treated with humanity.

There were about 900 Hessian soldiers captured at the Battle of Trenton. They expected the worst, but they were treated with a practical expression of the Golden Rule. In the end Hessian mercenaries were so impressed with American behavior that 25 percent of them decided to stay on and become citizens.

Robert Krulwich, from whose Feb. 17 NPR commentary I draw these facts, concludes as follows: "Washington's decision not to seek revenge, his choice to do the honorable, the moral and the right thing in war, help turn an army of invaders into an army of settlers, and citizens, and neighbors."

Let us reflect for a moment and determine whether the Bush administration's policies follow the Golden Rule.

- Would we want other nations to declare that they could take preemptive action against us if they considered us a threat?
- Would we want other nations to hold our citizens indefinitely, regardless of what they did, without any judicial review?
- Would we allow other nations to use interrogation techniques on our citizens, including simulated drowning, hours-long stress positions, and sexual and religious humiliation?
- Would we allow other nations to kidnap people off our streets and send them to a country we knew practiced torture?

I trust that your answer to each of these questions is an emphatic "No."

Hold-outs may still say that the so-called War on Terror is different and that justifies violating international law. Given their perception of American rebel misbehavior, the British could have said exactly the same thing.

The first President George, even while his soldiers were on the receiving end of brutal actions, embraced the Golden Rule, preserved his virtue and the honor of a

glorious young nation in the making. Is the current President George undermining what previous great Americans have so carefully built up?

At a ceremony at Mt. Vernon on February 19, 2007, President Bush declared that his administration is fulfilling Washington's vision by fighting a war in defense of American liberties. What many Americans see, however, are limitations to their freedom at home and abroad. Bush's own intelligence reports admits that war in Iraq has alienated the moderate Muslims that we need on our side.

Bush concluded his Mt. Vernon speech with the following words: "Over the centuries, America has succeeded because we have always tried to maintain the decency and the honor of our first President. His example guided us in his time; it guides us in our time, and it will guide us for all time." I submit the current George is not following the example of the first George.

Bush described George Washington's will as "unbreakable," and the will of the current George is equally stubborn. There is, however, a dramatic difference: the first president's will was guided by the Golden Rule, but the current president is guided an immoral and aggressive unilateralism.

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Many of his columns and articles can be read at [www.NickGier.com](http://www.NickGier.com).