

The Medal of Freedom as Medal of Shame, Duplicity, and Failure?

George Washington once said, "I hope I shall possess firmness and virtue enough to maintain what I consider the most enviable of all titles, the character of an honest man." What might President Washington have thought about President Bush's standards for judging meritorious service?

From artists to astronauts, politicians to former Presidents, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, has been bestowed upon those whom our Presidents and citizenry have esteemed the highest. President Truman created the award and President Kennedy broadened the medal's scope to its present standard: for "especially meritorious contributions to the security or national interest of the United States, World Peace or cultural or other significant public or private endeavors."

Past Medal of Freedom awardees include Pope John Paul II, Simon Wiesenthal, retired Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, Frank Sinatra, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. They were leaders and examples among those who have been rightfully honored with our nation's highest distinction.

In 2004, President Bush awarded the Medal of Freedom to three men central to his Iraq policy. Bush described retired Gen. Tommy Franks, former CIA Director George Tenet and former Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III, as having "pivotal roles in great events and whose efforts have made our country more secure and advanced the cause of human liberty."

None of these men deserved the Medal of Freedom as awarded by the likes of Harry Truman or George Herbert Walker Bush. To award our highest civilian distinction to men who have besmirched the ideals of our nation, compromised our national and international reputation and are among the architects of a disastrous Iraq policy is reprehensible. Contrary to President Bush's encomium of them, those men have made our country less secure and have significantly damaged the cause of human freedom. Nevertheless, American legislators and ordinary citizens alike have sat back and continued to allow this Administration the luxury of trampling the Medal of Freedom into a Medal of Shame.

Retired Gen. Tommy Franks

Franks, the retired four-star Army general who initially commanded U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, received the Medal for having "led the forces that fought and won two wars in the

defense of the world's security and helped liberate more than 50 million people from two of the worst tyrannies in the world," said Bush. The arguments for Franks' dereliction of duty with respect to conveying insufficient troop numbers to occupy and stabilize Iraq post invasion are well known. He allowed Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld to dominate war planning, and essentially to fire General Shinseki (for saying we'd need "at least several hundred thousand" boots on the ground), which led to the insufficient troop numbers to stabilize the country following the invasion. What hasn't been so well known until recently is that, in his retirement, Gen. Franks received \$100,000 to endorse the Coalition to Salute America's Heroes Foundation. Using the cachet of his General's stars, Tommy Franks urged well-meaning and generous Americans to contribute to a charity currently under investigation for fraud. He profited handsomely from the charitable instincts of patriotic Americans to support those troops injured under his dereliction of duty – when in fact only some 25% of those donations actually made it to those troops. General Tommy Franks truly earned a Medal of Shame.

George Tenet

Tenet left the CIA in July 2004 after seven years as director. He has been criticized for intelligence failures before the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks and the never-proven pre-war allegations that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. His now infamous "slam dunk" assurance to Bush regarding the outcome of an invasion of Iraq led to a significant untruth (the famous 16 words about how Saddam Hussein had obtained or tried to obtain nuclear-related material in Niger) in Bush's State of the Union speech on January 28, 2003, and to Secretary of State Colin Powell's speech at the UN in which he declared that there was proof of WMD.

Yet Bush credited him as "one of the first to recognize and address the threat to America from radical networks." He said that after September 11th, Tenet was "ready with a plan to strike back at al Qaeda and to topple the Taliban." Since Iraq had nothing to do with al Qaeda's attacks on US targets, how did the invasion and occupation of Iraq "strike back" at it? With the Taliban in resurgence in Afghanistan and the 'Talibanization' of parts of Iraq itself, how has the Taliban been "toppled"? George Tenet's Medal of Duplicity was well-deserved, indeed.

L. Paul Bremer III

Bremer was the top civilian U.S. official in postwar Iraq, overseeing the transfer of power to an interim Iraqi government. "For 14 months Jerry Bremer worked day and night in difficult and dangerous conditions to stabilize the country, to help its people rebuild and to establish a political process that would lead to justice and liberty," Mr. Bush said.

Bremer suggested the United States had paid a price in Iraq in the immediate aftermath of major combat operations because it did not have enough troops in place to stop the looting. The reality was that Bremer discarded policies and activities that had been put in place by retired Gen. Jay

Garner based on lessons learned from previous experience, and he was the one who imposed the now-infamous de-Baathification process, which cost many American lives and untold billions in financing. He disbanded the Iraqi army and he purged the country's entire governing group. He continually and deliberately misinformed Washington about what was really going on in Iraq.

George Bush claimed that Bremer worked "to stabilize the country" – but there has never been any stability since the invasion; that Bremer worked "to help its people rebuild" – but it is not at all clear what has been rebuilt, except perhaps the infrastructure of corruption; and that Bremer worked "to establish a political process... to justice and liberty" – but the processes which have flourished have resulted in ethnic cleansing of whole sectors of Baghdad and elsewhere. "Justice and liberty" for whom, Mr. Bremer and Mr. President? L. Paul Bremer, III richly merits the Medal of Failure bestowed upon him by President Bush.

Rekindling the Spirit of Freedom's Heroes

If General Tommy Franks, George Tenet, and L. Paul Bremer, III had had even the slightest hint of honor, decency, and self-respect, they would never have accepted the Medal of Freedom to begin with. They would undoubtedly not have put their names on self-congratulatory books, from which each, presumably, has profited handsomely – while courageous and honorable veterans who fought in their names go hungry and homeless this very night.

Bestowing the Medal of Freedom on three of the individuals most responsible for the Iraq debacle insults former award winners, our courageous military personnel, and the American people.

Let us hope that future Presidents choose more wisely upon whom to bestow our nation's highest civilian honors. For this Administration has brought disgrace to the Medal that Presidents Truman and Kennedy established to give the nation and the world ideals and role models to live up to.

Perhaps Franks, Tenet, and Bremer might someday develop some honor, decency, and self-respect and thereupon give back the Medals of Shame, Duplicity, and Failure they accepted. Only then might the Medal of Freedom have a chance to regain its lost dignity and gravitas.

Let's not hold our collective breaths, however.

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