

Collateral damage—Texas child hangs himself after viewing Saddam Hussein lynching

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A 10-year-old boy in Texas hanged himself from his bunk bed in an apparent accident after having seen the execution of Saddam Hussein on television. The child of Guatemalan immigrants, Sergio Pelico was found dead on New Year's Eve by a relative who was watching the children while their mother Sara Pelico DeLeon was at work. He had pulled a slip-knotted rope around his neck, mimicking what he had seen on TV.

Essentially the same tragic scenario was played out in at least three other countries in the wake of the televised broadcast from the Iraqi execution chamber. Also on New Year's Eve, a 9-year-old Pakistani boy, Mubashar Ali, hanged himself with the help of his 10-year-old sister. Three days later, 15-year-old Moon Moon Karmarkar hanged herself from a ceiling fan in the suburbs of Kolkata, India. And in Saudi Arabia, a 12-year-old boy in Hafr al-Baten, near the Kuwaiti border, climbed on a chair and hung himself with metal wire from a door frame in his family's home. Security officials said that the child had watched coverage of Saddam Hussein's hanging.

Few details of the Pelico family's circumstances have been reported, but those that are available are typical of working class immigrants from Central America and other countries, who live in Houston and cities across the US. Reliance on an extended family network, a father who lives apart from the family in New Jersey, no resources for childcare—while the mother works on a Sunday—other than neighboring relatives looking in, tragically in this instance, not often enough. Nor does Pelico's family have enough money for a funeral; the family is trying to raise money to bury the boy in Guatemala.

Family members have connected Sergio's tragic death with the TV news coverage of Saddam Hussein's execution, aired intensively in the days following the

Iraqi ex-leader's state killing. One of the boy's uncles, Julio Gustavo said that Sergio was upset by what he saw and had to be reassured that the killing was "OK," because Saddam was "real bad."

"I don't think he thought it was real," Gustavo said. "They showed them putting the noose around his neck and everything. Why show that on TV?"

Indeed, this was apparently a question that the television executives themselves debated in the wake of the lynching, attempting to determine whether and how much of the video to show. In the end, prurient sensationalism won out, and the footage of Saddam Hussein with a noose around his neck was broadcast, together with incessant references to the "butcher of Baghdad."

According to the Hollywood Reporter/Reuters, the networks ABC and CBS said they wouldn't air the full execution if the video became available. "We're very aware that we're coming into people's living rooms and that there could be children watching," CBS News senior vice-president Linda Mason said.

Be that as it may, the gruesome footage was still shown. If anything, the impact of the somewhat abbreviated version is more ghastly—for what it attempts to hide. And the spectacle of the hanging was supplemented by images of sections of the Shia Iraqi population rejoicing.

However, the effort to turn Hussein's execution into a triumph for the American occupation has backfired. After limiting itself to showing excerpts from the official video, the television networks were upstaged by an unedited video taken by an Iraqi official with a cell phone and circulated over the Internet.

In this version, ski-masked guards can be heard taunting Hussein, shouting the name of the radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, making it obvious that

this was a sectarian lynching. Hussein's relative dignity under the circumstances has made him into a martyr across the Arab world, even where he had been previously been viewed with hostility.

No doubt another viewer in Texas was watching the video of Hussein's execution over New Year's weekend. While reportedly asleep on his ranch in Crawford Texas at the time of the execution, President Bush knew it would be going forward even though his administration has since tried to distance itself from the timing of the botched event. His official comment was that Hussein's show trial had been fair, and that he had received "the kind of justice he denied the victims of his brutal regime."

In celebrating the lynching of Hussein as justice, the administration, as in so many other things, stands in sharp contradiction to the broad sentiments of the American people. This one more grisly spectacle produced by the US occupation of Iraq was viewed in the US, as around the world, with revulsion and shame.

And, in the case of Sergio Pelico, the crimes carried out by US imperialism in Iraq have produced a tragic echo in the US itself in the death of a young boy.



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