ESSAY

# Conduct Unbecoming

## The fiasco of the captured sailors reveals a changing Britain

BY MICHAEL ELLIOTT

**Navy blues** *Released mariners before returning to Britain*

THERE'S STIFF COMPETITION—THE handling of mad cow disease, the royal family's years of dysfunction—but it is hard to think of anything in modern times that has held Britain up to such, and such richly deserved, international contempt as the case of the 15 captured mariners in the Shatt al Arab. There was the original sin; messing about in lightly armed little boats in a waterway contested by Iran—a bit like poking a mad dog in the eye without being prepared to clobber it with a big stick if it bites. There has been the miserable, cringe-making behavior of the sailors and marines when in captivity. (As Max Hastings, distinguished military historian and journalist, said in the *Daily Mail:* Yes, the 15 had a very unpleasant and frightening ordeal, but if they were not ready for such a risk they should have worked at Tesco rather than in the armed forces.) And there has been the extraordinary, pantomimical flip-flop by Britain's Defence Secretary, Des Browne, on whether the sailors and marines could sell their stories (yes they could; oops, no they couldn't) to a media that has itself bounced from treating the 15 as plucky heroes one minute, the next sniveling weeds, and the next money-grubbing yobs. Government, armed forces, media—all have seemed to epitomize a society that knows the price of everything but the value of nothing.

How did Britain get like this? How did a society whose professed virtues were once those of duty, honor and discretion become a place of in-it-for-myself, let-it-all-hang-out emoting? Step forward those two women whose influence, combined—though one suspects they loathed each other—shaped a nation: Margaret Thatcher and Princess Diana.

Thatcher first. Her political party may have been called Conservative, but she was in truth one of the most radical leaders Britain has ever had. Thatcher could not abide the cozy and mildly corrupt arrangements that—as she saw it—had condemned post-1945 Britain to a managed decline, and was determined to blow them up. As one of her more waspish M.P.s once said, Thatcher could not see an institution without "hitting it with her handbag." But she never understood that once you removed the need to show deference to any institution—the BBC, the labor unions, the professions—you had undermined them all. If deference to the established order was so bad, why show it (for example) to the monarchy? Moreover—really for the first time in British politics—Thatcher placed market values, not abstract ones of duty and honor, at the heart of a social definition of success. In the 1980s, if you didn't make money (loadsamoney ... ), if you didn't cash in on your talents or luck, then you were worse than an idiot—you were somehow letting the side down.

Diana's contribution was just as subversive of the old Britain. In her later life—through the hugs, the tears, the riveting BBC interview of 1995—and even more in her death, the Princess of Wales turned traditional British values on their head. It was all right to cry! It was bad to suffer in silence, repress your emotions,

**Step forward those two women whose influence shaped a nation: Margaret Thatcher and Princess Diana**

say, "Steady on, old girl," and generally act in a tight spot like Trevor Howard on the train platform at the end of *Brief Encounter.* In today's remake, Howard would be bawling like a baby; or—as we now know—like a young squaddie.

Taken together, Thatcherite and Dianist thought has given us the recent horrors: a situation in which not even members of the armed forces—hell, not even the leaders of the armed forces—seem comfortable framing military obligation in terms of duty and honor, and in which the media's badge of heroism is conferred on those who are merely victims (only for it to be ripped off again when the victims behave less like heroes than heels). It is a sad and miserable tale.

But here's the uncomfortable truth. Britain needed both Thatcher and Diana. Its old institutions were indeed rotten; its disdain for trade, for market values, was indeed debilitating, and condemned generations of Britons to stunted life chances. Britain's traditional masculine values of the stiff upper lip and "mustn't grumble" did indeed breed emotional cripples, unable to appreciate the heights—or handle the depths—of human experience.

A Britain in which those captured at sea would have just given name, rank and number; would only have been men; would have done no more in captivity than suck on a pipe while dressed in a peacoat; would have just muttered, "Hello sir, glad to be back," when released, was not in most ways a better place than the insanely meritocratic, undeferential, deinstitutionalized Britain that Thatcher and Princess Diana unleashed. Every so often, however, Britons should be allowed to look back at that older nation—and mourn its passing. ■

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