

agenda, 18 suspect way to televise the



## How Many Strikes?

by Shekhar Deshpande

This nation owes a great debt to the government of Singapore and to the American teenager Michael Fay who is expected to receive six lashes of a brine-soaked rattan cane from a Marshall Arts expert for vandalizing cars and public property in that country.

The credit memo is lengthy. First, the incident has provided just the right element in the perfect syntax of abjection and pathetic admiration that this public has wallowed in recent months and indeed years. What we mean is that the story fits in perfectly as a sequel to the Bobbitt and Tonya Harding sagas. Sure, Richard Nixon's final departure seems to be occupying the ink and the airtime, but that shall soon pass.

Second, the Singapore incident is fueling a "national conversation" on a number of issues, from the nature of punishment to the ethics of cross-cultural judgments. Like the much celebrated political correctness battle, this incident is providing for all of us an opportunity to discuss complex issues in oversimplified terms, thereby killing any benefits of public debate.

Third, the Singapore drama uncovers the pathologies of a nation and a culture which are entirely without ease in confronting

moral problems of its own making, including the seething fascism in the populist post-Reagan America.

The genesis of the story itself is revealing. Initially, there was general alarm that some American kid had blatantly violated the laws of another country and should therefore deserve the punishment. When the story hit during the slow news days at *Time*, *Newsweek* and the *New York Times* (and other major publications and networks around the country), it was explained with greater emphasis on the kind of punishment he is getting rather than the nature of his crime.

Liberals loved the story. Here was a great chance to teach the populist airheads another lesson in cross-cultural understanding. Should we be making judgments about another culture? Is that ethical? And if we should, how do we act on it?

Some ears in the White House heard of the "sensitive" mood in the country and plugged the issue in Clinton's mouth. This "new democrat" intervened in the debate immediately condemning the "cruelty" in the punishment. Diane Sawyer, Katie Couric and other new anchors of the evergrowing prime time news programs provided a quick analysis of the issue, with all "human angles" properly emphasized.

Then the final phase arrived. The Right wing mouthpieces led by the likes of Rush Limbaugh got hold of the story. They saw multiple opportunities in it. First, this was a good chance to bash Clinton for being "soft on crime" in spite of the crime bill that he was pushing in Congress. Second, since William Bennett's morality tales were climbing up on the best seller list (*The Book of Virtues*, see *Little India* February 1994 issue), that encouraged the righteous Americans. They saw in this case an example of inappropriate upbringing, lack of moral fiber in "bleeding heart" liberals, and a chance to beat up on the issue of crime in this country.

Aided by its co-travelling talk-show hosts around the country, the Right added to the fire of populist fascism and made a case for "punishing the kid" because he committed the crime. The incident was linked to crime in this country. One thing is certain, they said, Michael Fay will never commit another act of vandalism in Singapore again. So there you go. Severe punishment is a deterrent. And therefore, if the kid was asking for it, let him get the lashes. The implicit wish in this

lashing nationally so that the "criminal element" learn something from it. Mail received by the Congressman in Hay's hometown in Ohio and public surveys by the major news organizations found overwhelming support for caning the kid. Never mind the nature of the punishment!

Since pathologies never make themselves clear to the observer's eye, there are problems and issues in this incident that are somewhat unconscious or at least submerged beneath the surface of public conversation.

While the incident made the national psyche work hard, National Public Radio's program Marketplace and CNN's Business World reported that the business community in Singapore was in full support of caning and had always taken that position regardless of the nationality of the perpetrator. Now we are talking! Imagine the nation lying on the couch listening to this version from one of the many personalities of the psyche.

Perhaps the general public does not know or does not wish to know, but American capitalists (or businessmen) have always supported fascist rule in other countries because strict and severe punishment creates an atmosphere in which it is easy and ultimately profitable to conduct one's business affairs. That is one of the obvious and well known reasons why the United States has supported dictatorships (and has refused to use economic boycotts for political reasons in some urgent cases).

The United States has brought enormous pressure on democratic governments in other countries to ensure draconian measures are taken in the name of law and order so that the "foreign" investments are protected. Why else would IMF and the World Bank (Western



tools by all means, with the greatest contributions coming from the richest country in the world) drag on negotiations on loans which seem pretty urgently needed to save lives in the developing countries? Why else would IMF talk about law and order in India when it knew that the loans were required for immediate assistance in building the infrastructure to provide goods to remote areas? These three-piece suit decked and the scholarly types with anthropological sensitivity leave their lofty beliefs about freedom of expression and cruel and unusual punishment at home when they enter another country to make profits.

The consistent fascism of the government in Singapore comes to surface only when an American citizen is likely to receive a punishment that has, at least tacitly been supported all along by its largest business partner. Why all the compassion now? How difficult is it for the United States, Singapore's largest trading partner, to bring pressure on its government?

Those six lashes would not sound so harsh a punishment for a bratty kid who has lived there for a while, knows the laws and violates them in his arrogance any way.

But you have to remember two

important factors here. He is not just any kid, he is an American kid. And, those six lashes, when described in details of their administration, sound neither like some gentle reminders of power, nor some erotic flagellations which want to express love while punishing at the same time.

That has raised a number of issues. Is this punishment "cruel and unusual"? Of course, it is. Should we have the right to criticize such punishment? Of course, we should. Does that make Singapore a fascist state? You bet! What are the alternatives?

If Michael Fay would do a similar act in this country, it is most likely that the owners of the automobiles would file a suit to cover the damages, the insurance companies would enter the picture and then spread the costs very subtly across its entire clientele. If Fay's parents were not resourceful enough, it is likely that he would spend a few years of his wages repaying the damages directly or otherwise. When property is damaged, the intent is to recover the damages. If that is private property, the damages should be recovered by those who suffer the loss. That is explained by individualistic capitalism.

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partment for 18 months? Jail for a few years? In all cases, you are treating his body as equivalent property.

Singaporeans are not worried about recovering the cost of their cars; they want to protect their collective dignity which was violated by someone who knew the law and could see what was happening around him. Some will say that caning brings about scars that will remain permanent, while cars can be repaired or restored. Good point. But Singaporeans don't see it that way. Injury to their collective welfare is just as permanent as the possible scars on Fay's behind.

Capitalism sees all losses as losses of property (or rights, which are also seen as property), but much of the world holds a different view. Thus, to make hasty judgments to condemn Singapore as an uncivilized society is to short-circuit your own moral position and any sensible understanding about the complexity of this world.

Speaking of civility, what is alarming is that the public opinion in this country thinks he should be caned and that such punishment will stop further crime. This is both immature and fascist. Such punishment may stop Fay himself from committing crime, but will not deter crime which arises out of an attitude toward society. Only hard and thoughtful work on changing that attitude will prevent crime.

Singapore, many say, is a clean and crime-free place. They said that about Mussolini's Italy too. Trains ran on time, then!

The secret wish of Americans to have a crime-free society is connected to their not-so-secret tendency to be brutal, compassionless, selfish, indifferent and irresponsible. The new crime bill (by Bill Clinton himself) underscores this lack of contextual understanding. More police on the street, more jails and more judges. No wonder that kind of thinking produces a rationale for more caning and more inhumanity.

This is another tale of morality for our times. It is part of the folklore of an impoverished world. This incident reveals the pathology of those who commit crime, those who exercise the punishment, those who cheer from the sidelines and those who pretend judging others is easy and right.

This tale doesn't have winners and losers. Just losers!

If we compare the two kinds of punishment, we should also compare the abstract reasoning behind them. In this country, violation of private property is a violation of individual rights. Social and institutional mechanisms, such as the police and the law come to protect the rights of the property owners.

In Singapore, as James Fallows suggested recently on the National Public Radio's *Fresh Air*, violations of private property are seen simultaneously as violations of collective ownership and private ownership. When Fay vandalized the cars and the traffic signs, the integrity of the collective was violated. The punishment, therefore, is more severe because in that part of the world, it is a crime more serious than damage to someone's cars.

Fay's body is the reciprocal (and even equivalent, in some sense) property that must be punished. There is no reason to get alarmed about this. We do the same thing in the West; bodies are punished for crimes of violations of property. May be not caning, but confinement and other deprivation of freedoms are all too common in the West. Also, the Western systems regard violations of collective integrity just as severely. Just take spying or terrorism. There is hardly any talk of mercy in these two cases. The whole nation feels injured by spies and terrorists. What happens to the issue of punishment that its the crimes in these instances?

Should this explanation justify severe caning for vandalizing 18 cars. The answer is no; this doesn't justify it. But it helps us understand those who give the punishment and those who support it. Think about what other punishment Fay should receive. Manual labor in the public works de-

