

The Huffington Post



Peggy Drexler

Pirates, Politics and Performance

Posted April 15, 2009 | 05:54 PM (EST)

When I first heard that Captain Richard Phillips had been rescued and that three Somali pirates had been surgically dispatched from the planet, I had one of those "All right America!" moments.

But then I paused.

Maybe it was eight years of cynicism born of government misdirection and dismal performance, but I settled in for the bad news -- the other shoe that would reveal that things were not all that they seemed. Maybe it was even the fear that, as in the curious case of Pvt. Jessica Lynch and her mythical broken-bone stand against the brutish Iraqis or the unconscionable manufacturing of the circumstances of Sgt. Pat Tillman's death, they never happened at all.

But mid-week, I am thrilled by a confidence that it all did, in fact, happen as reported. I am also thrilled by what didn't happen.

What did happen was a refreshing exercise in calm competence.

Granted, these ocean-going thieves were raggedy former fishermen. And the recent attacks in the wake of the pirate killings reinforce the obvious: their death hardly means the end of piracy. But they, too, appear good at what they do -- also heavily-armed, desperate and lethal. There was every opportunity for this to go very wrong.

Our new president met the test. There is some irony that this is the same commander-in-chief that former vice-president Dick Cheney said made us less safe because of his reluctance to torture, detain and wire-tap with impunity -- the same Dick Cheney who honchoed the gang that couldn't shoot straight, but shot at everything anyway.

The Obama team's ability to do its job allowed some incredible military professionals to do theirs. The shooters on deck were the product of a \$500,000 education and years of paring the good down to the best -- and then down to the very best of the best -- resulting in people arguably better at what they do than anybody else on the planet.

...which brings me to what didn't happen.

There was an absolute absence of the kind of political theater that was the leitmotif of the past administration. No Rovian photo ops of the president on the job and in command. No staged phone calls of congratulations. No manufactured heroics. No strutting across the deck in big-boy military dress-ups. No squint-for-the-camera guarantees to bring the perpetrators back dead or alive.

Significantly -- and thankfully -- neither did we have to watch our leaders wiggle and waffle as they shifted blame, ducked responsibility and denied reality for one more thing gone horribly wrong.

True, the political advantage is fleeting. But for the first time in a long time, political advantage was not the point.

It was simply competent and committed people doing the jobs we pay them to do. And doing them exceedingly well.