

Democrats agree to suppress photos of US torture in Iraq

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As evidence of mass torture of Iraqi detainees by US forces continues to emerge, the Senate Armed Services Committee has, through its public hearings, assumed the role of point-man in the effort of the US political establishment to conceal the dimensions of American war crimes and obscure the colonialist character of the Iraq war. True to form, congressional Democrats are playing the crucial role in shielding the chief perpetrators in the Bush White House and Pentagon.

As part of this effort, leading congressional Democrats have joined with the Republicans in suppressing photographic evidence of the torture and abuse of Iraqis being held by US forces. The fraudulent character of the Senate investigation is underscored by the refusal of the committee to even demand that the Pentagon turn over the hundreds of incriminating photos and video clips in the possession of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his underlings.

A congressional committee that is ostensibly investigating Rumsfeld and company has willingly acceded to the demands of the White House and the Pentagon that crucial evidence be kept out of the hands of Congress. Leaving aside the anti-democratic affront to the right of the American people to see all relevant evidence of US war crimes, this act of prostration before the military makes a mockery of Congress's constitutionally mandated responsibility of oversight of the military and the executive branch.

One measure of the putrefaction of American democracy is the contrast between Congress's present role and the position it took toward the Nixon administration in the Watergate scandal of the early 1970s. At that time, there was sufficient resistance within the American ruling elite to outright criminality and police-state tendencies to embolden Congress to demand that Nixon turn over the White House tape

recordings of the Watergate cover-up. Today, there is no trace of any such residual allegiance to democratic and constitutional norms.

The secret May 12 viewing, under military guard, of 1,800 photographs of torture and sexual humiliation by members of the Senate Armed Services Committee was a graphic demonstration of the degraded state of the entire political system. Before their viewing the pictures, members of Congress were handed a written warning that if they described a photograph in such a way as to reveal the identities of the people involved, they would violate "federal privacy laws." This was compounded by the pronouncement of Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John Warner, a Republican supporter of Bush and the Iraq war, warning that publicizing the photographs could have the effect of "inspiring the enemy to inflict further damage" to US personnel in Iraq.

Senators and congressmen were herded into a "secure room" on Capitol Hill by military guards and shown, in rapid succession, slides of the photographs of torture and sadistic behavior by US forces. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that military officers in attendance refused to comment or give details about the abuses shown in the pictures.

After the viewing, a number of senators expressed revulsion at the photographs and said they were "far worse" than what they had expected or what had been presented so far in the US media.

Questioning at Rumsfeld's May 7 testimony before the Senate committee had already made clear that the Pentagon was holding photographs that reveal horrible atrocities. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham said at the time, "The public needs to understand we're talking about rape and murder here." The pictures shown to the legislators reportedly included soldiers

posing with Iraqi corpses, pictures of Iraqi women forced to strip off their clothing, pictures of an Iraqi prisoner repeatedly banging his head against a wall at the behest of his jailers, and numerous other examples of sexual degradation.

A few senators commented that, upon seeing the extent of the torture, they could not believe that it was an isolated incident staged by a few rogue soldiers, and that approval had to have come from higher up in the chain of command.

However, after this summary viewing, the 12 discs containing the pictures were returned to the Pentagon. Warner gave out the official pretext for the suppression of the photos—that they were “evidentiary material” in a criminal investigation. This all-purpose excuse for suppressing information does not, of course, explain why Congress should allow the photos to remain in the clutches of those who bear primary responsibility for the crimes that they document.

This pretext has been roundly dismissed by human rights advocates as well as authorities on civil liberties and constitutional law. It is being given out, moreover, by an administration that has repeatedly and flagrantly violated the legal and constitutional rights of those it has named as terrorist suspects.

Leading Democrats vocally backed the Pentagon in withholding the pictures. Senator Dianne Feinstein of California baldly asserted that there was no need for the American people to see the war crimes that are being carried out in their name, stating, “I think it’s important that we see them so we know what we’re dealing with, but I think the nation has had enough of a sample.”

Democratic Senator Charles Schumer of New York put forward an even more preposterous argument in favor of withholding the photographs. Schumer said he had been inclined to release the photos, but changed his mind “when the military explained to us that to release [the photos] would violate their [the detainees’] privacy and the Geneva accord.” Here the Democratic “liberal” invoked the Geneva Conventions to sanction the suppression of evidence of massive violations of the self-same Conventions!

The agreement to suppress the photos is part of a systematic, bipartisan cover-up of the crimes of US imperialism in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. The Democrats have, for the most part, gone out of their

way to demonstrate their readiness to conceal, to the extent possible, the truth from the American people.

Indicative of the politically incestuous relationship between the two parties was an article in the May 12 *New York Times* extolling the amicable relations between Warner and the ranking Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, Carl Levin. The article quoted a political scientist at Rutgers University who compared Warner and Levin to “an old married couple.” The article continued: “Mr. Levin, of Michigan, did not deny it. ‘We’re very close, and we totally trust each other,’ he said, ‘and that’s the key to everything.’”

In the meantime, the White House, the Pentagon, congressional Republicans and sections of the media are mounting a campaign to legitimize and defend the war crimes committed by US forces in Iraq. After congressmen had seen the photographs, US House of Representatives Majority Leader Tom DeLay said, “Some people are overreacting. The people who are against the war are using this to their own political ends.”

Senator James Inhofe (Republican from Oklahoma), a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, took the lead in this counter-offensive at hearings on May 11. Declaring he was “more outraged by the outrage” over the torture of the Iraqi prisoners than over the torture itself, he launched into a full-throated defense of US war crimes. He directed his venom against “humanitarian do-gooders right now crawling all over these prisons, looking for human rights violations.” All but accusing Democratic critics of the prison abuse of treason, he read into the Congressional record part of a Democratic advertisement attacking President Bush’s “inept” response to the torture crisis.

Not a single Democratic member of the committee responded to Inhofe’s fascistic rant.



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