

Behind the demands for Rumsfeld to resign: White House prepares a fallback position to continue Iraq atrocities

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The American media and Washington political circles have suddenly begun a discussion of whether Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld should resign, taking responsibility for the savage mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison by military police and US intelligence operatives.

The calls for Rumsfeld's resignation emanating from the Democratic Party and sections of the media—and privately from a section of congressional Republicans as well—have nothing to do with any genuine outrage over the hideous abuses at Abu Ghraib. Rather it represents the bubbling up of conflicts within the ruling elite—and within the Bush administration itself—over the increasingly obvious failure of the US colonial enterprise in Iraq.

The Bush administration's own focus on Rumsfeld is a desperate effort to save itself from the political crisis provoked by the disaster in Iraq. The White House is prepared, if necessary, to sacrifice its secretary of defense, to insure the continuation of its illegal war and occupation.

The signal for an attack on Rumsfeld was given by Bush himself, in a rebuke to the Pentagon boss delivered at a closed-door meeting Wednesday in the White House, then promptly leaked to the press to provide fodder for the evening television news and front-page reports in the major daily newspapers Thursday.

The *Washington Post* reported: "President Bush privately admonished Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld yesterday, a senior White House official said, as other U.S. officials blamed the Pentagon for failing to act on repeated recommendations to improve conditions for thousands of Iraqi detainees and release those not charged with crimes."

The *New York Times* lead story began: "President Bush on Wednesday chastised his defense secretary, Donald H. Rumsfeld, for Mr. Rumsfeld's handling of a scandal over the American abuse of Iraqis held at a notorious prison in Baghdad, White House officials said." The *Times* acknowledged that these officials made their disclosures "under authorization from Mr. Bush."

Significantly, Bush's alleged rebuke focused not on the substance of what took place at Abu Ghraib, but on the catastrophic political repercussions of the exposure of the abuse, particularly on US foreign policy in the Middle East and in the wider Muslim world. His principal criticism was that Rumsfeld had not informed him of the existence of the digital photographs of naked Iraqi prisoners being abused by their US guards. "They

should have been brought to his attention," the White House official said, "and he shouldn't have had to learn of them through the media."

In other words, Rumsfeld received his slap on the wrist, not for the mistreatment of the prisoners, but for the mistreatment of the president, whose political handlers and spin doctors were caught off guard when CBS broadcast its first report on the Abu Ghraib torture last week.

The desire of the US ruling elite to use Rumsfeld as a political lightning rod, and thus protect the Bush White House, was expressed in the editorial Thursday in the *Washington Post*. Its headline, "Mr. Rumsfeld's Responsibility," epitomizes the effort to shift attention from President Bush and Vice President Cheney, those principally responsible for the invasion and occupation of Iraq, to their Pentagon subordinate.

The editorial begins by stating the obvious, that the abuses at Abu Ghraib can be traced back in part to Rumsfeld's frequent declarations, beginning with the treatment of Taliban and al Qaeda prisoners in Afghanistan, that the United States would no longer be bound by the Geneva Conventions; that prisoners classified as illegal combatants "do not have any rights"; that the military-run detention center in Guantanamo Bay was not subject to any oversight, either US or international.

None of these statements, however, were expressions of Rumsfeld's private opinions. They reflected the policy of the Bush administration, as set by Bush and Cheney. This policy applied not only to prisoners taken on the battlefield in Afghanistan, or in military raids in Baghdad and Fallujah, but to those detained within the United States itself in the Bush-declared "war on terror."

The treatment meted out to Iraqis imprisoned in Abu Ghraib was prefigured in the brutality against Arab and Muslim immigrants rounded up after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Moreover, the subject of torture and the necessity to use brutal methods of interrogation has been a constant theme in the US media since September 11.

For all the simulated outrage from Bush, the Pentagon and the US media, the brutality at Abu Ghraib is not the least surprising. It is not an aberration, but the logical expression of the imperialist, predatory, and therefore essentially criminal character of the US conquest of Iraq. The American government launched an

unprovoked war of aggression against a country which represented no threat whatsoever to the United States, in order to seize control of its oil resources and use its strategic location to project American power in the Middle East and Central Asia—and in the process, enrich corporate cronies of the leading figures in the Bush administration, from Halliburton to Bechtel to the various mercenary recruitment firms which have raked in billions from postwar contracts. Such an enterprise is inevitably bound up with the cultivation, among the occupation forces, of racist, colonialist attitudes towards the “inferior” peoples whose territory and natural resources are to be plundered.

The revelations from Abu Ghraib are only the tip of the iceberg—far worse atrocities are taking place on a daily basis. Already this week, in the wake of the reports by CBS and the *New Yorker* magazine, it has been revealed that at least 25 prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan have been killed while in the custody of American military and intelligence personnel. Not a single soldier or CIA interrogator has been prosecuted and only a handful even reprimanded.

A group of reporters visited Abu Ghraib Wednesday, only to witness an explosion of protest by the prisoners, many of whom were aware of the international outrage over their mistreatment. The prisoners shouted imprecations against Bush and the US occupation, proclaimed their innocence, and in some cases waved crutches and prosthetic limbs to show that they were not the dangerous guerrilla fighters they are alleged to be. The military escorts hurried the journalists out of earshot as quickly as possible.

Many more photographs of abuse at Abu Ghraib and other US detention facilities in Iraq have come to light, including more than 1,000 digital pictures which the *Washington Post* reported obtaining, some showing dead bodies of Iraqi prisoners, others showing US soldiers posing with the mutilated corpses of animals.

Even grimmer revelations may still be to come. After a briefing Wednesday to the Senate Intelligence Committee, California Democrat Dianne Feinstein declined to reveal any specifics, but told the press, “I’ve learned things that make me feel worse, that’s all I can say.”

In the meantime, while public attention in the US is focused on the revelations of torture, the US military is continuing to kill Iraqis by the dozens every day, in a renewed push against the positions held by insurgents in southern Iraq loyal to the Shi’ite religious leader Moqtada Sadr. The latest fighting Wednesday on the outskirts of Najaf, the Shi’ite holy city, left dozens dead and scores wounded, and US forces employed tanks, helicopter gunships and other heavy weapons, backed up by air strikes.

Congressional Democrats have followed Bush’s lead on the Abu Ghraib crisis, bemoaning not so much the abuse of Iraqi prisoners as the exposure of the abuse, because of the colossal damage to US foreign policy interests in the Middle East. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi issued a public call for Rumsfeld’s resignation, and she was joined by Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa, and, more conditionally, by Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware, the senior Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee.

The most craven role has been played by Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, the presumptive presidential nominee of the Democrats. Kerry had not held a press conference in nearly three

weeks, keeping as low profile as possible during the emerging crisis. He made his first public comment on Abu Ghraib Wednesday, declaring, “The horrifying abuse of Iraqi prisoners which the world has now seen is absolutely unacceptable and inexcusable and the response of the administration, certainly the Pentagon, has been slow and inappropriate.”

“I want to know, as I think Americans do, is this isolated? Does it go up the chain of command? Who knew what when?” he added. “All of those questions have to be answered, so I don’t want to shoot from the hip.” Kerry evaded a direct response to a press question as to whether Bush should apologize for the actions of the prison guards and interrogators at Abu Ghraib. Then he expressed his real concern: that the exposure of the crimes at the Baghdad prison could undermine the US war effort and “increase acts of terror against America and Americans.”

Kerry’s pathetic response reflects his fundamental agreement with the Bush administration over the necessity to maintain the US occupation of Iraq. He has publicly called for sending more troops to Iraq and declared his full support for whatever action is required to insure the success of the mission.

The Iraq war represents a criminal conspiracy against the American as well as the Iraqi people. It is working people in the United States who are being called on to sacrifice hundreds of billions of dollars and the lives of hundreds and thousands of young soldiers, used as cannon fodder for the conquest of Iraq. (On Wednesday, in an action noted in only the most perfunctory fashion by the media, the Bush administration asked for another \$25 billion to finance the occupation through the summer. At the same time, the Pentagon revealed plans to keep 138,000 American troops in Iraq through the end of 2005, more than double the troop strength previously projected.)

Tens of millions of American working people oppose the occupation of Iraq and want the war to be ended and all US troops withdrawn. But their views have been entirely excluded from the official debate in the 2004 election. On the most important issue confronting the American people in 2004, the two-party system offers the alternative of two pro-war candidates, Bush and Kerry, offering rival prescriptions for the victory of American imperialism.

Only the Socialist Equality Party and its candidates for president and vice-president, Bill Van Auken and Jim Lawrence, stand unequivocally against imperialism, and for the liberation of the Iraqi people from the new colonial regime imposed upon them by Bush’s Operation Iraqi Torture. We demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all American troops, and the punishment of all those responsible for the criminal aggression in Iraq. And we urge all those who support these demands to come forward now to place the SEP candidates on the ballot and circulate our program as widely as possible.



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