

# Rumsfeld testimony reveals: New photos will show “blatantly sadistic, cruel and inhuman” torture of Iraqi prisoners

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US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld appeared before the Senate and House Armed Services committees last Friday for hearings on the brutal treatment of Iraqi prisoners by US forces at the Abu Ghraib prison. Rumsfeld began his testimony by revealing that—as horrific as these images are—their exposure is only the tip of the iceberg.

He said that there are literally thousands of additional photos as well as videotapes of abuse of prisoners in Iraq, beyond those made public over the past 10 days, beginning with reports on the CBS News program “Sixty Minutes II” and in the *New Yorker* magazine.

In his opening statement to the Senate Armed Forces Committee, Rumsfeld said that military investigators had pictures and some videos of a “sadistic, cruel and inhuman” nature. “It’s going to get still more terrible,” he predicted. Committee member Lindsey Graham, Republican from South Carolina, commented after the Senate hearing, “The American public needs to understand we’re talking about rape and murder here. We’re not just talking about giving people a humiliating experience.”

The yet-to-be-released photographs allegedly show US soldiers having sex with an Iraqi woman prisoner and troops almost beating a prisoner to death. NBC News has quoted military officials saying the new photos also show US soldiers “acting inappropriately with a dead body” as well as the rape of young boys by Iraqi guards, filmed by US soldiers. Photos or video may also record the murder of a prisoner.

Rumsfeld indicated the potential impact of the publication of these images: “If these are released to the public,” he said, “obviously it’s going to make matters worse. That’s just a fact. I mean, I looked at them last night and they’re hard to believe.... And if they’re sent to some news organization, and taken out of the criminal prosecution channels that they’re in, that’s where we’ll be. And it’s not a pretty picture.”

In six hours of testimony in back-to-back sessions in the House and Senate, the defense secretary and US military officials—including Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Richard Myers—fielded questions from senators and congressmen on the controversy that has erupted following the publication of photos depicting US military personnel engaged in humiliating and sadistic treatment of prisoners.

Both the questions and answers demonstrated that the principal

concern in official Washington is not the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American military and intelligence personnel, but the enormous damage to US foreign policy. The exposure of the abuses at Abu Ghraib has totally discredited the Bush administration’s last remaining pretext for the invasion of Iraq, the claim that the US occupation is aimed at establishing democracy in Iraq and liberating the Iraqi people from the torture and repression of Saddam Hussein.

At Friday’s hearings, congressmen and senators went out of their way to moderate their questioning of Rumsfeld on these torture revelations with statements of support for the imperialist enterprise in Iraq, and praise for the “war for democracy.” Perhaps most effusive were the statements of Senator Joseph Lieberman (Democrat of Connecticut), who, while denouncing the treatment of Iraqi prisoners as “immoral, intolerable and un-American,” added, “I hope as we go about this investigation, we do it in a way that does not dishonor the hundreds of thousands of Americans in uniform...that we not dishonor their service or discredit the cause that brought us to send them to Iraq, because it remains one that is just and necessary.”

Indeed, the holding of the hearings was an effort in damage control aimed at salvaging support for the military occupation of Iraq, particularly among the US population, which has dropped dramatically in the past month and a half.

Senator John McCain (Republican from Arizona), stated: “I’m gravely concerned that many Americans will have the same impulse as I did when I saw this picture, and that’s to turn away from them. And we risk losing public support for this conflict. As Americans turned away from the Vietnam War, they may turn away from this one unless this issue is quickly resolved with full disclosure immediately.”

Congressional Democrats and Republicans tried to paint the Iraq prison atrocities as an “un-American” mistake. But in the course of questioning by the two panels, it became evident that the abuses were not an aberration but a direct consequence of military policy. The abuse was not confined to Abu Ghraib and was directly encouraged and promoted by specific directives from the military chain of command to encourage and promote it.

It is also clear, from numerous human rights and media reports published as early as last year, that senior Bush administration and military officials were well aware that the abuse was taking place

and attempted to contain news reports on the abuse.

Senator Mark Dayton (Democratic from Minnesota), addressing Gen. Myers on US military attempts to stop CBS from airing the torture images, commented that “attempts to suppress news reports, to withhold the truth from Congress and from the American people is antithetical to democracy.”

Questioning the defense secretary, Senator Robert Byrd (Democrat of West Virginia) stated: “The Red Cross claims that it made reports of prison abuse in Iraq throughout 2003.... Secretary Rumsfeld, how do we know that there isn’t a broader problem here?”

“We’ve heard reports of prisoner abuse from more than just the Abu Ghraib prison. Will you ask the Red Cross to waive its confidentiality agreement on those reports and make public all the pertinent reports on US military-run prison facilities including those in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantanamo and elsewhere?”

Byrd was referring to a confidential International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) report on prisoner conditions between March and November 2003 at Abu Ghraib and other Iraq facilities that was leaked to the press last week. The report described treatment of detainees “in some cases tantamount to torture” that constituted serious violations of the Geneva Conventions.

The ICRC report said the savage mistreatment “went beyond exceptional cases and might be considered as a practice tolerated” by coalition forces. Pierre Krähenbühl, Red Cross director of operations, told reporters that the abuses were not “isolated acts by individual members of the coalition forces, but amount to a pattern and a broad system.”

In Rumsfeld’s opening statement, he attempted to counter the contention that the military establishment and the Bush administration endorsed the abuse at Abu Ghraib, and that the photos caught the Pentagon off-guard. “The photographic depictions of the US military personnel that the public has seen have offended and outraged everyone in the Department of Defense,” he stated. “If you could have seen the anguished expressions on the faces of those in our department upon seeing those photos, you would know how we feel today.”

But even close supporters of Bush administration policy in Iraq found such an explanation hard to swallow. John McCain pressed Rumsfeld to describe who was in charge at Abu Ghraib. “Who was in charge of the interrogations?” he asked. “What agencies and what—or private contractors were in charge of the interrogations? Did they have authority over the guards? And what were the instructions to the guards?”

Rumsfeld replied that the responsibility rested with officers who oversaw detentions and with military-intelligence officers in charge of interrogations, and that the responsibility, “shifted over a period of time.”

Though the specific chain of command authorizing the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib has not yet been clearly established, it is known that Maj. Gen. Geoffrey D. Miller, who was appointed chief of interrogations and detentions in Iraq a month ago, made recommendations on the conduct of guards at the prison last summer. Miller was then in charge of operations in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where hundreds of “illegal combatants” have been held for months without charge, in violation of international law

and the Geneva Conventions.

Miller and a team visiting Abu Ghraib in August-September 2003 advised that US military police serving as guards become “actively engaged in setting the conditions for successful exploitation of internees,” according to an internal report by Maj. Gen. Antonio M. Taguba. Some of the guards allegedly began torturing and humiliating prisoners two months after Gen. Miller’s recommendations.

Secretary Rumsfeld held to his position that the Pentagon and military were shocked by the atrocities. “I’ll bet you anything that the sensitivity throughout the chain of command today is great on this issue,” he told the House panel. “I mean, everyone was stunned by it.” In fact, what has left Rumsfeld and the rest of the Bush administration in a state of shock is not the abuse itself, but the fact that it has come to public attention. He made the following extraordinary statement:

“My worry today is that there’s some other procedure or some other habit that’s 20th century, that is normal process—‘the way we’ve always done it’—a peacetime approach to the world, and there’s some other process that we haven’t discovered yet that needs to be modernized to the 21st century, that needs to recognize the existence, in this case, for example, of digital cameras. And trying to figure out what that is before it, too, causes something like this is my nightmare.”

In other words, Rumsfeld’s “nightmare” is that digital cameras were there to record the atrocities inside Abu Gharib prison, not the torture itself!

Last Friday’s hearings gave only a taste of what must inevitably come to light about the US government’s endorsement of torture as policy. It is a systemic practice that is thoroughly consistent with US imperialist aims not only in Iraq but worldwide.

In the specific case of the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, details will emerge to substantiate that these depraved acts were not the work of a few rogue soldiers, but were sanctioned at the highest levels of the Pentagon and the military command, and were carried out in response to directives from the White House itself.



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