

US media alibis for torture in Iraq

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Photographs of the sadistic torture of Iraqi prisoners at the hands of US troops became front-page news around the world after their release last week. Only in two countries were they largely suppressed by the media—the United States and Iraq itself.

In Iraq, newspapers that can be—and have been—shut down at a moment's notice by order of the US occupation chief Paul Bremer chose not to publish them. Most Iraqis viewed on Arab television the revolting scenes of their countrymen, naked and with bags over their heads, being abused by leering American soldiers.

In the US last Friday, as people throughout the world viewed the appalling photographs on the front pages of their newspapers, not a single major American daily chose to give them similar treatment, and most blacked them out altogether.

CBS News, which first broadcast the photos on its "60 Minutes II" program last week, withheld the story for fully two weeks at the request of General Richard Myers, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff. When it did air the segment, it was produced with the cooperation of the Pentagon, which sought to frame the story in such a way as to contain the damage before the foreign media obtained the same pictures.

But such is the gravity of this damage to US policy in the Arab and Muslim world that little or nothing can be done to contain it. The televised images seen by Iraqis have largely sealed the fate of the US occupation. They have confirmed the widespread and well-founded opinion that the war launched by the Bush administration was aimed not at liberating but subjugating the people of Iraq and expropriating the country's oil wealth. And they have created vast new reservoirs of support for a nationalist resistance that had already gained a mass following.

Iraqis viewing the hooded, naked men forced by grinning Americans to pile onto each other, simulate sex acts and, in one case, stand on a box with electrodes attached to the prisoner's body, were left to wonder whether the faces behind the masks were those of their relatives, neighbors or co-workers, tens of thousands of whom have disappeared into a network of concentration camps set up by the US occupation.

So the US media's efforts have largely been aimed at softening the impact of these revelations upon the American people themselves, among whom antiwar sentiment has never been higher. Two newspapers that serve as national voices for the ruling political establishment made this clear in a pair of editorials published over the weekend.

"President Bush spoke for all Americans of conscience yesterday when he expressed disgust" over the photographs, the *New York Times* declared in an editorial Saturday entitled "Abuses at Abu Ghraib."

It continued, stating that the torture and abuse captured in the photos defied "the accepted conventions of war" and supporting Bush's contention that the crimes committed at Abu Ghraib prison were the work merely of a "few soldiers" who would be "taken care of."

The media—including the *Times*—revel in proclaiming Bush the "commander-in-chief" as if it were some royal title. Yet now, somehow, he is the voice of "conscience" who bears no responsibility for the actions of those soldiers whom he presumes to command.

It can be safely assumed that Bush was neither shocked nor disgusted. The White House and the Pentagon had known about these atrocities for months and had done all they could to prevent them from being exposed.

As for the claim that torture at the US concentration camps is a crime carried out by just a handful of depraved military police reservists, it is disproved by the very existence of the photographs. Why did these soldiers feel so comfortable recording their criminal actions for posterity? How were they able to assemble large numbers of naked prisoners in an open area and stack them into a pyramid for their amusement, without any fear of being discovered or punished?

Clearly, this degrading and abusive treatment was standard operating procedure for the US military. Torture was accepted and encouraged.

The human rights group Amnesty International described the actions shown in the photographs as just "the tip of the iceberg." In a 2003 report, it stated: "Many detainees have alleged they were tortured and ill-treated by US and UK troops during interrogation. Methods reported often include beatings; prolonged sleep deprivation; prolonged restraint in painful positions, sometimes combined with exposure to loud music; prolonged hooding and exposure to bright light." The organization has documented a number of cases in which detainees have been beaten or tortured to death.

On the same day the *Times* published its editorial, the *New Yorker* magazine's web site posted a story by Seymour Hersh citing a 53-page report prepared by an Army general that concluded that "sadistic, blatant and wanton criminal abuses" were commonplace at Abu Ghraib.

Among the crimes, Major General Antonio Taguba recounted in his report: "Breaking chemical lights and pouring the phosphoric liquid on detainees; pouring cold water on naked detainees; beating detainees with a broom handle and a chair; threatening male detainees with rape...sodomizing a detainee with a chemical light and perhaps a broom stick, and using military working dogs

to frighten and intimidate detainees with threats of attack, and in one instance actually biting a detainee.”

Hersh points out that many of the thousands of detainees held at Abu Ghraib were there simply because they were caught up in sweeps of neighborhoods or grabbed at military checkpoints.

The article includes a chilling indication of the extent to which the military has inculcated the attitude among the troops that Iraqis—and for that matter all Arabs and Muslims—are subhumans against whom cruelty can be inflicted with impunity. One soldier—who testified against other members of his unit—told of seeing another soldier “hitting one prisoner in the side of its ribcage.” Not “his” ribcage, but “its.” The Iraqi detainee was not seen as a human being.

General Taguba’s report also concludes that the military police reservists—including the six who are the only ones facing prosecution at this point—were instructed by military intelligence and CIA interrogators to “set physical and mental conditions for favorable interrogation of witnesses.” That is, use torture and abuse to “break” the prisoners. Witnesses cited in the report quote military intelligence officers praising those carrying out these criminal acts. “Good job, they’re breaking down real fast,” said one.

Responsibility for these crimes go right up a chain of command—Taguba calls for reprimanding a colonel and lieutenant colonel responsible for military intelligence interrogations—that ends with the president himself.

In solidarizing themselves with Bush, the *Times* editors note that the vile actions of US soldiers at Abu Ghraib defy “the accepted conventions of war.” But the entire Iraqi invasion and occupation has been carried out in defiance of “accepted conventions of war.” Washington carried out an unprovoked war aimed at conquering an independent country that posed no threat to the United States, in order to subdue its people and seize control of its oil resources.

The Bush administration has prided itself on its arrogant refusal to be bound by any tenet of international law, repudiating the International Criminal Court and demanding that countries where its military operates agree to hold US soldiers as well as civilians immune from any charges of war crimes or human rights violations.

Bush himself glories in illegal acts of violence, boasting of US assassinations as a means of bringing Washington’s enemies “to justice.” To proclaim such an individual as the voice of “conscience” speaking for “all Americans” is an obscenity.

For its part, the *Washington Post*, the authoritative voice of the Washington political establishment, published an editorial headlined “Rule of Lawlessness.” Again, while ostensibly condemning the acts at Abu Ghraib, the editorial is crafted in a manner designed to minimize and even justify them.

“Taken together, the photographs demonstrate some of the most demeaning, humiliating and shameful treatment of prisoners imaginable, short of actual physical torture,” the *Post* writes.

Forcing naked men with bags over their heads to climb onto each other in a pyramid, or attaching electrodes to a man’s body and telling him he is going to be electrocuted if he falls off a box, is indeed torture. A number of Iraqis have come forward to say that they found the kind of degenerate sexual humiliation carried out

by their US captors worse than the physical torture inflicted by the secret police of the Saddam Hussein regime.

The *Post* laments the existence of the photographs for the “the damage they have done to America’s image in the world, to the cause of stability in Iraq and even to the cause of democracy in the Middle East.”

In reality, these images have provided a graphic expression of the criminal character and aims of the US intervention in Iraq. The war and occupation have nothing to do with democracy. The type of cruelty seen in these pictures is a feature of every war waged by an imperialist power against the people it seeks to colonize.

The *Post* goes on: “The fact that some of the soldiers in charge of the prison have now been suspended or penalized will surely be overlooked by foreign audiences, and the fact that the prisoners had attacked US troops matters not at all.”

This argument, meant to exonerate the US military, consists of inventions and lies. Those who are being prosecuted were not “in charge of the prison”; they consist of a handful of low-ranking reservists who are, from the standpoint of the Pentagon, entirely expendable. As for the prisoners having “attacked US troops,” how do the *Post* editors know that? Have they the names and records of the naked men with sacks on their heads? The bulk of those who are being held at the US prisons and torture camps were grabbed on the flimsiest grounds by US troops and are being held indefinitely without hearings or even charges.

Finally, the newspaper chides the Bush administration for failing to provide “adequate legal processes” for detainees held without charges not only in Iraq, but in Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere.

“Better than any legal treatise, these photographs demonstrate the potentially corrupting effect of the atmosphere of lawlessness in these prisons,” the editorial concludes. “It must not be allowed to continue.”

But the “corrupting...atmosphere of lawlessness” did not begin in the military’s prison camps. The torture carried out there is only the refined expression of the corrupt and lawless character of the US ruling establishment and the policy of armed conquest it has pursued in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

America’s ruling elite, both the Democratic and Republican parties, and in particular the corporate-controlled media are all implicated in the shameful and repulsive crimes carried out at Abu Ghraib and other US concentration camps and prisons around the world. Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and others are guilty of war crimes for the actions carried out by their military subordinates.



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