

Washington's hypocrisy over Iraq torture

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Forced to confront the catastrophic impact that the photographs of naked and hooded Iraqis being sexually abused and tortured by US troops has had in Iraq and throughout the Middle East, official Washington has feigned horror.

President Bush, speaking to the press in Michigan on Monday, said he was “shocked” by the photographs. “I was stunned by it all,” declared Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, adding that actions taken against Iraqis at Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad were “un-American.”

Who does he think he is kidding? Thanks to the likes of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Co., torture is as American as apple pie.

For more than two-and-a-half years, since “everything changed” on September 11, 2001, the US political establishment has fostered a public debate over the ethics of torture. Reams of articles have been published on the topic, and polls have been taken on whether terrorist suspects should be tortured. ABC’s Ted Koppel devoted a televised “town hall” meeting to the subject, while Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz conducted a media tour to urge that torture be legally sanctioned, with courts issuing warrants to allow a practice banned by international law.

This campaign to inure the American public to government torture unfolded as the Bush administration set up a network of US-run concentration camps from Guantanamo Bay in Cuba to the Baghram air base in Afghanistan, as well as in numerous “undisclosed locations.” Individuals detained by the US military and the CIA have been confined in these overseas prisons precisely to evade any legal restrictions and judicial oversight over the way these detainees are treated and any necessity to prove their guilt. There is every reason to believe that what has been uncovered at Abu Ghraib—and far worse—is taking place at these installations as well.

US Army officials speaking to Reuters on Tuesday said that at least 25 detainees held by the US military have died in custody. It appears that some of these deaths were the result of torture. In one case, a civilian contractor killed a prisoner during interrogation at the Iraqi prison. Subject to neither military discipline nor Iraqi law, the mercenary faced no penalty whatsoever.

In addition to its own activities, Washington has developed a system of contracting out its torture through a procedure that is discreetly referred to as “rendering.” Those detained by the US are rendered to regimes in Egypt, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Syria and other countries where local police torture them, often with US interrogators present.

This latest scandal over US torture has far-reaching historical precedents. The US has practiced torture and trained others in it for decades. In Vietnam, thousands held by the US died under torture and in the infamous “tiger cages.” In Latin America, US-backed dictatorships routinely tortured political prisoners. Most of those doing the torturing were trained by US personnel. The infamous SAVAK secret police of the Iranian Shah was likewise a creation of the CIA. After the Iranian revolution of 1979, US training materials, including a manual on how to torture women, were discovered in the CIA’s headquarters.

These grisly practices continued in the dirty wars waged by Washington in Central America in the 1980s. As US ambassador to Honduras during that period, John Negroponte was intimately connected with contra terrorism against Nicaragua and death squad murders in Honduras. It is hardly an accident that Negroponte has now been named as the US ambassador/proconsul to Iraq.

The man now serving as the US advisor to the Iraqi security forces, James Steele, is likewise a veteran of that period. He was the highest ranking US military officer in El Salvador in 1985, a year in which the US-backed regime killed more than 1,500 civilians and tortured many thousands more. Like Negroponte, he was implicated in the illegal conspiracy to arm and finance the contras.

With such elements directing operations in Iraq, the attempt to attribute the torture at Abu Ghraib merely to a half-dozen reservists and a roughly equal number of military intelligence officers amounts to a patent cover-up.

There is no doubt that those who amused themselves with sexual torture at Abu Ghraib are both backward and depraved. Their actions also reflect a far wider demoralization within the entire US occupation force, which is increasingly wondering why it is in Iraq. There is something about the torture in Iraq that is all too familiar.

Similar acts take place in the vast US prison complex or the backrooms of police stationhouses. Imperialism breeds such brutality, not just abroad but in the US itself.

The fact remains, however, that these sadistic actions were encouraged by elements who bear far greater responsibility for the illegal war against Iraq.

The top officer facing administrative discipline, Brigadier General Janis Karpinski, who oversaw the prison, has insisted that the commander of all land forces in Iraq, General Ricardo Sanchez, should also be held accountable. The decision to turn the prison over to military intelligence and to use whatever means necessary to pry out information on the growing resistance was taken at the top of the military command. Military intelligence, with command authorization, then instructed the reservists to prepare their interrogation subjects through acts of brutality and sadism such as those shown in the photographs.

Former Iraqi human rights minister Abdel Basset Turki, meanwhile, revealed that he informed Paul Bremer, the civilian chief of the occupation, about torture and abuse of Iraqi prisoners last November. "He listened but there was no answer," said Turki, who was denied permission to visit the prisons. He has since resigned from the puppet government in protest over the slaughter of civilians in the US military sieges against Fallujah and Najaf.

Thus, both the military and the civilian heads of the US occupation are implicated in this affair, but responsibility hardly stops there. Going up the chain of command still further, one reaches those who are politically responsible for these heinous acts.

The *Wall Street Journal*, whose right-wing views correspond closely to those of the administration, published an editorial Monday concluding that "the US has probably gone too easy on most arrested Iraqis."

This is the same message that has filtered down from the White House to the lowest ranking reservist. The invasion of Iraq has been cast as part of a global "war on terrorism" in which you are either "with us or with the terrorists."

With the great majority of Iraqis opposing the occupation of their country and many thousands of them taking up armed resistance, demoralized and disoriented troops are encouraged to see a nation of terrorists against whom no violence is too terrible. The inevitable result is mass brutality fueled in part by the racial contempt that is encouraged among the occupiers for the occupied in every colonial war.

The result of these methods has been an explosive growth of support for the struggle to defeat the US occupation. In a telling interview by *Time Asia*, Jumpei Yasuda, a journalist and one of the Japanese taken hostage earlier this month, described a conversation with one of the fighters holding

him:

"The man who pointed his gun at me told me he was walking on the sidewalk and was arrested by the GIs when he wouldn't answer their questions. He said he was imprisoned for almost a month and regularly beaten up. One day, he said, he was taken to a private room and sexually assaulted. He asked me what I would have done if I were him, and I had no answer."

There has been no outraged reaction from the Democratic Party—including its presidential candidate John Kerry—to the torture revelations. Instead, leading Democrats have reiterated their commitment to continuing the occupation that gave rise to these crimes.

The Democrats' sole concern is that the release of the photographs further undermines this crisis-ridden military operation. Like the Republicans, they are concerned not about ending the brutality against the Iraqi people, but rather with subduing the Iraqis in order to seize oil resources and establish US hegemony in the region and globally.

There is no reason to believe that the Army, the Congress or any other part of the US government will carry out a serious investigation into the use of torture in Iraq. Every section of the ruling establishment is implicated in this war and, therefore, in all of the atrocities it has spawned. A concerted attempt is already under way to bury the issue as quickly as possible, limiting responsibility to those at the bottom of the chain of command who were caught executing the orders and policies devised in Washington.

The hideous practices at Abu Ghraib are not a question of mistakes, poor training or inadequate discipline. They are criminal acts that flow inevitably from a greater crime, the conspiracy to invade and conquer Iraq.



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