# Abu Ghraib and the failure of American society

**David Walsh**
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The argument that the torture of Iraqi detainees by US military personnel and civilian contractors results from the actions of a few "bad apples" needs to be rejected with contempt. Every quasi-serious investigation, carried out by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the media or the US military itself, points to a "systemic" pattern of humiliation, terror and—in an unknown number of cases—murder prevalent in the American jails and camps holding Iraqi prisoners.

In any event, the recent revelation that Justice Department lawyers prepared memos in 2002-03 for Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld arguing that George W. Bush as "commander in chief" was not bound by international treaties or US laws prohibiting torture ought to disabuse the naïve. From the outset of the Iraq invasion torture has been official—although not publicly declared—US government and military policy.

In the final analysis, the violence of the treatment meted out to the detainees, 70 to 90 percent of whom, according to the ICRC, are not even "guilty" of participating in the insurgency, flows from the predatory and criminal character of the war and the grander design of which it forms a part: the attempt to establish US global domination by ruthless military aggression. The chatter—aimed primarily at throwing dust in the eyes of world and specifically American public opinion—to the effect that the US military would make a serious effort to win the "hearts and minds" of the Iraqi people has largely abated.

The nearly universal detestation of the American occupation in Iraq, except perhaps in those circles dependent on US largesse or those still hopeful of feeding at Washington's trough, is an empirically established fact. Each setback for the American and allied forces is greeted with a wild popular celebration by Iraqis. The conflict, from a military standpoint, has already been lost. US forces can inflict terrible and enduring damage, but they cannot rule or "stabilize" Iraq under their control in any meaningful manner.

From the point of view of the military-intelligence apparatus and the cabal of civilian reactionaries in the Bush administration, the purpose of the torture and violence in the Iraq detention facilities is evident enough. Facing increasing and obviously widespread opposition last summer—confounding the administration's propaganda, transmitted by a servile US media, about an easy "liberation" and pacification of Iraq—the military, CIA and Bush officials resorted to the "Battle of Algiers" model, first developed by the French in their attempt to suppress the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria in the late 1950s.

This method consists in the application of wholesale terror: thousands of people are hauled in at checkpoints and in other sweeps; they are frightened, humiliated and tortured to "soften" them up; they are then interrogated about their knowledge of the anti-colonial resistance and its supporters; a picture is built up of the resistance organization through these means and the military sets out to exterminate that organization and its membership.

So much for the strategy, which, it needs to be pointed out, did not work in the long run in Algeria or Vietnam (exemplified by the CIA's notorious Operation Phoenix, for example, in which some 20,000 Vietnamese were killed).

A more disturbing phenomenon concerns the willingness of certain US military personnel, men and women, to participate in these horrors. How and why is this possible?

Socialists reject the notion of German "collective guilt" for Nazism and we are no more tempted to subscribe to the theory of the "bad American"—in other words, that a broad swath of the US population has been so infected by the imperialist-chauvinist zeal of the human trash in the White House and Pentagon that it can only respond with unrestrained violence, particularly when confronted with oppressed peoples.

Quite specific social and economic processes have been at work, creating a layer of people who would find it difficult to resist carrying out the sort of horrific abuse inflicted on thousands of Iraqis at Abu Ghraib and other detention centers.

One must confront, in the first place, the role played by the "volunteer" character of the armed forces. The US ruling elite requires a fighting force that will not balk at criminal, bloody interventions around the globe. A precondition is the immunization, to the greatest extent possible, of the troops against progressive social ideas or even the feelings and critical opinions of the average citizen. The recruit is deliberately removed from his or her milieu, isolated and indoctrinated.

Moreover, viewed objectively, the soldiers as a group must reflect changes in American society, the general moral and cultural deterioration, the lumpenization of certain sections of the population in large and small cities alike. How many come from communities whose long-standing economic and social roots have been torn up? How many come from dysfunctional families and face dead-end lives?

The entire war in Iraq is an atrocity, a war crime, launched on the basis of lies. A definite environment has been created of blind patriotism and chauvinism. At one point polls indicated that 70 percent of the US population believed that Iraqis were responsible for the September 11 terrorist attacks. No doubt a substantial section of the US military force in Iraq bought into the idea that they were battling "terrorists." Entirely unprepared for what they face, thrown into a strange and hostile environment, American troops are likely to commit any number of crimes out of fear, exhaustion or demoralization.

Within that overall fighting force, furthermore, a certain selection is made. Not everyone is suited to be a military policeman or stand guard over detainees. Some have the background for it; some have what their commanders consider to be the right mentality.

In the end, whoever they are and whatever accidental elements may come into play, the perpetrators of the atrocities at Abu Ghraib are the product of American society and culture—or rather, the wholesale failure of American society and culture.

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**Given nothing**

The specifically "porno-sadistic" character of the attacks on the Iraqi prisoners captured in the published photographs speaks to a level of cultural deprivation and backwardness that has reached alarming levels. Whatever their military objective may be, the acts committed suggest that their perpetrators have failed to pass through some critical phase in human development, that they suffer from arrested development.

What are we to make of men and women who sodomize defenseless prisoners with phosphoric lights and night-sticks?

This is from a *Washington Post* account of the torture at Abu Ghraib:

"Mustafa Jassim Mustafa, detainee No. 150542, told military investigators he also witnessed the phosphoric-light assault. He said it was around the time of Ramadan, the holiest period of the Muslim year, when he heard screams coming from a cell below. Mustafa said he looked down to see a group of soldiers holding the detainee down and sodomizing him with the light.

"[Specialist Charles] Graner was sodomizing him with the phosphoric light, Mustafa said. The detainee 'was screaming for help. There was another tall white man who was with Graner—he was helping him. There was also a white female soldier, short, she was taking pictures.'

"Another detainee told military investigators that American soldiers sodomized and beat him. The detainee, whose name is being withheld by *The Post* because he is an alleged victim of a sexual assault, said he was kept naked for five days when he first arrived at Abu Ghraib and was forced to kneel for four hours with a hood over his head. He said he was beaten so badly one day that the hood flew off his head. 'The police was telling me to crawl in Arabic, so I crawled on my stomach and the police were spitting on me when I was crawling, and hitting me on my back, my head and my feet,' he said in his sworn statement.

"One day, the detainee said, American soldiers held him down and spread his legs as another soldier prepared to open his pants. 'I started screaming,' he said. A soldier stepped on his head, he said, and someone broke a phosphoric light and spilled the chemicals on him.

"'I was glowing and they were laughing,' he said.

"The detainee said the soldiers eventually brought him to a room and sodomized him with a nightstick. 'They were taking pictures of me during all these instances,' he told the investigators."

The mix of violence and pornography is characteristic of the fascistic fringe in America. At the WSWS we have considered more than once publishing a portion of the mail we receive from right-wingers, to provide the reader with a glimpse into the mentality of this social element. The vast majority of such emails are semi-literate, scatological and threatening.

The individuals charged in the Abu Ghraib case have clearly been given next to nothing intellectually, emotionally, aesthetically. This is not simply a matter of a lack of education—although great numbers of Americans today are literate only by the narrowest definition—but a breakdown in the cognitive process. This manifests itself in the inability to conceptualize the plight of the Iraqi prisoner, the Other, and experience elementary human sympathy. Reflected here is an acute degree of social alienation.

A brief glance at the biographies of some of those already charged is telling. The group of seven combines extremely oppressed individuals and those with backgrounds in prisons and police work, a potentially volatile mix.

Pfc. Lynndie England, a 21-year-old reservist, has become notorious for her leering poses with Iraqi inmates. In one photograph, with cigarette dangling from her lips and glazed eyes, England points to the genitals of a hooded and naked prisoner. In another she stands arm in arm with her lover, Spc. Graner, behind a pyramid of naked Iraqis; both are grinning and giving the thumbs-up sign. A third photo shows her leading a naked prisoner by a leash.

According to the *Washington Post*:

"England was determined to go to war, as she had been to join the Army in the first place. She was a 17-year-old high school junior when she marched into her family's trailer in the former coal-mining town of Fort Ashby, W.Va. [a town of 1,300 people], and announced that she wanted to enlist. She was a minor so she would need their consent and at first her parents resisted.

"She was only five-feet-two, not much more than 100 pounds. But she was determined. 'She said she would turn 18 soon anyway and just do it then," said her father, Kenneth England.

"But the decision was mostly driven by a desire to go to college and study meteorology, her relatives said. And she had seen enough Army recruiting commercials to know the military could help with tuition." While not on call, England worked in a chicken processing plant.

Spc. Jeremy Sivits, 24, the only soldier to plead guilty to abuse, comes from the hamlet of Hyndman, Pennsylvania. By the time his family moved to the town, the *Post* reports, "the trains had already begun bypassing Hyndman as a business stop, and the railroad jobs that once drove the local economy had vanished. ... The downtown is one block and has a two-pump gas station, one bank, one used-car dealership and a traffic light that blinks red. It's a dry town: Liquor sales are illegal.

"Freda Sivits, Jeremy Sivits's mother, works on the outskirts of town at the Dollar General store, where cashiers delight in the gossip that entertains many of Hyndman's 1,500 residents." Sivits's father, who lives on a small pension, is a Vietnam veteran; his uncle died in that war. A teacher describes Jeremy as "a little bit on the backwards side." The family lives in a "frame house with peeling paint, a shaky screen door and a slouching shed [located] in the yard across from train tracks."

The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* notes that the largest employer in Cresaptown, Maryland, the home-base of the 372nd Military Police Company, "is a state prison, which also provides a supply of Army Reservists with transferable skills. 'There's quite a few people in the town who serve there,' said Curt Tringler, who runs a small store selling police and security equipment." Three of the seven charged have police or prison connections.

Spc. Sabrina Harman of Alexandria, Virginia, 26, is the daughter of a homicide detective who, according to CBSNEWS.com "often brought crime scene photographs home for the family to 'profile.'

"She's been looking at autopsies and crime-scene pictures since she was a kid," her mother, Robin Harman, told a reporter. ...

"Her mother says Sabrina Harman, who worked as an assistant manager of a Papa John's Pizza before being sent to Iraq, dreamed of being a homicide detective like her father."

In civilian life, Staff Sgt. Ivan Frederick, 37, of Buckingham, Virginia, is a corrections officer at a state prison in Dillwyn, Virginia. In a journal he shared with family members, Frederick acknowledged concern that he was not equipped to deal with the type of prisoners he encountered in Iraq, and that prisoners were abused. He apparently grew up idolizing his uncle's Air Force career. His wife is a prison guard too.

Spc. Charles Graner, 35, of Uniontown, Pennsylvania, is a guard at a maximum-security state prison in Greene County, Pennsylvania. His estranged wife has obtained three temporary protection of abuse orders since 1997. In an affidavit for the first order, Staci Graner said Charles Graner threatened to kill her and told her "that she could keep his guns, because he did not need them for what he was going to do to the plaintiff." A judge ordered the couple to conduct their child custody exchanges at the police station. Staci Graner also alleged that her husband "set up a video camera in my house without my knowledge and showed me the tapes."

Cultural backwardness is rife in America, but nowhere so pervasively as

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in small cities and towns. Left to rot by corporations that have closed down plants and mines and moved on to more profitable pastures; ravaged by budget cuts in social programs and education—which have all but eliminated music and art from public schools—that ensure a stunted intellectual level; neglected and ignored by politicians and abandoned by the unions; as morally and spiritually isolated as some remote village in China; indeed, linked to the outside world principally through the stupidities of television ('reality shows,' cop shows, daytime talk shows, etc.) and the filth of right-wing talk radio—these towns offer very little. For many, especially the young people, life is bleak and without a future.

Leave the highway and drive through Dubois, Pennsylvania; Blaine, Washington; Adamsville, Michigan or Kingman, Arizona, and you will draw the unmistakable conclusion that much of America already lives in Depression conditions. That millions are eking out an existence, working two or three jobs, up to their ears in debt, one pay-check from genuine hardship, finds physical expression in the peeling paint, the boarded-up houses and factories, the rusting machinery, the deserted downtown streets.

A recent article in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* points out that small towns, defined as those with less than 40,000 inhabitants, have borne an inordinate burden in the Iraqi war. Some 46 percent of the 800 or so US soldiers killed have come from such areas, which represent only 27 percent of the American population. These are "economic conscripts," driven by lack of opportunity to enlist in the army. Out of these elements emerge a certain percentage capable of the crimes at Abu Ghraib.

One of their major influences is religion, Baptist and varieties of Christian fundamentalism, whose obsessive sexual repression is turned inside out in the Iraqi prisons. Also taking its toll is the decades-long bombardment of the population by xenophobia and chauvinism, whether by right-wing demagogues or Hollywood films. Treating Iraqis as subhumans comes all too easily to some.

One Iraqi detainee told investigators that a soldier "continued to abuse him by striking his broken leg and ordered him to curse Islam. 'Because they started to hit my broken leg, I cursed my religion,' he said. 'They ordered me to thank Jesus that I'm alive.' The detainee said the soldiers handcuffed him to a bed. 'Do you believe in anything?' he said the soldier asked. 'I said to him, "I believe in Allah." So he said, "But I believe in torture and I will torture you.""

**Shared responsibility**

Where does the responsibility lie for this depraved situation?

With the entire political and media establishment, with the political parties, with the entertainment industry and popular culture, with the intelligentsia.

The stupidity and sadism begin at the top. Tucker Carlson, a right-winger, has reported that he asked Texas Gov. George W. Bush about the then-pending conviction of Karla Faye Tucker. Bush responded, according to Carlson, by mocking an interview Tucker had given to CNN's Larry King. "Please don't kill me," Bush whimpered, in mock desperation.

In their daily lives Americans, and not only those living in smaller communities, lead an impoverished existence. Popular culture, itself vastly debased and commercialized, wallows in selfishness, individualism and greed. "Porno-sadism" in films has become a sub-genre, whether in the Quentin Tarantino quasi-anarchist variety or in the form of Mel Gibson's evangelical Catholicism. Sexuality is held out as an enticing, all-consuming commodity, the pornography industry is a billion-dollar business, while sexual relations among the young, according to a recent *New York Times Magazine* piece, are increasingly cold and perfunctory. Casinos and lotteries, with all their attendant manipulated fantasies, flourish. Fast-food restaurants and strip-malls blight the landscape.

How could dissatisfaction, disquiet, even seething anger, not be widespread?

In the face of all this, politics, dominated by the wealthy and corrupt, seems an utterly distant and hostile realm. The media speaks for and to an insulated and isolated handful at the top of society. The so-called liberal intelligentsia, cowardly and conformist, has made accommodation to the extreme right a way of life.

Only people who have been given nothing morally or culturally by their society are capable of the crimes committed at Abu Ghraib. And the US armed forces will have ever-increasing need of this social type to carry out its dirty work.

The warning must be issued: such a military, accompanied by a growing army of professional "civilian" mercenaries, represents a danger not only to oppressed peoples in the Middle East, Central Asia and elsewhere, but to the democratic rights of the population in the US. These same elements will be mobilized against the American people when opposition to the policies of the government becomes a broad-based and threatening movement.

The various military tribunals and Congressional hearings will do nothing to halt the growth of such malignant tendencies in American society and the US military. On the contrary, the latter are merely public relations efforts designed to obscure the deep and 'systemic' roots of the problem.

The antidote to the torture and madness in the Iraqi prisons is the construction of a powerful independent political movement of the working class aimed at the rotten foundations of capitalism, the source of the violence and repression. A mass socialist movement will call upon the finest traditions of egalitarianism and democratic thought in the US and inspire millions with great ideals.

The horrors at Abu Ghraib reveal very sharply the alternatives facing the American and global population: socialism or barbarism.

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