

Washington's policy of sadism and sexual abuse: excerpts from Seymour Hersh's *Chain of Command*

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In his valuable book, *Chain of Command*, published earlier this month (HarperCollins Publishers), investigative reporter Seymour Hersh debunks the official myth that the US atrocities exposed at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad were the work of a handful of “bad apples” among American military police stationed at the prison. He presents an irrefutable case that the torture and sexual humiliation inflicted on Iraqi detainees were the result of policy decisions made at the highest levels of the American military and civilian command.

Hersh traces the war crimes at Abu Ghraib—as well as at US prisons in Afghanistan and the Guantanamo concentration camp—to Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld and the White House. He provides damning examples of the sadistic and murderous treatment of “terrorist suspects”—thousands of whom were civilians swept up in indiscriminate roundups—and examines some of the political and ideological conceptions within the Bush administration and the US ruling elite as a whole that led to these crimes against humanity.

The book provides an insight into the policies and methods that rapidly turned virtually all sections of the Iraqi population—Shiite as well as Sunni—against the American occupation.

On page 35, for example, Hersh describes a photo from Abu Ghraib that came into his possession shortly before CBS News broke the story in April of torture at the prison:

“Another image shows that the man, an Iraqi prisoner, is naked. His hands are clasped behind his neck and he is leaning against the door to a cell, contorted with terror, as the dogs bark a few feet away. Other photographs show the dogs straining at their

leashes and snarling at the prisoner. In another, taken a few minutes later, the Iraqi is lying on the ground, writhing in pain, with a soldier sitting on top of him, knee pressed to his back. Blood is streaming from the inmate's leg. Another photograph is a close-up of the naked prisoner, from his waist to his ankles, lying on the floor. On his right thigh is what appears to be a bite or a deep scratch. There is another, larger wound on his left leg, covered in blood.”

On pages 42-43, Hersh writes:

“A military consultant with close ties to the Special Operations community told me in the summer of 2004 that he had been informed that some officers who were serving in Iraq had filed written complaints about prison abuse before the photographs were revealed. They were told, he said, that their papers had to be routed to General Sanchez [at that time the top US commander in Iraq]. War crimes were committed and no action was taken, he added, in anger. ‘People were beaten to death. What do you call it when people are tortured and going to die and the soldiers know it, but do not treat their injuries?’ He answered his own question: ‘Execution.’”

On the calculated character of these atrocities and their connection to the racist and colonialist conceptions of top policy-makers in the Pentagon and the White House, Hersh writes, on pages 38-39:

“The notion that Arabs are particularly vulnerable to sexual humiliation had become a talking point among pro-war Washington conservatives in the months before the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. One book that was frequently cited was *The Arab Mind*, a study of Arab culture and psychology, first published in 1973, by Raphael Patai, a cultural anthropologist who taught at,

among other universities, Columbia and Princeton, and who died in 1996. The book includes a twenty-five-page chapter on Arabs and sex, depicting sex as a taboo vested with shame and repression...

“The Patai book, an academic told me, was ‘the bible of the neocons on Arab behavior.’ In their discussions, he said, two themes emerged—‘one, that Arabs only understand force and, two, that the biggest weakness of Arabs is shame and humiliation.’”



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