

Documents reveal systematic torture by US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan

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Official documents made public this week by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) demonstrate that the US military has engaged in the widespread and systematic torture of prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan. The material indicates that high-ranking administration officials not only approved of the abuse, but have carried out a systematic cover-up of these activities. The new revelations represent a damning indictment of the Bush administration, and make clear that it is guilty of war crimes.

Much of the material in question was posted by the ACLU on its website on December 20 and 21. They were obtained only after a protracted legal battle. The Bush administration repeatedly stonewalled on a number of Freedom of Information Act requests made from October 2003. A federal court judge ordered the government to release the documents in September 2004.

One email from a Federal Bureau of Investigations official (whose name was suppressed) referred to a presidential Executive Order (EO) authorizing certain measures of torture against Iraqi prisoners. Among the techniques that the author indicates were authorized by the order were “sleep ‘management’, use of MWD (military working dogs), ‘stress positions’ such as half squats, ‘environmental manipulation’ such as the use of loud music, sensory deprivation through the use of hoods, etc.”

An Executive Order is a presidential edict, which need not always be publicly disclosed, that institutes additional or complementary legal instructions. If there was an EO signed by Bush authorizing such interrogation techniques, it would represent a direct connection between the president and the abuse of prisoners in Iraq.

The White House has denied the existence of any such EO. Whether such an order was ever issued or not, the documents released by the ACLU demonstrate that those involved in the abuse and murder of Iraqis had no doubt that their work was authorized at the highest levels, and understood that they could act with impunity.

One heavily redacted (censored) document is from a Federal Bureau of Investigations official in Iraq to the FBI

Director, dated June 25, 2004. It is a report of information provided by an unidentified individual “who observed serious physical abuses of civilian detainees in [redacted] Iraq during the period of [redacted]...He described that such abuses included strangulation, beating, placement of lit cigarettes into the detainees ear openings, and unauthorized interrogations.”

The report states that the individual “was providing this information to the FBI based on his knowledge that [redacted] were engaged in a cover-up of these abuses. He stated these cover-up efforts included [redacted].”

Files from the Army’s Criminal Investigation Command (CID), described a number of other incidents in which the Army apparently sought to cover-up the killing of Iraqi detainees. An ACLU press release stated, “One of the most troubling files relates to the suspected murder of a detainee held in Tikrit [Iraq]. On August 8, 2003, American forces arrested Obed Hethere Radad during a raid. According to the documents, on September 11, 2003 an army specialist shot and killed Radad without any advance warning.” While the CID found that there was probable cause to try the soldier for murder, the Army officers in charge scuttled this process by quickly demoting the soldier and discharging him.

Other emails described cases of mock executions, the deliberate burning of a detainee’s hands, the use of death threats during interrogations, and the shocking of a detainee with an electric transformer. An email from July 28, 2004 noted that an FBI investigation was taking pace into the alleged rape of a young male prisoner in Abu Ghraib. US dog-handlers in the facility competed among themselves to see who could scare detainees into urinating on themselves the fastest.

All of these methods are direct violations of the Geneva Conventions. Anyone determined to have engaged in them or ordered them is guilty of war crimes.

There were also more revelations on US torture of detainees in Guantanamo Bay. Another email from an FBI official, sent in December 2003, described an incident in which Army interrogators used “torture techniques” while

pretending to be federal agents. “If this detainee is ever released or his story made public in any way, DOD [Department of Defense] interrogators will not be held accountable because these torture techniques were done [sic] the ‘FBI’ interrogators.”

A January 21, 2004 email stated that “this technique [of impersonating FBI agents] and all those used in these scenarios [that is, the ‘torture techniques’ referred to in the other email], was approved by the Dep Sec Def,” referring to Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz. A Pentagon spokesman denied that Wolfowitz approved any techniques.

An undated memo from an FBI employee reports that members of the agency had observed the use of “loud music/bright lights/growling dogs” during interrogations in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. If true, this would directly contradict previous statements by Major General Geoffrey Miller, who was head of Guantanamo Bay from October 2002 to March 2004, before he was sent to Iraq. Miller said that “we never used the dogs for interrogations while I was in command” at Guantanamo Bay.

An FBI agent reported on May 10, 2004 that in a conversation with Miller, the general defended the Army’s use of certain techniques not allowed by the FBI. The military “has their marching orders from the Sec Def,” he declared, referring to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld.

One FBI official recounted in an August 2, 2004 email: “On a couple of occasions, I entered interview rooms to find a detainee chained hand and foot in a fetal position to the floor, with no chair, food or water. Most times they had urinated or defecated on themselves and had been left there for 18-24 hours or more... On another occasion, the A/C had been turned off, making the temperature in the unventilated room probably well over 100 degrees. The detainee was almost unconscious on the floor with a pile of hair next to him. He had apparently been literally pulling his own hair out throughout the night.”

Another email dated July 20, 2004 described how a detainee was wrapped in an Israeli flag and subject to loud music and flashing strobe lights.

The mountain of material obtained by the ACLU is expected to number in the hundreds of thousands of pages. This week, the organization won a decision in a federal court seeking to force the CIA to turn over documents relating to detainee abuse. The CIA had previously refused to release any information, citing an ongoing internal investigation.

In response to the revelations, the *Washington Post* published an extraordinary editorial on December 23, under the heading “War Crimes.”

In a major indictment of the Bush administration, it noted: “Since the publication of photographs of abuse at Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison in the spring the administration’s

whitewashers—led by Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld—have contended that the crimes were carried out by a few low-ranking reservists, that they were limited to the night shift during a few chaotic months at Abu Ghraib in 2003, that they were unrelated to the interrogation of prisoners and that no torture occurred at the Guantanamo Bay prison where hundreds of terrorism suspects are held. The new documents establish beyond any doubt that every part of this cover story is false.”

The *Post* went on to declare that the government will do nothing to address the issue: “The record of the past few months suggests that the administration will neither hold any senior official accountable nor change the policies that have produced this shameful record. Congress, too, has abdicated its responsibility under its Republican leadership: It has been nearly four months since the last hearing on prisoner abuse. Perhaps intervention by the courts will eventually stem the violations of human rights that appear to be going on... For now the appalling truth is that there has been no remedy for the documented torture and killing of foreign prisoners by this American government.”

This is an extraordinary statement. A major voice of the political establishment is directly accusing the White House of sanctioning, if not directly ordering, heinous criminal acts. Not only that: the *Post* declares that there exists no viable avenue to put a stop to government-sanctioned crimes, let alone bring the criminals to justice. In other words, we have reached the point of a complete breakdown of rule by law and constitutional democracy in the United States.

Having arrived at this conclusion, the *Post* somehow manages to maintain the pretense that the torture and killings carried out by the government can be separated from the war in Iraq as a whole.

The abuse and killings committed by US forces were not the result of individual transgressions, but rather flowed from the very nature of the war. The entire political establishment and media—including the *Post* itself—supported the launching of a war which was in violation of international law and from which all subsequent crimes have inevitably followed.



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