

Australia: former leading intelligence official exposes government lies

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Like all regimes involved in criminal activity, systematic lying is now the modus operandi of the Howard government. It is a well-established fact that the government lied to parliament about “weapons of mass destruction” to create the pretext for Australian involvement in the criminal and illegal invasion of Iraq, and lied when it claimed that before the release of the horrific images of torture in Baghdad’s Abu Ghraib prison it had no knowledge of the abuse of Iraqi detainees.

A damning interview with former Australian intelligence officer Rod Barton on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation current affairs program “Four Corners” has not only provided further proof of the government’s lies on the prisoner abuse issue; it has blown to pieces the claim made last year by Defence Minister Robert Hill that no Australian personnel were involved in the interrogation of Iraqi detainees. The “Four Corners” program, aired on February 15, was aptly entitled “Secrets and Lies”.

Last June 16, in the wake of the Abu Ghraib revelations, Hill told parliament that a thorough review by the Defence Department had confirmed that “Australia did not interrogate prisoners, Australia was not involved in guarding prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison, or any other prison”. Prime Minister John Howard supported and repeated the claims both in and outside parliament. Even before Hill’s so-called review, Howard had declared in a radio interview on May 28: “We were not involved in any interrogations. We did not witness interrogations.”

However, Barton told “Four Corners” reporter Liz Jackson that he had been involved in the interrogation of Iraq prisoners at Camp Cropper. The detention facility, according to Barton, held about 100 “high value” prisoners, including senior officials of the former regime and Iraqi scientists. Barton is a trained microbiologist who worked as a senior specialist advisor for the US Iraq Survey Group (ISG), which was dispatched to search for “weapons of mass destruction” (WMDs) in Iraq. Before that, he had been seconded from the Australian Defence Intelligence Organisation to work with the chief UN weapons inspector, Hans Blix.

Barton said he had been “annoyed” by Hill’s June 16 statement because when responding to the Defence Department’s “review” questionnaire he had confirmed that he had been present at interrogations at Camp Cropper and had personally been involved in interviewing a senior Iraqi detainee. When Barton telephoned a high-ranking Defence Department official to object to Hill’s statement, he was told: “We regard that you did interviews and not interrogations.”

Barton told “Four Corners” that the department’s interpretation—one that has since been seized on by Hill in an attempt to extricate the government and himself from the charge of misinforming parliament—was “misleading”. When “someone was brought to me in an orange jumpsuit with a guard with a gun standing behind him... I call that an interrogation,” he said. When former ISG chief David Kay, who quit the ISG just before Barton’s arrival in Iraq, was recently asked about the supposed difference between interviews and interrogations, he said: “Look, it’s not a distinction I make. I assume... that anyone in a room with a prisoner is engaged in an interrogation.”

Barton confirmed in the “Four Corners” interview that even before the Abu Ghraib revelations he had informed a high-ranking Australian Defence Department official of his concerns about prisoner abuse at Camp Cropper. “I had certain indications and certain evidence that this had occurred.” His concerns had led him to make a recommendation to the official, “that Australia should not be involved in the interview or interrogation of any prisoners at Cropper”.

Despite the seriousness of what Barton had raised, he claimed that no Defence Department official had asked him any further questions. “I gathered later that nothing was done about it. Nothing was followed up.” Yet Barton’s chilling account in the “Four Corners” interview pointed to extreme forms of prisoner abuse at Cropper. Barton confirmed that detainees were kept in “solitary confinement, basically” in small 1.5- by 2-metre cells with no natural light. Before being committed to the main facility, prisoners were kept for a couple of days with hessian bags over their heads. He believed the practice was “part of this disorientation process, softening up, a sort of purgatory before they actually finished up in prison...”

Barton said he became gradually more aware of abuse during briefings known as “prisoner of the week” where a profile and photograph of a particular detainee were displayed. On two occasions, the photographs showed prisoners with abrasions about the face. Barton began to question the official explanation that the injuries were inflicted when the person had resisted arrest and to suspect that they were the result of a “softening up process” and that “this was deliberate”.

The most horrific case of abuse suspected by Barton was in relation to the death of senior Iraqi scientist Mohammed Hamdi Azmirli in February 2004. Barton had been told his death was due to a brain tumor. But later, when he returned to Australia, he had

read a press report of an autopsy done on Azmirli, showing that he suffered brain damage due to a beating, had a fractured skull and a broken jaw. Barton said: “I had my suspicions that this person had actually been beaten to death in the prison” and felt “that it should be investigated”. Defence told him that someone would “get back” to him about his concerns, “but I am still waiting for the call”.

Barton also further exposed the lies told on WMD. He detailed the “sexing up” of an interim ISG report. He revealed that he had come under pressure from the incoming ISG chief, Charles Duelfer, in mid-February 2004 to produce a report on his investigation in Iraq “that had no conclusions”. Barton—who by that time had become convinced that there were no WMD or “weapons programs”, told Duelfer: “I believe it’s dishonest. If we know certain things, and we’re asked to provide a report, we should say what we have found and what we haven’t found. After all, if we had found positive results, we would report that.”

According to Barton, the interim ISG report “left the impression that maybe there were WMDs out there: maybe there were programs still to find” and “all our future work might discover this”. This allowed Duelfer to report to the US Congress that while ISG had not found evidence of stocks of weapons, “we continue to receive reports all the time that there are hidden weapons, so it’s something which we have to pursue”. Shortly afterward, in March 2004, Barton resigned in protest, as did another senior Australian and a British colleague.

Barton returned to Iraq in September to again work with ISG at Duelfer’s invitation to produce the final report. He was assured “that no one influences him (Duelfer)” and they would do “an honest report”. Barton said the final report concluded: “[T]here were no weapons of mass destruction since 1991, and there were no programs to produce weapons”.

Barton voiced his concern that despite the findings, Iraq scientists and military officers who were earlier involved in weapons production were still being held in Camp Cropper without charges after more than 18 months. The final ISG report demonstrated that “they (the detainees) haven’t done anything wrong, at least internationally”. Barton explained: “While they may have been involved in the production of biological or chemical weapons in the past, under international law, as long as they weren’t involved in the use of these weapons, that is not illegal”.

Coming in the wake of the shocking allegations of torture recently released by Australian Guantanamo Bay detainee Mamdouh Habib, who detailed how he was interrogated in the presence an Australian official, Barton’s “Four Corners” interview is a body blow to the Howard government. To buy time for Hill to concoct a story to counter Barton’s claims, Howard last week point-blank refused to answer questions in parliament on the issues raised, declaring that they should be directed to Hill in the Senate. The Senate was not in session at the time.

At a Senate estimates hearing that began on February 16, Hill’s clumsy attempts to rationalise the government’s statements last year only further fueled the already broadly held perception that Howard and his cohorts are a gang of habitual liars.

Assisted by leading defence officials, including Brigadier Steve Meekin and Lieutenant-General Peter Leahy, Hill told the Senate

committee that he had since been informed that “a small number” of military personnel had been employed in Iraq as “debriefers but did not conduct interrogations”. Meekin admitted that up to eight Australians had been involved in so-called “debriefing” sessions.

Hill made the preposterous claim that “debriefs are not interrogations—the major difference being the matter of consent”. According to Hill, a detainee in a debriefing session had the “right to break off the interview at any time” and “cannot be compelled to answer questions”. He claimed that “debriefs at Camp Cropper in which Australians were involved, all involved detainees that were compliant, and were willing participants in the debrief”.

This claim is ludicrous given that the people being questioned were detainees who had been incarcerated in a maximum-security prison for months without access to lawyers or the outside world and who were completely at the mercy of their captors. What process had they been put through to make them so “compliant”? No doubt the “softening up” techniques observed by Barton would have played their part, and Azmirli’s death is evidence enough that some of the detainees at Cropper were subjected to far worse.

Attempting to back up Hill, Meekin revealed more than he meant to when he insisted that Australian ISG members had been instructed “that they were not to take part in forced interrogations” and “indeed they were to withdraw from that situation if it was an interrogation and it appeared to them to be an interrogation”.

The question is: how would the Australians judge that an interview had suddenly turned into an interrogation? The definition of an interrogation given by Lieutenant-General Leahy to the Senate gives a clue. As opposed to a mere “debriefing”, Leahy explained an interrogation was “a hostile, aggressive and systematic method of information-gathering where various techniques are utilised to elicit information” and “weaken the subject’s will to resist...”

In other words, when detainees were being beaten up or, as the Abu Ghraib images show, subjected to humiliation and torture, Australians were merely to “withdraw”. Note, Meekin did not say they were instructed to object, or intervene to stop abuse or even to report it; they were only to “withdraw”. This can mean nothing else than Australian personnel were instructed to turn a blind eye and walk away when prisoners were being abused.

One can now begin to understand why Barton’s concerns over prisoner abuse were treated with complete indifference by ranking officials in the Defence Department. This was no accident or the result of departmental laziness. It was completely in line with government and departmental policy that tolerates and supports the most brutal methods to achieve political ends—including torture.



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