

Bush visits the CIA: reassuring America's Murder Inc.

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President Bush's visit to CIA headquarters last Thursday was an effort to assure the officials and agents of the chief US spy agency of continued White House support. His trip followed press reports of growing concern among career CIA officers that they could face discipline or even prosecution for the torture of prisoners detained as part of Bush's "war on terror."

Congressional Republicans have rejected calls for special hearings of the House and Senate intelligence committees to review the mounting evidence that kidnapping, torture and even murder of prisoners is standard practice for the CIA. Only one CIA agent, contract employee David Passaro, has been charged with a crime related to post-9/11 activities—in his case, the killing of a prisoner in Afghanistan who was beaten to death.

At least one other CIA officer is under investigation for a killing at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The CIA station chief in Baghdad was removed from his post in December 2003, the *New York Times* reported February 28, at least in part because of the death of two prisoners who had been interrogated by agency employees. The same article in the *Times* revealed: "The agency has referred some cases to the Justice Department for a review of possible criminal charges under the federal torture law, which forbids extreme interrogation tactics, and under civil rights laws more commonly used in police brutality prosecutions."

The two Iraqi deaths were those of Manadel al-Jamadi, who died in a shower room at Abu Ghraib prison on November 4, 2003, and Maj. Gen. Abed Hamed Mowhoush, who was beaten and asphyxiated. In both cases, military personnel have been charged with directly inflicting the fatal injuries—al-Jamadi was struck repeatedly on the head with rifle butts by Navy Seals, while Mowhoush was shoved into a sleeping bag head-first by Army intelligence officers and suffocated. CIA

interrogators, however, were present and participating in both incidents.

In testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee, CIA Director Porter Goss said that "a bunch of other cases," in addition to Passaro's, were under review by the CIA inspector general. He added, "What I can't tell you is how many more might come in the door."

This is was the background for Bush's visit to CIA headquarters March 3 for a public relations event in the lobby of the building named after his father, George H.W. Bush, who was CIA director in 1975-76. The president spent two hours in the building, receiving a classified briefing that White House and CIA officials declined to discuss, as well as shaking hands with hundreds of agency employees. The administration has called for a 50 percent expansion in CIA manpower over the next few years.

Bush was effusive in his praise of the agency, telling his accompanying press corps: "I wanted to assure the people here that their contribution was incredibly vital to the security of the United States, and that, together, we've achieved a lot in securing this country. There's a lot of really incredibly bright, capable, hard-working, dedicated Americans who work in this building."

A photo-op for the media cannot, however, divert attention from the ongoing revelations about the participation of CIA agents in crimes against the people of Afghanistan, Iraq and many other countries.

On the same day that Bush visited the headquarters in Langley, Virginia, the *Washington Post* carried a front-page story about the murder of a young Afghan detainee in November 2002 at the hands of the CIA. A CIA case officer ordered Afghan guards to strip the prisoner naked, chain him to the concrete floor of a warehouse code-named the Salt Pit, and leave him exposed overnight without any cover. The man froze to death. An autopsy confirmed hypothermia as the cause of death.

The prisoner was buried in an unmarked grave, his

family was not notified, and even his name is unrecorded. “He just disappeared from the face of the earth,” one US government official told the *Post*. The CIA case officer involved has since been promoted.

The Salt Pit was an abandoned brick factory in Kabul, part of a 10-acre facility set up as a CIA-controlled but nominally Afghan concentration camp. Afghan guards and other personnel ran the prison under CIA direction, an arrangement that allowed the agency to designate it as a “host-nation facility.”

According to the *Post*, “Its designation as an Afghan facility was intended to give US personnel some insulation from actions taken by Afghan guards inside, a tactic used in secret CIA prisons in other countries, former and current CIA officials said.” This tactic had the desired effect. When the CIA was eventually compelled to refer the case of the frozen prisoner to the US Justice Department for investigation, the department said it had no jurisdiction.

Significantly, the CIA briefed Congress about the prisoner’s death shortly after it occurred. The chairmen and vice chairmen of the House and Senate intelligence committees were informed—standard practice for covert operations. The two Democrats and two Republicans kept their mouths shut about the murder and cover-up until last week, when the Democrats asked for an investigation into the deaths of people in CIA custody overseas.

Also reported on March 3, by the *Los Angeles Times*, was the apparent kidnapping of a Muslim cleric in Italy by the CIA. Hassan Osama Nasr, an Egyptian-born imam, disappeared two years ago in Milan. His family said he had been kidnapped by American agents, a charge that Italian authorities initially downplayed.

Nasr eventually surfaced in Egypt 15 months later, saying he had been kidnapped by US and Italian agents and shipped to Egypt for interrogation under torture. Shortly after telephoning his wife and several friends in Italy, he was rearrested by the Egyptian government. His whereabouts are now unknown.

Last week, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, Italian prosecutor Armando Spataro, investigating Nasr’s abduction, went to the US-run NATO air base at Aviano to demand records of vehicular and air traffic related to the case. The cleric was believed to have been flown from the base to Egypt—meaning that the US military as well as the CIA was involved in the kidnapping.

Opposition legislators raised the issue in the Italian parliament, asking officials of the government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi what the government knew

about the case. One senator asked, “I want to know if Italy is involved in the outsourcing of torture.” Another said that Italy was being treated like “a banana republic.”

Finally there was the article Sunday in the *New York Times* reporting that the Bush administration had given the CIA broad authority to transfer “suspected terrorists” to foreign countries for interrogation. Bush signed an executive order shortly after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, authorizing the process known as “rendition.”

The *New York Times* reported that as many as 150 CIA prisoners have been moved from one country to another—a number considerably larger than previous accounts. The countries include Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Pakistan, all known for abusing and torturing prisoners.

The *Times* account included a lengthy defense of rendition by unnamed CIA and Bush administration officials, but it also noted: “[I]n interviews, a half-dozen current and former government officials said they believed that, in practice, the administration’s approach may have involved turning a blind eye to torture.”

The Bush administration, congressional Democrats and Republicans, and the corporate-controlled American media are currently engaged in an orgy of self-congratulation over the advance of “democracy” in the Middle East supposedly triggered by the US invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan and the January 30 election in Iraq. The reports of CIA torture and murder—and Bush’s rush to embrace and reassure the perpetrators—demonstrate the real content of this imperialist “democracy.”



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