

Media bows to US torture regime

Newsweek retracts Guantánamo abuse story

Bill Van Auken
17 May 2005

Caving in to pressure from the Pentagon and the White House, *Newsweek* magazine Monday retracted a story on anti-Muslim abuse of detainees held in the Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, detention camp. The article sparked anti-US upheavals that swept Afghanistan last week claiming at least 17 lives and spreading to other parts of the Muslim world.

The retraction represents an act of journalistic cowardice and expresses the ever-closer integration of every section of the American media into the state apparatus. This is only the latest in a series of incidents in which major news outlets have backed away from reporting because of administration pressure.

The offending article was published in the May 9 issue of *Newsweek*. It cited an unnamed US senior official as saying that an upcoming report by the Pentagon's US Southern Command on abuses at Guantánamo included a case in which "interrogators, in an attempt to rattle suspects, flushed a Koran down a toilet." The account was picked up by Afghan and Pakistani news outlets, triggering outrage among Muslims.

A Defense Department spokesman, Brian Whitman, denounced the *Newsweek* report Sunday as "irresponsible" and "demonstratively false." He said the magazine "hid behind anonymous sources, which by their own admission do not stand scrutiny. Unfortunately, they cannot retract the damage that they have done to this nation or those who were viciously attacked by these false allegations."

The Pentagon's chief spokesman Lawrence Di Rita went further, declaring, "They printed a story based on an erroneous source or sources that was demonstrably wrong and that resulted in riots in which people were killed."

The White House weighed in as well on Monday. "The report has had serious consequences," spokesman Scott McClellan said. "People have lost their lives. The image of the United States abroad has been damaged."

He went on to criticize the magazine for failing to retract the story and failing to live up to a "certain journalistic standard." This from an administration whose "standards" include relentlessly planting false stories in the media, covertly paying columnists to promote its policies and passing off government-funded propaganda as news.

Among the most ominous comments came from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who warned, "you must be careful what you say, as well as what you do," clearly suggesting that speech opposed to the government may be criminal.

The assault on *Newsweek* was encouraged by an "apology" published in the magazine's May 23 issue. Under intense pressure from the Pentagon, *Newsweek* felt compelled to acknowledge that its source for the story, the unnamed senior official, was no longer sure

whether he read of the Koran being thrown into the toilet in the US Southern Command report or another official document.

In a revealing glimpse into the relations between the corporate media and the government, *Newsweek* editor Mark Whitaker said the magazine showed the report to Pentagon officials before it was published and made it clear that it would have agreed not to publish the item had they so requested.

Whatever the confusion of the government source about where the Pentagon report had originated, there was no question as to the article's substantive charges concerning the treatment of detainees.

Yet *Newsweek's* cowardly retreat was answered by a revolting wave of reports on television news Monday night clearly suggesting that the discrepancy about which government document had verified the criminal actions at Guantánamo somehow meant that the actions themselves were a fabrication. It seemed that those who control the mass media decided that the best way to insulate themselves from government criticism was to join in the right-wing attacks on the magazine's story.

The report on the deliberate desecration of the Koran—which amounted to half of a sentence in a two-paragraph article published in *Newsweek's* May 9 issue—was hardly a scoop for the magazine. There have been numerous news reports going back more than two years of military guards and interrogators using attacks on Muslim detainees' religion as a means of "breaking" them.

On March 26, 2003, the *Washington Post* reported that a group of 18 Afghans released from Guantánamo the day before "complained that American soldiers insulted Islam by sitting on the Koran or dumping their sacred text into a toilet to taunt them."

One of the men recounted US soldiers using the same tactic in a prison in Kandahar, Afghanistan. "It was a very bad situation for us," he said. "We cried so much and shouted, 'Please do not do that to the holy Koran.'"

Further confirmation of these psychological torture methods targeting the detainees' religious beliefs came a year later with the March 2004 release of three Britons who had been held by the US for more than two years in Afghanistan and Guantánamo.

The three men—Shafiq Rasul, Asif Iqbal and Ruhel Ahmed—issued a joint statement charging that the guards in Guantánamo routinely attacked their religion.

Asif stated: "The behavior of the guards towards our religious practices as well as the Koran was also, in my view, designed to cause us as much distress as possible. They would kick the Koran, throw it into the toilet and generally disrespect it. It is clear to me that the conditions in our cells and our general treatment were designed by the officers in charge of the interrogation process to 'soften us up.'"

He also said that the US military guards interfered with the call to prayer. “The Americans would respond by either silencing the person who was doing it, or, more frequently, play loud rock music to drown them out. They would also go into the person’s cage and shackle them, leaving them for four or five hours.”

The other released Britons described similar instances, including guards throwing copies of the Koran on the floor and kicking them.

Last January, lawyers for Kuwaiti detainees at Guantánamo said their clients had made similar complaints. “Several of our clients did tell us that the guards had desecrated the Koran,” Kristine Huskey, of the lawyers told AFP. “At least two stated that the Koran had been thrown in a toilet, another said it had been stepped on and I believe another said it had been thrown by a guard and/or spat on.”

A New York-based attorney representing 13 Yemeni prisoners at Guantánamo also recounted “systematic” religious abuse against his clients. The attorney, Marc Falkoff, told BBC News, “The government is trying to use religion to humiliate them.” He too quoted his clients as saying that American interrogators threw copies of the Koran on the ground and stepped on them.

Falkoff has subsequently told *Newsweek* that a guard’s stomping on a Koran promoted a mass suicide attempt at Guantánamo in August 2003, with 23 detainees trying to hang or strangle themselves.

Then there is Brahim Benchechrún, a 26-year-old Moroccan, who gave an interview to the Spanish daily *Diario de León* after spending more than two years in Guantánamo.

He charged that the anti-Muslim intimidation began when he was first held at the Bagram prison camp in Afghanistan.

“They grabbed the holy Koran, threw it on the floor, ripped it up, urinated on it and then threw it into the latrines,” he said. “They stopped us from praying,” he added. “When there was a call to prayer, the Americans would laugh, sing and dance.”

The *New York Times* on May 1 of this year published a story headlined “Inquiry Finds Abuses at Guantánamo Bay.” The story reported on the military’s investigation into the abuses, which was prompted by memoranda issued by FBI agents who questioned the treatment of detainees after visiting the detention camp in Cuba.

It also quoted a recently released detainee, who reported that after guards threw copies of the Koran into a pile and stepped on them, the detainees launched a hunger strike. The action, according to the *Times*, ended only after a senior US officer issued an apology over the camp’s public address system. The paper cited a former Guantánamo interrogator who confirmed the account of the hunger strike and the apology over the desecration of the Korans.

The sheer volume of these reports and the number of different sources reporting similar incidents leave no doubt that the desecration of the Koran described by *Newsweek* took place. Moreover, the fact that precisely the same kind of abuse was witnessed at different US detention facilities in both Afghanistan and Cuba makes clear that this was not a matter of unauthorized brutality by individual soldiers. Rather, senior officials in US military intelligence and in the Pentagon leadership devised and ordered a tactic of religious-based abuse aimed at destroying the will of the detainees.

Confronting the intimidation campaign of the administration—which has been widely echoed by the mass media—*Newsweek* issued a mealy-mouthed apology. “We regret that we got any part of our story wrong, and extend our sympathies to victims of the violence and to the US soldiers caught in its midst,” wrote Whitaker in the magazine’s May 23 issue.

Together with the Pentagon’s attempts to blame *Newsweek* for the

biggest anti-American uprising in Afghanistan since the US invaded the country have come the solemn proclamations of US officials from Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on down about their unqualified respect for the “Holy Koran.”

Who are they kidding? From Afghanistan to Iraq and Guantánamo, the US military has tortured and sodomized prisoners, beating not a few of them to death, but it would never lay a finger on their sacred texts.

If half a sentence in *Newsweek* could bring thousands into the streets across Afghanistan and much of the Muslim world, it is because US imperialism’s acts of aggression in the region—carried out on the pretext of fighting terrorism—have fueled a popular rage that can boil over at any time.

In Afghanistan, three-and-a-half years of occupation have created immense resentment. US troops still routinely raid homes and detain Afghans without charges and on the flimsiest of suspicions. They simply disappear into the detention camps run by the American military.

With its blistering attacks on *Newsweek*, the government has succeeded once again in intimidating the media and issuing a warning to anyone who dares question the official story about US military operations abroad.

The clear implication of the tirades from the Pentagon and the White House is that the use of unnamed government sources is itself impermissible. These are virtually the only kind of sources that can be used to pry loose information about criminality within the government. When it comes to Guantánamo Bay and the global network of US detention camps, the Bush administration, with the complicity of Congress, has attempted to maintain an impenetrable veil of secrecy behind which it detains innocent individuals indefinitely and employs methods of torture outlawed by the Geneva Conventions.

These practices are well known and deeply hated all around the world. Washington’s concern is to conceal them as much as possible from the American people and to blame anyone within the media who exposes them for the inevitable resistance that these ugly methods of US imperialism provoke.

Newsweek’s capitulation in the face of White House pressure is one more confirmation that there exists no significant constituency for democratic rights or institutions within the US ruling elite. The days when the mission of the press was seen as that of “Fourth Estate,” acting as an independent power whose purpose was to scrutinize, expose and criticize the actions of the state, are over. Now, what is acceptable as news is to be determined by state policy.

The outcome of this latest affair is to conceal the criminal actions of the US government. What the *Newsweek* episode makes clear is that the job of the major news outlets—all owned by giant conglomerates—is not to inform the people, but to defend corporate and state interests by suppressing inconvenient information and promoting government-sponsored lies.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact