

US military atrocities and the moral choice facing the American people

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A *New York Times* editorial May 23 accused the president of the United States, along with other members of his administration, of grave crimes in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

“Patterns of Abuse” first takes note of a comment by George W. Bush to the effect that the American government’s handling of the brutality at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq would be a model of transparency and accountability and that those responsible would be punished. This made for a fine photo opportunity, comment the *Times* editors, “Unfortunately, none of it is true.”

In other words, the president is a liar.

The editorial—published in conjunction with a two-part series detailing the horrifying murder of two Afghans at the Bagram prison by US military personnel—proceeds to accuse the administration of withholding reports and stonewalling inquiries. Moreover, “The administration has prevented any serious investigation of policy makers at the White House, the Justice Department and the Pentagon by orchestrating official probes so that none could come even close to the central question of how the prison policies were formulated and how they led to the abuses.”

The *Times* asserts that “what happened at Abu Ghraib was no aberration, but part of a widespread pattern. It showed the tragic impact of the initial decision by Mr. Bush and his top advisers that they were not going to follow the Geneva Conventions, or indeed American law, for prisoners taken in antiterrorist operations.”

The administration then is guilty of war crimes, contravening international law.

A policy that officially mandated humane treatment, but only when it suited “military necessity,” leading interrogators to believe that they “could deviate slightly from the rules,” created a situation in which the US military’s “slight deviations included killing prisoners, and then covering up the reason they died.”

The *Times*, although it does not care to spell this out, is charging the president, vice president, secretary of defense and various military officials with sanctioning torture and murder. The facts are unambiguous. In reality, the entire political and media establishment (including the *Times* itself), which endorsed and supported the invasion of Iraq, is implicated.

Everyone knows that the murders at Bagram and abuse at Abu Ghraib are only the tip of the iceberg. One can say without fear of contradiction that crimes are being committed on a daily basis in Iraq, Afghanistan and the US internment camp in Cuba. If there is not more exposure of the atrocities, and outrage at their commission, that must be explained by the general support such methods find within the American ruling elite.

The greatest fiction, which the *Times* editors continue to maintain, is

that the truly savage treatment of ordinary Afghans and Iraqis can be considered apart from the character of the war as a whole. As though systematic and homicidal cruelty, part of “a widespread pattern” in the newspaper’s own words, were a mere blemish on the face of an otherwise noble, democratic cause.

On the contrary, the episodes at Bagram provide the most appropriate basis for evaluating the character of US policy. They sum up one of the central aims of the American project in Afghanistan and Iraq: to terrorize subject, colonial peoples.

The US invasion and occupation of Central Asia and the Middle East have been criminal enterprises from the beginning, in all their aspects. The lies justifying the ongoing conflicts and the lies covering up their crimes flow from the same source: the attempt by American imperialism to bring the entire world under its reactionary sway. Resistance, or even in some cases the mere presence of a conquered population, will be met with brute force.

Prior to the Iraq war any serious investigation would have proven that the Bush administration’s claims about Saddam Hussein’s regime were lies. If there was anyone in the American media who didn’t know, it was because he or she chose not to know. They were all in on the crime, from the neo-fascist “base” of the Republican Party and the ultra-right Murdoch press to John Kerry, the Democratic Party and the “liberal” *Times* and *Washington Post*.

Now the lies are unraveling, as monstrous lies always do, as they especially do in America. The horrors at the Bagram Collection Point and Abu Ghraib confront the American people with a stark moral choice.

The first responsibility, and the first step toward addressing the problems, is to tell the truth about the present state of affairs.

The “honorable” US military has been unleashed on defenseless peoples in the Middle East and Asia with horrifying consequences. Much of what is foul and backward in American society has been encouraged and cultivated in the armed forces, inviting or producing a considerable crowd of sadists, psychopaths and, frankly, perverts. These are often lumpenized elements of the population, given nothing culturally or morally, exposed to the most reactionary influences—religious fundamentalism, nationalism, the cult of blood and guns.

The description of the physical and psychological torture of the prisoners at Bagram renders one physically ill. And one encounters the same porno-sadism over and over again in the exploits of this military all over the world!

Administration personnel are confident that they will never be held to account for their crimes. This confidence rests on the fact that a broad consensus of support exists for such conduct within the ruling

elite. Both government spokesmen and liberal pundits like Alan Dershowitz, Ted Koppel and Michael Ignatieff have been explicitly or tacitly advocating torture since the events of September 11, 2001. Genuinely democratic consciousness has almost entirely disintegrated within the upper echelons of American society. Today, anything goes.

The argument that barbaric methods are needed to combat “terrorism” and extract information that could “save lives,” the time-honored claim of every authoritarian regime, is both spurious and illegal, especially given that the US government had considerable prior knowledge about the 2001 terrorist hijackings and refused to act on it. Moreover, this argument ignores the political reality: torture is never about specific pieces of information, it is one element of an overall policy. It is meant to break the will of a resisting movement or population. So it was with the Nazi authorities, so it is today with the American military.

The absence of widespread and loudly voiced revulsion to the crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq is shameful. It speaks to the degraded state of American public opinion.

There is no shortage of blame for this. Political structures entirely dominated and, in fact, strangled by corporate power have polluted the air. The filthy atmosphere is the moral, political reflection of the workings of American capitalism in the 1990s and 2000s, pervaded by parasitism, corruption, criminality.

The current wave of politicians is the inevitable product of these processes: individuals such as Rick Santorum, the ultra-right Catholic senator from Pennsylvania, considered a contender for the 2008 Republican presidential nomination. A recent piece in the *New York Times* Sunday magazine brought out the fact that when their first child, months premature, died at birth, Santorum and his wife, in an act the article’s author notes timidly some might find “discomforting, strange, even ghoulish,” refused to “let the morgue take the corpse of their newborn; they slept that night in the hospital with their lifeless baby between them. The next day, they took him home” for their other children to hold. (“The Believer,” May 22, 2005) This is clearly an individual who needs to be pursuing psychiatric help, not public office.

In their commitment to the interests of big business, the Democratic Party and its leading constituencies cede nothing to the Republicans. The so-called labor movement, the AFL-CIO trade unions, is a principal culprit. The union bureaucracies have done all that lay within their power to deaden class consciousness, promote chauvinism and create a climate inhospitable to humane and progressive ideas. Nowhere in the advanced capitalist world has the working class been left so unprepared for the assault of big business, nowhere has the official labor movement left behind it a greater cultural and political wasteland.

The right-wing media is a cesspool of political violence and pornography; the publication of photographs of Hussein in his underwear in the *Sun* and the *New York Post*, two Murdoch-owned tabloids, sums up the mentality of these people. The appearance of the photos, obviously leaked by American military officials, is a violation of the Geneva Conventions against degrading treatment of prisoners. Even the Nazi leaders, guilty of the greatest crimes in history, were accorded basic rights by their captors.

Confronted with the photographs’ illegality and inflammatory character, Graham Dudman, managing editor of the *Sun*, vociferously defended their publication. “They are a fantastic, iconic set of news pictures that I defy any newspaper, magazine, or television station who were presented with them not to have published.” No one

seriously challenges him.

The notion also that such images, which disgusted Arab and world public opinion, will deal a serious blow to the anti-US insurgency in Iraq simply reveals something about the unreality that dominates the American political and military mind.

Meanwhile, cowed and insincere, the liberal media endlessly retreats in the face of the right’s provocations. One might say that the *Times*, what remains of liberalism on the television networks and the various organs of Democratic Party opinion are the congealed expression of such a retreat. Convinced that the extreme right is invincible, the population hopelessly reactionary, the liberal press gives a mile for every inch taken by the right-wing forces. The latter have the upper hand at present, above all, by default.

There is great disgust, registered in private conversations, encountered accidentally on the street, but people keep this largely to themselves. To whom should they turn? The political establishment, every wing of it, is impervious to genuine popular sentiment and concerns.

Black and Hispanic politicians, still comically dubbed “civil rights leaders,” along with other sections of the post-1970s ‘radical’ and liberal middle class, have jumped on the corporate and stock market gravy train, enriching themselves while the inner cities have decayed into near Third World conditions.

The culture industry has played its deplorable part. Films, popular music, video games promote, or, rather, embody brutalization and desensitization. Confused by events, unaware of social and historical realities, too many permit themselves to be pacified by the mind-numbing products of America’s entertainment industry.

In the post-September 11 world Hollywood has turned increasingly to torture and bloody revenge as key themes or motifs, lending legitimacy to the ravings of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and the rest of them. The average studio “action” blockbuster is as indifferent to body counts as the Pentagon.

As part of its ideological rationale for colonial subjugation of ‘uncivilized’ peoples, the American media loves to declare that “life is cheap” in Baghdad or the West Bank or the mountains of Afghanistan. Can life anywhere be much cheaper than it is in American popular culture? Killing, torture and other forms of mayhem are simply not taken seriously—they are “no big deal.” And this has had an impact.

This is the culture that has been produced by American capitalism in its crisis. Behind this lies the industrial decline, the vast social inequality, the obscene pile of wealth that has been created at one pole of society at the expense of the lives and conditions of everyone else.

Appalling crimes are being committed in Afghanistan, Iraq and Guantánamo in the name of the American people. The working class has to choose a different course, a different policy, one based on solidarity, compassion and an understanding of the need for a socialistic reconstruction of society.



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