

The Abu Ghraib photos and the anti-Muslim “free speech” fraud

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The release of more horrifying photographs and videos from Abu Ghraib prison sheds a revealing light on the hypocritical and genuinely sinister character of the supposed “free speech” campaign surrounding the publication of anti-Muslim cartoons in the European and international press.

The Australian Special Broadcasting Service’s “Dateline” program broadcast a number of the new images from Abu Ghraib on Wednesday. One video revealed a handcuffed man pounding his head against a metal cell door. In other pictures the same man is shown dangling upside down, smeared with his own feces. The corpse of a man who allegedly died during a CIA interrogation appears in another photograph. Certain images reveal detainees obviously wounded and bleeding. SBS aired a video clip of five men with bags over their heads, masturbating on their guards’ orders.

Independently, *Salon.com* has obtained what appears to be a complete set of the Abu Ghraib photos, made between October 18 and December 30, 2003.

Salon’s Mark Benjamin explains that the material includes an investigative report summarizing the contents, which reads in part: “A review of all the computer media... revealed a total of 1,325 images of suspected detainee abuse, 93 video files of suspected detainee abuse, 660 images of adult pornography, 546 images of suspected dead Iraqi detainees, 29 images of soldiers in simulated sexual acts, 20 images of a soldier with a Swastika drawn between his eyes, 37 images of Military Working dogs being used in abuse of detainees and 125 images of questionable acts.”

Benjamin notes that the photographs include: “a naked, handcuffed prisoner in a contorted position; a dead prisoner who had been severely beaten; a prisoner apparently sodomizing himself with an object; and a naked, hooded prisoner standing next to an American officer who is blandly writing a report against a wall. Other photographs depict a bloody cell.”

The images broadcast by SBS represent “a quantum leap in terms of the seriousness of the apparent abuse. It does add a lot to what we know was going on there,” commented Mike Carey, senior producer of “Dateline.” *Salon*’s Walter Shapiro noted that “the photographs that news organizations have so far published represent only a partial sample of the government’s chilling documentary record from Abu Ghraib.”

These horrific images of systematic torture, abuse and murder serve to remind us in the starkest fashion what the “values” of “Western Civilization”—as proclaimed by those who are now championing the “clash of civilizations” crusade against Muslims—mean *in practice* in much of the world, certainly the Arab and Muslim world. George W. Bush, his media apologists, and his accomplices in the Democratic Party can chatter all they like about “bringing freedom and democracy to Iraq,” but the US presence in that country is synonymous in the minds of masses of people with pervasive and sadistic forms of oppression and terror.

What was it *New York Times* columnist David Brooks wrote last week,

in response to the protests over the racist Danish cartoons? “We in the West were born into a world that reflects the legacy of Socrates and the agora... We believe in progress and in personal growth. By swimming in this flurry of perspectives, by facing unpleasant facts, we try to come closer and closer to understanding... Our mind-set is progressive and rational. Your mind-set is pre-Enlightenment and mythological.”

Brooks simply put the most unctuous face on the argument, repeated endlessly in the media and the political establishment over the past few weeks, that an insuperable chasm separates “Western values” and the fanatical, barbaric Muslim world. Fred Barnes of the right-wing *Weekly Standard* was more blunt, informing viewers on the Fox News Channel that the cartoon controversy “tells us that our enemy... is not just Al Qaeda... That Muslims all over Europe and all over the world are certainly enemies of Western civilization... We see the Muslims’ contempt for democracy, for freedom of speech, for freedom of the press, and particularly, for freedom of religion.”

The editors of the *San Diego Union-Tribune* (and similar predictable, philistine comments could be found in any number of US newspapers) asserted: “For nearly three centuries, the West has been imbued with freedom of expression as a fundamental right of man. But the 18th century Age of Enlightenment, which imparted this core principle to secular societies in Europe and America, passed the Muslim world by.”

The editors could now perhaps tell us: How did the fundamental rights of man make their presence felt amidst the blood and filth of Abu Ghraib’s torture chambers?

No one can seriously pretend that the horrors captured in the thousands of images known to exist represent the work of a few ‘rotten apples.’ What took place at Abu Ghraib was instituted, in defiance of international law, at the highest levels of the Pentagon and the Bush administration.

The “chain of command” leading from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld through Gen. Geoffrey Miller, Gen. Ricardo Sanchez and others has been well traced out. Torture, to extract intelligence, was official policy. To date, no high official has been punished; nine low-ranking military reservists have been sentenced to terms ranging from discharge from the army to imprisonment. And there is no reason to believe that the cruel and perverse practices have been discontinued.

The Abu Ghraib images bring home, again, what has inspired outrage among the Arab and Muslim masses around the world. Contrary to the incomprehension of confused or outright malicious elements over the response to the publication of the Danish cartoons, this popular fury is not irrational, nor is it, in the words of the vicious and stupid editors of Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian*, a “hysterical over-reaction.”

The racist cartoons were merely the final indignity. For historic and cultural reasons the cartoons became the focal point for all the grievances felt by hundreds of millions over the violence and exploitation perpetrated by the great powers—for the sake of oil, rubber, diamonds and the greater profits of the global corporate giants—against the populations of the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia. This imperialist criminality

has reached a crescendo under the Bush administration.

What do the noble campaigners for “free speech” have to say about the suppression by the US military, the Bush administration, Congress, the Republican and Democratic parties of the Abu Ghraib images? Since the existence of the photos and videos became public knowledge in April 2004, the Pentagon and the Bush administration have fiercely resisted releasing them. First, they argued, against a Freedom of Information suit launched by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), that publication of the pictures would only add to the humiliation of the detainees and violate their rights under the Geneva Conventions!

When the court threw out that argument, after the ACLU pointed out that the faces of the detainees could be obscured, the government came up with a last-minute objection in July 2005: the images should not be released because they would endanger US troops and civilians overseas.

Lucy Dalglish of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press observed, “The government has taken the position in this case that the more outrageously the behavior exhibited by American troops, the less the public has a right to know about it. Such a stance turns the Freedom of Information Act inside out.”

Gen. Richard B. Myers, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, maintained in court documents that publishing the photographs and videos would aid Al Qaeda recruitment, weaken the Afghan and Iraqi governments, and incite violence against US troops. Gen. John Abizaid, commander of the US Central Command, claimed that releasing the images would hinder his work against terrorism: “When we continue to pick at the wound and show the pictures over and over again it just creates the image—a false image—like this is the sort of stuff that is happening anew, and it’s not.”

The Bush administration and the military suppressed the material not because it created a “false image” of US operations, but because it provided a *true and accurate* one, revealing the brutal, colonialist essence of the Iraq war and occupation. The images of torture and abuse inflamed the Iraqi and Arab population and undermined support for the war among the American people. As Defense Secretary Rumsfeld noted in 2004 about the remaining Abu Ghraib images: “If these are released to the public, obviously it’s going to make matters worse.”

In September 2005, a federal judge ruled that the images had to be released, over the government’s complaints that they would damage America’s reputation and put American lives at risk. The Bush administration appealed the decision. The exposures by Australian television and *Salon* have delivered a blow to this concerted effort to suppress the truth.

As opposed to the *absence* in Europe and the US of state censorship of the Danish anti-Muslim cartoons, notwithstanding the phony hue and cry about press freedom in that case, the suppression of the photos and videos from Abu Ghraib is a case of real censorship. Yet the American media and the official opposition party, the Democrats, have willingly gone along with it, and there has been not a peep from the latter-day advocates of “free speech” in the camp of the anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim right in Europe.

CBS, NBC and the *New York Times* belong to the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, which has filed a supporting amicus brief to the ACLU suit, but these news groups have hardly been in the vanguard of a campaign to expose US military practices at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere in Iraq and Afghanistan.

With the resources and connections available to the American television networks and major newspapers, it would be absurd to claim that they could not have brought this information to light. According to the *Financial Times*, the Australian television report “was filed by Olivia Rousset, an award-winning freelance reporter, who is believed to have obtained the pictures through local contacts in Iraq.”

Subservient American media figures, promoters of the invasion of Iraq

and accomplices in US crimes, failed to uncover the material because they had no desire to embarrass the Bush administration or further discredit the war.

While the US population was prevented from seeing the torture photos and videos, members of Congress had a special viewing on May 12, 2004. Both Republicans and Democrats expressed indignation at the images they saw. “What we saw is appalling,” Sen. Bill Frist, Republican of Tennessee, the Senate majority leader, told reporters. “Take our word for it. They’re disgusting,” said Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the majority whip.

California Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein commented, “The whole thing is disgusting and it’s hard to believe that this actually is taking place in a military facility.” Sen. Bill Nelson, Florida Democrat told the media, “What I have seen is disgusting and it is disappointing.” He added, “Now, you can’t tell me that all of this was going on with seven or eight Army privates. And so the question is: How far up the chain of command did these orders [go], and where did that failure of the command and control occur?”

While Republican right-wingers and Bush loyalists like Sen. John Warner of Virginia, Frist and McConnell called for the images to be kept from the American public (Warner suggested that releasing the torture material would jeopardize “the cause of freedom”!), other members of Congress, like Democratic Senator Carl Levin of Michigan, urged that the images be released to the public and promised “to get to the bottom” of the abuse.

All of this was merely for public consumption. The media and the politicians dropped the Abu Ghraib abuse issue as quickly as possible. ABC News broadcast two new photos May 19, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* printed a handful more, and that was it. Incident closed.

At the time of the confirmation hearings for torture advocate Alberto Gonzalez as attorney general, rumor reportedly had it that Levin would press for disclosure of more of the Abu Ghraib photos. He did no such thing. According to Matt Welch at *Reason.com*, Levin’s spokeswoman Tara Andringa commented, “He and Senator Warner are on the same page.” If it were up to the Democrats in Congress, the images would still be unavailable to the public.

As we can see, these proponents of “Western values” are highly selective about applying the fundamental rights of man, including freedom of speech. In regard to the latter, the formula seems simple: what provokes and demonizes the Muslim peoples, and justifies in advance further wars and occupations, should be published and widely disseminated; what exposes the crimes of American imperialism should be suppressed.

The facts—and the photos—speak for themselves.



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