

# US media drops Abu Ghraib torture issue

David Walsh  
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Horrifying images of systematic US military abuse of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison were aired last week on Australian television and also published at *Salon.com*. The images of prisoners, naked, strapped to apparatuses on the floor, hanging upside down, wounded, threatened by snarling dogs, masturbating for their abusers, draped in women's underwear, forced to sodomize themselves, arranged in the most degrading and painful positions, as well as photographs of dead bodies and blood-smearred cells, have been in the possession of the US military for several years and have been systematically suppressed. The Pentagon has resisted efforts to have the photographs and videos made available to the public.

And for good reason. The Abu Ghraib images demonstrate, in the first place, the depraved and sadistic character of US treatment of detainees. More than that, they help give the lie to the propaganda of the Bush administration and the media about the motives for the Iraq war and occupation and its essential character. How could such barbarism be associated with the effort to spread 'democracy' in the Middle East, to 'liberate' the Iraqi people? The conduct by the US military prison guards is a telltale sign of a brutal, colonial occupation. The occupying power resorts to terror and criminality to suppress a population that opposes and despises its presence.

After a flurry of nervous commentary February 16, the day following the Australian broadcast, the Abu Ghraib horrors have for all intents and purposes been dropped by the American media. A few pious editorials appeared over the weekend (for example, in the *New York Times*, *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Baltimore Sun*), none of which carried much weight or conviction.

The *Times* editors commented that the pictures "are a reminder that the Bush administration has yet to account for what happened at Abu Ghraib. No political appointee has been punished for the policies that led to the atrocities. Indeed, most have been rewarded." The newspaper concludes on a pathetic note, urging Republican Sen. John Warner, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and one of those leading the effort over the past two years to *hide* the images from the American public, to "keep his promise to dig out the truth about Abu Ghraib."

Of course publications like the *Times*, the *Inquirer* and the *Sun* are hopelessly compromised in raising the Abu Ghraib issue by the fact that they defend the occupation and subjugation of Iraq. Their position is self-contradictory and untenable: they support the crime, but object to certain of the criminal methods. This explains the unconvincing and half-hearted nature of their criticism. They will editorialize limply once, perhaps twice, then go silent again.

The US military responded to the appearance of the new images as any powerful and thoroughly guilty party would: it denied, stonewalled, dismissed the images or blamed the abuses on subordinates. Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said, "There aren't new allegations; they're old allegations. These aren't new

photos; they're old photos." Whitman claimed that the original Abu Ghraib photos, published in April 2004, had provided the impetus for the US military "to take a look at our detention operations in a very broad and deep fashion. And these abuses that have occurred have been thoroughly investigated."

Last Friday, before Congress, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld repeated the claim that the new images of abuse and torture were 'old news.' He declared, "I'm told that these photographs that are coming out now are nothing more than the same things that came out before, if not identical of the same type of behavior. That behavior has been punished. The Department of Defense, from the beginning of this conflict, has had a policy that prohibits torture. It is not permitted, and we do not today. The people are trained to avoid it. And there's no question, but that there was conduct that was improper, and people were court-martialed, and people have been sent to prison, and people have been reduced dramatically in rank, officers have, and punished for the behavior that was unacceptable."

This statement is simply one lie or half-truth piled upon another. First of all, no one in the media will challenge the very framework of Rumsfeld's comments. He and a select group of the political elite have seen the images, while deliberately preventing the rest of the American population from viewing them. He is speaking about suppressed, banned material. It is not for Whitman and Rumsfeld to rule on their content. Decisions to conceal proof of their own crimes—and then declare their conduct irreproachable, without any independent party able to make an evaluation—are made by police-state regimes, not democratic ones.

In any event, the claim that the guards at Abu Ghraib acted against Defense Department orders is a lie and everyone knows it. Torture and abuse of prisoners have become official US policy under the Bush administration.

In December 2002 Rumsfeld personally approved of a list of techniques for the detention camp at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, that included putting prisoners in "stress positions" for four hours, hooding them and subjecting them to 20-hour interrogations, "fear of dogs" and "mild, non-injurious physical contact." The list was so severe that military officers complained and the defense secretary was obliged to order a high-level review of interrogation policy. In April 2003 Rumsfeld approved a new list, which included the use of at least six techniques—including the use of dogs.

In August and September 2003, General Geoffrey Miller, the officer in charge at the Guantánamo camp, was sent by Rumsfeld to Iraq with orders to increase the brutality of the military's treatment of prisoners there, to "Gitmo-ize" conditions. On one of these visits, Rumsfeld accompanied Miller. On September 14, 2003, General Ricardo Sanchez, at the time the top military commander in Iraq, issued an order authorizing a number of techniques, including "presence of military working dogs" which will "exploit Arab fear of dogs while

maintaining security during interrogations.”

“The use of dogs, however,” as we noted recently on the WWSW, “was only one of a number of new methods introduced into Iraq, some explicitly approved and some implicitly condoned by Sanchez, Rumsfeld and Miller. Stripping prisoners naked and forcing them to wear women’s underwear—part of a general policy of deliberate sexual humiliation—were both practiced in Guantánamo Bay before being transferred to Iraq. Miller was specifically cleared of responsibility for the use of these methods in a probe into abuse at Guantánamo Bay, on the grounds that they were approved military practice.” (See “Miller takes the Fifth: US general withholds testimony in Abu Ghraib abuse trial”)

The interrogators and guards were simply unleashed on the Iraqi prisoners (most of whom were guilty of nothing whatsoever) and encouraged to ‘break’ them by any means necessary. If some of the guards ‘improvised,’ it was improvisation from a script written by Rumsfeld, Miller and Sanchez.

The Abu Ghraib images are documentary proof of US government policy. Here is the policy made manifest, in the form of humiliated, bruised, tortured and dead human bodies.

The very fact that thousands of images were recorded of the mistreatment and torture, complete with grinning or nonchalant guards, is one proof of the official character of the conduct at Abu Ghraib. No one thought he or she was breaking the rules; on the contrary, the personnel had been instructed in these techniques.

As for the claims by Whitman and Rumsfeld that the crimes have been investigated and the guilty parties have been punished ... a handful of wretched, backward prison guards have been jailed. Neither Rumsfeld, Miller or Sanchez has ever been the subject of an investigation, much less a criminal charge. As Amnesty International notes, zero is the “[n]umber of high-level military or civilian leaders held accountable for policies or practices that lead to abuse of detainees and deaths in custody.”

The practices in the Iraqi detention centers and elsewhere no doubt continue. The occupation hasn’t changed its character. The US forces are hated more than ever by the Iraqis. Former army interrogator Tony Lagouranis, for example, in a segment of PBS’s “Frontline” program broadcast last October, described his experiences in Iraq from January 2004 to January 2005, well after the first Abu Ghraib photos appeared and the military promised to mend its ways. He commented, “The worst stuff I saw was from the detaining units who would torture people in their homes. They would smash people’s feet with the back of an axe-head. They would break bones, ribs, you know. That was serious stuff.”

Amnesty International in April 2005 reported that it continued to receive reports of abuse of detained Iraqis. According to testimony received by the group, “US interrogators have participated in questioning prisoners held at the Iraqi Interior Ministry, a location at which detainees have repeatedly alleged torture and ill-treatment.”

In any event, if the photographs and videos are ‘more of the same,’ then why is the US government so ferociously resisting their release? Defeated in court numerous times over the issue, the Bush administration continues to appeal a federal judge’s decision last September ordering their release. The government and military are fearful because the images expose the actual, ugly and brutal face of the US occupation of Iraq, the face that the administration, in coordination with the media, is attempting to keep as much as possible from the American public.

The US government claims that it opposes the images’ release

because, in the words of State Department legal advisor, John Bellinger, they will fan “the flames at a time that sentiments on these issues are raw around the world.” No doubt Arab and Muslim public opinion is an issue, although the US could hardly be viewed less favorably than it is at present. Probably of more concern to the administration is preventing the reality of the war from making its way to the population in the US. Why else so assiduously suppress battlefield images and photographs of coffins containing the American dead returning home?

Moreover, even the claim by Rumsfeld and Whitman that these are simply ‘old photos’ is false. As Mike Carey, executive producer of the “Dateline” television program in Australia that exposed the new images, told the media, “Well, it seems to us that there’s a quantum leap in the abuse, in the potential abuse: corpses, really despicable sexual humiliation. As far as I understand, these have not been investigated.” One of the corpses is a man who died during a CIA interrogation; no CIA employee have ever been charged in relation to crimes at Abu Ghraib.

Olivia Rousset, reporter for “Dateline,” told Amy Goodman of the *Democracy Now!* radio program: “Obviously, a lot of it [the new imagery] is the same as what was released before, from the same series of events, the same torture and abuse, but there are new cases of abuse that haven’t been seen before and some corpses of people who have been either killed in riots or killed from mortars going over the wall into the prison. But, to me, it sort of shows that there was pretty widespread abuse going on.”

The lack of outrage in the American media about the Abu Ghraib torture and murder, and the concealment of the images, is entirely predictable, but nonetheless revealing. (Of course, the right-wing media is up in arms—that the material surfaced at all. The thugs at Fox News, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, the ultra-right talk shows, web sites and so forth believe that the American military should be allowed to carry out its crimes unobserved and undisturbed.)

What would be the response if the shoe were on the other foot, and hundreds or thousands of US military personnel or civilians had been systematically abused, tortured and, in some cases, murdered? One can only imagine the blood-curdling headlines for days, weeks and months, backed up by threats and plans for war! Sadism, blood and death in an Iraqi prison, however, counts for very little in the US media, which is a wholehearted accomplice in the invasion and occupation.

As a footnote, it almost goes without saying that leading figures in the Democratic Party have had nothing to say about the new revelations of crimes at Abu Ghraib. A search of the Democratic Party National Committee’s official web site returns the revealing result: “No pages were found containing ‘Abu Ghraib photos.’” No press release was issued by the Democrats. No statement can be found by John Kerry, Hillary Clinton or Howard Dean’s “Democracy for America.” These too are accomplices.



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