

New York Times details secret US military torture operation

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A *New York Times* report on March 19 details the operations of Task Force 6-26, a highly secret US Special Operations Unit whose members have reportedly engaged in torture and assassination in Iraq and Afghanistan. The existence and a hint of the operations of the unit—previously known as Task Force 121 and since renamed Task Force 145—have been reported in the press before, however there has never been a complete public accounting for its illegal activities.

Based on new interviews with military and government officials, the *Times* piece (“Before and After Abu Ghraib, a US Unit Abused Detainees,” by Eric Schmitt and Carolyn Marshall) provides some additional information about the unit, particularly with regard to its widespread practice of torturing Iraqi prisoners. However, the newspaper does more to conceal than to reveal the real significance of TF 6-26, which has been closely integrated with a policy of torture and assassination approved at the highest levels of the American government. To this day, TF 6-26 continues to operate, but in an even more secretive environment than it did during the period covered by the *Times* article.

According to the *Times* and previous media reports, TF 6-26/TF 121 was originally formed in the summer of 2003, a few months after the invasion of Iraq. Its ranks were filled with highly-trained Special Operations forces, including from the Army Delta Force and the Navy Seals, and also included intelligence agents from the Defense Intelligence Agency. It has also worked closely with the CIA, the FBI and foreign intelligence agencies.

The main task of TF 6-26 was to develop methods to defeat the insurgency, which during the months following the invasion became more intense than American military planners had anticipated. The group also had the task of capturing Saddam Hussein, which it did in December 2003. The grisly methods it used to meet these objectives were developed in a small compound known as Camp Nama, located adjacent to the Baghdad International Airport. It also apparently used Abu Ghraib prison as something of an outsourcing post, where it would drop off and pick up prisoners that it wanted interrogated. TF 6-26 primarily dealt with “high value” detainees—individuals considered to be closely involved in the insurgency or with the former Baathist government.

The *Times* reports that much of the interrogation at Camp Nama was done in the “Black Room,” a “windowless, jet-black garage-size room” where “some soldiers beat prisoners with rifle butts, yelled and spit in their faces and, in a nearby area, used detainees for target practice in a game of jailer paintball.” The Black Room was “nearly bare but for several 18-inch hooks that jutted from the ceiling, a grisly reminder of the terrors inflicted by Mr. Hussein’s inquisitors,” the *Times* notes. “Jailers often blared rap music or rock ‘n’ roll at

deafening decibels over a loudspeaker to unnerve their subjects.”

The newspaper reported that the soldiers posted placards reading, “NO BLOOD, NO FOUL.” “The slogan, as one Defense Department official explained, reflected an adage adopted by Task Force 6-26: ‘If you don’t make them bleed, they can’t prosecute you for it.’” The newspaper quotes another Pentagon official, “The reality is, there were no rules there.” The prisoners who entered Camp Nama disappeared, having no contact with anyone, including the Red Cross, which by international law must have access to all prisoners.

In January 2004, TF 6-26 captured the son of one of Saddam Hussein’s bodyguards. According to the *Times*, “The man told Army investigators that he was forced to strip and that he was punched in the spine until he fainted, put in front of an air-conditioner while cold water was poured on him and kicked in the stomach until he vomited.”

According to the *Times*, evidence of abuse at Camp Nama includes the period during which the infamous photos at Abu Ghraib were taken, but extends farther, into early 2004—after the Abu Ghraib photos were released. This included the beating of an 18-year-old man who was suspected of selling cars to a group led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Then, “on June 25, 2004, nearly two months after the disclosure of the abuses at Abu Ghraib, an F.B.I. agent in Iraq sent an e-mail message to his superiors in Washington, warning that a detainee captured by Task Force 6-26 had suspicious burn marks on his body. The detainee said he had been tortured.”

Shortly after this incident, TF 6-26 moved to a more discrete location in Balad, 45 miles north of Baghdad.

According to previous reports, TF 6-26 also developed a method of seizing the wives of men it wanted to capture, holding them as ransom. This is another clear violation of international law.

After presenting this evidence of systematic torture by TF 6-26, the *Times* article proceeds to exonerate the Defense Department officials from any responsibility. “The tensions laid bare a clash of military cultures,” the authors write. “Combat-hardened commandos seeking a steady flow of intelligence to pinpoint insurgents grew exasperated with civilian interrogators sent from Washington, many of whom were novices at interrogating hostile prisoners fresh off the battlefield.” At one point, the newspaper writes, “one of Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld’s top aides, Stephen A. Cambone, ordered a subordinate [Lieutenant General William Boykin] to ‘get to the bottom’ of any misconduct.”

This attempt to present the history of TF 6-26 as a case of military commandos gone awry, in the face of opposition and concern from Bush administration officials, turns reality on its head. It represents an

attempt to cover for the administration's policy of torture, either on the part of the *Times*, the *Times's* sources, or a combination of the two. Rumsfeld, Cambone and Boykin were among the principal architects of this policy.

The increased role and power of the Special Operations Command, operating within the framework and direction of the Department of Defense, has been a specific policy aim of Rumsfeld since at least 2003. Rumsfeld has championed the idea of small, secretive military units engaged in "manhunts" and other operations, and has sought to increase the role of military intelligence—as opposed to the CIA or FBI—in gathering information in Iraq and elsewhere.

In carrying out this policy, he has relied heavily on Stephen Cambone, the under secretary of defense for intelligence. This post, which Cambone assumed in March 2003, was created by Rumsfeld for the purpose of increasing the role of the military in intelligence-gathering. The necessity of this move was particularly important for Rumsfeld following the disputes that arose between the Bush administration and the CIA over Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. Cambone has worked closely with Boykin, a Christian fundamentalist who has proclaimed that the war in Iraq is a part of a conflict between Christianity and Islam, and had said that President Bush was "not elected," but rather "appointed by God."

Seymour Hersh, in a May 15, 2004, article in the *New Yorker*, tied the abuse at Abu Ghraib to this new policy. Citing American intelligence officials, Hersh reported on a Pentagon operation that "encouraged physical coercion and sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners in an effort to generate more intelligence about the growing insurgency in Iraq." He cited a "senior CIA official" who "said the operation stemmed from Rumsfeld's long-standing desire to wrest control of America's clandestine and paramilitary operations from the CIA."

Hersh wrote that Rumsfeld "authorized the establishment of a highly secret program that was given blanket advance approval to kill or capture and, if possible, interrogate 'high value' targets... A special-access program, or sap—subject to the Defense Department's most stringent level of security—was set up." After an earlier dispute within the Pentagon, Cambone had been given authority to control all special-access programs relevant to the "war on terrorism," which would include those in Iraq.

Hersh's sources claimed that this new program was eventually transferred to Abu Ghraib and the attempt to defeat the Iraqi insurgency. This provoked opposition from sections of the CIA, who had been working with the program but feared that its transfer to Iraq, accompanied by the inclusion of military forces that had not been trained to operate clandestinely, would disrupt the operation and lead to a situation such as happened in 2004, when photographs of torture were made public.

While Hersh did not mention TF 6-26 in his original article, the task force appears to have been closely involved in these operations. A document released by the ACLU in January of this year was filed by an army investigator who said he could not continue to pursue an investigation into the torture of the son of Saddam Hussein's former bodyguard because the unit accused of the torture, TF 6-26, was part of a special access program.

The ACLU reported, "A memorandum included in the report states that 'fake names were used by the 6-26 members' and that the unit claimed to have a computer malfunction which resulted in the loss of 70 percent of their files. The memorandum concludes, 'Hell, even if we reopened [the investigation] we wouldn't get any more

information than we already have.'" A separate report, dated April 8, 2005, said that the Army investigation could not pursue 23 criminal cases "due to the suspects and witnesses involvement in Special Access Programs and/or the security classification of the unit they were assigned to during the offense."

There is other evidence that has been reported linking TF 6-26/121 to Abu Ghraib. In the fall of 2003, when the insurgency in Iraq was intensifying, Major General Geoffrey Miller, who was at the time in charge of the Guantánamo Bay prison camp, was sent to Iraq under the direction of Cambone. It later came to light that his main task was to "Gitmoize" interrogation procedure in Iraq, i.e., transfer the techniques used in Cuba to Iraq. In September, new methods were approved by Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, the military commander in Iraq, for use at Abu Ghraib. These methods came directly from TF 6-26/121.

According to a *New York Times* piece on August 27, 2004, a classified and unreleased section of a military report on Abu Ghraib, known as the Fay report, "says that a July 15, 2003, 'Battlefield Interrogation Team and Facility Policy,' drafted for use by Joint Task Force 121 ... was adopted 'almost verbatim' by 519th Military Intelligence Battalion, which played a leading role in interrogations at Abu Ghraib." The *Times* wrote at the time that the policy "endorsed the use of stress positions during harsh interrogation procedures, the use of dogs, yelling, loud music, light control, isolation and other procedures used previously in Afghanistan and Iraq."

Prior to being shifted to Iraq, the 519th MI Battalion had worked closely with TF 121 in Afghanistan, the classified section of the Fay report said. It is well known that during the time of the abuse at Abu Ghraib there were many unidentified military personnel, dressed in civilian clothes, who drifted in and out of the prison, and who Janis Karpinski, then commander of the military police unit at the facility, could not identify. These individuals were likely involved with military intelligence, TF 121, or otherwise involved in the secret interrogation programs set up under the direction of the Pentagon.

The true role of outfits like TF 6-26 have been systematically covered up by the military, both big-business political parties and the media. All the investigations carried out by the government and the military have been so many attempts to whitewash the crimes of the Bush administration in ordering and directing the use of torture in Iraq and elsewhere. The handful of convictions that have been handed down—including the recent conviction of an army dog-handler—have targeted only low-level soldiers, while leaving the actual architects of this policy to remain at large, indeed to retain their posts in the highest offices of the government.



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