

Standard Operating Procedure: Images from a neo-colonial war

Joanne Laurier
17 June 2008

Directed by Errol Morris, book by Morris and Philip Gourevitch

The infamous photographs taken at the Abu Ghraib prison in the fall of 2003 recorded the depraved treatment suffered by Iraqi detainees at the hands of the US military. The images, first made public in April and May 2004, were tangible proof of the terror and criminality employed by the occupying power to suppress a population that opposed and despised its presence.

Veteran American documentarian Errol Morris (*Fog of War*) investigates the context of the photos and the motives of the US military prison guards who took the pictures in his new film, *Standard Operating Procedure*. The film's high production values are accentuated by an affecting score by Danny Elfman. Re-enactments and artful special effects add weight to the testimony of the interviewees.

The material amassed in a two-year study, according to Morris, was more than could be contained in one movie and he subsequently co-wrote a book of the same title with the *New Yorker* staff writer Philip Gourevitch.

"The one thing that can be said about Abu Ghraib is it was entirely in violation of the Geneva Conventions," states Morris in the movie's production notes. "But it's not only about torture. It's everything. Extortion, kidnapping. Keeping children in prison. The use of attack dogs. This is America? This is the America that we've grown up to love and defend? And then blaming low-ranked soldiers for all of this ... it's the simple idea of little guys getting punished and the big guys who are really responsible walking away. Cover up, misdirection, scapegoating."

The filmmaker mentions that he and his team tried to locate, unsuccessfully, the detainees who appeared in the most notorious photographs. Their search was particularly focused on the prisoner his guards dubbed "Gilligan," the hooded man photographed standing on a box with electrical wires attached to his hands. The iconic image, evocative of a crucifixion, became the symbol of the Abu Ghraib horrors.

Morris begins his documentary by establishing those responsible for introducing systematic torture into the Iraqi prison, when prisoners were renamed "security detainees" or "unlawful combatants" and therefore, according to the White House, not subject to the Geneva Conventions. This is the moment when "The gloves are off" (as if they had ever been on!) became a motivational catch phrase.

Standard Operating Procedure opens with the September 2003 visit that then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made to Abu Ghraib. Former Brigadier General Janis Karpinski, at the time commander of the 800th Military Police Brigade and in charge of 15 military detention camps in Iraq, explains to Morris that in the fall of 2003, Rumsfeld sent Major General Geoffrey Miller to Iraq to "Gitmo-ize" operations there. "Gitmo" is the military slang for Guantánamo Bay.

The book provides a more detailed overview of that period. In September 2003, General Ricardo Sanchez, then the top military commander in Iraq, issued an order authorizing a number of interrogation techniques, including the "presence of military working dogs." This was

shortly after the 2002 Rumsfeld memo that included, among the list of acceptable interrogation methods, the use of dogs. Morris and Gourevitch mention that two weeks before Miller flew into Baghdad, at least 23 Guantánamo prisoners had attempted suicide in a mass protest.

That any abuse short of death was standard operating procedure (SOP) is categorically asserted in the interviews with five of the "seven bad apples"—a media term for the Military Police (MP) members who were indicted for crimes perpetrated at the prison. Those five are Sabrina Harman, Megan Ambuhl, Lynndie England, Jeremy Sivits and Javal Davis. Morris and his team were not allowed access to Charles Graner and Ivan Frederick, who are still incarcerated by the military. (The book mentions that as a veteran of the first Gulf War, Graner was denied help for symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.)

When Sabrina Harman and the others started taking pictures of prisoners strapped naked to the floor, handcuffed in stress positions, hanging upside down, wounded, threatened by dogs, masturbating for their jailers, draped in women's underwear, positioned naked in a pyramid formation, dragged around on dog leashes, as well as bodies of dead detainees and blood-drenched cells, torture policies had already been put into place by the military and the CIA. Lynndie England says coldly, "This is what we saw."

Morris states that "they [the seven MPs] were punished for embarrassing the military, for embarrassing the administration. One central irony: Sabrina Harman was threatened with prosecution for taking pictures of a man [Manadel al-Jamadi] who had been killed by the CIA. She had nothing whatsoever to do with the killing, she merely photographed the corpse. But without her photographs we would know nothing of this crime."

No agency operative, Morris points out, has ever been charged or convicted in connection with the murder.

Javal Davis sums it up for the rest when he claims that what he did and was witness to were wrong, but "it was affirmed and reassured through the leadership—we are at war, this is Military Intelligence, this is what they do—and it's just a job. So you become numb to it. It's nothing. It just becomes the norm."

That soldiers, police or government officials were "just carrying out orders" when they committed horrendous crimes was a defense, of course, that was rejected by international courts of law and world public opinion in the mid-twentieth century. It is no more justifiable in Iraq.

Nonetheless, Morris contends, quite rightly, that the seven guards were scapegoated while top officials in the military and the Bush administration got off scot-free. The guards, the authors argue in the book, were "[i]nexperienced, untrained, under attack, and under orders to do wrong."

In the documentary, Morris allows the MPs to try and defend themselves. In particular, he uses the letters that Harman wrote to her domestic partner as a prominent narrative device. In those Harman claims that her photos were meant "to prove the US is not what it says," i.e., that they were actually taken to expose the abuse going on.

A hard-boiled Ambuhl tells the camera that “the pictures only show you a fraction of a second. You don’t see forward, you don’t see behind, you don’t see outside the frame.”

England, the most inarticulate and oppressed of the lot, defends the entire episode, claiming the experience at Abu Ghraib was worth something because she eventually bore a son from Graner. “We didn’t kill ‘em,” she says belligerently. “We didn’t cut their heads off. We didn’t shoot ‘em. We didn’t make ‘em bleed to death. We did what we were told, soften ‘em up [for interrogation].”

The documentary and accompanying book contain a good deal of valuable and harrowing material. For Morris, previously the epitome of the passive documentarian, who apparently refuses to adopt an attitude toward his material, this is an advance. The horrors of the war and the criminality of the American establishment are having an impact on artists, as they must. However, the approach of Morris (and Gourevitch) still raise questions.

Standard Operating Procedure says a great deal, but leaves a great deal unsaid. The Abu Ghraib incident was no passing phase, or a minor blemish on the surface of “American democracy.” It helped tear away the mask and reveal the ugly face of US imperialism. There is shallowness in the filmmakers’ treatment, an underestimation of the crisis of American society, an unwillingness to see just how far things have gone.

After all, what is the viewer to make of men and women who, with apparent relish, abuse in the most degrading fashion defenseless prisoners, who show no ability to empathize and who seem devoid of an awareness of the depravity of their actions? It is correct to point out that these are not monsters, it’s another to relativize or ‘normalize’ their behavior, which the film borders on doing at times. These individuals are product of American society and the police/military culture in particular. The crimes in Iraq are “Made in the USA.” What sort of society produces such behavior?

The film culminates in a chilling scene in which Brent Pack, the lead forensic examiner of the computer crime unit of the US Army Criminal Investigative Unit, in analyzing the thousands of Abu Ghraib photographs, distinguishes between those depicting a criminal act from those whose contents fall within the norms of SOP, i.e., “standard operating procedure.” So, for example, naked men forced to masturbate or piled on top of one another in a human pyramid—a criminal act. Men cuffed to a bed and forced to wear female underwear on their heads—SOP. The treatment of the prisoner called Gilligan, terrorized into thinking he was in immediate danger of electrocution—SOP. Etc., etc.

Morris gives Gen. Karpinski wide latitude, in the form of lengthy screen-time, to proclaim her innocence as a pawn of higher-ups.

In an interview about the genesis of *Standard Operating Procedure*, the director says: “I brought Karpinski to Boston and we did a 17-hour interview over two days, this quite extraordinary interview where Janis Karpinski started out angry and got angrier and angrier and angrier ... [A]t one point she made a comparison between Lynndie England and herself and Jessica Lynch. I suppose it’s these pictures of American women in the military, how the story changed from the damsel in distress to these evil witches who caused perhaps the demise of our war effort in Iraq. And the way Janis put it, I will never, ever forget. She said, ‘They needed another face of American women in the military in Iraq and it was Lynndie England and it was me.’” This appears to be the essence of Morris’ sympathy for the demoted general.

But despite certain criticisms of the powers that be, there is no mention in either the movie or the book of the real context of the Abu Ghraib photographs: that the use of torture was bound up with policies pursued by the Bush administration, and supported by the Democratic Party, using the attacks of September 11 as a pretext. That neither oil nor any other geopolitical factor is ever brought up suggests that Morris and Gourevitch either tacitly accept the bogus “war on terror,” or do not have the political

and intellectual wherewithal to challenge it.

Moreover, implicit in the film but explicit in the book is the notion of collective guilt. “The stain is ours,” write Morris and Gourevitch, “because whatever else the Iraq war was about, it was always, above all, about America...What was at stake, for the war’s advocates, skeptics, and opponents alike, was an American story—the story of America as a champion of law and liberty at home and abroad, a tough but righteous arbiter of the destiny of nations, intolerant only of intolerance, a scourge to rogue nations and bandit dictators who usurp the innate craving of all humankind to aspire to her example.”

No, this is not a story about *America*, it is a story about the America of the bankers, generals and torturers, the ruling elite and its accomplices aligned against the population of Iraq and the American people.

In something akin to a post-modern disclaimer, the authors write that “[t]here is a constant temptation, when rendering an account of history, to distort reality by making too much sense of it. This temptation is greatest when the history is fresh and deals with crises that are ongoing—crises that mold our understanding of the world and ourselves.” This is pretty shabby and somewhat self-defeating, a roundabout way of warning the spectator not to draw too many conclusions from the images in the film.

Morris and Gourevitch go on to say that the nightmare of Abu Ghraib was “entirely gratuitous” because it produced “no great score of useful intelligence.” What if it had? And what do they consider useful intelligence—the capture of an Iraqi insurgent fighting a foreign occupier?

However, there is an even larger issue. The round-up, incarceration and torture of tens of thousands of Iraqis (the film does point out that those in the photographs were generally innocent civilians) have not been carried out simply for the purposes of gathering intelligence, although that is clearly one reason, but also with the aim of terrorizing and intimidating an entire population. This is the history of modern “counter-insurgency,” in Algeria, Vietnam and now Iraq.

There is also something distasteful about the debate in the book as to which was worse, the photograph of “Gilligan” standing on the box, or the dead al-Jamadi. “Why Gilligan, when al-Jamadi had been lying dead in the shower?” ask the authors. This is an evasion. All the photos are evidence of a single criminal operation for which those who set it into motion—George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell, Gen. Sanchez, Gen. Miller and others—should be brought before war crimes tribunals.

In the end, wrong-headedly, Morris and Gourevitch accuse everyone, including those tormented, of responsibility for the Abu Ghraib atrocity. The book ends, literally, by opining that “captors and captives alike—made their accommodations. We all did.” One wants to say, speak for yourself. Whatever is of value in *Standard Operating Procedure*, both its cinematic and literary versions, is diminished by this outlook.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact