

Guardian/BBC report lays out US policy of torture, murder in Iraq

Naomi Spencer
12 March 2013

An investigative report by the British *Guardian* and the BBC's Arabic language service links top US officials to atrocities carried out by Iraqi police forces after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. General David Petraeus and Bush-era Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, among others, worked directly with US officials overseeing death squads, secret prisons, and torture practices in US-occupied Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis died and millions were displaced as a result of the chaos that the atrocities produced.

The memos and reports featured in the *Guardian* /BBC documentary come from the 2010 leak attributed to Army Private Bradley Manning and published by WikiLeaks. The Obama administration has protected the officials linked to the abuse, many of whom remain on the government payroll; David Petraeus was Obama's CIA director until last November.

The *Guardian* /BBC report, published as a documentary, focuses on the role of retired Colonel James Steele, who worked with Petraeus and Rumsfeld. (See: *James Steele: America's mystery man in Iraq*) A Special Forces veteran of Vietnam, Steele was sent in 1984 to El Salvador, where he trained and directed counterinsurgency operations. As many as 70,000 left-wing opponents of the Salvadoran regime were murdered by government death squads.

In 2004, amid rising armed resistance in Iraq and rising antiwar sentiment in the US, the Bush administration turned to the "Salvador option." The methods Washington used in the 1980s in Latin America were quickly recycled into assembling Shi'a-majority death squads targeting Sunni Iraqis—who were at the time the heart of the anti-occupation insurgency.

John Negroponte, the head of the US embassy in Honduras in the 1980s, was appointed ambassador. David Petraeus was given command to oversee the creation of a new Iraqi military police force.

Petraeus hired Steele and Colonel James Coffman as advisors. Steele arrived in Baghdad as an "energy consultant" and began working with Coffman to train the paramilitary units under the authority of the interior ministry. These forces, including one called the Wolf Brigade, were composed largely of former Shi'a members of Saddam Hussein's security forces. Steele acted as Defense Secretary Rumsfeld's personal envoy to the group.

The 2,000-man brigade roved the streets of Baghdad, Samarra, and Mosul in American pickup trucks, rounding up Sunnis for interrogation. Captives would be thrown into secret prisons established in libraries, airports, and ministries. Anti-occupation politicians, human rights activists, and journalists were murdered. Bodies, at times tortured beyond recognition, were deposited in garbage dumps or on the streets. Thousands of corpses piled up in morgues each month, many of them still wearing police handcuffs.

"We would be blindfolded and handcuffed behind our backs," a former Samarra prisoner told the *Guardian* /BBC. "Then they would beat us with shovels and pipes. We'd be tied to a spit, or we'd be hung to the ceiling by our hands, and our shoulders would be dislocated."

"They electrocuted me," another former prisoner said. "They hung me from the ceiling. They were pulling at my ears with pliers, stamping on my head, asking me about my wife, saying they would bring her here."

The Bush administration gave the Wolf Brigade a budget of \$2 billion. Prisoners bearing signs of torture were paraded out on a state-run, US-financed television program called "Terrorism in the Grip of Justice" to make public confessions to "terrorism." The purpose of the show, like the bodies on the streets, was to terrorize ordinary Iraqis who opposed the US occupation.

Steele sent regular memos to Donald Rumsfeld, who forwarded them to President George Bush and Vice-

President Dick Cheney. In one such email to the president, Rumsfeld wrote: “The attached memo is from a person we have sent into Iraq from time to time essentially to work with the Iraqi police. He is smart, tough, and a keen observer.”

Steele also reportedly paid multiple visits to the White House.

General Muntadher al-Samari, Iraqi interior minister from 2003-05, told the *Guardian* /BBC that Steele and Coffman were well aware of the barbaric practices they were overseeing: “I never saw them apart in the 40 or 50 times I saw them inside the detention centres. They knew everything that was going on there ... the torture, the most horrible kinds of torture.”

“I remember a 14-year-old who was tied to one of the library’s columns,” al-Samari said. “And he was tied up, with his legs above his head. Tied up. His whole body was blue because of the impact of the cables with which he had been beaten.”

“One of the detainees was screaming,” he said. “By chance, James Steele was outside, washing his hands. He opened the door and saw the detainee. He was hanging by his legs, upside-down. James Steele didn’t react at all when he saw this man. It was just normal. He closed the door, and came back to his seat in the advisor’s room.”

Gilles Peress, a photographer who accompanied reporter Peter Maass on assignment for the *New York Times* in 2005, said they sat down to interview Steele in his office in the Samarra library, “and I’m looking around, I see blood everywhere.”

Maass added, “And while this interview was going on with a Saudi jihadi with Jim Steele also in the room, there were these terrible screams, somebody shouting: ‘Allah, Allah, Allah!’ But it wasn’t kind of religious ecstasy or something like that, these were screams of pain and terror.”

As the *Guardian* /BBC documentary makes clear, wide layers of the US armed forces knew that US counterinsurgency tactics involved the most gruesome forms of torture and murder.

“At the time, I just felt like everybody knew, and nobody cared what was going on,” Army Medic Neil Smith, whose platoon entered a prison that had been set up in Samarra’s main library, told the *Guardian* /BBC. “It was pretty widely known in our battalion, definitely in our platoon, that they were pretty violent with their interrogations, that they would beat people, shock them with electrical shock, stab them—I don’t know what all else, pretty awful things.

“If you sent a guy there, he was going to get tortured, and perhaps raped, or whatever,” Smith said. “Humiliated, brutalized by the special commandos in order to get whatever information they wanted.”

In one incident, a team of Oregon Army National Guard soldiers stormed the Iraqi interior ministry after spotting men in plainclothes beating prisoners in a courtyard. “I saw some horrific things. I saw one room that had 75 prisoners crammed into one small space,” said one guardsman.

The prisoners, some of them boys, begged for food and water. When the soldiers began administering first aid and radioed for help, they were ordered to leave the scene immediately and say no more about what they had witnessed. The incident occurred on June 29, 2004, the day the US declared as Iraq’s official first day as a sovereign country.

Many of the US officials involved have continued to profit from their activities. James Steele is currently a motivational speaker on “security and counterterrorism policy,” charging \$15,000 per appearance. He is CEO of Buchanan Renewables, an energy company in Liberia.

The *Guardian* noted that in Samarra, residents “greeted a showing of the documentary on Wednesday evening... thousands of people gathered in the city for antigovernment protests were excited to watch part of the documentary and there was a plan to set up big screens to show the whole film on Friday.”

“We as people of Samara know the whole story as many of the people in Samarra were detainees and sustained a great deal of torture and some of them we found their bodies at the forensic department,” Waleed Khalid told the *Guardian*. “But it is so important for us that the world would hear our story and reconsider these violations against the detainees which amount to crimes against humanity.”



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