

by Michael I. Niman

STRANGE FRUIT IN ABU GHRAIB: THE PRIVATIZATION OF TORTURE

With the broadcast this past May of images from the United States' Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, torture became a hot topic in the U.S. media. This was new. It wasn't such a hot topic over the last two years as neoconservative pundits, oblivious to the irony of their argument, filled newspaper op-ed pages with columns justifying the use of torture in the "War on Terror." Editors gave them a free ride, treating them as if they were parties to a civil debate, and not the vile throwbacks to the Dark Ages that they actually are.

Anti Anti-Torture

Torture also wasn't much of an issue during the summer of 2002, when George W. Bush's administration stonewalled the United Nations, trying to kill an anti-torture protocol in committee. Nigeria, China, Iran, Pakistan, and Cuba were among those nations which backed the U.S. position, but the protocol was approved nonetheless, with strong support from Europe and Latin America. If the UN eventually approves and ratifies the bill, the United States has announced it won't be a signatory and won't abide by its provisions. Outrageous as this position is, the American media aired hardly a peep about it, keeping it under the public radar.

Torture also wasn't an issue for the last two years as the American alternative press joined the world press in reporting well-founded allegations of torture in American-run

prisons in U.S.-occupied Afghanistan, Iraq, and Cuba. The mainstream media stayed mum.

And torture wasn't an issue back in late February and early March of 2004 when the U.S. Army-commissioned investigation reported "systematic and illegal abuse of detainees" in Iraq at the hands of U.S. mercenary and military forces. The fifty-three page report, prepared under the supervision of Major General Antonio M. Taguba, termed the abuses "sadistic" and "blatant" while adding that they were well documented by photographs, confessions, and witness statements. Among the abuses cited in that report were rapes, sexual torture, nude photography of male and female captives, holding prisoners naked, making male prisoners wear women's undergarments, forcing prisoners to perform for amateur pornographic videos, including forcing them to masturbate onto each other. The report also cites instances where American guards and interrogators sodomized prisoners and attacked them with dogs. More recent revelations add pedophilia to the "interrogation techniques" employed by U.S. forces and associates in Iraq.

Rumsfeld Knew About Bush's "Rape Rooms"

The Department of Defense's immediate response to the army's report was to classify it. This was illegal since federal law clearly states that the classification process cannot be used to cover up criminal acts. The report also

wasn't telling Pentagon officials anything they didn't already know. The *Washington Post* now reports that the U.S. viceroy to Iraq, Paul Bremmer, had warned Donald Rumsfeld about widespread torture in American detention centers as early as last fall. The *Post* also reports that Rumsfeld found out back in January about the existence of photos documenting this torture; in fact, he testified in congressional hearings in May that he knew about the allegations in mid-January and that the investigation had proceeded as it should. So even if Rumsfeld doesn't read the European press, listen to Pacifica Radio, or surf AlterNet, he still knew what the rest of the world knew: that something was radically amiss in America's overseas gulags.

Even with Pentagon-issued evidence of barbaric abuse on their desks, torture never was an issue for the Bush junta. To the contrary, *torture* as a word remained a rhetorical tool in its arsenal, used to condemn Saddam Hussein's despotic regime but not America's. With his "weapons of mass destruction" and "support for al-Qaeda" myths debunked as Fox Newsisms, Bush fell back on ridding Iraq of what he called Hussein's "rape rooms" as his justification for war.

Even after his administration learned that the "rape rooms" were back up and operating, now under American control, Bush still chose to wage a frontal assault on reality. On April 15, six weeks after the Pentagon completed its report on Bush's rape rooms (roundabout is fair play), the Commander in Chief made this statement: "Our military is... performing brilliantly." He went on to explain, "See, the transition from torture chambers and rape rooms and mass graves and fear of authority is a tough transition. And [the U.S. forces are] doing the good work of keeping this country stabilized as a political process unfolds."

Donald Rumsfeld is also belligerently confronting the reality of torture with the trickery of semantics. On May 4 he responded to the unfolding torture scandal by arguing that there really wasn't any torture, explaining, "I'm not a lawyer. My impression is that what has been charged thus far is abuse, which I believe technically is different from torture." He went on, "I don't know if it is correct to say what

you just said, that torture has taken place, or that there's been a conviction for torture. And therefore I'm not going to address the torture word." This isn't simple arrogance. It's arrogance on an almost unfathomable level. When it comes to accusations of torture, suddenly Mister Indefinite Detention without Charges is all about innocent until proven guilty.

The "C" Word

The army report focuses on the Abu Ghraib prison, where the "C" word—*contractors*—appears yet again in the reportage of Bush's wars. In defense of common English, I'd like to make one point clear: a *contractor* is someone who builds you a new bathroom. A heavily armed person who threatens, tortures, or kills people for a living is a *mercenary*. And mercenaries seem to be at the heart of this situation.

According to the report, private "interrogators" working for the San Diego, California, based Titan corporation and the Arlington, Virginia, based CACI International

Corporation instructed military police officers to terrorize detainees while misleading investigators about the locations and methods of these interrogations. The report also cites evidence of at least one instance where a civilian mercenary raped a captive Iraqi child. Technically, a military police officer confronted with a civilian felon should arrest the felon. Or at the very least, there is no protocol by which the police officer should fall under the command of the

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civilian. But this is exactly what happened in Abu Ghraib, where military personnel fell under the command of civilian mercenaries.

One of the soldiers named in the army report claims he complained to his commanding officer about the “contractors,” only to be told to go back to his duty station and do as the contractors tell him. Specifically, he claims he was ordered to “loosen” captives up for interrogation.

“Cutting Edge” Interrogators Wanted

CACI, the employer of the “contractor” in question, describes itself as being “among the largest government information technology contractors, providing a wide range of services.” According to its website, its “Intelligence Solu-

tions” division boasts of an “attitude and culture of commitment to customer satisfaction reflected in everything we do.” Its work “touch[es] on every facet of defense and law enforcement intelligence needs.” CACI customers include the Department of Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the National Reconnaissance Office, as well as other governmental agencies. Among the services it offers is the acquisition of “human source intelligence.” It meets its goals by “featuring cutting edge technology.” We might have seen some of this cutting edge technology in the recently released photos.

As a business, CACI is doing quite well. Not even a major torture scandal seems capable of taking the wind out of its sails, with its stock value suffering only a minor ding

Unlearned Prison Lessons

BY RALPH R. REILAND

WHEN THEY THOUGHT no one was watching, “The guards were escalating their abuse of prisoners in the middle of the night. . . . Their boredom had driven them to ever more pornographic and degrading abuses of power.” These words aren’t from a report on the abuse of prisoners in Iraq. They’re the words of Stanford University psychologist Philip G. Zimbardo, past-president of the American Psychological Association, describing what happened during his classic experiment in the summer of 1971 at Stanford University.

By placing a newspaper ad in a local paper, Zimbardo enlisted seventy college students in a study on the psychology of prison life. After eliminating candidates with crime records, drug use, or psychological problems, the researchers were left with twenty-four volunteers who were, according to testing and observation, “an average group of healthy, intelligent, middle-class males.”

With a flip of a coin, half the group was assigned to be guards, the other half to be prisoners. The situation ran out of control so quickly that Zimbardo prematurely ended his planned two-week study after only six days.

The guards were outfitted with mirrored sunglasses, khaki uniforms, cop whistles, and nightsticks—and given no specific training. “They were free, within limits, to do whatever they thought was necessary to maintain law and order in the prison and to command the respect of the prisoners,” explains Zimbardo. “The guards made up their own set of rules.”

The uniform of each prisoner was a stocking cap made from a woman’s nylon, a foot chain, and a smock-like dress with a prison ID number on the front and back—and no underpants. “As soon as some of our prisoners were put into these uniforms,” reports Zimbardo, “they began to walk and sit differently and to hold themselves differently—more like a woman than a man.”

On the first day, each prisoner was systematically searched, stripped naked, and sprayed with an anti-lice disinfectant. On the morning of the second day, a rebellion broke out, with prisoners tearing off their ID numbers and stocking caps, cursing the guards, and barricading their cell doors with their beds. The guards responded by shooting the prisoners with carbon dioxide from a fire extinguisher, breaking into the cells, and again stripping the prisoners naked.

With each passing day, the guards stepped up their surveillance, harassment, and intimidation, restricting prisoners to solitary confinement, forcing them to urinate and defecate in buckets, and, responding

with this latest controversy. Perhaps Wall Street understands business-as-usual better than the American public. CACI has satisfied its customer.

CACI is also hiring. Among the positions posted on its website is one for “Interrogator/Intel Analyst Lead Assistant (requisition number BZSG308)” to be stationed in “Bagh-

dad, Iraq.” The successful candidate will “assist the interrogation support program team lead to increase the effectiveness of dealing with Detainees, Persons of Interest, and Prisoners of War (POWs) that are in the custody of US/Coalition Forces in the CJTF 7 AOR, in terms of screening, interrogation, and debriefing of persons of intelligence

value.” The description goes on to explain that the new hire, “under minimum supervision, will assist the team lead in managing a multifaceted interrogation support cell.” The job posting makes no mention of any requirement of familiarity with the Geneva Conventions



to a rumor of an escape plot, chaining the prisoners together and putting bags over

their heads. “After just four or five days,” reports Zimbardo, “the guards are doing homophobic things to the prisoners.”

In less than a week, the guards had become so abusive that the experiment had to be stopped—and this was all a simulation, just a study on Stanford’s campus, just a matter of play acting in the psychology department. There were no incoming mortars to put the guards on edge. No guard had a buddy on the outside who’d been killed in the previous days or weeks by someone who looked a lot like the people he was now guarding. None of the guards suspected any of the college prisoners of being part of a gang of international evildoers.

The photos we’re now seeing from the Abu Ghraib prison are mirror images of what happened during the Stanford exercise some three decades ago. In the campus experiment, the guards “made up their own set of rules.” No checks and balances existed until Zimbardo pulled the plug.

Antonio Taguba, the army general who first investigated the abuse of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, told the Senate Armed Services Committee in his May testimony that the mistreatment resulted from defective leadership, a “lack of discipline, no training whatsoever and no supervision.”

The lesson from Stanford is that things run out of control when no one is in charge. The lesson from Abu Ghraib is that no one was in charge.

George W. Bush says the mistreatment was the result of “the wrongdoing of a few”—just a few bad apples in the barrel who need some good court-martialing. Wrong. It’s the barrel that’s wrong—the top, the big picture guys who tossed an inadequate number of troops into a hell-hole with no training and no supervision.

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or any other protocols of international law regarding treatment of POWs. This is the ultimate frontier of privatization: outsourcing thuggery to contract rights violation professionals accountable only to Wall Street. Isn't this a real terrorist cell?

A Thug's Warden

If there was ever a place where contract thugs would feel at home, it's Abu Ghraib. The American official recruited by U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft to supervise the training of Abu Ghraib's guards and oversee its conversion into a U.S. prison was Utah's former director of the Department of Prisons, Lane McCotter. According to the *New York Times*, McCotter resigned from the Utah post following a scandal regarding a schizophrenic prisoner who was tortured to death under McCotter's watch. The inmate was shackled nude to a chair for sixteen hours. Sound familiar? McCotter's last position was with a private prison company recently criticized by the Justice Department for maintaining unsafe conditions and failing to provide medical treatment to prisoners. Yes, this would be the Justice Department led by the same John Ashcroft who appointed McCotter to the Abu Ghraib post.

This is the point the media failed to make: that the Abu Ghraib prison—like the entire American gulag system ranging from Iraq and Afghanistan across the ocean to Cuba—is functioning exactly as it was designed to function. It's a private factory established to extract and refine information mined from tortured human souls. That's why George W. Bush incensed the world by initially refusing to apologize when he appeared on Arab television. Nothing went wrong. Why should he apologize?

If something were wrong, it certainly wouldn't be clear to Bush. As governor of Texas, he presided over a prison system condemned by the Federal District Court after it determined that prison officials, according to the *New York Times*, were knowingly "allowing inmate gang leaders to buy and sell other inmates as slaves for sex."

The Scapegoat and the Spooks

The officer ultimately in charge of the Abu Ghraib guards is Brigadier General Janis Karpinski, who is now suspended and facing court martial. Karpinski, however, claims that the section of the prison where the torture took place was a "no-go area" under the control of intelligence officers. This, in essence, would be the factory floor where interrogators plied their trade. Karpinski said it was off-limits to anyone not involved with the interrogations. Intelligence officers, she added, were there twenty-four hours a day. The situation is more complex than that of a few sadists running wild. Nothing happens in the intelligence community without a reason.

Keeping this in mind, we must also surmise that 1,000-plus photos would not leave such areas unless there was a reason as well. This is where things get difficult to con-

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strue—with only the seemingly most outlandish theories making any sense. Almost every foreign policy move Bush has made since entering office in 2001 has succeeded in polarizing the world and nurturing anti-American hatred. And by nurturing this hatred, Bush has recruited far more terrorists for the al-Qaeda movement than Osama bin Laden could ever hope to. As CNN reported on May 21, in view of the scandal at Abu Ghraib, Iraqis ponder, "And Americans wonder why we hate them?" In recruiting and empowering this suicidal army while polarizing the Islamic world against the West, Bush is pushing the world ever closer to the mother of all battles—the apocalypse he believes is

necessary before his homies can be raptured into the kingdom of heaven.

Apocalypse or not, it's interesting to note that the current scandal would probably never have surfaced if it weren't for the photographic evidence. This is our mediated society: reality isn't *real* unless it's confirmed virtually. Hence, investigative reports documenting U.S. torture were never worthy of mass media coverage until they were accompanied by images—in this case, images could be classified as hard-core pornography. We've seen this time

and time again in both the U.S. homeland and abroad. Police brutality, now rampant in America, only becomes worthy of public attention when complainants can provide Rodney King-style visual documentation. Such photographs and videos are seldom available since their producers often fall victim to the very police attacks they attempt to document.

“This is Not the America I Know”—G.W. Bush

Likewise, Abu Ghraib-style abuses are common in American prisons. Recent reports in the *New York Times* document such practices as forcing male inmates to wear pink panties or black hoods or march nude as being sanctioned practices in American prisons. Tortures such as rape and sleep deprivation, though officially unsanctioned, are also common. Hence, it should come as no surprise that Lane McCotter, upon opening Abu Ghraib, exclaimed that it was

actions of the Bush administration’s surrogate forces around the world. Recent reports from U.S.-occupied Haiti (also occupied by French and Canadian troops) tell a tale of wholesale slaughter of supporters of that country’s recently deposed democratically elected government. Convicted death squad leaders from an earlier coup, now playing key roles in Haiti’s post-coup regime, appear responsible for the deaths and disappearances of about one thousand members of the former ruling party, including twenty who were locked into a shipping container and dropped into the sea. But there are no photos, no videos—only missing people and sordid eyewitness accounts. And hence, there is no mainstream media coverage.

Strange Fruit

In our image-addicted world, it is visual documentation more so than events that ultimately consummate news—though it often is only by either chance or perverse political engineering that some events are photographed or recorded and some aren’t, and some are made public and some never will be.

There’s also an issue of context. One person exclaimed to me in anger that the Abu Ghraib photos lacked context. If we knew what had transpired before or after these snapshots in time, he argued, they would tell a different story. Normally I’m one of the first people to argue this truth—that photos freeze time out of context and misnarrate reality. But in this case, I can’t imagine any context in which the actions depicted in these photos would be acceptable.

They do, however, clearly fit into a historical context. This is their most frightening aspect. Those smug happy smiling faces of Americans posing, glistening with pride, over their victims, aren’t new. Pick up a history book. Look at the classic lynching photos from the era of the Ku Klux Klan. It’s the same evil. We’ve seen it before. It’s the worst of who we are and, as long as we celebrate violence, vengeance, and militarism, we’ll keep seeing it. Only now the perpetrators aren’t a wink-wink “secret” underground hate group. Today’s lynchers are professionals—on the company clock. The ultimate question is: will the American people allow this strange fruit to grow? ☹

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“the only place we agreed as a team was truly closest to an American prison”—though I believe he had another context in mind for his statement. It should also come as no surprise that two of the Abu Ghraib torturers implicated in the army report, are U.S. prison guards fulfilling army reserve duties in Iraq.

The systematic torture of American prisoners in state-side prisons is more or less a nonissue due to the lack of photographic evidence. It’s difficult to get cameras into or out of secured areas, and felons seldom provide visual evidence of their crimes as they did at Abu Ghraib.

Also invisible are the abuses conducted by U.S. forces in other Iraqi prisons and in other theaters of combat. Recent reports, for example, document that the CIA regularly houses detainees being held for interrogation in metal shipping containers in Afghanistan. Then there are the