

MAY 6

The war and racism – media denial in overdrive

Among the millions of words that have appeared in the U.S. press since late April about abuse and torture at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, one has been notably missing: Racism.

Overall, when it comes to racial aspects, the news coverage is quite PC – as in Pentagon Correct. The outlook is “apple pie” egalitarian, with the media picture including high-profile officers who are African-American and Latino. Meanwhile, inside the policy arena, Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice are frequently in front of cameras to personify Uncle Sam in blackface.

The U.S. government doesn’t drop bombs on people because of their race. Washington’s geopolitical agendas lead to military actions. But racial biases make the war process easier when the people being killed and maimed aren’t white people. An oversize elephant in the American media’s living room is a reality that few journalists talk about in public: The USA keeps waging war on countries where the victims resemble people who often experience personal and institutional racism in the United States.

In the American media coverage of the uproar after release of the Abu Ghraib photos, one of the only references to race was fleeting and dismissive, midway through a Wall Street Journal opinion piece on May 3: “So far the alleged grotesqueries are more analogous to the nightmares that occur occasionally at American prisons, when rogue and jaded guards freelance to intimidate and humiliate inmates. The crime, then, first appears not so much a product of endemic ethnic, racial, or religious hatred, as the unfortunate cargo of penal institutions, albeit exacerbated by the conditions of war, the world over.”

That essay, by the Hoover Institution’s Victor Davis Hanson, typifies media denial about what’s happening in the hellish American cells populated so disproportionately by low-income blacks and Latinos. In the world of the Journal editorial page’s convenient fantasy, guards “occasionally” choose to “freelance to intimidate and humiliate inmates.” In the world of prisoners’ inconvenient reality, guards frequently

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intimidate, humiliate – and brutalize.

Media denial lets the U.S. military – and the U.S. incarceration industry – off the hook. Yet it's significant that a man implicated as a ringleader in the Abu Ghraib crimes, Staff Sgt. Ivan Frederick, "had also worked for six years as a guard for the Virginia Department of Corrections," according to Seymour Hersh's article in the May 10 edition of *The New Yorker*. A special agent in the U.S. Army's Criminal Investigation Division, Scott Bobeck, testified that Sgt. Frederick and a corporal apparently "were put in charge because they were civilian prison guards and had knowledge of how things were supposed to be run."

That knowledge came from working as guards in an American system of incarceration that now has 2,033,000 people behind bars – 63 percent of them black or Latino. With racial minorities vastly over-represented in federal and state prisons and local jails, such numbers reflect profound institutional biases that converge at the intersection of racism and unequal justice based on economic class.

A public-interest group, The Sentencing Project, notes that "black males have a 32 percent chance of serving time in prison at some point in their lives; Hispanic males have a 17 percent chance; white males have a 6 percent chance." Most of the people sentenced to prison are poor, while the affluent and wealthy are very infrequent guests.

Conditions are often inherently abusive behind bars. Many prisoners must cope with violence and duress. At the Stop Prisoner Rape organization, executive director Lara Stemple points out: "For women, whose abusers are often corrections officers, the rates of sexual assault are as high as one in four in some facilities."

The same government that runs this prison system also conducts foreign policy that during the past four decades has resulted in bombing and invading the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Grenada, Panama, Afghanistan and Iraq. More circumscribed Pentagon missions landed in Somalia and Haiti. In 1999, a major U.S.-led bombing campaign caused enormous suffering among civilians in Yugoslavia. Sudden missile strikes hit Libya and Sudan. And U.S.-funded military forces on several continents – from Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala to Angola to Indonesia – took many lives.

Generally, with the exception of Serbs, the victims of Pentagon firepower have been people of color who've looked different than the USA's white majority and power structure. In the United States, racial biases have helped to grease the war machinery. We may want to view the large number of Latino and black GIs as reassurance that U.S. warfare is race-neutral. But the decision to launch a war is hardly democratic.

Soldiers, by definition, follow orders that result from a political process: skewed by the inequities of power and the effects of prejudice.

For troops on the ground, racial bias – objectification of “the other” – can have magnified impacts in an environment of high stress and danger. As author Iris Chang has documented in “The Rape of Nanking,” when Japan’s troops committed atrocities on a massive scale against civilians in 1937, those crimes were fueled by virulent anti-Chinese racism and indoctrination touting Japanese racial superiority.

We might prefer to believe that racism plays no part in the politics and media coverage of U.S. foreign policy. But that’s about as plausible as the claim that racism plays no part in American society.

Trying to calm outrage by speaking to viewers of Arabic-language television on May 5, George W. Bush said the people of Iraq “must understand that what took place in that prison does not represent the America that I know.” But as governor and president, he has rebuffed every plea to ameliorate the flagrant injustices and brutalities inside the courtrooms and prisons of Texas and the entire country. Bush “knows” – or at least publicly admits to knowing – only what he wants to acknowledge.

During the few minutes allotted to him as a guest on NPR’s “Talk of the Nation” program, the executive director of Amnesty International USA explained that efforts had been made to alert top Washington officials to barbaric treatment of Iraqi prisoners in U.S. custody. During the May 3 broadcast, William Schulz said: “Close to a year ago, human rights groups went to the Pentagon, to the National Security Council; the president himself issued a statement in which he indicated that this kind of behavior was utterly inappropriate and, of course, it is seen to have continued long after that statement was issued. And one of the reasons, I’m afraid, is because those who undertake this kind of activity, whether they be the prison guards themselves or military intelligence or higher-ups, are able to get away with it.”

A minute later, a caller – identified as Steve from Minneapolis – made an insightful comment on the air. “I point out one other failing, in addition to the other ones that Mr. Schulz has eloquently listed, and that’s the media,” he said. “I mean, a year ago, you could have been interviewing Mr. Schulz instead of today, and maybe that would have prevented, you know, this recent scandal of torture.”

While the Bush administration did little but yawn about evidence of torture and other abuses of Iraqi people at the hands of American occupiers, such disinterest was largely replicated in the U.S. news media. “Ever since the war began, Amnesty

International has been receiving reports of Iraqis who have been taken into detention by Coalition Forces and whose rights have been violated," said an Amnesty International press release dated March 18. "Some have been held without charge for months. A number of detainees have been tortured and ill-treated. Virtually none has had prompt access to a lawyer, their family or judicial review of their detention."

A statement from an independent credible source that some of the U.S. military's prisoners "have been tortured" would seem to cry out for a quick response in the form of journalistic exploration. But the statement conflicted with thousands of news stories that – one way or another – portrayed American troops as heroic and humane. It was easy for U.S. news editors to ignore what Amnesty International had to say. Investigative reporter Hersh, who gained extensive access to official documents, writes that the 372nd Military Police Company's "abuse of prisoners seemed almost routine – a fact of Army life that the soldiers felt no need to hide."

Unlike the U.S. mainstream press, some British daily newspapers have explored the racist aspects of that abuse.

In the daily Independent, the longtime Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk wrote that American and British soldiers who were involved came from "towns and cities where race hatred has a home." And he alluded to the pernicious role of some mass media entertainment – "the poisonous, racial dribble of a hundred Hollywood movies that depict Arabs as dirty, lecherous, untrustworthy and violent people."

In the Arab world, the photographs "have strengthened the feeling that there is a deep racism underlying the occupiers' attitudes to Arabs, Muslims and the Third World generally," Ahdaf Soueif wrote in a Guardian article that appeared on May 5. She contended that "the acts in the photos being flashed across the networks would not have taken place but for the profound racism that infects the American and British establishments."

Soueif added: "There have been reports of U.S. troops outside Fallujah talking of the fun of being a sniper, of the different ways to kill people, of the 'rat's nest' that needs cleaning out. Some will say soldiers will be soldiers. But that language has been used by neocons at the heart of the U.S. administration; both Kenneth Adelman and Paul Wolfowitz have spoken of 'snakes' and 'draining the swamps' in the 'uncivilized parts of the world.' It is implicit in the U.S. administration's position that anyone who does not agree that all of history has been moving towards a glorious pinnacle expressed in the U.S. political, ideological and economic system has 'rejected modernity'; that it is America's mission to civilize and to punish."

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That's what Martin Luther King Jr. was talking about when he said early in the spring of 1968: "The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just. A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war: 'This way of settling differences is not just.'"

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