

Strange fruit at Abu Ghraib

SUDDENLY, with the broadcast of images from the United States' Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, torture is a hot topic in the US media. This is new. It wasn't such a hot topic over the last two years as neo-conservative 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.

It also wasn't much of an issue in the summer of 2002, when the Bush administration stonewalled the United Nations, trying to kill an anti-torture protocol in committee. Nigeria, China, Iran, Pakistan and Cuba were among those who backed the US position, but the protocol was approved none-the-less, with strong support from Europe and Latin America. If the UN eventually approves and ratifies the bill, the US has announced that it will not be a signatory and will not abide by its provisions. Outrageous as this position was, 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 US occupied Afghanistan, Iraq and Cuba. The mainstream media stayed mum.

And torture wasn't an issue back in late February and early March, when the Army commissioned investigation reported "systematic and illegal abuse of detainees" in Iraq at the hands of US mercenary and military forces. The 53-page report prepared under the

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supervision of Major General Antonio M. Taguba termed the abuses as "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 US forces and associates in Iraq.

Rumsfeld knew about Bush's "rape rooms"

The Department of Defense's immediate response was to classify the Army's report. 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 that they didn't already know. The Washington Post now reports that the US 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. So it seems that 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 their arsenal, used to condemn Saddam Hussein's despotic regime, but not our own. With his "weapons of mass destruction" and "support for al Qaida" myths debunked as Fox Newsisms, Bush fell back on ridding Iraq of what he called, Saddam'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 15th, six weeks after the Pentagon completed its report on Bush's rape rooms (roundabout is fair play), the Commander and Chief made this statement: "Our military is ... performing brilliantly." Shedding his native New England accent for a fake Texas drawl, 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 they're [the US forces] 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 4th, 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 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 that 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 their website, their "Intelligence Solutions" division boasts of an "attitude and culture of commitment to customer satisfaction reflected in everything we do." Their work "touch[es] on every facet of defense and law enforcement intelligence

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needs." Their customers are the Department of Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency and the National Reconnaissance Office, among other governmental agencies. Among the services they offer is the acquisition of "human source intelligence." They meet their 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 their sails, with their stock value suffering only a minor ding 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 their website is one for "Interrogator/Intel Analyst Lead Assistant (requisition number BZSG308)" to be stationed in "Baghdad, 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 Accords or any other protocols of international law regarding treatment of POWs. This is the ultimate frontier of privatization – outsourcing thuggary 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 John Ashcroft to supervise the training of Abu Ghraib's guards, and oversee its conversion into an American 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 16 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

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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 24 hours per 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+ photos would not leave such areas unless there was a reason as well. This is where things get difficult to figure out – with only the seemingly most outlandish theories making any sense. Almost every foreign policy move Bush has made since entering office 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 Qaida movement than bin Laden could ever hope to. 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 never have surfaced if it wasn't for the photographic evidence. This is our mediated society. Reality isn't real unless it's confirmed virtually. Hence, investigative reports documenting American 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 US homeland and abroad. Police brutality, now rampant in America, only becomes worthy of public attention when

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complainants can provide Rodney King style photographs. Such photographs are seldom available since photographers 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 "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 US prison guards fulfilling Army Reserve duties in Iraq.

The systematic torture of American prisoners in stateside prisons is more or less a non-issue due to the lack of photographic evidence. It's difficult to get cameras into or out of secured areas – and felons seldom provide photographic evidence of their crimes as they did in Abu Ghraib.

Also invisible are the abuses conducted by US forces in other Iraqi prisons and in other theatres 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 actions of the Bush administration's surrogate forces around the world. Recent reports from US-occupied Haiti (also occupied by French and Canadian troops) tell 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 1,000 members of the former ruling party, including 20 who were locked into a shipping container and dropped into the sea. But there are no photos – only missing people and sordid eyewitness accounts. And hence, there is no mainstream media coverage.

Strange fruit

In our image addicted world, it is photos 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 and some aren't, and some photos are made public, and some never will be.

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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 historic context. This is their most frightening aspect. Those smug happy smiling faces of Americans posing, glistening with pride, over their victims, are not new. Pick up a history book. Look at the classic lynching photos from the KKK era. 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?