

The tortured silence of the media elite

By Danny Schechter

mediachannel.org | May 10, 2004

With Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's announcement of an "independent review" board to examine the "abuse" of Iraqi prisoners, we now have three self-described "independent" panels at work. All are stuffed with insiders unlikely to be too critical of the government. It is clearly time for a fourth.

Military failures, intelligence failures and 9-11 policy failures are all being probed to some small degree, but where is the investigation of mainstream media's failure to report on the torture of Iraqis when it became known months before?

Why is it that, even to this day, more than a year after the war in Iraq began, the government's basic worldview and language still shapes the news we see and the discussions we hear?

We hear the gruesome terrorizing of prisoners described with sanitized language like "abuses" but rarely "torture." (To his credit, Tim Russert of Meet The Press did use the "T word" Sunday.) The Abu Ghraib prison scandal is being spun as the misdeeds of a small number of immoral individuals, not the outcome of systemic policies and practices that teach and encourage psychological abuse and torture. This conflicts with the findings of the military's own report.

The photographs first shown by CBS are themselves misleading, and hardly tell the whole story. Why are we hearing so few demands from media outlets that the Pentagon release ALL of its photos and VIDEOS? As Rumsfeld indicated, there are many more images that we have not seen. Major media outlets do not seem to be going to court or clamoring for their release. Still classified, they will soon be released to the Senate but not necessarily to the public.

CBS held its story for two weeks at the request of the Pentagon's most senior officer General Richard B Myers. Myers denied that he was trying to suppress the story, indicating that CBS was happy to cooperate in the delay. In other words, this was a case of self-censorship, not government censorship. CBS admits also it only aired the story when it

The tortured silence of the media elite / 2

learned that the New Yorker's Seymour Hersh was preparing to publish his version. So much for patriotism! The fear of being scooped drove CBS's agenda.

The New York Times explained that it was the family of a soldier charged with crimes who brought the pictures to CBS through retired Colonel David Hackworth's website. And so we learn that it was not enterprise reporting by CBS that uncovered the story. "62" – as its known in the business – had the story dumped in its lap. CBS also explained it held up its report in order to be able to interview a General from Iraq. In TV terms, that's known as introducing conflict and confrontation to juice up a story. 60 Minutes 11's segment had, as its experts, a Major General, a CIA official and former military interrogator who worked in Vietnam. There were no critics of US policy. This is called playing it safe, very, very, safe.

Without the grotesque images, the story probably would not have even been reported. The Red Cross spokesman Antonella Notari says "the photographs are certainly shocking, but our reports/ratios are worse. . . . We don't need the photos to know what's going on and that it's not acceptable." CBS was so nervous about bucking the Pentagon that it needed to interview war supporters and spooks to validate its decision to air the story.

Rumsfeld testified that the Red Cross reports were "helpful" and implied that corrective action was taken, but he then refused to release the reports. According to Le Monde, the ICRC had initially made several reports and recommendations to American and British authorities in Iraq and, subsequently, with their superiors in Washington and London.

Administration officials and military officers have been given hours of airtime to insist how shocked they were by these practices, and how isolated they were in an Army that otherwise expresses "American values." Again and again, we are told how much these prison practices are in conflict with all that America stands for. It took weeks for reports to surface in the press to show that torture is commonplace in many US prisons in Iraq, and in America.

The scandal was well known in Iraq for almost a year. Amnesty International reported on allegations of torture in the prison in July 2003. There was little coverage. In fact, even as Rumsfeld revealed that military affairs officers in Baghdad announced the prison abuse in January, "to the world," there was still no mainstream media pick up.

Today, even Republican Senators like Lindsay Graham are speaking not of incidents but of "system failure." Where should the buck stop? Who knew what and when did they forget they knew it? Is the mainstream media telling us? Other abuses have been shown but not commented upon and, as a consequence, never rose to the level of being newsworthy as an issue. Ahdaf Soueif wrote about this last week in the Guardian: "In the past year the world has seen photos of many Iraqis stripped with their wrists tied behind their backs with plastic cord. At first we could look into their eyes and bear witness to what

The tortured silence of the media elite / 3

was happening. Then they were bagged. At no point was there an outcry.”

So here we have a major story that, even now, is being downplayed, narrowly focused and distorted. Ironically, you can be sure that it is likely to become even bigger, if and when videos are released. I have also heard rumors of similar abuses in prisons housing children and women. These outrages, known for many months, have been reported on by truly independent agencies, even disclosed by the government, and still scant mainstream media attention was paid.

Some in the media see a need now for a more aggressive stance and pro-active approach. The Associated Press’s new President and CEO Tom Curley announced on Friday that that AP is backing a new media advocacy center to lobby in Washington for open government.

“The powerful have to be watched, and we are the watchers,” Curley said, “and you don’t need to have your notebook snatched by a policeman to know that keeping an eye on government activities has lately gotten a lot harder.”

Media calling for openness in government is easy. Calling for openness in the media themselves is much tougher. Even in his statement announcing a new initiative, the AP’s Chief gives his colleagues a pass: “It’s entirely understandable – and reasonable – that the press and public were willing to step back for a time and give the government room to address an unknown and frightening threat” he said.’

Was it understandable and reasonable for media organizations to do more selling of the war than telling about it? Is it understandable and reasonable for this prison story to be treated the way it is being treated? The Rumsfeld hearings were seen on CSPAN but not in prime time on the networks. Perennial soundbyte artist Richard Pearle was back on CSPAN Sunday morning knocking the media for its obsession with violence, in effect, blaming the messenger to deflect attention away from the immorality of fighting this war.

Indeed, the messenger does deserve critical scrutiny. Not because mainstream media are obsessed with violence, as Pearle claims, but because they have failed to rigorously question the official view of this war and to portray its human consequences.

It is time for the media to investigate itself.

News Dissector Danny Schechter writes a daily blog for MediaChannel.org and is now making a film on the media role in Iraq based on his book EMBEDDED: Weapons of Mass Deception (Prometheus Books).