

Brutality starts at home

By Ritt Goldstein

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On April 30, US President George W Bush condemned the incidents of Iraq prison abuse and those who perpetrated them, saying: “That’s not the way we do things in America.” Administration officials have launched a campaign to portray the incidents as isolated aberrations; though, “systemic” abuse has been charged by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Amnesty International claims a “pattern of torture”. But while an army report has described the “sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses” of Iraqi prisoners – including sodomy and other physical assaults – no one has yet dared compare this to America’s well documented abuse of its own citizens, and the factors driving abuse at home and abroad.

“Five years ago, after prison scandals gripped California with tales of guards setting up inmates in human cockfights and then shooting them dead, the state Department of Corrections vowed to change its ways,” read a December 28, 2003 article from the Los Angeles Times. Notably, the article was entitled “Despite State Promises, Reform Eludes Prisons”, illustrating a well-established official pattern of effectively condoning abuse, then paying lip-service to outrage and reform when a scandal breaks.

The Army Times – an independent paper read widely in military circles – called for the removal of America’s top Pentagon managers, saying that “while responsibility begins with the six soldiers facing criminal charges, it extends all the way up the chain of command to the highest reaches of the military hierarchy and its civilian leadership”. Paralleling this question, the Los Angeles Times article had noted that a US federal court was examining allegations that both California’s corrections commissioner and the highest levels of his staff had “stopped internal investigators”, the case involving the suppression of evidence against “brutal guards”.

While most officials say rights are important, the status quo appears sacred, and a well-tread path of political expediency goes to and from it. US rights groups and civil-rights attorneys have long described abuses within the US criminal justice system as part of a

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widely entrenched “culture” of official misconduct. When Oklahoma’s Republican Senator James Inhofe declared that he was “more outraged by the outrage” over the Iraq abuse than by the abuse itself, he aptly demonstrated a perspective held by many, one which “justifies” abuse.

At the core of this logic lies the assumption that those abused have done something to deserve their illegal and inhumane treatment. And misconduct critics have long charged that many victims of US law enforcement abuse are routinely perceived in a manner similar to that in which rape victims once were – the victims viewed as having done something to “deserve it”.

A December 19, 2003 article by the Washington Post revealed that a report by the US Justice Department’s Inspector General revealed foreign detainees rounded up in the wake of September 11 had their guards “ram them into a wall”. The report concurrently noted that from videotape of the incidents, “there was no evidence that the detainees had provoked or attacked the guards”.

In 1998, Human Rights Watch (HRW) released a report on systemic, coast-to-coast abuse by US law enforcement, “Shielded from Justice”. The report found a pervasive violation of “the public’s trust”, coupled with “defective” accountability systems and a “tolerant” leadership, allowing US law enforcement to commit crimes with “impunity” nationwide. As regards what the effective acceptance of the abuse of such authority has meant in the United States:

* A November 10, 2003 report by Houston’s 11 News began: “Where can you lie, cheat or steal and still keep your job? Or how about repeatedly getting drunk and getting behind the wheel? Or assaulting your wife or girlfriend? The answer in dozens of cases is the Houston Police Department.”

* Paralleling Iraqi charges of sodomizing prisoners, the most famous case in the US was that of Abner Louima in 1997, sodomized with a toilet plunger, with the blood and feces-covered plunger then used to break out his front teeth. When initially investigated by New York City police, the incident was reported as “self-inflicted”; though officer Justin Volpe later pleaded guilty to the crime. The latest major news report of similar conduct was provided in the November 7, 2003 Minneapolis Star Tribune, with Stephen Porter alleging that “police sexually assaulted him with the handle of a toilet plunger”, the paper reported, noting a witness account appeared to corroborate Porter’s story.

* HRW’s report also addressed the “repeated practice of torture by Chicago police”, with electric shock being the favored technique, supplemented by burning prisoners. “Shielded from Justice” specifically cites a report of electric shock applied to the “head and genitals”. The group notes that after the city “settled the claim of 13-year-old Marcus

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Wiggins”, the attorneys representing the boy in his torture suit were able to secure internal police documents, providing further evidence to support torture claims. The City of Chicago did eventually acknowledge that “planned torture” occurred.

* While US media have reported the use of dogs and armed threat against Iraqi detainees, a November 7, 2003 report by CBS News detailed a police drug raid on Stratford High School in Goose Creek, South Carolina. There, students were forced to “lie on the floor”, while they endured “guns put to their head and a K9 dog”. Notably, no drugs were found in the “commando-style raid”, according to CBS, but the “school’s principal defends the dramatic sweep”, they reported.

* As regards charges that chemicals from broken light fixtures were poured on some Iraqi detainees, the March 20, 2004 New York Times reported on a police officer “spraying pepper spray (a powerful chemical irritant used by police) into the mouth of a man who died in custody after being wrongly picked up”. Lesser incidents of pepper spray abuse are widely reported as virtually commonplace.

* Regarding the alleged rape of a young Iraqi man in custody, reports of sexual assault by US law enforcement frequently surface; notably, a number of these have been alleged incidents of a male officer attacking a female officer. As regards the sexual violation of young people, a June 25, 2003 report by the Associated Press began by noting that “at least a dozen teenagers assigned to work with police departments as part of the Boy Scouts’ Law Enforcement Explorers program have allegedly been sexually abused by officers during the past year”, with the incidents reported from coast-to-coast. The article mentioned some specific cases, including a Texas case where “former police officer John Ross Ewing, 28, was indicted by a grand jury in March on charges that he sexually assaulted two male Explorer scouts, ages 15 and 16”.

Echoing the Iraq accusations made by Army Times, HRW highlighted that domestic US abuse stems from a “problem of supervision, management and leadership”. The human rights group also noted that “shortcomings in recruiting, training and management” extended across the US law enforcement abuse spectrum. And “Shielded From Justice” also provides insight as to why early reports of Iraqi prisoner abuse were ignored, demonstrating a pattern which HRW domestically termed “federal passivity”.

Addressing the results of domestic allegations made to the Civil Rights Division of the US Justice Department, HRW found that of 10,129 civil rights cases that were reviewed, approximately 1 in 500 resulted in a Justice Department attempt to prosecute. More disturbing, HRW found that in some US police departments the particularly abusive officers are “often rewarded”, being given “positive evaluations and promotions”.

In their criticism of Pentagon leadership, Army Times noted: “The message to the troops:

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anything goes.” And a 1997 Time Magazine article by former US police chief Joseph McNamara provided the precise parallel, saying: “This wouldn’t happen if some cops didn’t believe they had a mandate for such behavior.”

A belief in such a “mandate” would explain Iraq pictures with smiling torturers.

McNamara noted that most contemporary police misconduct has “an element of police gangsterism. Small groups of police officers share a fermenting contempt for the people they encounter.” He added: “Rogue cops band together and cover up one another’s crimes.” And the most readily seen aspect of the Iraqi abuse has been the obvious contempt those perpetrating it have had for their victims.

While it is widely accepted that most of the US military, US law enforcement and US citizenry are good and decent people, many elements within American society have long voiced increasing concern over the disparity between the way the US sees itself, and the way others are increasingly seeing it.

Notably, it was a US military police officer who finally broke the Iraq scandal by courageously providing a CD of abuse’s gruesome imagery. In the US it has been well documented that many good and decent police officers have attempted to address abuse, only to be badly abused themselves. But in both Iraq and the US, patterns of nightmarish abuse have grown which have been documented as “systemic”.

In 1941, famed social psychologist Erich Fromm wrote in *Escape From Freedom* of how those who are sadistic rationalize their behavior in two ways: the first being retaliation for a perceived injury; the second is that “by striking first I am defending myself or my friends against the danger of being hurt”. Fromm reflected: “Man’s brain lives in the 20th century; the heart of most men still lives in the Stone Age.”

Footnoting domestic US police violence, there was a time when I wrote laws instead of articles. A January 10, 1997 editorial written by the staff of America’s oldest newspaper, The Hartford Courant, was entitled “Consider a statewide review board”, and advocated the pursuit of the police accountability legislation I had once authored. On December 6, 1996 I had chaired the Senator Tim Upton-Ritt Goldstein, SCOLED Informational Hearing on Police Accountability in Connecticut’s legislature. But after spreading my legislative proposal on the national level, by July 1997 I was forced to flee the US for my life, seeking political asylum in Sweden.

While life-threatening harassment (I was shot at, had the steering unscrewed on my car, was assaulted multiple times daily, etc) was determined, I am yet forced to live underground. A February 10, 1998 Reuters article explained the reason as “it was by individual police and not authorized by police authorities”. Amnesty International’s

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Swedish section noted that this violated Swedish legislation. Later, a June 21, 2001 article in the United Kingdom's Guardian was entitled "European parliament committee urges Swedes to rethink".

Martin Luther King Jr once observed that "we live in an age of guided missiles and misguided men".

Cutting to what many see as the heart of America's problems, the Army Times entitled its article "A Failure of Leadership at the Highest Levels". As the father of recently deceased Nick Berg said in criticism of the administration: "It's not the same America I grew up in."

In the spring of 2002, I interviewed the Reverend Robert Bosse, SCJ, of the Chicago-based 8th Day Center for Justice, a global-justice non-governmental organization whose 4,000 members are primarily Catholic clergy. Bosse expressed a profound concern as to America's future, and that of the structures and values which had once made the country.

In considering the end of the road he saw the Bush administration as taking, he solemnly noted a parallel to World War II Germany, saying: "I thought of those good people who gradually became collaborators in an unthinkable crime, all in the name of security."

Ritt Goldstein is an American investigative political journalist based in Stockholm. His work has appeared in broadsheets such as Australia's Sydney Morning Herald, Spain's El Mundo and Denmark's Politiken, as well as with the Inter Press Service (IPS), a global news agency. This article first appeared in the Asia Times newspaper.