

## *The Abu Ghraib Scandal and the U.S. Occupation of Iraq*

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Shorter version on the website of Historians Against the War:  
<http://www.historiansagainstawar.org/resources/torture/cox.html>

The U.S. public was shocked to learn at the end of April 2004 that American troops had abused and tortured helpless Iraqi prisoners. An April 28 broadcast of the popular CBS news show “60 Minutes,” followed within a few days by the first of several articles by Seymour Hersh in the *New Yorker*, exposed the criminal conduct of members of the 372<sup>nd</sup> Military Police Company at Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad. The story may never have received much attention—many other credible accounts of U.S. abuses in Iraq had gone unnoticed—were it not for the release of video evidence of the crimes.<sup>1</sup> Many of the torturers filmed their misdeeds in an effort to further humiliate, as well as to blackmail, their victims, as well as for their own gratification and amusement.

Public and official interest in the torture scandal would soon subside. After a couple weeks of hearings in the U.S. Senate, during which it was apparent that very few of the Senators had read any of the relevant reports or bothered to learn how to pronounce the name of the infamous prison, the story virtually disappeared from the mainstream news media. The courts-martial of seven of the perpetrators provided the only partial resolution; deeper questions about the chain of responsibility, as well as rumors that footage existed documenting even worse abuses, evaporated, and only momentarily reappeared at the end of August when the U.S. Army completed a report (the “Fay Report”) on the scandal. Abu Ghraib was never mentioned during the presidential campaign or any of the debates, as Senator John Kerry politely declined to raise the issue.

But for a brief time, the scandal threatened to severely undermine the Bush Administration’s war policy and even to educate large sections of the American public

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<sup>1</sup> *New York Times* Executive Editor Bill Keller admitted that his newspaper only picked up the story because of the sensational photographic evidence. “Any honest editor will give you the same answer. It’s the pictures; that’s what did it,” he was quoted in an article in the *American Journalism Review*, adding, “But it shouldn’t require visual drama to make us pay attention to something like this.” Sherry Ricchiardi, “Missed Signals,” *AJR* August/September 2004.

about the tactics typically employed by the U.S. military in the Third World. Why were the revelations so upsetting and surprising to U.S. public opinion? That occupation forces should commit transgressions against their subjects is sadly predictable, as any historian of colonialism or imperialism can confirm. But in this case several mythologies were disturbed: This wasn't just any occupying force, it was the armed forces of the United States, which are presumably distinguished by their professionalism and their moral rectitude; and further, the U.S. presence in Iraq isn't really an "occupation," but simply an effort to bring democracy to a benighted people, which of course is always the principal interest of U.S. foreign policy. The threat to these delusions helps explain why the news was so upsetting—probably more upsetting for many U.S. citizens than the inhumane acts themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Within official discourse complaints over the revelations fell into two categories: The photographs would tarnish an otherwise laudable effort to bring democracy to Iraq; the images would fan the flames of anti-Americanism in the region, increasing the dangers to U.S. troops and serving as recruitment propaganda for the insurgents or "terrorists." There were few expressions of sympathy for the Iraqi victims but much dismay over the "unfair" public-relations damage. It only took a few days for an aggressive backlash to develop against the negative publicity. On May 12 Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., declared: "I'm probably not the only one up at this table that is more outraged by the outrage than we are by the treatment [of the Iraqi prisoners]."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The *Sacramento Bee* published a photograph on its front page on May 7 of U.S. Army Spc. Lynndie England holding a naked Iraqi man on a leash. "Readers were outraged," reported Sherry Ricchiardi for the *American Journalism Review*, "not at the MP's behavior but at the *Bee*. They used words and phrases like 'sensationalism,' 'Bush-bashing,' and 'pornographic' when they contacted the paper.... A mere 'handful' commended the *Bee* for running the photograph," according to the newspaper's Ombudsman. Ricchiardi, "Missed Signals."

<sup>3</sup> Inhofe added, "You know, they're not there for traffic violations," he said. "If they're in cell block 1A or 1B, these prisoners -- they're murderers, they're terrorists, they're insurgents. Many of them probably have American blood on their hands. And here we're so concerned about the treatment of those individuals."

"G.O.P. Sen.: 'Outraged' at Outrage," AP story (no author),

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/05/11/politics/main616896.shtml>, retrieved 18 August 2004.

### *What happened in Abu Ghraib?*

Following the initial revelations, two important reports came to light: a report prepared by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in February 2004 and another compiled for the U.S. military by General Antonio Taguba at the beginning of the year. Following are some of the ICRC's findings:

- The crimes were not confined to Abu Ghraib, but occurred in more than a dozen “internment facilities” in central and southern Iraq, “indicating a consistent pattern... of brutal behavior during arrest.”
- In making arrests, U.S. troops routinely entered homes “after dark, breaking down doors, waking up residents roughly, yelling orders” and destroying property. The soldiers would tie the hands of the “suspects” behind their backs; “sometimes they arrested all adult males present in a house, including elderly, handicapped or sick people.” This section of the report describes additional forms of physical abuse that routinely accompanied arrests: “pushing people around, insulting, taking aim with rifles, punching and kicking and striking with rifles.” The troops allowed little if any opportunity for “suspects” to retrieve personal items before being bundled away, and “in many cases personal belongings were seized during the arrest, with no receipt being issued.”
- “In almost all instances documented by the ICRC, arresting authorities provided no information about who they were [when making arrests], where their base was located, nor did they explain the cause of arrest. Similarly, they rarely informed the arrestee or his family where he was being taken and for how long, resulting in the de facto ‘disappearance’ of the arrestee for weeks or even months.”
- Among the specific crimes listed by the ICRC: Occupation forces arrested nine men in Basra on 13 September 2003, forcing the men “to kneel, face and hands against the ground, as if in a prayer position. The soldiers stamped on the back of the neck of those raising their head,” and then “confiscated their money without issuing a receipt.” The “suspects” were then taken to a detention center—like Abu Ghraib, it was formerly used by Saddam Hussein’s police—and severely beaten, killing one of the detainees, a 28-year-old father of two. The report has many other such stories to illustrate its conclusions about the breadth of the abuses.

The report listed the numerous sections of the Third and Fourth Geneva Conventions routinely violated by the U.S.-led occupation authorities and added that the ICRC had “regularly brought its concerns to the attention of the CF [Coalition Forces]” since “the beginning of the conflict.”<sup>4</sup> Who was being detained and subjected to this treatment—

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<sup>4</sup> The ICRC report is available at:  
[http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2004/icrc\\_report\\_iraq\\_feb2004.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2004/icrc_report_iraq_feb2004.htm)

terrorists, armed insurgents, common criminals? On the contrary, the ICRC report concludes that “between 70% and 90% of the persons deprived of their liberty in Iraq had been arrested by mistake,” according to Coalition intelligence officers themselves.<sup>5</sup>

The Taguba report documented these findings:

- During the time of Taguba’s investigation (October to December 2003), there were “numerous instances of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses.” Following are some examples taken directly from Taguba’s report:
- Punching, slapping, and kicking detainees; videotaping and photographing naked male and female detainees; forcibly arranging detainees in various sexually explicit positions for photographing; arranging naked male detainees in a pile and then jumping on them; positioning a naked detainee on a box, with a sandbag on his head, and attaching wires to his fingers, toes, and penis to simulate electric torture; placing a dog chain or strap around a naked detainee’s neck and having a female soldier pose with him for a picture; and a male MP guard having sex with a female detainee.
- Breaking chemical lights and pouring the phosphoric liquid on detainees; threatening detainees with a charged 9mm pistol; pouring cold water on naked detainees; beating detainees with a broom handle and a chair; threatening male detainees with rape; allowing a military police guard to stitch the wound of a detainee who was injured after being slammed against the wall in his cell; sodomizing a detainee with a chemical light and perhaps a broom stick; using military working dogs to frighten and intimidate detainees with threats of attack, and, in one instance, actually biting a detainee.<sup>6</sup>

It should go without saying that these instances of abuse constitute torture, which is defined by the 1984 UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment as “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity.” Needless to say, the Iraqi prisoners had no one to turn to: Their families rarely knew of their whereabouts, they had no legal guidance, and even the American medical staff at Abu Ghraib was often likelier to aid the torturers than to protect the victims.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Taguba report is available at: <http://news.findlaw.com/cnn/docs/iraq/tagubarpt.html>

<sup>7</sup> Robert Jay Lifton, M.D. “Doctors and Torture” in *New England Journal of Medicine* (351:5), 29 July 2004; Steven H. Miles, “Abu Ghraib: its legacy for military medicine,” *The Lancet* 364: 9435, 21 August 2004. Miles reported: “The medical system collaborated with designing and implementing psychologically

### *What we have not yet heard: Abuses of women, children*

Torture and sexual abuse of female detainees was largely overlooked in the U.S. press coverage of the prisoner-abuse scandal. In December 2003 a woman prisoner at Abu Ghraib smuggled a note out of the prison alleging that “U.S. guards had been raping women detainees,” and several were now pregnant. Further, “women had been forced to strip naked in front of men,” reported Iraqi lawyer Amal Kadham Swadi.<sup>8</sup> Swadi had earlier visited another U.S. detention center—at al-Kharkh, a former police compound in Baghdad—where she spoke with another woman who said she had been raped. “Several American soldiers had raped her. She had tried to fight them off and they had hurt their arm. She showed me the stitches.” In a *Los Angeles Times* article, Tracy Wilkinson reported: “One woman told her attorney she was forced to disrobe in front of male prison guards. After much coaxing, another woman described how she was raped by U.S. soldiers. Then she fainted” from the duress of recounting her experience.<sup>9</sup> The Taguba report mentioned briefly that a videotape existed of “a male MP guard having sex with a female detainee,” yet few journalists pursued this obvious reference to rape. There are also reports of the sort of acts that U.S. news media have often labeled “humiliation” or “embarrassment” rather than torture, such as Iraqi women being forced at gunpoint by U.S. prison guards to bare their breasts.<sup>10</sup> Who are the female victims—resistance fighters, Hussein-era criminals? U.S. officials have admitted that their troops often detain Iraqi women “in the hope of convincing male relatives to provide information; when U.S. soldiers raid a house and fail to find a male suspect, they will frequently take away his wife or daughter instead,” reported the London *Guardian*.<sup>11</sup>

Amnesty International has expressed its concern over “numerous human rights violations against Iraqi juveniles, including detentions, torture and ill-treatment, and killings,” and an article in the Scottish *Sunday Herald* determined that at least 107 children were still being held several weeks after the onset of the prisoner-abuse scandal.<sup>12</sup> An Iraqi television reporter saw the children’s wing of the prison when he was arrested and held for 74 days while making a documentary. The reporter, Suhaib Badr-Addin al-Baz, said that he saw “boys, under the age of puberty” being held. “There were certainly hundreds of children in this camp.” He recalled the beating by Americans of a 12-year-old girl, and added that he “heard her cries and whimpering daily.” This “caused

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and physically coercive interrogations.... In one example of a compromised medically monitored interrogation, a detainee collapsed and was apparently unconscious after a beating, medical staff revived the detainee and left, and the abuse continued.”

<sup>8</sup> Luke Harding, “The other prisoners,” *The Guardian*, 20 May 2004. Swadi’s efforts to investigate the plight of women in Abu Ghraib were frustrated. When she last tried to visit women at Abu Ghraib, “The U.S. guards refused to let us in. When we complained, they threatened to arrest us.”

<sup>9</sup> Tracy Wilkinson, “A Double Ordeal for Female Prisoners,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 11 May 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Harding, “The other prisoners.”

<sup>11</sup> Harding, “The other prisoners.”

<sup>12</sup> Neil Mackay, “Iraq’s Child Prisoners,” *The Sunday Herald*, 1 August 2004

other prisoners to cry as they listened to her.” Al-Baz also mentioned the case of an “ill 15-year-old boy who was soaked repeatedly with hoses until he collapsed. Guards then brought in the child’s father with a hood over his head. The boy collapsed again.”<sup>13</sup> A German television program, *Report Mainz*, interviewed a U.S. army sergeant named Samuel Provance who described the mistreatment of a skinny 16-year-old boy: “He was terribly afraid. He had the skinniest arms I’ve ever seen. He was trembling all over.... The interrogation specialists poured water over him and put him into a car. Then they drove with him through the night, and at that time it was very, very cold. Then they smeared him with mud and showed him to his father, who was also in custody.... The interrogation specialists told me, after the father had seen his son in this state, his heart broke. He wept and told them everything they wanted to know.”<sup>14</sup> One former prisoner told investigators that he witnessed the rape of a boy aged about 15 in Abu Ghraib.<sup>15</sup> In a speech given in San Francisco in July, Seymour Hersh also asserted that young males were raped by U.S. soldiers: “The boys were sodomized with the cameras rolling, and the worst part is the soundtrack, of the boys shrieking.”<sup>16</sup>

An internal Army investigation released its findings on August 25, 2004, listing several additional examples of the torture and sexual abuse of women and children. The Army report, called the Fay Report after one of the officers responsible for the investigation, disclosed “an alleged rape committed by a U.S. translator and observed by a female soldier, and the alleged sexual assault of a female detainee.”<sup>17</sup> The Fay Report also described the use of “unmuzzled dogs in a sadistic game to frighten detained Iraqi teenagers to force the youths to urinate or defecate on themselves.”<sup>18</sup>

### ***Who was responsible?***

U.S. government officials quickly created their own version of the prisoner-abuse scandal, a story that many political commentators were all too quick to promote: The errors were committed by a group of six or seven poorly educated enlisted personnel, who were not representative of the military or its mission in Iraq. President Bush spoke of

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<sup>13</sup> Mackay, “Iraq’s Child Prisoners.”

<sup>14</sup> Mackay, “Iraq’s Child Prisoners.”

<sup>15</sup> Osha Gray Davidson, “The Secret File of Abu Ghraib,” *Rolling Stone*, 31 July 2004. The witness said that the rape was videotaped by a female soldier. This witness, Kasim Mehaddi Hilas, also reported that he saw another boy sodomized with a phosphoric light, also videotaped by the same soldier. Hilas’s sworn testimony is contained in the nearly 6,000 pages of classified annexes to the Taguba report.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Arthur, “Secret film shows Iraq prisoners sodomised,” *The Independent*, 16 July 2004.

<sup>17</sup> “Latest Report on Abu Ghraib: Abuses of Iraqi Prisoners ‘Are, Without Question, Criminal’,” no author, *The New York Times*, 26 August 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Eric Schmitt, “Abuses at Prison Tied to Officers in Intelligence,” *The New York Times*, 26 August 2004. An unclassified, 177-page version of the Fay Report (also known as the Fay-Jones Report) is available online at: [http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/us\\_law/PDF/abuse/040825fay.pdf](http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/us_law/PDF/abuse/040825fay.pdf).

“a few bad American troops who dishonored our country,” while *New York Times* columnist William Safire ascribed the acts to a “handful” of bad soldiers.<sup>19</sup>

But who *was* responsible for the abuse of the Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib? Even the *Army Times*, not usually a bastion of anti-Pentagon criticism, could not accept the efforts of Bush et al. to exonerate themselves. In an editorial published on its on-line edition May 17, *Army Times* derided the notion heard “around the halls of the Pentagon” that “the six morons who lost the war” were solely to blame, and charged that responsibility “extends all the way up the chain of command to the highest reaches of the military hierarchy and its civilian leadership.”<sup>20</sup>

Seymour Hersh interviewed several current and retired intelligence officials in his efforts to trace responsibility for the crimes. Hersh reported that Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller, who had been the commander of the military prison at Guantánamo, was sent to Iraq in August 2003 to make recommendations on interrogation procedures there. “In a report marked secret, Miller recommended that military police at the prison [Abu Ghraib] be ‘actively engaged in setting the conditions for successful exploitation of the internees.’”<sup>21</sup> Miller briefed U.S. commanders in Iraq on the methods used at Guantánamo, such as sleep deprivation, stress positions for agonizing lengths of time, and exposure to extremes of hot and cold. A former intelligence official said that the aim of Miller’s recommendations was abundantly clear: “It means treat the detainees like shit until they will sell their mother for a blanket, some food without bugs in it and some sleep.”<sup>22</sup> Hersh reported that Donald Rumsfeld and Stephen Cambone, the Under-Secretary for Intelligence, went even further than Miller’s proposals, importing into Iraq a “special-access program” employed in Afghanistan that expanded the range of techniques to include physical abuse and sexual humiliation. “The roots of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal lie not in the criminal inclinations of a few Army reservists,” Hersh concluded, “but in a decision approved by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld” to expand an operation into Iraq that “encouraged physical coercion and sexual humiliation” in order to “generate more intelligence about the growing insurgency in Iraq.”<sup>23</sup>

According to the *New York Times*, the August 2004 Fay Report ascribes blame for the abuses to a “combination of factors, including a small group of ‘morally corrupt’ soldiers and civilian contractors, poor leadership by commanding officers and a failure by military headquarters in Baghdad to recognize the looming disaster.”<sup>24</sup> The *Washington*

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<sup>19</sup> William Safire, “The Cruellest Month,” *The New York Times*, 3 May 2004.

<sup>20</sup> “Editorial: A failure of leadership at the highest levels,” *Armytimes.com*, 17 May 2004. URL: <http://www.armytimes.com/story.php?f=1-292925-2903288.php>, retrieved 30 August 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Hersh, “The Gray Zone,” *The New Yorker*, 24 May 2004. Hersh has published a more thorough account of his findings in his book, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (New York: HarperCollins), released in September 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Davidson, “The Secret File of Abu Ghraib.”

<sup>23</sup> Seymour M. Hersh, “The Gray Zone,” *The New Yorker*, 24 May 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Schmitt, “Abuses at Prison Tied to Officers in Intelligence.”

*Post* has provided a closer analysis of the report, noting the disjunction between the “headlines proclaim[ing] that no official policy” was responsible and the “clear and meticulous account,” buried in the hundreds of pages of detail, “of how decisions made by President Bush” and his top civilian and military aides and commanders “led directly to those searing images of naked prisoners being menaced with guard dogs.”<sup>25</sup> According to the *Post*, the Fay Report links the Abu Ghraib torture to the institutionalized abuses at Guantánamo and to President Bush’s infamous February 2002 order that unilaterally declared that the United States would disregard the Geneva Conventions when dealing with suspected members of Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

### ***Was Abu Ghraib an aberration?***

The evidence is overwhelming that the mistreatment and torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib was systematic and was sanctioned by high-ranking military and civilian authorities. But is it nevertheless possible that it was an exception to the broader norms of the U.S. occupation? Or has there been a pattern of abuse that extends beyond the walls of Hussein’s old prison, and even beyond the walls of the other U.S.-run detention centers?

While it required sensational photographs to focus public scrutiny on Abu Ghraib, there had been credible reports detailing abuse and torture at several U.S.-run detention centers in Iraq since the beginning of the invasion in March 2003. “Detailed allegations of psychological abuse, deprivation, beatings and deaths at U.S.-run prisons in Iraq were met by public silence from the U.S. Army last October,” noted Pulitzer-winning reporter Charles J. Hanley in May, “six months before shocking photographs stirred world outrage and demands for action.... These early accounts by freed prisoners, reported by the Associated Press last fall, told of detainees punished by hours lying bound in the sun; being attacked by dogs; being deprived of sufficient water; spending days with hoods over their heads. One told the AP of seeing an elderly Iraqi woman tied up and lying in the dust; others told of ill men dying in crowded tents.”<sup>26</sup> Hanley recounted some examples of torture inflicted in two other U.S.-run detention centers, Camp Bucca and Camp Cropper, as well as at Abu Ghraib:

Last summer, when temperatures topped 120, guards struck one man at Camp Cropper with an "electric stick" because he was slow carrying water, and then "tied his hands and put him in the sun for three hours," said Ziad Tarik, 24. This punishment in "The Garden" also was recounted by others: being made to lie bound in the sun for hours on a patch of sand enclosed by razor-wire, even for such lesser infractions as shouting to the next tent or stealing food. They also told of beatings by guards — for example, of an Abu Ghraib

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<sup>25</sup> Jackson Diehl, “How Torture Came Down From the Top,” *The Washington Post*, 27 August 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Charles J. Hanley, “Early accounts of Iraqi prisoner abuse ignored,” *The Associated Press* 8 May 2004.

prisoner who refused to eat. "He was stubborn, so they hit him, and he spent three days in the hospital," Tarik said. "They used to hit people and turn dogs loose on them," said Saad, 36, the third Naif brother, who spent 2-½ months in Abu Ghraib. "They used to humble people by putting nylon bags over their heads, for three days, with their hands tied up. I know one who died because he couldn't breathe."<sup>27</sup>

### ***"Strange liberators"***

The U.S. occupation has victimized many thousands of Iraqis in addition to those subject to arbitrary arrest and confinement. Amnesty International released a report in March 2004 detailing a range of human-rights abuses by the occupation forces, including random killings, beatings and arrests of non-combatants, and robbery. The report includes some episodes that were reported and then quickly forgotten in the U.S. press, such as the killing of "scores of Iraqi demonstrators in several incidents," including seven in Mosul on April 15, 2003 and at least fifteen in Fallujah two weeks later.<sup>28</sup> Amnesty International uncovered other appalling crimes against the Iraqi populace: "On May 14, two US armed vehicles broke the perimeter wall of the home of Sa'adi Suleiman Ibrahim al-'Ubaydi in Ramadi. Soldiers beat him with rifle butts and then shot him dead as he tried to flee." A twelve-year-old child was shot by U.S. forces while carrying bedding to the roof of his home, and died after American soldiers prevented his neighbors from transporting him to the hospital. As the AI report noted, the perpetrators of these crimes have little to worry about, as L. Paul Bremer, while administrator of Iraq, declared an order granting immunity from criminal prosecution for all U.S. citizens in Iraq—an order still in effect after the July 28, 2004 "handover of power," along with his dozens of other orders restructuring the economy and politics of Iraq to benefit foreign interests.<sup>29</sup>

"They must see Americans as strange liberators," Martin Luther King, Jr. said of the Vietnamese people in 1967. The latest stage in America's *mission civilisatrice* is no less strange for its supposed beneficiaries. A Dutch photographer told *Le Monde* that he had witnessed several shootings of civilians at U.S.-run checkpoints: "With my own eyes I saw fifteen civilians killed in two days," including a "grandfather [who] was walking slowly with a cane on a sidewalk."<sup>30</sup> "What they (the people of the United States) need to know," said Staff Sgt. Jimmy Massey after returning home from his tour of duty, "is that we killed a lot of innocent people.... The occupation hurt the Iraqis. And I didn't see any

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<sup>27</sup> Hanley, "Early accounts of Iraqi prisoner abuse ignored."

<sup>28</sup> Amnesty International, "Iraq: One year on the human rights situation remains dire," 18 March 2004. Available on-line at: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE140062004>.

<sup>29</sup> For Bremer's "100 Orders" and their retention by the Allawi regime, as well as other aspects of the continuation of U.S. control of Iraq after July 28, see Antonia Juhasz, "The Hand-Over that Wasn't: How the Occupation of Iraq Continues," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, July 2004. Available on-line at: <http://www.fpif.org/papers/0407iraqtransf.html>; also Yochi J. Dreazen and Christopher Cooper, "Behind the Scenes, US Tightens Grip on Iraq's Future," *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 May 2004.

<sup>30</sup> *Le Monde* 16 April 2003 (diplomatie??) by Michel Guerrin "Embedded Photographer: 'I Saw Marines Kill Civilians'" Translated for counterpunch by Norman Madarasz

humanitarian support.” Massey told the *Sacramento Bee* that he was involved in five checkpoint shootings, all of which, as it turned out, targeted unarmed Iraqis. In one of the shootings, a driver failed to stop as he approached the checkpoint, “with us being trigger happy, we didn’t really give this guy much of a chance. We lit him up pretty good. Then we inspected the back of the van. We found nothing.” On another occasion, “we lit up a rally”—a political demonstration in Baghdad—“after we heard a stray gunshot.... They were young and they had no weapons.” The U.S. troops shot at least a half a dozen “kids,” according to Massey, all of whom were “taken out,” except one boy who managed to hobble off with “half his foot trailing behind him.” Massey asserted that the order to shoot the demonstrators “came from senior government officials, including intelligence communities within the military and the U.S. government.”<sup>31</sup>

These ghastly incidents illustrate the fatal combination of a number of factors: the nervousness of U.S. troops, untrained for police duty, who often respond to distant explosions or gunfire with massive firepower (the Americans have been criticized as “trigger-happy” by British officers serving in Iraq); the ignorance of the region and of local customs on the part of the U.S. troops and their commanders (in some cases, an extreme ignorance: some of the Abu Ghraib torturers actually thought their prisoners were responsible for September 11); a growing mutual hostility between the occupying troops and the occupied people, sometimes fueled by anti-Arab racism; and an official policy that will sacrifice large numbers of Iraqis in order to prevent harm to the occupying troops.<sup>32</sup> The U.S. assault on Fallujah of April 2004 demonstrates several of these factors, especially the last. At the end of March, four U.S. citizens working for a private military company were killed by Iraqis in Fallujah. Over the next several days, U.S. officials announced to the world that they would soon launch a major offensive on the city. “When the United States began the siege of Fallujah” on April 5, reported Rahul Mahajan from the besieged city, “it targeted civilians in several ways. The power station was bombed; perhaps even more important, the bridge across the Euphrates was closed,” cutting off most of the city’s population from its main hospital. After one week, local

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<sup>31</sup> “Atrocities in Iraq: ‘I Killed innocent people for our government,’” by Paul Rockwell *Sacramento Bee* 16 May 2004

<sup>32</sup> Some un-embedded journalists have eschewed the standard, highly simplified portrayals of the heroic U.S. serviceperson, instead providing honest descriptions that capture the prevalence of racism among the troops. “‘I say we just—nuke this place and make it into a parking lot,’ seethed Lance Cpl. Ryan Eman, 22, of Michigan,” quoted in the *New York Newsday* in the first month of the war. The *Newsday* article continued, “‘It’s like you’re fighting a faceless enemy,’ said Cpl. Jeb Moser, 21, of Ruston, La. ‘They’re all just ragheads to me, the same way they used to call the enemy ‘gooks’ in Vietnam.’.... ‘Raghead, raghead, can’t you see? This old war ain’t \_\_\_ to me,’ sang Lance Cpl. Christopher Akins, 21, of Louisville, Ky., sweat running down his face in rivulets as he dug a fighting trench one recent afternoon under a blazing sun. Asked whom he considered a raghead, Akins said: ‘Anybody who actively opposes the United States of America’s way... If a little kid actively opposes my way of life, I’d call him a raghead, too.’” Letta Taylor, “Cultural Gulf Separates Forces, Iraqis,” *Newsday*, 7 April 2003. “The Iraqis are sick people and we are the chemotherapy,” said Corporal Ryan Dupre. “I am starting to hate this country. Wait till I get hold of a friggin’ Iraqi. No, I won’t get hold of one. I’ll just kill him.” Mark Franchetti, “US Marines turn fire on civilians at the bridge of death,” *The Times* (London), 30 March 2003.

medical authorities reported that more than 600 bodies had been counted at area emergency facilities, “but it is widely believed that a significant number of victims were buried without ever receiving care at a clinic or hospital. Locals say two entire football fields have been converted into cemeteries and mass funerals have been conducted during brief, local lulls in the fighting.... Additionally, Fallujah residents say Marines are opening fire randomly on unarmed civilians and have attacked clearly marked ambulances.”<sup>33</sup>

In another horrifying massacre that failed to generate the sort of press coverage dedicated to the killing of the four U.S. mercenaries in Fallujah, U.S. fighter planes attacked a wedding party in the western Iraqi town of Ramadi on May 19, killing at least forty-two people. “We went out of the house and the American soldiers starting to shoot us,” recalled survivor Haleema Shihab. “They were shooting low on the ground and targeting us one by one.” Shells exploded around them as they ran across a field, Shihab continued, killing her two boys. “I fell into the mud and an American soldier came and kicked me. I pretended to be dead so he wouldn’t kill me.”<sup>34</sup>

Shihab’s two children joined the ever-growing list of Iraqis who have died as a consequence of the U.S. war and occupation. In addition to the 1,100 U.S. service members whose deaths have been reported, tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians have been killed since March 2003—not to mention the many thousands of Hussein’s unfortunate conscripts who were killed in the early weeks of the war.<sup>35</sup>

### ***“After 9/11 the gloves came off”***

The Abu Ghraib abuses were consistent not only with U.S. practices throughout Iraq but with its practices in other parts of the world under the rubric of the “War on Terror.” “In the past three years,” reported the British *Observer*, “thousands of alleged militants have been transferred around the world by American, Arab and Far Eastern security services, often in secret operations that by-pass extradition laws.” Suspects are often “sent from the West to countries where they can be tortured to extract information.” According to the *Observer*, as many as three thousand people have been held without trial in a vast network of detention facilities around the world, “which range from massive prison camps such as that at Guantánamo Bay to naval vessels in the Indian Ocean.” Asked about this vast network and its extra-legal practices, one U.S. official,

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<sup>33</sup> Dahr Jamail, “No End in Sight as Fallujah Death Toll Approaches 700,” *The New Standard*, 13 April 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Rory McCarthy, “U.S. soldiers started to shoot us, one by one,” *The Guardian*, 21 May 2004.

<sup>35</sup> A group called Iraq Body Count maintains a tally of Iraqi civilian deaths: <http://www.iraqbodycount.net> An Iraqi political group called the People’s Kifah (Struggle for Hegemony) released what it called a “detailed study” of civilian deaths at the end of July 2004, which estimated that 37,000 civilians have been killed. In October 2004 *The Lancet*, the esteemed medical journal, published a study conducted by researchers from Johns Hopkins University that concludes that as many as 100,000 Iraqi civilians may have died due to the U.S. invasion and war. The report is available on-line at: [http://www.thelancet.com/journal/vol364/iss9445/early\\_online\\_publication](http://www.thelancet.com/journal/vol364/iss9445/early_online_publication).

perhaps unaware of the provenance of his phrase, said, “You have to break eggs to make omelettes.” Another retorted, “There was a before 9/11 and an after 9/11. After 9/11, the gloves came off.”<sup>36</sup>

Further, Abu Ghraib cannot be separated from the widespread mistreatment of the ever-growing prison population within the United States. “We certainly see many of the same kinds of things here in the United States, including sexual assaults and the abuse of prisoners, against both men and women” said Kara Gotsch of the ACLU.<sup>37</sup> Nationwide during the last twenty-five years “over forty state prison systems were under some form of court order, for brutality, crowding, poor food or lack of medical care,” according to the director of the Sentencing Project, a research and advocacy group.<sup>38</sup> And the link between abuses at home and abroad is sometimes more direct: Two of the American MPs allegedly involved in the torture of Iraqis, Charles Graner and Ivan Frederick, previously worked as prison guards in the United States. Guards at the Pennsylvania prison where Graner worked routinely beat and humiliated prisoners, according to reports that came to light during a scandal while he was working there. Lane McCotter resigned under pressure from his position as director of the Utah Department of Corrections in 1997 after a schizophrenic inmate died while strapped naked to a restraining chair for sixteen hours. This scandal did not prevent McCotter, who then became an executive of a private prison company, from being selected by Attorney General John Ashcroft to a team sent to “rebuild” Iraq’s criminal justice system; McCotter helped reopen Abu Ghraib in 2003.<sup>39</sup>

### *Conclusions*

Anyone who has a superficial knowledge of the realities of warfare understands its dehumanizing and morally corruptive influence, and would be sadly unsurprised by the news from Abu Ghraib.<sup>40</sup> Contrary to what we are so often told, Americans and American society are not superior to other peoples and countries: U.S. citizens share the traits, both negative and positive, of other members of the species, and hopefully one day more Americans will consider themselves part of a larger human race. Given license to abuse and degrade their prisoners, many U.S. soldiers developed imaginative means to debase their victims—as well as themselves—as their videotapes so disturbingly

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<sup>36</sup> Jason Burke, “The secret world of US jails,” *The Observer*, 13 June 2004. The phrase “you can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs” probably originated in an apology by *New York Times* reporter Walter Duranty for Stalin’s forced collectivization and the consequent Ukrainian famine of 1932-33.

<sup>37</sup> Alan Esner, “Abuse Common in U.S. Prisons, Activists Say,” *Reuters*, 6 May 2004.

<sup>38</sup> Butterfield, “Mistreatment of Prisoners is called Routine in U.S.”

<sup>39</sup> Fox Butterfield, “Mistreatment of Prisoners is called Routine in U.S.,” *The New York Times*, 8 May 2004.

<sup>40</sup> The renowned journalist Chris Hedges explores these themes in his excellent 2003 book *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. Hedges said in an interview that the goal of his book was to analyze the “disease” of war “and how that disease in wartime infects and destroys individuals and societies.”

illustrate.<sup>41</sup> The British *Guardian* newspaper reported that “an Iraqi woman in her 70s had been harnessed and ridden like a donkey at Abu Ghraib and another coalition detention center after being arrested last July.”<sup>42</sup> Charles Graner and Lynddie England apparently celebrated England’s 21<sup>st</sup> birthday last November 8 by indulging in a long night of torturing their handcuffed victims. For their amusement the Americans delivered vicious beatings, arranged prisoners in what England termed a “dog pile,” and stripped and forced and forced prisoners into sexual positions and acts, compounding the humiliation through photographing these acts; meanwhile Graner, England, and several other Americans laughed and cracked jokes. This night of fun for the U.S. soldiers was, for victim Nori Al-Yasseri, a “night which we felt like 1,000 nights.”<sup>43</sup>

There is no doubt that the soldiers who indulged in this depraved conduct are criminals and should be treated accordingly. But as we have seen, their conduct was, in a fundamental sense, encouraged and sanctioned by the standards established by their superiors, whether or not they were always acting under direct orders. The war and occupation could hardly have failed to take this shape given their origins: U.S. policy makers seized upon September 11 as an “opportunity... to remake the world,” to quote Condoleezza Rice, and manufactured novel and dangerous doctrines such as “preemptive war” while threatening the world with the bellicose declaration that “you’re either for us or against us” in an endless “war on terror”; U.S. officials, including the president and the secretary of state, brazenly misled the world through a calculated campaign of innuendo and outright falsehoods; when the U.S. failed to cajole or entice more than a few countries to join its crusade, it attacked Iraq anyway in violation of international law and in defiance of the UN and world opinion.<sup>44</sup>

But finally, torture at Abu Ghraib was not simply a product of the Bush Administration’s post-9/11 foreign policy. Successive U.S. administrations have subjected the people of Iraq to fourteen years of unremitting warfare, beginning with the imposition of sanctions in 1990 and greatly exacerbated by the brutal 1991 war that killed 200,000 Iraqis. But the most deadly phase of this long aggression was the maintenance of the sanctions between the 1991 and 2003 wars, when more than one million Iraqis—of a population of 23 million—died as the result of a policy that forbade them the means to

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<sup>41</sup> The systematic use of sexual abuse and humiliation probably resulted from a conscious policy of higher-ranking officials. A U.S. government consultant told Hersch that the abuse and the photos had the aim of coercing the prisoners, who “would do anything—including spying on their associates—to avoid dissemination of the shameful photos to family and friends. The government consultant said, ‘I was told the purpose of the photographs was to create an army of informants, people you could insert back in the population.’ The idea was that they would be motivated by fear of exposure, and gather information about pending insurgency action, the consultant said.” Hersch, “The Gray Zone.”

<sup>42</sup> Luke Harding, “The other prisoners,” *The Guardian* 20 May 2004. This incident was investigated by a British Labour Party MP, who found it to be true; the elderly Iraqi had been held for six weeks without charge.

<sup>43</sup> Davidson, “The Secret File of Abu Ghraib.”

<sup>44</sup> Nicholas Lehmann, “The Next World Order,” *The New Yorker*, 1 April 2002, for Rice’s comments on September 11 as an “opportunity.”

purify their drinking water and medicines and pain-killers that could not conceivably have served a military purpose.<sup>45</sup> That only a few voices outside Iraq's region were raised in protest during this terrible time speaks volumes about Western moral standards.

Fortunately for the architects of the crimes discussed here, the U.S. administration is unaccountable to international law and has little to fear from the UN or the International Court of Justice. But unfortunately for the U.S. government, the images filmed by the Abu Ghraib torturers were quickly transmitted around the world, they have not disappeared as they have in the United States, and in most countries people understand the horrifying photographs in the broader context described here.

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<sup>45</sup> For an incisive look into the sanctions and their effects, see Joy Harper, "Cool War: Economic sanctions as a weapon of mass destruction," *Harper's Magazine*, November 2002. See also UNICEF and Ministry of Health of Iraq, "Child and Maternal Mortality Survey 1999 Preliminary Report" (July 1999) and UNICEF, "Questions and Answers" (16 August 1999); also "Iraq Sanctions: Humanitarian Implications and Options for the Future" (6 August 2002), a very useful and comprehensive report compiled by British human-rights organizations and available on-line at: <http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/sanction/iraq1/2002/paper.htm#note119>