

The Horror of Abu Ghraib

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QUOT-Abu Ghraib prison was used for torture in Saddam's time. People will ask now: 'What's the difference between Saddam and Bush?' Nothing!" So declared Saudi commentator Dawud al-Shiryani on the English-language website of Al Jazeera, a sign of how the now-infamous photographs of Iraqi prisoners being tortured and sexually humiliated by American soldiers are reverberating in the Arab world. The appalling images--seven naked Iraqis piled on top of one another as two grinning GIs look on; a kneeling detainee posing as if he is performing oral sex on another naked, hooded male inmate; the battered body of a dead prisoner packed in ice--have led to criminal charges against six US soldiers and administrative penalties for seven officers.

But the abuses are an indictment of more than just a "handful of people" who strayed from protocol, as Air Force Gen. Richard Myers tried to suggest on *Face the Nation*. As Seymour Hersh observes in the May 10

New Yorker

, the sadistic behavior detailed in Maj. Gen. Antonio Taguba's fifty-three-page classified report, including the sodomizing of a detainee with a chemical light, offers "an unsparing study of collective wrongdoing and the failure of Army leadership at the highest levels." Those implicated, among them employees of a private military contractor who apparently had no training in the handling of prisoners, claim they were following orders from their superiors, who urged that prisoners be "softened up" in order to extract information.

Ultimate responsibility lies in Washington. Despite George W. Bush's expression of "disgust"--"that's not the way we do things," he insisted--there is reason to believe abusive interrogation methods have become an integral part of the Administration's "war on terrorism." It was two years ago that the *Washington Post* detailed a pattern of mistreatment at overseas CIA interrogation centers like the Bagram airbase in Afghanistan, where three detainees died; US military doctors termed it "homicide." Amnesty International has received scores of reports over the past year of detainees in Iraq "being routinely subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment." The US Army is conducting investigations into thirty cases of misconduct in both

countries, at least ten of which involve suspicious deaths. Amnesty and Human Rights Watch are calling for a public investigation into allegations of torture by coalition forces, a demand that some in Congress have echoed. Representative Jan Schakowsky, meanwhile, has called on Bush to suspend all contracts with private firms for "security, supervision and interrogation of prisoners." It is hardly reassuring that the man charged with overseeing reforms in interrogation practices at US-run prisons in Iraq, Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller, was imported from Guantanamo Bay, the site of numerous human rights abuses and violations of international law.

Given that the war in Iraq is, in part, a war of images, the Abu Ghraib scandal represents a profound and perhaps irreversible defeat for the United States. Can any Iraqi now be expected to believe US intentions are good? A more insulting, inflammatory message to the world's Muslims and Arabs--and a more effective recruiting tool for groups like Al Qaeda--can scarcely be imagined. "The release of these pictures may be the point at which the United States lost Iraq," Juan Cole, a Middle East specialist at the University of Michigan, observed in the *Washington Post*

. With this in mind, we offer a forum on page 11 on how the United States can extricate itself from Iraq as responsibly and expeditiously as possible--both for its own sake and that of the Iraqi people.