

OP ED Essay
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TITLE: The "Trophy Photos": Abu Ghraib's Horrors and Worse

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It is obvious why the Bush administration and the Pentagon's staff are vigorously challenging the legal pressures by the ACLU to release more of the photos of torture and abuse of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib Prison. Once you have seen them all, as I have in the course of gaining background for my role as expert advisor in one of the court martial trials of the guilty guards, you realize why they want to suppress them. Many of the hundreds of images are worse than those originally leaked to CBS' **60 Minutes 11** program on its April 2004 exposé. There are bloodied prisoners; close ups of decaying prisoners; soldiers engaging in sexual intercourse and oral sex with other reservists; imprisoned Iraqi prostitutes with bared breasts; dead Iraqis with their heads or bodies blown apart, images of "detainees" engaging in forced masturbation and simulating fellatio on each other.

These photos are testimony to the total breakdown of military discipline and failure of Command accountability. A lack of responsible leadership enabled such deeds to continue for months. Most of the abuses were widely known by many other soldiers in the prison, and even by some nurses and medics, who were all guilty of the 'evil of inaction.' They are also an indictment of the Bush doctrine that negated the principles of the Geneva Convention in its obsession with the war on terrorism. As was apparent in the recent **PBS Frontline** program, "A Question of Torture" (10.18.2005), much of what the few allegedly "bad apples" did on that night shift evolved directly from Defense Secretary Rumsfeld's inducements to "take the gloves off" and get tough with these possible insurgent captives. The specific guidelines he set forth for interrogating "enemy noncombatants" at Cuba's Gitmo prison were transported to Abu Ghraib at his insistence and through his direct pressure on General Sanchez, who in turn proclaimed a similar set of extreme coercive interrogation tactics. Together they created their own Little Shop of Horrors in Saddam Hussein's former torture and execution center—Iraq's Auschwitz.

The "culture of abuse" that exists in many overseas United States military prisons permeated Abu Ghraib's hard site, Tier 1-A. It is evident from reading many of the independent investigations of the causes of these abuses that being immersed in a very bad barrel corrupted some good American soldiers.

The "bad apple" rap focuses attention on the sadistic dispositions of the few soldiers at the bottom of the barrel, and of course directs attention away from the powerful situational forces operating on them, while absolving the bad System that created the bad Situation that continues to make good cops and soldiers do bad deeds.

(My forthcoming book, "The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil" analyzes in detail the specific situational and systemic forces at work in the behavioral context at Abu Ghraib. Random House, Fall 2006.)

The puzzle of the "trophy photos"

But the guilt of these few soldiers was broadcast loud and clear when they put themselves into their digital camera photographs while they were abusing Iraqi prisoners. What were they thinking? Abuses have been traditional in combat zones in all wars by most nations, but not before with abusers giving personally autographed portrayals of their guilt in action.

Many of the trophy photos reveal soldiers smiling in the act of abusing their captives. Is there any precedent in our nation for such trophy photos? Indeed, recall from another era, media images of big game hunters and sports fisherman standing beside their prey. The classic image is of President Teddy Roosevelt proudly holding his rifle next to the huge elephant that he killed. Trophy photos are exemplars of power and mastery, of how mighty beasts can be overpowered by skill and technology. The same is true of the Abu Ghraib trophy photos; they represent domination over the lowly prisoners by Army reservists who had the least status of any military personnel and lived in constant fear of mortar attacks by Iraqi insurgents and prisoner riots.

Yet have we ever seen young American men and women smiling at the torment of others? Yes, indeed if we look at the many postcard photos of lynchings and burnings of black Americans that took place over many decades, which include children watching these horrors along with their parents.

It now appears that the Abu Ghraib Nine guilty soldiers are not alone in their digital frenzy of documenting their abusive behavior. British soldiers also photographed sexual humiliation of their Iraqi captives engaged in forced simulated sodomy. An American officer and several sergeants in the Army's elite 82nd Airborne Division have testified to Human Rights Watch that they severely abused Iraqi prisoners for information and for 'amusement.' Many of their physical abuses were much more severe than any heaped on the Abu Ghraib prisoners. These violent abuses occurred before and continued after the Tier 1-A scandal erupted. But these soldiers were savvy enough to destroy the many photographs documenting their dirty deeds. They did not want to be found digitally culpable, as were the mindless Abu Ghraib MP's.

Finally, gory trophy photos can be found on a new amateur porn web site, which invites soldiers to exchange such images for free access to pornography. So for instance we see a group of uniformed American soldiers smilingly giving high fives in front of the charred body of a dead Iraqi man. Its title: "Burn Baby Burn."