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## **How Abu Ghraib Was Politically Defused, Part 1**

**by James Bovard**

It is now more than four and a half years since Americans first saw the photos depicting the brutalizing of detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. At that time, some commentators thought that the photos would be a political disaster for the Bush administration, perhaps even imperiling the president's reelection. However, the Bush administration managed to exploit patriotism, blind trust, and reflexive servility to defuse the crisis.

It is important to understand how the Bush administration managed to blunt the torture scandal, since it is likely that other presidents will use similar tactics to whitewash other atrocities in the future.

On April 28, 2004, CBS broadcast photos of graphic abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, showing bloodied prisoners, forced simulation of masturbation and oral sex, the stacking of naked prisoners with bags over their heads, mock electrocution by a wire connected to a man's genitals, guard dogs on the verge of ripping into naked men, and grinning U.S. male and female soldiers celebrating the degradation. Three days later, the *New Yorker*, in an exposé by Seymour Hersh, published extracts from a March 2004 report by Maj. Gen. Antonio Taguba that catalogued U.S. abuses at Abu Ghraib prison, including

breaking chemical lights and pouring the phosphoric liquid on detainees; pouring cold water on naked detainees; beating detainees with a broom handle and a chair; threatening male detainees with rape ... sodomizing a detainee with a chemical light and perhaps a broom stick, and using military working dogs to frighten and intimidate detainees with threats of attack, and in one instance actually biting a detainee.

On the day after Hersh's article was posted on the Internet, Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, admitted in a television interview that he had not yet bothered to read the Taguba report.

## **Minimizing the damage**

The Bush administration quickly portrayed the leaked photos as aberrations resulting from a handful of deviant National Guard members. However, a government consultant informed Hersh that the Abu Ghraib photos were specifically intended to be used to blackmail the prisoners abused, “to create an army of informants, people you could insert back in the population.” Hersh noted that “the notion that Arabs are particularly vulnerable to sexual humiliation became a talking point among pro-war Washington conservatives in the months before the March, 2003, invasion of Iraq.”

The Abu Ghraib photos were only the tip of the iceberg. Far more incriminating photos and videos of abuses existed, which Pentagon officials revealed in a slide show for members of Congress. However, the Bush administration slapped a national security classification on almost all the photos and videos not already acquired by the media. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told Congress that the undisclosed material showed “acts that can only be described as blatantly sadistic, cruel, and inhuman.” Highlights included “American soldiers beating one prisoner almost to death, apparently raping a female prisoner, acting inappropriately with a dead body, and taping Iraqi guards raping young boys,” according to *NBC News*. Suppressing those videos and photos enabled the Bush administration to persuade many people that the scandal was actually far narrower than the facts would later show.

On May 5, 2004, Bush granted an interview with Alhurra Television, an Arabic-language network owned and controlled by the U.S. government. He stressed,

We have nothing to hide. We believe in transparency, because we're a free society. That's what free societies do. They — if there's a problem, they address those problems in a forthright, upfront manner. And that's what's taking place.

A minute later, he announced what the results of the investigation would be: “We’re finding the few [U.S. troops] that wanted to try to stop progress toward freedom and democracy.” Three days later, in his weekly radio address, Bush assured Americans that the abuses had been committed by “a small number of American servicemen and women.”

On May 7, Rumsfeld informed the House and Senate Armed Services Committees that he was taking “full responsibility” for “the terrible activities that occurred at Abu Ghraib” and was personally appointing a commission to investigate the problem. He urged members of Congress to recognize the real victims: “If you could have seen the anguished expressions on the faces of those of us in the Department upon seeing the photos, you would know how we feel today.” Rumsfeld complained that “people [in Iraq] are running around with digital cameras and taking these unbelievable photographs and then passing them off, against the law, to the media, to our

surprise, when they had not even arrived in the Pentagon.” Rumsfeld, like Bush, stressed the idealistic upside:

Judge us by our actions. Watch how Americans, watch how democracy deals with wrongdoing and scandal and the pain of acknowledging and correcting our own mistakes and, indeed, our own weaknesses.

### **The Taguba report**

In reality, Rumsfeld was already deeply involved in putting a lid on the scandal. Seymour Hersh revealed last year in the *New Yorker* that Taguba was vindictively forced into retirement by the Pentagon because of his courageous report. Taguba said Rumsfeld deceived Congress in May 2004 when he portrayed himself as a blindsided victim of a leak when testifying shortly after the Taguba report and the Abu Ghraib photos were posted online. Rumsfeld claimed to have not seen Taguba’s report when they met the day before he first testified, even though Taguba had submitted more than a dozen copies to the Pentagon and elsewhere in the military command structure. Doug Feith, who set policy for detainees in Iraq, emailed a message around the Pentagon prohibiting officials from reading the Taguba report. Feith also warned that Pentagon officials should not discuss the report with anyone, even family members. One Pentagon consultant declared that the Bush team’s “basic strategy was ‘prosecute the kids in the photographs but protect the big picture.’” Suppressing the worst evidence was key. Taguba told Hersh that he had seen “a video of a male American soldier in uniform sodomizing a female detainee.” That could not have been spun away as mere college fraternity hazing.

Taguba had been ordered to focus only on the actions of the military police at Abu Ghraib. He could not examine the responsibility of senior officers or the Pentagon for the atrocities he found. Col. Tom Pappas, the commander of the battalion that carried out the abuses photographed at Abu Ghraib, “was granted immunity in return for his testimony against a dog handler,” as author Andrew Cockburn derisively noted.

### **Attacking the critics**

On May 15, 2004, Pentagon Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Lawrence Di Rita revealed that newspaper editorial writers were as abominable as the soldiers who rampaged at Abu Ghraib. Di Rita declared that the *Washington Post’s* criticisms of Bush administration detainee policies put its editorial page “in the same company as those involved in this despicable behavior in terms of apparent disregard for basic human dignity.”

The Republican Party quickly exploited Abu Ghraib to portray Democrats as anti-American and unpatriotic. The Republican National Committee chairman, Ed Gillespie, accused

Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) of exploiting the scandal as a fundraising method and declared that Democrats

do not see the reprehensible images from Abu Ghraib Prison as the isolated, aberrant acts of a few soldiers who should be brought to justice.... These hasty calls for [Rumsfeld's] resignation reflect a cynical political ploy, or an inaccurate and sadly unfortunate view of the honor of our Armed Forces.

Yet Kerry specifically commented that the prisoner scandal did not reflect “the behavior of 99.9 percent of our troops.” That did not dissuade the Bush-Cheney campaign chairman, Marc Racicot, from denouncing Kerry for having suggested that all U.S. troops in Iraq are “somehow universally responsible” for the Abu Ghraib abuses. Many Republicans and much of the conservative media convinced themselves that the torture scandal was a fabrication of the liberal media and of the “hate America” crowd. At a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing on May 10, 2004, Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.) fumed, “I’m probably not the only one up at this table that is more outraged by the outrage than we are by the treatment” the Abu Ghraib prisoners received.

On May 25, the Bush administration responded to the growing PR debacle by bringing seven Iraqis whose hands had been chopped off at Abu Ghraib during the Saddam era to the White House for a meeting and photo session with President Bush. (The men received new mechanical hands, thanks to private donors in Texas.) The White House subsequently touted the “get-together” as the “President’s Meeting With Tortured Iraqis.”

The Bush administration distracted public attention from the Abu Ghraib scandal with a new terror alert. On May 26, Attorney General John Ashcroft announced,

Credible intelligence from multiple sources indicates that Al Qaeda plans to attempt an attack on the United States in the next few months. This disturbing intelligence indicates Al Qaeda’s specific intention to hit the United States hard.... [An] Al Qaeda spokesman announced that 90 percent of the arrangements for an attack in the United States were complete.

He assured one and all that the attack plans had been “corroborated on a variety of levels.” But Homeland Security officials told the media that “there was no new information about attacks in the U.S., and ... no change in the government’s color-coded ‘threat level.’”

The Ashcroft warning quickly became a laughingstock — at least to people who followed the news. *NBC News* reported on May 28 that Ashcroft’s primary al-Qaeda source was “a largely discredited group, Abu Hafs al-Masri Brigades, known for putting propaganda on the Internet” that had falsely “claimed responsibility for the power blackout in the Northeast last year, a power outage in London, and the Madrid bombings.” One former White House terrorism expert

commented, “The only thing they haven’t claimed credit for recently is the cicada invasion of Washington.” The group’s warning consisted of one message emailed two months earlier to a London newspaper. *Newsweek* reported that the White House

played a role in the decision to go public with the warning.... Instead of the images of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, the White House would prefer that voters see the faces of terrorists who aim to kill them.

*James Bovard is the author of [Attention Deficit Democracy](#) [2006] as well as [The Bush Betrayal](#) [2004], [Lost Rights](#) [1994] and [Terrorism and Tyranny: Trampling Freedom, Justice and Peace to Rid the World of Evil](#) (Palgrave-Macmillan, September 2003) and serves as a policy advisor for The Future of Freedom Foundation.*

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