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How Abu Ghraib Was Politically Defused, Part 2

by James Bovard

From the first days of the torture scandal, the Bush administration followed a “deny everything and praise American values” strategy to defuse the controversy over Abu Ghraib.

In a May 28, 2004, interview, a French journalist mentioned Abu Ghraib and asked President Bush, “Do you feel responsible in any way for this moral failure in Iraq?” Bush replied, “First of all, I feel responsible for letting the world see that we will deal with this in a transparent way, that people will see that justice will be delivered. And what I regret most of all is that the great honor of our country has been stained by the actions of a few people.”

Bush reminded the Frenchman that “America is a great and generous and decent country.”

The Bush strategy of down-playing Abu Ghraib was helped by comments by prominent Republicans demonizing anyone whom the Americans locked up in Iraq. On June 3, Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.) sneered at those who complained about Abu Ghraib. He explained to a Mississippi television interviewer, “Hey, nothing wrong with holding a dog up there, unless the dog ate him.” Lott explained, “This is not Sunday school; this is interrogation; this is rough stuff.” He pointed out that some of the Abu Ghraib detainees “should not have been prisoners in the first place, probably should have been killed.” But U.S. military intelligence officers told the Red Cross that between 70 and 90 percent of detainees in Iraq “had been arrested by mistake.”

On June 17, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, at a Pentagon press conference, portrayed the government as the victim and blamed the news media:

The implication is that the United States government has, in one way or another, ordered, authorized, permitted, tolerated torture. Not true. And our forces read that, and they’ve got to wonder, do we?

He added,

I have not seen anything that suggests that a senior civilian or military official of the United States of America ... could be characterized as ordering or authorizing or permitting torture or acts that are inconsistent with our international treaty obligations or our laws or our values as a country.

Yet in December 2002 Rumsfeld personally authorized “the use of techniques including hooding, nudity, stress positions, ‘fear of dogs’ and physical contact with prisoners at the Guantanamo Bay base.” Numerous commentators suggested that Rumsfeld’s authorization was itself a war crime.

On June 22, Bush responded to criticism:

Let me make very clear the position of my government and our country.... The values of this country are such that torture is not a part of our soul and our being.

Instead of the issue’s being Bush’s orders, the issue was the American “soul and being.” Repeating largely meaningless denials and invocations satisfied most Bush supporters.

The torture memos

On the same day, White House counsel Alberto R. Gonzales announced that some parts of the Bybee memo (the Justice Department memo by Office of Legal Counsel attorneys Jay Bybee and John Yoo, which claimed that the president did not need to obey U.S. criminal law) were being formally disavowed, calling the memo’s claims “irrelevant and unnecessary to support any action taken by the president.” Gonzales stressed the PR problems caused by the memo: “It was harmful to this country in terms of the notion that we may be engaged in torture.” He spoke of the “quaint” memo and other advocacy of vigorous interrogation methods as mere “documents ... generated by government lawyers to explore the limits of the legal landscape as to what the Executive Branch can do within the law and the Constitution as an abstract matter.” He made it clear that the Bush administration was not disavowing its claim to absolute power:

I must emphasize that the analysis underpinning the President’s decisions stands and [is] not being reviewed. The Commander-in-Chief override power discussed in the opinion is, on its face — on its face — limited to our conflict with al-Qaeda. There is no indication that it applies to our conflict in Iraq.

His qualifying phrases “on its face” and “no indication” reserved the Bush administration’s options. Gonzales’s claim that the president has the right to override the law and the Constitution received little coverage in the American media.

The politics of torture

The Democrats made a few languid gestures in opposition. On June 23, Democratic senators sought to issue a subpoena for Bush administration documents on detainee abuses. Republicans defeated the measure by a largely party-line vote, 50-to-46. The “talking points” issued to Republicans by the Senate Republican Policy Committee warned,

Because of an out-of-control media and widespread hysteria, the White House and Pentagon have been forced to reveal secret interrogation techniques just to prove our men and women in uniform aren't torturers and murderers.... The forced disclosure will now complicate efforts to get information from terrorists who will train to withstand these techniques.... It's high past time we remember who [our] enemies are.

Sen. John Cornyn (R-Tex.) condemned Democrats' criticism of Bush torture policies as “not only false — they dangerously undermine troop morale, put our troops at risk, and impede our efforts to win the global war against terrorism.”

In reality, it was the Bush administration policies that placed American troops at risk. By effectively proclaiming a right to torture captives, the U.S. government would legitimate similar abuses by foreign regimes against U.S. troops.

The following day, Bush was interviewed by a petite female Irish journalist who told him that most Irish people are “angry over Abu Ghraib. Are you bothered by what Irish people think?” Bush replied, “Listen, I hope the Irish people understand the great values of our country. And if they think that a few soldiers represent the entirety of America, they don't really understand America then.” He was furious at the question and the White House is said to have protested to the woman's superiors.

On June 26, in his annual proclamation on the UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, Bush assured the world,

The American people were horrified by the abuse of detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.... They were inconsistent with our policies and our values as a nation.... The United States will continue to lead the fight to eliminate [torture] everywhere.

After the Abu Ghraib torture scandal had percolated for six weeks, the *New York Times* and *CBS News* polled people on whether “members of the Bush administration are telling the entire truth, are mostly telling the truth but are hiding something, or are mostly lying” in their statements on Abu Ghraib. Only 15 percent of respondents said the administration was telling the

“entire truth”; 52 percent said they were “hiding something”; and 27 percent said they were “mostly lying.”

Yet, even though the public was not buying Bush’s story, the Democrats lacked the courage to vigorously challenge or even to strongly condemn his policies. At the Democratic National Convention in Boston at the end of July, Abu Ghraib was barely mentioned. Though the torture scandal had sparked fury and protests in America and around the world, the Democratic Party ignored the issue in a convention that celebrated the theme of former Navy officer John Kerry’s “reporting for duty.” The Democrats may have feared being labeled unpatriotic for mentioning the torture. But regardless of how they muzzled themselves, the Democratic candidate was soon savagely maligned by the “Swift Boat Vets for Truth” advertisement barrage.

Suppressing the truth

The Pentagon sought to rewrite the narrative in Iraq as well as in America. On September 14, U.S. military authorities proudly unveiled Camp Liberty, a new tent compound to house Iraqi detainees next to Abu Ghraib. Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller, the camp commander, declared that Camp Liberty and other changes in the treatment of Iraqi prisoners are “restoring the honor of America.” The camp was used for Iraqis cleared of wrongdoing who were on the verge of being released. The *New York Times* noted that as detainees were released a soldier would give them “\$25, in the form of a crisp new \$20 bill and a \$5 bill, and a 12-page glossy pamphlet on Iraq’s interim government, ‘Iraq. Development.’” The Bush administration’s use of the word “liberty” to try to expunge Abu Ghraib atrocities illustrated how all limits were waived in degrading the American political vocabulary. This was the second re-christening, since Pentagon officials had speedily christened part of the Abu Ghraib complex Camp Redemption in May, when the leaked photos were first rattling the world.

Despite the Abu Ghraib scandal, Bush ran for reelection as the anti-torture candidate. In a campaign speech in Missouri, he denounced Saddam: “For decades he tormented and tortured the people of Iraq. Because we acted, Iraq is free and a sovereign nation.” It was as if torture subverts freedom only if done on a dictator’s orders, not when inflicted by the greatest democracy in the world. In the closing weeks of the campaign, Bush constantly reminded audiences, “Think about how far that country has come from the days of torture chambers and mass graves. Freedom is on the march, and America and the world are better for it.”

But political lies were marching far further and faster than freedom in the 2004 presidential election. Investigations completed after the 2004 election, as well as disclosures of FBI and military memos and documents, proved that torture was far more systematic in the U.S. military and the CIA after 9/11 than the Bush team admitted before his reelection victory.

The media flinched, the public shrugged, the politicians lied, and Bush snared a second term. When he was asked about Iraq by a reporter shortly before his second inauguration, he

declared that Americans had had their “moment of accountability” regarding his Iraqi policies. In his own eyes, his reelection was a total absolution for anything he did in the first term.

Bush will be leaving office on January 20. Americans may have seen only the tip of the iceberg of the abuses that the U.S. government committed during his presidency. Whether Americans learn the details of the torture abuses of the Bush era will be an acid test for the health and survival of American democracy.

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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