

Torture scandal becomes focus of political warfare within US government circles

By Joseph Kay and Barry Grey
26 June 2004

The mounting evidence of Bush administration complicity in the torture of prisoners in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo has become a focal point for intensifying conflicts within the American political establishment and state apparatus. The background to the administration's decision to release internal documents concerning interrogation methods against foreign prisoners is a level of political warfare between and within the military, the civilian leadership of the Defense Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, the State Department and Bush's inner circle itself that has no modern precedent, with the possible exception of the super-charged period of the Nixon Watergate crisis.

Various factions of the political and media establishment are lining up and taking sides in an increasingly open and fractious struggle over policy issues related to, and fueled by, the debacle for US imperialism that is unfolding in Iraq. The conflicts reflect growing concerns within the American ruling elite over the damaging consequences of the Bush administration's unilateralist posture and reckless application of military force, which have all but shattered the post-World War II structure of international relations—particularly between the US and Europe—and left Washington largely isolated on the international arena.

The political warfare is heightened by the approach of the presidential election. The tone of editorial and political criticism of the Bush administration from sections of the media and representatives of the diplomatic, military and intelligence establishment indicate a growing consensus within official circles in favor of a change of White House personnel in November, i.e., the replacement of Bush and the Republicans by Kerry and the Democrats.

The latter, for their part, are doing all in their power to reassure the corporate and media power brokers that they are no less committed than their Republican counterparts to “finishing the job” in Iraq and prosecuting the “war on terrorism”—a euphemism for the pursuit of US global hegemony. Kerry and company contend that they can manage US imperialist policy, including the use of military force, more effectively than those who have overseen the disastrous intervention in Iraq.

These divisions are highlighted by two recent editorials published by the *Washington Post*, the principal newspaper of the nation's capital. While reiterating its support for the war in Iraq, the *Post* issued uncharacteristically sharp criticisms of the Bush administration, and particularly Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

In the paper's lead editorial published on June 21, entitled “Torture Policy (Cont.),” the editors respond to an attack made by Rumsfeld against newspapers—including the *Washington Post*—which published reports or editorials containing, according to Rumsfeld, “the implication is that the United States government has, in one way or another, ordered, authorized, permitted, tolerated torture.” Rumsfeld all but accused such media outlets of aiding and abetting terrorists and stabbing American soldiers in the back, saying such statements would encourage Iraqis or Afghans to torture American troops in retaliation.

The *Post* responds: “As supporters of the missions in Iraq and

Afghanistan, we have been particularly concerned about the ways that the scandal—and the administration's continuing failure to come to terms with it—could undermine the chances for success. What strikes us as extraordinary is that Mr. Rumsfeld would suggest that this damage would be caused by newspaper editorials rather than by his own actions and decisions and those of other senior administration officials.”

Particularly noteworthy in the above excerpt is the phrase “his own actions and decisions and those of other senior administration officials.” Here the *Post* directly suggests that Rumsfeld and others, possibly including Bush and Cheney, bear responsibility for the torture of Iraqi prisoners.

The editorial goes on to turn the tables on Rumsfeld, citing chapter and verse where the defense secretary issued orders in clear violation of both international and US laws against the use of torture:

“What might lead us to describe Mr. Rumsfeld or some ‘other civilian or military official’ as ‘ordering or authorizing or permitting’ torture or violation of international treaties and US law? We could start with Mr. Rumsfeld's own admission during the same news conference that he had personally approved the detention of several prisoners in Iraq without registering them with the International Committee of the Red Cross. This creation of ‘ghost prisoners’ was described by Maj. Gen. Antonio M. Taguba, who investigated abuses at Abu Ghraib prison, as ‘deceptive, contrary to Army doctrine and in violation of international law.’ Failure to promptly register detainees with the Red Cross is an unambiguous breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention; Mr. Rumsfeld said that he approved such action on several occasions, at the request of another senior official, CIA director George J. Tenet.”

Coming from a leading establishment newspaper, this is an extraordinary indictment. It almost reads like a brief for the prosecution of Rumsfeld and other top government officials for war crimes.

But the *Post* editorial goes further, directly accusing high government officials of ordering torture. “Did senior officials order torture? We know of two relevant cases so far. One was Mr. Rumsfeld's December 2002 authorization of the use of techniques including hooding, nudity, stress positions, ‘fear of dogs’ and physical contact with prisoners at the Guantanamo Bay base. A second was the distribution in September 2003 by the office of the top US commander in Iraq, Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, of an interrogation policy that included these techniques as well as others, among them sleep and dietary manipulation. In both cases lawyers inside the military objected that the policies would lead to violations of international law, including the convention banning torture. Both were eventually modified, but not before they were used for the handling of prisoners. In the case of the Abu Ghraib prison, the policy apparently remained in effect for months.”

In other words, according to the *Post*, Rumsfeld and other senior civilian and military officials did authorize a policy of torture, and that policy was carried out at Abu Ghraib prison. Here the newspaper alleges a direct connection between the documented abuses and crimes at the Iraqi

prison and the orders issued by the Secretary of Defense.

There follows a paragraph that has the character of a “no-holds-barred” counteroffensive against Rumsfeld and the entire Bush administration:

“Did senior officials ‘permit’ torture? A Pentagon-led task force concluded in March 2003, with the support of the Justice Department, that the president was authorized to order torture as part of his war-making powers, and that those who followed his orders could be immunized from punishment. Dictators who wish to justify torture, and those who would mistreat Americans, have no need to read our editorials: They can download from the Internet the 50-page legal brief issued by Mr. Rumsfeld’s chief counsel.”

The editorial concludes with a call for a “full and independent investigation of the matter, including the decisions made by Mr. Rumsfeld and other senior officials.”

No less significant was the response of the *Post* to the Bush administration’s release of documents on interrogation methods and Bush’s statements denying that he ever ordered or condoned the use of torture. In a June 24 editorial entitled “A Partial Disclosure,” the newspaper adopted the technique of “damning with faint praise,” calling the administration’s moves “important steps toward correcting its policies on the handling of foreign detainees,” and then proceeding to criticize both the limited nature of the disclosure and the definition of torture given by White House Counsel Alberto Gonzales.

On the first question, the editorial points to “the administration’s continuing failure to disclose the interrogation policies applicable outside Guantanamo, including those used by the military in Iraq and Afghanistan and those employed by the CIA at its secret detention centers outside the United States.”

On the second, the *Post* quotes Gonzales as defining torture, in a statement given June 22, as “a specific intent to inflict severe physical or mental harm or suffering.” As the *Post* proceeds to explain, this carefully parsed definition would, in fact, allow for a vast array of abuses that are banned under international law and deemed to constitute torture:

“That narrow definition, according to the administration’s previous reasoning, would allow the infliction of pain short of death or organ failure, and even this would be acceptable if the pain were not the interrogator’s primary purpose.”

The newspaper concludes by repeating its charge from the June 21 editorial that the abuses at Abu Ghraib are attributable to policy directives issued by Rumsfeld and Sanchez, and declaring: “How did this spread of improper and illegal practices occur? The Bush administration has yet to offer a convincing answer or hold anyone accountable for it.”

There are, besides the accusatory *Post* editorials, a series of actions and statements by members of the intelligence and foreign policy establishment that reflect the intensity of the political warfare within the ruling elite, and the deepening crisis not only of the Bush administration, but the entire political system.

Much media play has been given to a new book, *Imperial Hubris*, penned by an anonymous but current high-level official in the Central Intelligence Agency. The book is not slated for publication until August, but over the course of the past week the author has been interviewed on CNN and ABC television news programs, his face obscured so as to maintain his anonymity.

The book denounces the war in Iraq as “an avaricious, premeditated, unprovoked war against a foe who posed no immediate threat.” The author argues that the war is a diversion from the war against Islamic jihadist terrorism and a political boon to Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda.

The *New York Times*, which received an advance copy of the book, noted in its report published on Wednesday, “It is rare for a CIA officer to publish a book while still serving at the agency and highly unusual for the book to focus on such a politically explosive topic. Under CIA rules, the book had to be cleared by the agency before it could be published.”

The book was reportedly completed several months ago, but the CIA has been sitting on it for some time. Its decision to approve the book’s publication comes at a point of intense conflict between the CIA and those government factions that promoted Iraqi exile Ahmed Chalabi, particularly the civilian leadership of the Pentagon and Vice President Cheney. It follows the CIA-led raid on the Iraqi offices of Chalabi and the resignations earlier this month of CIA Director George Tenet and Director of Operations James Pavitt.

Another flashpoint in the political warfare is the Justice Department investigation into allegations that Bush administration officials were responsible for “outing” CIA operative Valerie Plame, the wife of Bush-critic and former diplomat Joseph Wilson. In recent weeks top administration officials, including Vice President Cheney, Bush political aide Karl Rove, and White House Counsel Gonzales have been obliged to testify before a federal grand jury convened by the special prosecutor in charge of the probe, and on Thursday, Bush himself was interviewed by the prosecutor in the Oval Office. Both Cheney and Bush have taken the unusual step of hiring private criminal lawyers to defend themselves in the case.

Finally, there is the letter published earlier this month, signed by a group of 27 former government and military officials. The group—which calls itself Diplomats and Military Commanders for Change—is composed of individuals who served under Republican as well as Democratic administrations. The letter denounced Bush’s policy on Iraq and, more broadly, the unilateralist approach of the administration.

The letter-writers declared, “[The administration] justified the invasion of Iraq by manipulation of uncertain intelligence about weapons of mass destruction, and by a cynical campaign to persuade the public that Saddam Hussein was linked to Al Qaeda and the attacks of September 11. The evidence did not support this argument...Never in the two-and-a-quarter centuries of our history has the United States been so isolated among the nations, so broadly feared and distrusted.”

Signers of the statement included Arthur Hartman, ambassador to the Soviet Union under Ronald Reagan, his successor at that position, Jack Matlock, the ambassador to Israel under the first President Bush, William Harrop, and the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Reagan, William Crowe.

The letter all but endorsed Democrat John Kerry for President. Like Kerry, the signers made clear their continued support for the occupation of Iraq, and much of the criticism took the form of denouncing Bush for not committing sufficient resources to the occupation.

Retired General Tony McPeak, former head of the Air Force and one of the signers, declared, “Because of the Pollyannaish assumptions that were made by the administration in going in there that bouquets would be thrown at us and so forth, we were totally unprepared for the post-combat occupation.” McPeak said he had supported Bush in the 2000 election but was now acting as an advisor to Kerry.

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