

# More evidence of US military's culture of torture in Iraq

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Material obtained by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), under Freedom of Information, provides further evidence of the culture of torture and abuse that has prevailed among US military personnel involved in the interrogation of Iraqi prisoners. It confirms that the brutal treatment photographed at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad during November and December 2003 was not an isolated series of actions. The abuses occurred within the context of an open discussion among US interrogators on using illegal methods to break the willpower of Iraqi prisoners and extract information.

On August 14, 2003, Captain William Ponce of the joint task force headquarters in Baghdad, wrote an email to a number of US interrogators, telling them that the scale of the Iraqi insurgency meant the “gloves were coming off” and giving them three days to submit a list of “alternative interrogation techniques” they would like to be able to use.

Last week, the *Washington Post* published summations and extracts of several of the replies, which were made available as part of a release of documents, court records and files. The 2,200 documents obtained by the ACLU have been scanned and put online at: <http://www.aclu.org/torturefoia/released/041905/>.

An interrogator in Qaim, working in a detention centre run by the Third Armored Cavalry Regiment, replied on August 14 recommending “close confinement quarters, sleep deprivation, white noise and harsher ‘fear-up’ approaches”. His email included a clause that “fear of dogs and snakes appear to work nicely”.

Interrogators in Tikrit, working for the Fourth Infantry Division, sent back an email on August 17, 2003, recommending “open hand strikes, closed-fist

strikes, using claustrophobic techniques and a number of ‘coercive’ techniques such as striking with telephone books, low-voltage electrocution and inducing muscle fatigue”.

The feedback was used in the drafting of a memo on acceptable interrogation methods, which was released on September 14, 2003, by then-US commanding officer in Iraq, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez. While carefully worded, the document authorised at least 12 techniques that breached the Army’s own field manual.

The memo included the technique described as “fear-up harsh”—or “significantly” increasing a prisoner’s sense of fear—and another called “pride and ego down”, defined as “attacking or insulting the ego of detainee”.

The discussions unfolded amid obvious signs that the US occupation confronted an unexpected guerilla war against a well-organised resistance. The American military had little knowledge of the forces it was fighting and desperately required information.

Administration officials such as Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz had predicted before the war that less than 60,000 US troops would be needed in Iraq within months of an invasion. Bush had strutted the deck of an aircraft carrier and declared “victory” on May 1, 2003.

Instead, by August, the scale of the anti-occupation insurgency had forced the Pentagon to maintain troop numbers at more than 140,000 and US casualties were steadily rising. Mutinous statements were being made by soldiers in frontline American units such as the Third Infantry Division, denouncing the government for lying about what they would confront in Iraq.

By November 2003, senior field commanders such as Major General Charles Swannack, commander of the

82nd Airborne Division, were telling journalists “there’s no-holds barred” on the methods the US military was prepared to use. Brigadier General Martin Dempsey, commander of the US 1st Armored Division, told a press conference that “the one thing I am blessed with is a chain of command that runs right up through the president of the United States, who has essentially told me ‘You do whatever you need to do, in a way that’ll make your country proud, to finish that fight’”.

The discussion in the military on using harsher tactics against the Iraqi resistance establishes that the attempt by the Bush administration to blame “bad apples” for the abuse of prisoners is nothing more than crude scapegoating. Interrogators were encouraged to believe they had the go-ahead to use torture to gain information on the popular insurgency. Such methods flowed inevitably from the demands of the Bush administration for the military to suppress the opposition of Iraqis to the illegal occupation of their country.

A US intelligence sergeant, for example, responded to a reprimand he was given over prisoner abuse in September 2003 by accusing his superiors of “blurring the lines between official enemy prisoners-of-war and terrorists not afforded international protection”. He had been punished for supervising an interrogator in Tikrit who allegedly beat an Iraqi detainee on the soles of his feet, his buttocks and back with a police baton.

“In hindsight,” the sergeant wrote, “it seems clear that, considering the seeming approval of these and other tactics by the senior command, it is a short jump of the imagination that allows actions such as those committed by [name censored] to become not only tolerated but encouraged.”

At the Qaim detention facility, the torture went much further. Former Iraqi general Abid Mowwhoush died while under interrogation in November 2003. At the time of his death, he was tightly bound inside a sleeping bag—a “claustrophobic technique”—and had been beaten. Three American soldiers and an interrogator have been charged over the killing.

At Abu Ghraib, the American guards who have been prosecuted, have alleged that the orders to sexually humiliate Iraqis came from intelligence officers who instructed them to “prepare” prisoners for interrogations. One of the other guidelines from Sanchez’s office was the use of dogs, “to exploit Arab fear” of the animals. Five US soldiers have now been

tried and convicted for crimes committed at Abu Ghraib.

More than likely, the cases at Tikrit, Qaim and Abu Ghraib are only the tip of the iceberg of US crimes against Iraqi prisoners. According to the ACLU, the documents it has now published include “autopsy reports that provide new, and often gruesome details about detainee deaths ruled to be homicides, including death by strangulation and ‘blunt force injuries’”.

ACLU attorney Amrit Singh noted in a press release on April 19 that the documents showing a discussion on torture were further evidence “that the chain of command in Iraq approved and even encouraged the abuse of detainees... Instead of holding that chain of command accountable for systematic detainee abuse, the US government continues to thwart efforts to bring the full truth out about who was ultimately responsible”.

This charge was confirmed on April 22. An investigation by the US Army Inspector General cleared General Sanchez and three other senior officers of any culpability in the torture and abuse carried out by soldiers under their command.

In total, just 125 US personnel have been charged with criminal or administrative offences over prisoner abuse. The only high ranking officer who is likely to face any sanction is Brigadier General Janis Karpinski, the Army reserve officer who was ostensibly in charge of Abu Ghraib. She is expected to receive a reprimand.

Those most responsible for the crimes committed in Iraq, however, are the civilian and military leadership in the White House and the Pentagon. It is simply not credible that the Bush administration and the chiefs-of-staff were unaware of the systemic abuses and use of torture taking place in US-run detention centres.

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