

One year since the torture revelations at Abu Ghraib

Mistrial in reservist's court martial

By Bill Van Auken
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One year after photographs of American soldiers torturing and humiliating naked and hooded Iraqi prisoners triggered a wave of international revulsion, the US Army was forced Wednesday to declare a mistrial in the prosecution of one of a handful of junior-ranking enlisted personnel charged in the matter.

Private First Class Lynndie England, an Army reservist, had pled guilty two days earlier to charges of mistreating Iraqi detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison and conspiracy. "I had a choice, but I chose to do what my friends wanted me to," said England.

The 22-year-old woman, recruited into the military from rural West Virginia, was at the center of the furor over Abu Ghraib because of pictures showing her holding a leash attached to a naked prisoner who was apparently being dragged across the floor. In other photos, she was seen with a cigarette dangling from her mouth, pointing to the genitals of naked and hooded detainees and standing next to naked prisoners stacked in human pyramids.

The mistrial came because of testimony by England's immediate superior at Abu Ghraib, Pvt. Charles Graner Jr., who in civilian life is a prison guard. Graner was convicted on similar charges last January and sentenced to 10 years in prison. He impregnated England while the two were assigned to Abu Ghraib, but subsequently married another enlisted woman involved in the scandal.

According to Graner, he asked England to pose for the pictures and took them to document what he said was a "planned use of force" to extract a prisoner from his cell. While Graner's testimony was supposed to support the defense attorney's plea for leniency in sentencing, it contradicted the principal charge—that she had conspired with others to abuse and humiliate the detainees.

"You can't have it both ways," said the military judge in declaring a mistrial. "You can only plead guilty if you believe you are guilty."

The collapse of the trial was met with evident perplexity by the mass media, which described the case as returning to "square one." England's conviction was supposed to have been the final act in Washington's whitewashing of the torture revelations and clearing nearly all but a few hapless reservists who were portrayed as "rogue soldiers" acting on their own.

Graner's testimony, however, reopens the issue that the government had sought to bury: the obscene atrocities

photographed on tier 1 of Abu Ghraib prison resulted from criminal orders that came down a chain of command that reached all the way into the White House.

In the year since the broadcast and publishing of the Abu Ghraib photographs, a steady stream of revelations has established beyond any doubt that the torture as well as murder of prisoners portrayed in these images was anything but an aberration.

They were prepared by legal opinions produced by the then-White House counsel and now US Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, who rationalized torture and argued that the protections of the Geneva Convention did not apply to those captured in Washington's "global war on terrorism."

The same methods of sexual and religious humiliation used at Abu Ghraib were first tried out at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp and then exported to Iraq. Specific forms of torture—keeping prisoners in "stress positions," threatening them with attack dogs and other methods—received explicit authorization from US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Lieut. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, the former commander of US forces in Iraq. Yet not a single senior official or military officer has been held accountable.

Rather, the Army's inspector general concluded an investigation last month exonerating Sanchez and every other senior commander.

When the photographs from Abu Ghraib first surfaced, Bush and other top administration officials feigned shock and disgust over the torture. In a transparent attempt to defuse the explosive anger that swept the Arab world, they promised to hold those responsible accountable.

At the time, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell said he told foreign officials concerned about the revelations: "Watch how we deal with this. Watch how America will do the right thing."

Well, a year has passed and the world can see how America, or more precisely its rulers, has dealt with Abu Ghraib. They behaved in the same way as the fascist-military dictatorships Washington helped bring to power in Latin America in the 1970s. Faced with incontrovertible evidence exposing one example of widespread torture, they placed the blame on the lowest-ranking soldiers involved in order to cover up their own responsibility and ensure that the systemic practice continues.

Every day, fresh evidence emerges of the impunity with which the US military is allowed and encouraged to inflict violence upon

the people of occupied Iraq.

On Wednesday, the US Marine Corps announced that it has cleared a corporal who was filmed executing a wounded Iraqi inside a Fallujah mosque last November. The horrific scene of the enraged marine shouting obscenities, screaming that the Iraqi was “faking he’s dead” and firing point-blank into the wounded man’s head was broadcast over television in the US and internationally.

The Marine Corps investigation not only found that the corporal’s actions were “consistent with the established rules of engagement” in Fallujah, but also revealed that he killed two other wounded men in the mosque in the same way. And a fourth wounded Iraqi was similarly executed, but an investigation is continuing into who shot him.

Those executed in the mosque had been wounded by another US unit the day before, taken prisoner and then left behind. The exoneration of those responsible for this atrocity only demonstrates that the “rules of engagement” prescribed to the troops in Fallujah were criminal, violating the most basic precepts of the Geneva Conventions. They boiled down to “kill anything that moves.”

Then there is the report exonerating the US forces who shot and killed the Italian intelligence agent Nicola Calipari March 4 on the road to Baghdad airport. The incident, which occurred after Calipari had succeeded in freeing journalist Giuliana Sgrena from hostage-takers, provoked outrage in Italy. The military once again found that the troops firing the fatal shots were only following “rules of engagement.” There is widespread suspicion in Italy that more may be involved in the killing, reflecting Washington’s displeasure with any negotiations with anti-occupation forces.

Putting that aside, once again the rules of engagement amount essentially to shoot anything that moves. What happened to Calipari and to those wounded in the car is almost a daily occurrence for Iraqis. In these less publicized cases, the Pentagon is just as loath to admit any blame.

“The American troops have adopted an atmosphere of impunity,” a recent joint report issued by Occupation Watch and the Defense of Human Rights in Iraq concluded. “Arrogant and violent behavior goes unpunished and continues.”

This impunity, arrogance and violence is a measure of the demoralization that has set in among the US occupation force, the same demoralization that led the reservists at Abu Ghraib to participate enthusiastically in the torture and humiliation of fellow human beings.

These troops are fighting a war that the majority of the American people oppose. In most cases, they have little understanding of why they are there, and see the Iraqi population itself as the enemy.

A revealing glimpse of the demoralized state of the US military emerged in a column last week by *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert, who interviewed Aidan Delgado, a former Army private who sought conscientious objector status because of his revulsion over the war. Delgado spoke of “gratuitous violence... routinely inflicted by American soldiers on ordinary Iraqis.”

He told the *Times*: “Guys in my unit, particularly the younger guys, would drive by in their Humvee and shatter bottles over the

heads of Iraqi civilians passing by. They’d keep a bunch of empty Coke bottles in the Humvee to break over people’s heads.” Asked why they did it, the soldiers told him it was because they “hated being in Iraq” and hated “Hajjis,” the derogatory and racist term employed to describe the occupied Iraqi people.

A year after the revelations about Abu Ghraib, the social and political cancer revealed in the photographs has continued to spread. While professional military commanders normally discourage such atrocities in wartime, knowing the damage they do to both the morale and discipline of the soldiers they command, in Iraq such practices have received encouragement from both the top civilian leadership of the Pentagon and the Bush White House itself.

Aside from mouthing the same hypocritical expressions of shock and dismay as the Republicans, the Democratic Party has carefully avoided making the atrocities carried out by US troops in Iraq a political issue.

Politically sanctioned and defended routinely within the military, the “atmosphere of impunity” and “gratuitous violence” in Iraq has ominous implications.

The atrocities at Abu Ghraib are not that alien to American society. Similar forms of torture, abuse and sexual humiliation take place in US prisons, immigrant detention centers and police stationhouse bathrooms.

While by no means every soldier sent to Iraq has carried out the kind of crimes committed at Abu Ghraib, the war is feeding this reactionary social tendency. Disconnected from society and immersed in a culture of violence, elements are being trained that can serve as the raw material for a future fascist movement.

The methods developed in Iraq can be brought home, with death squads and torture becoming tools for suppressing popular unrest and eliminating political opposition within the United States itself.

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