

# More on Newsweek's retraction of the Koran story

By Kate Randall  
30 May 2005

New details emerging about detainee abuse at the Guantánamo Bay prison camp underscore the utterly craven and politically motivated character of *Newsweek*'s retraction of its May 9 article citing desecration of the Koran.

The latest developments confirm the charge contained in the May 9 article that US forces at Guantánamo handled the Koran in a contemptuous manner, and make clear that the decision of the publishers to retract the story was not, as they declared at the time, taken to uphold standards of accuracy or journalistic ethics. Rather, *Newsweek* and its parent organization, the Washington Post Company, capitulated in the face of a political attack by the Bush administration.

The May 9 *Newsweek* article cited an unnamed US senior officer who said an upcoming report by the Pentagon's US Southern Command would note a case in which "interrogators, in an attempt to rattle suspects, flushed a Koran down a toilet."

The account was blamed for triggering anti-US protests across the Muslim world, claiming at least 17 lives in Afghanistan. Following intense pressure from the Pentagon and the White House—and vilification in ultra-right media circles—*Newsweek* retracted the story. (See "Media bows to US torture regime: *Newsweek* retracts Guantánamo abuse story").

On May 26, one day after the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) released previously undisclosed FBI documents revealing widespread desecration of the Koran during detainee interrogation at Guantánamo, Brig. Gen. Jay W. Hood, commander of the Guantánamo Joint Task Force, acknowledged that a Pentagon review had documented 13 reported cases of mistreatment of the Koran by US forces at Guantánamo, of which five had been confirmed.

The ACLU obtained the documents as a result of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests aimed at investigating the treatment of prisoners at the facility. One of these documents includes an FBI interview with a prisoner dated August 1, 2002, which includes the following passage: "About five months ago, the guards beat the detainees. They flushed a Koran in the toilet."

According to the documents obtained by the ACLU, detainees interviewed by the FBI also reported the Koran being kicked, withheld as punishment and thrown on the floor. Prisoners also said they were mocked during prayers.

In addition to these Koran-related abuses, detainees recounted instances of being "kicked in the stomach and back by several individuals." They cited an occasion when a handcuffed prisoner was "kicked violently in the jaw" after he had tripped and fallen, and another instance when a prisoner was sexually assaulted by a female guard.

The ACLU's release of these documents is but one more confirmation of what is common knowledge—and not only among the world's Muslim population. The US military and American intelligence agencies are engaged in a systemic violation of human rights, involving torture, indefinite detention, "extraordinary rendition" and other violations of international law.

The mistreatment of the Koran at Guantánamo, as well as torture involving sexual humiliation and other sadistic methods that were exposed at Abu Ghraib, are integral components of a systemic policy that has been authorized at the highest levels of government.

It is the US government's barbaric practices that have evoked worldwide revulsion and hatred—not their exposure by human rights organizations or, far more rarely, media outlets. The claim by Bush administration officials that *Newsweek*'s one reference to the alleged

Koran flushing incident was solely responsible for anti-American riots was absurd. It was, however, given a measure of credibility by *Newsweek's* rush to accept culpability.

Following publication of the *Newsweek* story, the military launched its own inquiry into the Koran abuse allegations. Last Thursday, Brig. Gen. Hood held a Pentagon news briefing on its preliminary findings. The event was a classic example of the doublespeak and evasion that have become the stock-in-trade of the Bush administration.

Gen. Hood assured the assembled reporters: "I'd like you to know that we have found no credible evidence that a member of the Joint Task Force at Guantánamo Bay ever flushed a Koran down a toilet."

The inquiry did, however, uncover 13 reported incidents in which a guard or an interrogator mishandled the Koran, Hood acknowledged. He claimed investigators had substantiated that the Koran had actually been mishandled in only five of these cases, and that "none of these five incidents was a result of a failure to follow standard operating procedures in place at the time the incident occurred."

Hood claimed that a re-interview of the detainee cited by the ACLU as having witnessed the Koran-flushing incident undermined the story. He said investigators asked this prisoner whether he had personally seen any such abuse of the Koran, "and he allowed as how he hadn't but he had heard guards—that guards at some other point in time had done this."

Hood said the detainee was not specifically asked about the toilet incident, nor did investigators mention his previous interview. The statements of this prisoner—which have not been released to the press—to the effect that he had heard of these practices, but had not personally witnessed them, are the supposed "credible evidence" that they never took place!

For its part, *Newsweek* has chimed in with a new article on the topic, posted online and slated for its May 30 issue. Titled "The Qur'an Question," and penned by Evan Thomas and Michael Isikoff, the author of the May 9 article, the piece goes out of its way to accommodate the Pentagon line. It carries the subtitle, "In 31,000 documents the Pentagon has reviewed, there are allegations—but Defense says none is substantiated."

The article relies heavily on the statements of

Defense Department spokesman Lawrence Di Rita. It should be noted that this is the same person who in a May 17 press conference dismissed out of hand allegations by former detainees that the Koran had been mishandled and abused at Guantánamo. He said that there hadn't been any previous investigations "because there haven't been credible allegations to that effect." In other words, the charges of former prisoners were not even worthy of investigation.

After explaining guidelines introduced at Guantánamo in January 2003 to respect the Koran, the article concludes: "The Pentagon is not ruling out the possibility of finding credible reports of Qur'an desecration. But so far, said Di Rita, it has not found any."

Having issued a cowardly apology for printing what was, in essence, a legitimate story, *Newsweek's* editors are seeking to further atone for their sins by uncritically toeing the government's line. Their subservient behavior is but one more demonstration of the spineless and reactionary role of the US media.

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