

Former US general confirms high-level knowledge of Abu Ghraib torture

By Joe Kay
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Former US Major General Antonio Taguba, who headed the first military investigation into torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, has now alleged that former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other top officials were aware of abuse at the Iraqi prison months before it was made public in late April 2004. According to Taguba, the torture at Abu Ghraib arose from a policy promoted by Rumsfeld and the Bush administration.

Taguba's statements, in an interview conducted by veteran journalist Seymour Hersh, appear in the June 25 issue of the *New Yorker* magazine. The interview is also available online.

In the conversations with Hersh, Taguba also asserts that he was forced out of his position in the military because of his role in investigating torture in Iraq and his reluctance to lie to help cover up for the administration.

Speaking of the Abu Ghraib abuse, Taguba remarked, "From what I know, troops just don't take it upon themselves to initiate what they did without any form of knowledge of the higher-ups."

According to Hersh in the *New Yorker*, "Taguba came to believe that Lieutenant General Sanchez, the Army commander in Iraq, and some of the generals assigned to the military headquarters in Baghdad had extensive knowledge of the abuse of prisoners in Abu Ghraib" even before photographs of the torture fell into the hands of the Army's Criminal Investigation Division in January 2004.

Taguba told Hersh that Sanchez regularly visited Abu Ghraib during the fall of 2003, during the time the documented torture was taking place, and that he personally witnessed at least one interrogation. "Sanchez knew exactly what was going on," Taguba said. This is a very serious accusation.

These statements go beyond what was reported in his own initial investigation, which formed the basis for the first news stories about the Abu Ghraib scandal in the spring of 2004. That investigation was limited to

examining the role of the military police at Abu Ghraib and not higher-level military officers and civilians. The military has carried out a number of separate investigations into torture in Iraq, but all have served to obscure the role of top officials and military personnel.

It was Taguba's 2004 report that first documented links between Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay, particularly through the person of Major General Geoffrey Miller. Rumsfeld and the former undersecretary of defense for intelligence, Stephen Cambone, transferred Miller from his command at Guantánamo to Abu Ghraib in the fall of 2003. According to the Taguba report, one of the main purposes of Miller's visit was to get military police involved in "setting the conditions of successful exploitation of internees" by intelligence.

Hersh also reports that one of Miller's tasks was to bring methods developed by the Pentagon's Special Access Programs—secret programs authorized without any congressional oversight—to Abu Ghraib. In other words, at a time when the US was facing growing resistance to its occupation of Iraq, Miller was tasked with introducing more "aggressive" interrogation techniques.

When Taguba's report, along with a selection of photographs, was leaked, the Bush administration immediately moved to blame low-level soldiers. Leading administration officials, including Rumsfeld, also claimed they were unaware of the evidence and had not been told of the photographs at the center of Taguba's investigation. This was what Rumsfeld told congressional hearings in May 2004. However, according to the man who led the investigation, this was a lie.

Taguba had been sending emails to top Pentagon officials for months, which evoked little response. Hersh writes, "Taguba said that senior officials in Rumsfeld's office had been briefed on the photos only a couple days after they were first given to the Army's Criminal Investigation Division, in January 2004." However, prior

to the publication of the photographs—and the ensuing public outcry—no one in the Pentagon was particularly interested. Once the photographs were released to the media, the main focus of the administration was on containing the political fallout, and Rumsfeld concentrated in particular on trying to find out who had leaked the report.

When Rumsfeld claimed in testimony before Congress May 7, 2004, to have no knowledge of the extensive abuse, “Taguba, watching the hearings, was appalled,” Hersh writes. “He believed that Rumsfeld’s testimony was simply not true.”

Hersh’s article also associates George W. Bush with the attempt to conceal the scandal at Abu Ghraib. “Whether the President was told about Abu Ghraib in January (when emails informed the Pentagon of the seriousness of the abuses and of the existence of photographs) or in March (when Taguba filed his report), Bush made no known effort to forcefully address the treatment of prisoners before the scandal became public, or to reevaluate the training of military police and interrogators, or the practices of the task forces that he had authorized,” Hersh writes. “Instead, Bush acquiesced in the prosecution of a few lower-level soldiers.”

Taguba implicates Rumsfeld as well in the abuse of prisoners at Guantánamo Bay—abuse that, unlike Abu Ghraib, has never been photographed. An investigation overseen by Lieutenant General Randall Schmidt in 2004-2005 found that Miller and Rumsfeld were behind the interrogation of Mohammed al-Qahtani, who, according to Schmidt, was interrogated and abused 20 hours a day, for at least 54 days.

As with Abu Ghraib, Rumsfeld sought to distance himself from any traceable and direct involvement. “Rummy did what we called ‘case law’ policy—verbal and not in writing,” Hersh quotes Taguba. “What he’s really saying is that if this decision comes back to haunt me I’ll deny it.”

Taguba was eventually pushed out of the Pentagon for raising uncomfortable questions and for refusing to obediently follow the story laid out by the Bush administration—that the torture at Abu Ghraib was the product of a few “bad apples,” and that White House and Pentagon policy had nothing to do with it.

In particular, he continued to insist, including during congressional testimony, that Miller played a critical role in getting military police at Abu Ghraib to abuse prisoners. But Miller had been sent by Cambone, under the direction of Rumsfeld. To point the finger at Cambone

was to point the finger at Rumsfeld. To implicate Rumsfeld, however, raised the danger of the entire administration, including the president and vice president, falling under suspicion.

Taguba’s comments are further evidence that the torture photographed at Abu Ghraib—the sexual humiliation and abuse, the use of dogs to maul prisoners, the use of agonizing stress positions, the outright murder of prisoners—was not the product of a few individuals, but had its source much higher up, ultimately in the White House itself.

The former general’s comments underscore the fact that more than three years after the evidence first came out, those responsible for the crimes at Abu Ghraib have not been held accountable. For this, the Democratic Party, along with the American media, shares a large measure of blame.

The question of torture at Abu Ghraib, a national scandal, was not made an issue during the elections of 2004 or 2006. When a series of new and even more brutal photographs and videos was finally released last year—after being suppressed by the media for two years—the matter was quickly dropped. Since the Democrats gained control of Congress in January, they have not sought to make the question of torture, and the White House’s responsibility for it, a subject for investigation or subpoena.

There is every reason to believe that similar forms of abuse continue today—in Guantánamo Bay, in Iraq and in secret prisons operated by the CIA internationally.

In his article, citing a former senior intelligence officer and a government consultant, Hersh notes that “after the existence of secret CIA prisons in Europe was revealed, in the *Washington Post*, in late 2005, the Administration responded with a new detainee center in Mauritania.” The Military Commissions Act, passed with bipartisan support in 2006, was designed to allow the CIA program to continue while shielding administration officials from future prosecution.

The New Yorker article in its entirety can be found here

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