

The pictures that lost the war

By Neil Mackay

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It's an image that would do Saddam proud. A terrified prisoner, hooded and dressed in rags, his hands out-stretched on either side of him, electrodes attached to his fingers and genitals. He's been forced to stand on a box about one-foot square. His captors have told him that, if he falls off the box, he'll be electrocuted.

The torture victim was an Iraqi and his torturers were American soldiers. The picture captures the moment when members of the coalition forces, who styled themselves liberators, were exposed as torturers. The image of the wired and hooded Iraqi was one of a series of photographs, leaked by a horrified US soldier inside Saddam's old punishment centre, Abu Ghraib – now a US PoW camp.

When the images were flashed around the world by America's CBS television network last Wednesday, there was a smug feeling within the UK that British troops would never behave like that to their prisoners. But on Friday night, the UK was treated to images – courtesy of the Daily Mirror – of British soldiers urinating on a blood-stained Iraqi captive, holding guns against the man's head, stamping on his face, kicking him in the mouth and beating him in the groin with a rifle butt.

The pictures of US soldiers torturing their captives have the added horror of sexual abuse. In five of the 14 images that the Sunday Herald has seen, a female soldier – identified as Lynndie England, a 21-year-old from a West Virginia trailer park – is playing up to the camera while her captives are tortured. In one picture, she's smiling and giving the thumbs-up. Her hand rests on the buttocks of a naked and hooded Iraqi who has been forced to sit on the shoulders of another Iraqi prisoner.

In another, she is sprawled laughing over a pyramid of naked Iraqis. A male colleague stands behind her grinning. Later, she's got a cigarette clenched between grinning lips and is pointing at the genitals of a line of naked, hooded Iraqis. A third snap shows her embracing a colleague as a naked Iraqi lies before them.

In other pictures, two naked Iraqis are forced to simulate oral sex and a group of naked Iraqi men are made to clamber on to each other's backs. One dreadful picture features

The pictures that lost the war | 2

nothing but the bloated face of an Iraqi who has been beaten to death. His body is wrapped in plastic.

Other pictures, which the world has not seen, but which are in the hands of the US military, include shots of a dog attacking a prisoner. An accused soldier says dogs are “used for intimidation factors”.

There are also pictures of an apparent male rape. An Iraqi PoW claims that a civilian translator, hired to work in the prison, raped a male juvenile prisoner. He said: “They covered all the doors with sheets. I heard the screaming ... and the female soldier was taking pictures.”

The British pictures show a hooded Iraqi aged between 18-20 on the floor of a military truck being brutalised. According to two squaddies who took part in the torture, but later blew the whistle, the Iraqi’s ordeal lasted eight hours and he was left with a broken jaw and missing teeth. He was bleeding and vomited when his captors threw him out of a speeding truck. No-one knows if he lived or died.

One of the British soldiers said: “Basically this guy was dying as he couldn’t take any more. An officer came down. It was – Get rid of him – I haven’t seen him’.” The other whistle-blower said he had witnessed a prisoner being beaten senseless by troops. “You could hear your mate’s boots hitting this lad’s spine ... One of the lads broke his wrist off a prisoner’s head. Another nearly broke his foot kicking him.”

According to the British soldiers, the military police have found a video of prisoners being thrown from a bridge, and a prisoner was allegedly beaten to death in custody by men from the Queen’s Lancashire Regiment. Although there is a debate about the veracity of the images, Armed Forces Minister Adam Ingram said that if the pictures were real, they were “appalling”. A Downing Street spokesman said Tony Blair expected “the highest standards of conduct from our forces in Iraq”. The UK’s most senior army officer, General Mike Jackson, said that if the allegations were true then those involved were “not fit to wear the Queen’s uniform”. The Defence Ministry is in crisis over the pictures as top brass know they ruin any hope of UK forces winning Iraqi hearts and minds.

The US torture pictures were taken by members of the American 800th Military Police Brigade sometime late last year. Following an investigation, 17 soldiers were removed from duty for mistreating captives. Six face court martial. Brigadier General Janice Karpinski, who ran Abu Ghraib and three other US military jails, is suspended and faces court martial. Prior to the revelations, Karpinski assured the US media that Abu Ghraib was run according to “international standards”.

Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, deputy director of coalition operations in Iraq, said he was “appalled”. He added: “These are our fellow soldiers. They wear the same uniform as

The pictures that lost the war | 3

us, and they let their fellow soldiers down. Our soldiers could be taken prisoner as well – and we expect our soldiers to be treated well by the adversary, by the enemy – and if we can't hold ourselves up as an example of how to treat people with dignity and respect . . . we can't ask that other nations do that to our soldiers as well. This is wrong. This is reprehensible. But this is not representative of the 150,000 soldiers over here.”

But these soldiers aren't simply mavericks. Some accused claim they acted on the orders of military intelligence and the CIA, and that some of the torture sessions were under the control of mercenaries hired by the US to conduct interrogations. Two “civilian contract” organisations taking part in interrogations at Abu Ghraib are linked to the Bush administration.

California-based Titan Corporation says it is “a leading provider of solutions and services for national security”. Between 2003-04, it gave nearly \$40,000 to George W Bush's Republican Party. Titan supplied translators to the military.

CACI International Inc. describes its aim as helping “America's intelligence community in the war on terrorism”. Richard Armitage, the current deputy US secretary of state, sat on CACI's board.

No civilians, however, are facing charges as military law does not apply to them. Colonel Jill Morgenthaler, from CentCom, said that one civilian contractor was accused along with six soldiers of mistreating prisoners. However, it was left to the contractor to “deal with him”. One civilian interrogator told army investigators that he had “unintentionally” broken several tables during interrogations as he was trying to “fear-up” detainees.

Lawyers for some accused say their clients are scapegoats for a rogue prison system, which allowed mercenaries to give orders to serving soldiers. A military report said private contractors were at times supervising the interrogations.

Kimmitt said: “I hope the investigation is including not only the people who committed the crimes, but some of the people who might have encouraged the crimes as well because they certainly share some responsibility.”

Last night, CACI vice-president Jody Brown said: “The company supports the Army's investigation and acknowledges that CACI personnel in Iraq volunteered to be interviewed by army officials in connection with the investigation. The company has received no indication that any CACI employee was involved in any alleged improper conduct with Iraqi prisoners. Nonetheless, CACI has initiated an independent investigation.”

However, military investigators said: “A CACI investigator's contract was terminated because he allowed and/or instructed military police officers who were not trained in interrogation techniques to facilitate interrogations which were neither authorised nor in

The pictures that lost the war | 4

accordance with regulations.”

One of the US soldiers facing court martial is reservist Staff Sergeant Chip Frederick – the equivalent of a part-time territorial army squaddie. In civvy street, he was a prison warder in Virginia. Frederick has said he will plead not guilty and blame the army for the torture at Abu Ghraib. “We had no support, no training whatsoever,” he said, claiming he had never been shown the Geneva Convention. “I kept asking my chain of command for certain things like rules and regulations and it just wasn’t happening.”

Frederick also blamed the intelligence services for encouraging the brutality. Among the agencies coming to the prison were “military intelligence”, says Frederick, adding: “We had all kinds of other government agencies, FBI, CIA.”

In letters and e-mails home, he wrote: “Military intelligence has encouraged and told us –Great job’.” He added: “They usually don’t allow others to watch them interrogate. But since they like the way I run the prison, they have made an exception . . . We help getting [the PoWs] to talk with the way we handle them . . . We’ve had a very high rate with our style of getting them to break. They usually end up breaking within hours.”

Frederick said prisoners were made to live in cramped windowless cells with no clothes, running water or toilet for up to three days. Others were held for 60 days before interrogation. He said one prisoner with a mental health condition was “shot with non-lethal rounds”. An interrogator told soldiers to “stress one prisoner out as much as possible [as] he wanted to talk to him the next day”. Frederick also said one prisoner was “stressed so bad that the man passed away”. Prisoners were covered in lice and some had tuberculosis. None were allowed to pray. Frederick said his commander sanctioned all this.

The former commander of Guantanamo Bay prison, Major General Geoffrey Miller, has now been made deputy commander for containment operations to overhaul the Iraqi detention centres. Frederick, unlike mercenaries, faces jail and being thrown out of the army. His lawyer, Gary Myers, said: “The elixir of power, the elixir of believing that you’re helping the CIA, for God’s sake, when you’re from a small town in Virginia, that’s intoxicating. And so, good guys sometimes do things believing that they are being of assistance and helping a just cause . . . and helping people they view as important.”

Kimmitt admitted: “I’d like to sit here and say that these are the only prisoner abuse cases that we’re aware of, but we know that there have been others.”

This also applies to Britain. A Sunday Herald investigation has found that at least seven civilians have died in British custody in Iraq.

Describing the images of abuse as an “atrocit y”, Abdel Bari Atwan, editor of the newspaper Al-Quds Al-Arabi, said: “The liberators are worse than the dictators.” His sentiments have been echoed around the world. It is hard to find a country or agency that

The pictures that lost the war | 5

hasn't condemned the torture of Iraqi prisoners. From the Red Cross to the UN and from Amnesty to the coalition's loyal "deputy in the Pacific", the Australian premier John Howard, the world is united in horror against the actions of the US and UK forces.

The awful cost of these acts of barbarism by Britain and America is summed up by ex-US Marine Lieutenant Colonel Bill Cowan: "We went to Iraq to stop things like this from happening, and indeed, here they are happening under our tutelage . . . If we don't tell this story, these kind of things will continue, and we'll end up getting paid back 100 or 1000 times over."

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