

Waiting for 'torture fatigue'

By Bill Berkowitz

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Two weeks after photos depicting torture in Abu Ghraib prison became public, the right-wing media machine is telling America to get over it, already. According to the conservatives, the inhumane treatment of detainees is turning into a scandal because the liberal media are prolonging the attention, allowing lefty "Bush-haters" to politicize and capitalize on the affair. And all this hand-wringing will only hurt the troops in Iraq.

"We need to move on to something else ... get on with the war on terror," former Senator Bob Dole recently told MSNBC on May 11. Dole complained that recent polls were unfavorable to President Bush because he was being hammered in the media by all this prisoner abuse stuff. And that, claims Glenn Reynolds of the conservative web log Instapundit, is the aim of the coverage: "If all this coverage is leaving you demoralized, and hopeless, and depressed, let me suggest that this isn't an accident – it's the goal."

Dole and Reynolds are part of a growing chorus of conservative supporters of Bush's war with Iraq trying to convince the American public that it has seen and heard enough about the t-word.

Sen. James Inhofe (R-OK) led the rightwing counter-offensive on Wednesday at the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing:

"First of all, I regret I wasn't here on Friday. I was unable to be here. But maybe it's better that I wasn't because as I watch this outrage that everyone seems to have about the treatment of these prisoners I have to say and I'm probably not the only one up at this table that is more outraged by the outrage than we are by the treatment.

"The idea that these prisoners, they're not there for traffic violations. If they're in cell block 1A or 1B, these prisoners, they're murderers, they're terrorists, they're insurgents, and many of them probably have American blood probably on their hands and here we're so concerned about the treatment of those individuals."

Inhofe's claim is, of course, ridiculous. According to a February 2004 International Red Cross report, "Certain CF military intelligence officers told the ICRC that in their estimate

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between 70 percent and 90 percent of the persons deprived of their liberty in Iraq had been arrested by mistake.”

Others have preferred to blame the messenger, i.e. the media. In a recent piece, conservative columnist Dennis Prager played the “liberal media” card, arguing that the key reason for the “massive attention the news media have been giving to the stripping and humiliation of Iraqi male prisoners,” is “the political bias of the news reporting.”

The Mudville Gazette attacked Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh for his groundbreaking stories in *The New Yorker* magazine. According to the Gazette, Hersh has a problem telling the truth and “has embarked on a televised disinformation campaign.”

During an appearance on Fox News Channel’s “O’Reilly Factor,” claims the Gazette, Hersh tried “to sow additional confusion in a public already stunned into incomprehension by the graphic photos he helped make famous worldwide.” The Gazette claims that Hersh’s effort “relies on two main points, neither of which is completely factual: 1) the Army did nothing, and 2) it’s the superior’s fault, not the troops. Point one is a lie. Point two is true, but there’s a level where it becomes ludicrous. Given that point one is a lie, that level is low.”

But the Gazette’s position is actually an improvement on some of the other reactions on the right to the scandal. When the story first broke, some conservative commentators questioned the need for the U.S. to apologize. After all, terrorists never issue apologies. Fox News Channel’s Neil Cavuto told his audience that he didn’t “remember hearing anyone say the deviants who strung up those four American contractors in Fallujah should apologize.”

Cavuto instead blamed the world’s America-bashers for publishing the photos: “Why should it be surprising that the world would prefer to trump pictures of American soldiers abusing prisoners over American soldiers helping kids and curing the sick? No, it’s far easier to say ‘screw you,’ than simply ‘thank you.’”

Former Republican Party operative Rich Galen who recently returned from Iraq was furious at the public outcry because “the prisoners at Abu Ghraib ... were trying to kill me and others like me. And if they succeeded in doing that, they were going to come over there and try to kill you.”

Then there are those who blame the “Left.” Right-wing columnist David Limbaugh claims that the “Left” sees the torture scandal as a way of fulfilling its “dream of destroying George Bush.” According to Limbaugh, “the Left’s hysteria over the abuse illustrates how differently they view the enemy, and how much they misapprehend the motives and mindset of conservatives and President Bush. It underscores just how detrimental it would be to American security if they recaptured the White House during this critical, white-hot phase of the War on Terror.”

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That the right-wing media machine has swung into action is not surprising. The more important question is whether these relentless attacks will gain credence? Will they succeed in changing the subject, as the Bush administration so desperately wants?

Or will the 24/7 media coverage, the slow bleed of details, and the possibility of more photos and perhaps videos, result in “Torture Fatigue?”

Here is what history tells us: Years ago, when Americans first saw them on the streets of cities and towns around the country the public was shocked and outraged. How could the richest country in the world abide such poverty and need? Eventually concern gave way to cynicism. The oft-used refrain became “they’re homeless because they want to be.” Overwhelmed by the intractability of the problem, a new phrase entered the lexicon – “compassion fatigue.”

Heard much about the homeless lately?

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