

Why Abu Ghraib shouldn't surprise us

By Doug Stokes

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What is perhaps most surprising about the abuses committed against civilians at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq is the fact that they came as a surprise at all. The 'sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses' found by Major General Taguba has a long history within the tradition of US imperial policing of third world nations. The primary means for this policing had traditionally been counter-insurgency warfare which has always sought to contain and destroy social forces considered inimical to US interests.

Given the fragile social base of the US occupation in Iraq coupled with the increasing ferocity of the Iraqi resistance it comes as little surprise that the US has turned to counter-insurgency warfare to help it undermine and destroy resistance to its rule. The reports and pictures coming out of Abu Ghraib merely confirm what has long been a legitimate tactic within US counter-insurgency warfare: the targeting and torture of civilians. This terror serves not only to break the will of those targeted but has a wider symbolic psychological function in that it dramatically raises the cost of dissent.

Whether it is was a 'war on communism' during the Cold War, or a 'war on terrorism' in the post-9/11 era, the targets and tactics have remained the same and the abuses at Abu Ghraib are the logical outcome of what the US has long been teaching both its own counter-insurgency specialists and those of allied nations. This functional use of terror and torture becomes clearer when we examine the very manuals used by US counter-insurgency warfare experts to train others in the art of 'unconventional warfare'.

For example, in one US counter-insurgency manual called Psychological Operations the manual argued that the primary target 'for tactical psychological operations is the local civilian population'.¹

After other means have failed, the manual stated pro-US forces can legitimately target civilians to instil terror: Civilians in the operational area may be supporting their own government or collaborating with an enemy occupation force. Themes and appeals

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disseminated to this group will vary accordingly, but the psychological objectives will be the same as those for the enemy military. An isolation program designed to instil doubt and fear may be carried out ... If these programs fail, it may become necessary to take more aggressive action in the form of harsh treatment or even abductions. The abduction and harsh treatment of key enemy civilians can weaken the collaborators' belief in the strength and power of their military forces.²

Another manual, entitled *Handling Sources*, continued along similar lines and advocated the harsh treatment of civilians. The manual was used to teach CI forces the art of cultivating government informants within alleged insurgent organisations. The manual states that good techniques to force people to inform were the targeting of family members and the use of physical violence. The 'CI agent could cause the arrest of the employee's parents, imprison the employee or give him a beating as part of the placement plan of said employee in the guerrilla organization'.³

The manual went on to outline how crucial successful informants are, with an informant's worth increasing through the number of 'arrests, executions, or pacification[s]' the informants information led to, all the while 'taking care not to expose the employee as the information source'.⁴

According to the manual even children were to be used as potential information sources: 'Children are, at least, very observant and can provide precise information about things they have seen and heard, if they are interrogated in the appropriate manner'.⁵ The use of state terror was thus overtly advocated as a legitimate technique to be employed by counter-insurgency forces, with recipient militaries trained in the use of terrorism and the 'abduction and harsh treatment' of civilians advocated so as to raise the associated costs of dissent.

One of the key features of US-backed throughout the third world was the institutionalisation of torture against perceived enemies with torture practised routinely and on a wide scale by US-backed counter-insurgency forces.⁶

The use of coercive techniques as part of the overall counter-insurgency effort were advocated by US trainers and physical and mental coercion was openly advocated as a legitimate part of the counterinsurgents arsenal. For example, in the CIA's *Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual*, it was stated that although US trainers 'do not stress the use of coercive techniques, we do want to make you aware of them and the proper way to use them'. The manual outlines a number of coercive techniques including sensory deprivation, solitary confinement and different forms of physical torture including bizarre forms of water torture whereby subjects were 'suspended in water and wore black-out masks'. The manual continues that the stress and anxiety become unbearable for most subjects ... how much they are able to stand depends upon the psychological characteristics of the individual ...

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the 'questioner' can take advantage of this relationship by assuming a benevolent role.⁷

The manual cautioned that if a 'subject refuses to comply once a threat has been made, it must be carried out. If it is not carried out then subsequent threats will also prove ineffective'. The training manual concludes that 'there are a few non-coercive techniques which can be used to induce regression, but to a lesser degree than can be obtained with coercive techniques'.⁸

This manual was based on an earlier manual used by the CIA. The older manual was called the KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation Manual and dates from 1963. In its introduction, the manual states that if bodily harm or 'medical, chemical or electrical methods or materials are to be used to induce acquiescence' then prior approval from CIA headquarters is required. The manual continues that if 'a new safehouse is to be used as the interrogation site, it should be studied carefully to be sure that the total environment can be manipulated as desired. For example, the electric current should be known in advance, so that transformers or other modifying devices will be on hand if needed'.⁹

The Baltimore Sun conducted an investigation into the use of these manuals. They were told by an intelligence source that the 'CIA has acknowledged privately and informally in the past that this referred to the application of electric shocks to interrogation suspects'.¹⁰

In sum, torture was condoned as part of the strategic arsenal available to counter-insurgency forces in combating alleged subversion. Importantly, torture not only provided an efficient means for inducing 'regression' but also acted to instil terror within target populations. The abuses committed at Abu Ghraib thus form part of a covert tradition within the history of US imperial policing and counter-insurgency warfare.

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Notes

¹ US Department of the Army, Psychological Operations, FM33-5, 1962, p.125.

² US Department of the Army, Psychological Operations, FM33-5, 1962, pp. 115-116.

³ Department of Defense, US Army School of the Americas, Manejo de Fuente, p.65 translated by the National Security Archive and accessed at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/archive/news/dodmans.htm>.

⁴ Department of Defense, US Army School of the Americas, Manejo de Fuente, p.66.

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⁵ Department of Defense, US Army School of the Americas, Manejo de Fuente, p.26; See also Latin American Working Group, Declassified Army and CIA Manuals, February 1997. <http://www.lawg.org/pages/new%20pages/Misc/Publications-manuals.htm>.

⁶ On the use of torture by US-backed Latin American states see Cynthia Brown (ed.) With Friends Like These: The Americas Watch Report On Human Rights and US Policy In Latin America (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual, 1983.

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB27/>

For background see Dana Priest, Washington Post, September 21, 1996.

⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual, 1983.

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB27/>.

⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation Manual, 1963.

http://www.kimsoft.com/2000/kub_iii.htm; For background see Tom Blanton, The CIA in Latin America, National Security Archive, March 14, 2000.

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB27/index.html>.

¹⁰ The Baltimore Sun, Monday, January 27, 1997.

<http://eagle.westnet.gr/~cgian/ciatortu.htm>.