

Abuse at Abu Ghraib: Not aberrant but systemic

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [June 1, 2004](#) issue

Both the International Red Cross and Amnesty International knew about the horrors of Abu Ghraib. Both organizations had sent reports detailing brutal behavior in U.S.-run Iraqi prisons to military authorities. But no action was taken until Specialist Joseph M. Darby alerted the army's Criminal Investigation Division and mentioned photographs. Darby said he "felt bad about [the abuse] and thought it was very wrong."

The subsequent army investigation led to a 53-page report written by Major General Antonio M. Taguba. The report was intended for internal army use, but a copy was obtained by *New Yorker* writer Seymour M. Hersh. Included in the report, Hersh writes, was a finding that "between October and December of 2003 there were numerous instances of 'sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses' at Abu Ghraib."

The Bush administration has been fighting a public relations battle to curb the damage, and insists that the behavior of soldiers at Abu Ghraib is aberrant and does not reflect the high ideals of the U.S. Army. This is only partly true. The humiliation of prisoners does not reflect anyone's high ideals, but there is growing evidence that "aberrant" is not the right word to describe the action of a few soldiers from the 372nd Military Police Company. A better word would be "systemic."

Staff Sergeant Ivan L. Frederick II, the senior enlisted soldier facing prosecution for actions at Abu Ghraib, told his family in letters and e-mails that he was following directions from "military-intelligence teams," whom he described as "CIA officers and linguists and interrogation specialists from private defense contractors."

Gary Myers, a civilian attorney defending Frederick, asked Hersh, "Do you really think a group of kids from rural Virginia decided to do this on their own? Decided that the best way to embarrass Arabs and make them talk was to have them walk around nude?" In a letter home, Frederick wrote, "I questioned some of the things

that I saw . . . such things as leaving inmates in their cell with no clothes or in female underpants, handcuffing them to the door of their cell[s], and the answer I got was, 'This is how military intelligence wants it done.'"

Posed pictures of naked prisoners appearing to be masturbating or performing oral sex on other men are designed to humiliate prisoners. "Such dehumanization is unacceptable in any culture, but it is especially so in the Arab world," says Bernard Haykel, professor of Middle Eastern studies. "It's all a form of torture."

Did these American MPs devise this torture themselves? Unlikely. They were trained by someone knowledgeable about torture. Several MPs said they had been told their task was to "soften up" the prisoners for the interrogators. Frederick said that the military-intelligence officers "encouraged and told us, 'Great job,' they were now getting positive results and information."

The "aberrant behavior of a few" will not prevail as an explanation. Members of Congress are pressing Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Pentagon officials to identify responsible personnel higher in the chain of command. The army will also punish some of the soldiers who were directly involved.

But Robert Fisk, foreign correspondent for the *Independent*, in London, thinks the army should look more closely at those who directed the American MPs. "Who are these mysterious 'interrogators'? If they were not CIA or FBI staff, who were they? . . . Several names are already doing the rounds—journalists claim they have no final proof—and a number [of these named], I understand, hold more than one passport. Why were they brought to Abu Ghraib?"

The Taguba report identified two private companies, CACI International and Titan, as suppliers of civilian personnel working in the prison. The report identified a contractor from CACI and urged that he "be fired from his army job" for actions "not in accordance with army regulations." Several other civilian employees were identified by the report as "directly or indirectly responsible for the abuse at Abu Ghraib."

Those behind the torture in the prison were experts in the art of breaking the spirits of incarcerated Arab men, and they spoke Arabic. Someone in authority brought them to the prison to perform the duties that led an American soldier, Private First Class Lynndie England—now pregnant and transferred back to the U.S.—to hold a leash attached to the neck of an Iraqi lying on the prison floor.

Private England also was named as the woman pointing at a naked soldier in derision, smiling broadly at the camera. Her family and friends back home say this is not how the Lynndie they know would behave. So who convinced her she was doing her patriotic duty? Who supplied her with the leash?

Those outside consultants and their army superiors who taught American MPs how to humiliate Arab prisoners were good at what they did, but they could not control the conscience of Joseph M. Darby, who decided torture was “very wrong,” and said so.