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The Prison Abuse Scandal and the Human Heart

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The pictures are gruesome beyond imagination. Though the existing images do not show physical torture or murderous assault, the images portray the abject sexual humiliation of Iraqi men and the moral debasement of the uniformed Americans who gladly posed for the photographs. The sight of naked Iraqi men beset by dogs, forced to commit sexual acts, and wired for electrocution sent the ugliest of messages around the world. Subsequent reports indicated that some Iraqi prisoners had been subjected to being sodomized with a chemical light, forced to commit homosexual acts, and piled upon each other in a naked act of debasement. We are warned that more is to come.

For most Americans, the images came as absolute shock. The nation has been proud of the Americans in uniform who have defended freedom's cause in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other trouble spots around the world. The United States military remains the most highly respected institution in the nation, according to numerous national polls and surveys. Americans had been feasting on images of kind Americans doing good works among Iraqi civilians, even as increased attacks on American personnel threatened the stability of the liberation effort.

But now, the images are altogether different. Indeed, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld warns that we face the prospect of even more devastating photographs and potential video in days to come. These photographic images shot around the world in digital form, sending a quick lesson that war is no longer hidden from public view.

President George W. Bush, who first expressed "deep disgust" upon seeing the photographs, has since responded with promises that the American perpetrators of this abuse will be brought to justice. In recent days, the military has announced formal court martial proceedings against at least some of the soldiers pictured in the infamous photographs. The press and leaders of the Democratic Party went on an offensive, demanding the resignation of Secretary Rumsfeld. The President insisted that his Secretary of Defense was dealing effectively and swiftly with the problem, and that he was needed for the successful completion of the Iraqi project.

The international response was even more vitriolic, attacking the United States for gross hypocrisy and for violations of international law—including the Third Geneva Convention, revised in 1949. Even when the international press was more restrained, the point was made clear. As *The Economist* of London explained, "You fight a war against Saddam Hussein at your initiative, not his, and you say it is a war about law, democracy, freedom, and honesty. A big metaphorical banner hangs above both wars proclaiming that your aim is to bring freedom, human rights, and democracy to the Arab world. All of that sets admirably high standards for the conduct of your forces as well as of your government itself. Now, however, some of your own armed forces are shown to have fallen well below those standards."

The photographs served as undeniable proof that American personnel had indeed acted "well below" basic standards of human decency—standards that pertain even in the context of war.

How could such abuse happen? What would lead otherwise normal Americans to act as sadists, inflicting maximum humiliation and the skillful use of pain and degradation in order to “break down” Iraqi prisoners?

Moral romanticists can only scratch their heads in wonder. Christians, on the other hand, are informed by the biblical teaching that human evil is written into the very warp and woof of humanity after the Fall. Christianity deals honestly with the reality of evil—never denying that evil is directly traceable to the human heart. In a very genuine sense, Christians are the ultimate realists when it comes to human evil. While others speculate about the cause of such manifestly evil actions, Christians know that the human heart is capable of almost limitless evil. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?,” asked the prophet Jeremiah [Jeremiah 17:9].

The peculiar context of a military prison provided the setting for these atrocities. At best, prisons are exercises in moral compromise—necessary to protect civilization from its enemies, but always running the risk of dehumanizing both prisoners and guards.

Ted Conover, himself a former prison guard, explains, “It is a heady thing to have prisoners at your mercy.” Writing in *The New York Times*, Conover went on to relate that a military prison “has the potential to be the most heartless of worlds.” Having power over a prisoner tends to bring out the worst in some individuals, who in other circumstances would never act with such viciousness and nihilistic perversity.

The guards look so quintessentially American. The photographs depict young American men and women looking gleefully into the camera lens even as they humiliate the prisoners in their care and under their watch. For many of us, the most horrible feature of the photographs are the smiles on the American faces. These expressions of perverse pleasure are far more difficult to accept than the gruesome humiliation of the naked prisoners set before them. What can explain the smiling face of a young American woman, who shows the camera a “thumbs up” sign even as a young Iraqi man is forced to perform a sexual act in front of her? What depth of perverted imagination is required to conceive of piling naked Iraqi men on each other while forcing them to simulate sodomy?

Even as the photographs forced Americans to look directly into the face of moral depravity, the images also bring to mind what philosopher Hannah Arendt called “the banality of evil.” In her famous work, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt followed the trial of the famous Nazi war criminal. Eichmann had been directly responsible for the murder of millions of Jews in the Nazi concentration camps. After his capture by Israeli authorities, Eichmann appeared no more threatening than the average person’s next-door neighbor. During his trial, Eichmann was described in the press as having the appearance of a mere bureaucratic clerk or accountant—not the mastermind of such monstrous evil.

Again, the Christian worldview provides a corrective to the very idea that evil is a reality known only to those who would look to be threatening or who publicly declare themselves to be depraved. To the contrary, we know that evil resides in every human heart. Take away the restraining force of civilization and law, and the accountant will become a murderer.

“We’re going to live with the consequences of this for the next 40 years,” said a senior White House official [*TIME Magazine*, May 17, 2004]. He is surely right, and America had better get ready for an extended battle against terror and lawlessness. We will show our true colors by how we deal with the prison abuse crisis. The criminals—Iraqi and American—must be brought to trial and brought to justice. This is an important opportunity to show Iraqis how the rule of law works.

Just days after the prison abuse story surfaced, a terror cell associated with Al Qaeda brutally executed American businessman Nicholas Berg—supposedly in response to the prison abuse.

We must resist the temptation to moral equivalence here. The sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners is indeed a crime—but it is not tantamount to beheading an innocent civilian. The Al Qaeda thugs who killed Nicholas Berg and then sent the video around the world at least reminded us of what is at stake.

We are fighting for the survival of civilization itself. The Al Qaeda warriors who displayed Nicholas Berg’s severed head as a trophy sent the world an urgent reminder of why terror must be opposed. The tragic photos from Abu Ghraib prison remind us that even a war with noble goals can bring out the very worst in those who fight. This lesson is too

expensive to waste.

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