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## The Sexual Politics of Abu Ghraib: Hegemony, Spectacle, and the Global War on Terror

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*Revelations of the torture, murder, and maltreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq came with sensational photographs of U.S. military personnel torturing Iraqi prisoners and forcing them to perform sexualized acts. Evidence of gross violations of international law, the photographs have been used by U.S. elites to construct a discourse not about war crimes but “prisoner abuse,” some referring to the activities recorded as analogous to fraternity hazing. In this essay, I argue that the photos reflect complex reactions to the attacks of September 11, 2001, including a need to assert U.S. global dominance by punishing those who are, in American eyes, an inferior oriental enemy. The photographs are analyzed in the context of orientalism in the U.S. chain of command, a phenomenon linked to what feminists call “the politics of the gaze”—the vulnerability of women and other subalterns to virtual as well as actual violation by those in positions of domination. They are compared to evidence of other rituals of violence, such as lynching, orchestrated by elites and imitated by popular-culture entrepreneurs. The sexual politics of Abu Ghraib includes the deployment of female figures to brand, scapegoat, and repair the damage from discovery of the photographs, thereby trivializing the policies and behaviors of U.S. officials and eliding the American public’s responsibility for the continued U.S. failure to condemn, much less to halt, the torture carried out in their name.*

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News of abusive treatment, torture, and murder of detainees by U.S. military and intelligence personnel at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq shocked the world. Bursting into public view in May 2004, on CBS’s *60 Minutes II* and in a series of articles by Seymour Hersh in the *New Yorker*, the stories were accompanied by sensational photographs of naked prisoners, some engaged in simulated sexual acts. Prominent conservatives sought to minimize the significance of the photos by saying that the actions they document are merely horseplay by soldiers trying to blow off steam in a tense situation, and all in all, no worse than fraternity hazing (People for the American Way 2004).

However, the pictures tell of something more sinister. The few images of corpses convey a mix of triumph and relief: my enemy is dead (and I am still alive). They resemble snapshots taken by soldiers in other wars, for

example, pictures of enemy corpses taken by soldiers on the Western Front during World War I, some sporting jaunty epitaphs and sent as postcards to the Allied troops' families and friends (Ferguson 1998, n.p.). But most of the Abu Ghraib photographs belong to a genre that veterans rarely publish. Like the video of the execution of six Muslim prisoners at Šrebrenica that was shown at the Milošević trial in The Hague and rerun interminably on television in the Balkans during the summer of 2005, or images from the Vietnam War of U.S. soldiers posed next to piled-up bodies of dead peasants, of interrogations that ended in the shooting and burial of detainees,<sup>1</sup> or of enemy corpses mutilated after death, these are "trophies" intended for limited distribution only. Author Douglas Kahn wrote

I grew up in a military town where, during high school in the late 1960s, I saw numerous snapshots of necromutilations, of Vietcong beheaded with their cocks coming out of their mouths, brought back by older brothers of students. These were secretly passed from one person to the next in the same manner as pornographic playing cards and other taboo photos. (Douglas Kahn, quoted in Sturken 1997, 92)

From this perspective, viewers might be tempted to see the Abu Ghraib photos as depicting "normal," if extreme, reprehensible, behavior. Yet there are many elements in the ensemble of images that call for a more disturbing explanation. With a few exceptions, the subjects of these photos are not corpses. They are living persons in the thrall of powerful and sadistic captors. We see them terrified, abject, forced to perform humiliating acts, and subjected to physical torture. Their images are not harmless war souvenirs; like the Šrebrenica video, they are evidence. They document the crimes as well as the impunity with which they were committed.

I would call all these photographs pornographic, if we define pornography as a record of the violation of a subject's physical and psychic integrity. However, many Abu Ghraib images also are pornographic in the conventional sense. Their subjects are naked and lewdly posed, some with clothed American women playing dominatrix roles. These photos—some depicting corpses and brutal interrogation practices—are like stills from snuff films, statements of the utter worthlessness of the prisoners and the life-and-death power over them exercised by their captors. And, like conventional pornography, these images convey complex messages about the persons who produced them (Kuhn 1985).

In this essay, I situate the politics of Abu Ghraib in a tradition of orientalism that fetishizes and feminizes the sexuality of subject peoples as part of a strategy of domination. The photographs record rituals of violence affirming power relations between occupier and occupied (Amnesty International 2005b; Danner 2004a). Sexuality, coded according to complex cultural norms of feminine subjection to masculine power, infuses the language and acts of members of dominant groups against those they seek

to subjugate. The pornography of Abu Ghraib constitutes a field report on the production and reproduction of U.S. global dominance.

## Hegemony and Spectacle

Hierarchies of international power are outcomes of war, but war is not required to maintain a hierarchy once it is established. Maintenance of the hierarchy depends on prestige—the reputation for power (Gilpin 1981). Because prestige is the bedrock of the authority, war is always a risk for a dominant power, not simply because it uses up valuable resources but, more significantly, because war can weaken a hegemon and even bring about its defeat. Moreover, as Hannah Arendt tells us, violence negates power (1969). An unambiguously powerful actor doesn't have to inflict violence in order to rule. Subordinates may go along out of fear, but successful leaders enjoy deference because others believe in the rightness of their authority.

Policy in the Bush administration is shaped by people who are concerned to orchestrate their “messages” to convince watchers and hearers to share their vision of reality (Lemann 2003). Their pursuit of power runs on two tracks. One is ideological, signified by terms like “neoconservative,” and expressed in the policies neoconservatives devise and support, like high levels of defense spending and a willingness to intervene abroad (Mann 2004, 90–1). The other track is theatrical, motivated by the desire to ensure that the United States will remain the most powerful country in the world for generations to come—perhaps forever. The people managing this track believe that perceptions are as important as material resources in the projection of political power: *what you see is what is*. Political analyst Ron Suskind reports that,

In the summer of 2002, after I had written an article in *Esquire* that the White House didn't like . . . I had a meeting with a senior adviser to Bush. He expressed the White House's displeasure, and then he told me something that at the time I didn't fully comprehend—but which I now believe gets to the very heart of the Bush presidency.

The aide said that guys like me were “in what we call the reality-based community,” which he defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. “That's not the way the world really works anymore,” he continued. “We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.” (Suskind 2004, 50–1)

The success of Osama bin Laden on 9/11 provoked a massive effort to recreate the perception that U.S. power is both indisputable and unassailable. On 7 October 2001, President Bush launched a military attack on Afghanistan, the presumed haven of the authors of the 9/11 attacks (Woodward 2002). But this response was not enough; the president wanted to assert U.S. power in a spectacular way, to demonstrate dominance once and for all.<sup>2</sup> So shortly after U.S. forces entered Afghanistan, he initiated measures for an invasion of Iraq (Boyer 2003; Hersh 2001; Woodward 2004). While he had expected—and received—support from Americans and others for the attack on Afghanistan, it was not likely that an attack on Iraq would be as easily condoned (Wolfowitz 2003). Thus, the president constructed the ideological basis for what he had in mind by making speeches threatening war as an object lesson, identifying potential targets of U.S. military action, and foreshadowing major changes in U.S. military policy (Bush 2002a; 2002b). In September 2002, the White House produced a formal policy statement laying out a new, multi-pronged national security strategy to maintain U.S. global dominance indefinitely. It included the option of preventive war undertaken without the imprimatur of the United Nations (Bush 2002c). Such a war was launched against Iraq in March 2003.

Great attention was paid to managing the war as a spectacle. The tele-genic bombing of Baghdad was advertised in advance as a campaign to “shock and awe” (Kaplan 2003; Mann 2004, 334) while media access to the war zone was carefully restricted. Reporters were forced either to rely on official information grudgingly dispensed in Doha, Qatar, far from the front (Noujaim 2004; Rushing 2005), to “embed” with military units on the ground for a micro-level view of the conflict (Katovsky and Carlson 2003), or to travel to Iraq on their own and face a high likelihood of being injured or killed (Garrels 2003; International Federation of Journalists 2004). U.S. government control of information was not absolute, however, thanks to the reporters who braved the third option.

On 1 May 2003, the president, dressed in a flight suit, emerged from a fighter plane that had landed on the deck of the aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln*. Against the backdrop of a banner proclaiming “Mission Accomplished,” he told the assembled troops—and the viewers watching him on TV—that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed” (Bush 2003). As it turned out, however, this proclamation was premature. A combination of neoconservative ideology and belief in the magical power of spectacle had led the Bush administration to underestimate the complexity of the mission (Hirsh 2004; Johnson and Russell 2005). In their minds, the Iraqis without Saddam would gratefully accept a new government made up of U.S.-backed exiles, passively acquiesce to U.S. desires regarding their new political and economic role in the world, and gladly

pay for it all themselves out of their oil revenues (Hersh 2001). Despite detailed warnings from the “reality community” (Crane and Terrill 2003; Fallows 2002), the White House advisers and Pentagon planners failed to imagine the prospect of Iraqi agency and thus the need for an informed and attentive “post-conflict” policy.

## Orientalist Spectacles

The term “orientalist” went from a descriptive to a pejorative term with the publication of Edward Said’s influential account of “the formidable structure of cultural domination” that supported the political and economic domination of “the east” by “the west” (Said 1978, 25). Said found that orientalism permeated Western scholarship, art, and politics, underpinning a perspective from which “orientals” are viewed as exotic, Other, not “people like us.” Orientalism, like other ideologies, is a way of seeing *and not seeing*<sup>3</sup> that organizes perceptions around a particular view of reality. The messages of orientalist communication imply, when they do not proclaim, the moral and cultural inferiority of orientals and the entitlement of superior Westerners to resources held by such feckless and wicked people.

According to Leila Ahmed, although the “peculiar practices of Islam with respect to women had always formed part of the Western narrative of the quintessential otherness and inferiority of Islam,” the issue of women became the centerpiece of the Western narrative of Islam only in the nineteenth century, in conjunction with the European colonization of Muslim countries.

[T]he colonial powers . . . developed their theories of races and cultures and of a social evolutionary sequence according to which middle-class Victorian England . . . stood at the culminating point of the evolutionary process. . . . In this scheme Victorian womanhood and mores with respect to women . . . were regarded as the ideal and measure of civilization. . . . The Victorian male establishment devised theories to contest the claims of [an increasingly vocal] feminism . . . [while it] captured the language of feminism and redirected it, in the service of colonialism, toward Other men and the cultures of Other men. It was here . . . that the fusion between the issues of women and culture was created. . . . The idea that Other men, men in colonized societies or societies beyond the borders of the civilized West, oppressed women was to be used, in the rhetoric of colonialism, to render morally justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized peoples. (Ahmed 1992, 149–51)

In the nineteenth century, sexualized images of the oriental Other proliferated in popular as well as high culture. “Orientalism provided the ideal excuse to paint nudes, but since Moslem women would not sit for the artists, they . . . usually hired models [and] posed [them] in the studio,

with suitable eastern accessories. The rising class of industrialists, throwing aside the pruderies of the capital, found it cheaper and safer to buy works by living artists. These erotic pictures gave them an official excuse to enjoy scenes of odalisques and dancers, chained slaves, public baths and harems, with overtones of rape, brutality and sensuality" (Thornton 1978). Orientalism was not confined to elites. Picture postcards of "harem women" were produced in Algeria and sold to legions of male tourists, colonists, and soldiers. These postcards also featured hired models in fabulous costumes, some peering out from behind bars, while others were shown smoking or in "candid" poses that revealed breasts and bare legs.

"The postcard . . . becomes the poor man's phantasm: for a few pennies, display racks full of dreams. The postcard is everywhere, covering all the colonial space. . . . It produces stereotypes in the manner of great seabirds producing guano. It is the fertilizer of the colonial vision . . . [and] the comic strip of colonial morality." (Alloula 1986, 4)

## The Politics of the Gaze

"A cat may look at a king," remarked Alice during her adventures in Wonderland (Carroll 1865, n.p.). This statement attests less to the inability of humans to control cats than to the gulf between the power of dominant persons who have privacy and authority and others, the subjects of their proprietary scrutiny, who do not. Both the Abu Ghraib photographs and narratives and the orientalist high and popular art of the nineteenth century are examples of "the politics of the gaze" (Betterton 1987, 3–14; Wilson 1987, 166). To be "looked at" in this way is to be put in a feminine position as an object of the masculine gaze.

Pornography is the quintessential expression of the politics of the gaze (Kuhn 1985, 22–3). In the Abu Ghraib photos, Arab male captives are feminized by showing them in settings that emphasize both their sexuality and their helplessness. Perhaps the best example is the photograph of Private Lynndie England holding a leash while the other end is wrapped around the neck of a naked Arab prisoner (Danner 2004b, 219). In this now-iconic image, the power of Americans over Arabs is symbolized not only by the leash but also by the fact that the prisoner is naked while his captor is clothed. The message is enhanced by its inversion of conventional gender expectations: the man is the captive of the woman, a juxtaposition that evokes memories of the famous Vietnamese cartoon showing a very small peasant woman pointing a rifle at a very large male pilot (Tétreault 1994, 122). Another photo takes this "design for living" (Wolf 1982, 388) to a more explicit level. It shows a clothed—and grinning—American woman leaning over a pile of naked Arab men while over them all stands a large, clothed—and smiling—American man (Danner 2004b, 223). The ethnic/gender hierarchy could not be clearer.

The gaze is not reciprocal. As Alice implied, the king may look at anyone but few objects of his gaze may look back. In the Abu Ghraib photos, Americans are the kings while prisoners are stripped and posed so that every part of their bodies is available to handling by their tormenters and inspection by the camera's eye. But the prisoners are hooded, physically prevented from returning their captors' gaze; hooding literally makes the prisoners faceless, preventing guards and interrogators from seeing them as people.

## Ritual Violence and the Politics of Torture

It is important to see the events at Abu Ghraib in the context of the treatment of people who were captured and detained in the course of a war. The hoods are explained in interrogation manuals as tools to disorient prisoners (U.S. Army Field Manual 1987 34–52, cited in Bazelon, Carter, and Lithwick 2005). The prisoners are being “softened up” for interrogation, a procedure that the testimony of witnesses questioned by General Anthony Taguba and his staff during his early 2004 investigation of the Abu Ghraib allegations say was often conducted using illegal means under the Geneva Conventions—that is, torture (Greenberg and Dratel 2005, 472–528). As Elaine Scarry argues, the coupling of torture and interrogation constitutes a ritual of violence, another domain in which the basic propositions describing domination and subjection are inscribed.

Torture consists of a primary physical act, the infliction of pain, and a primary verbal act, the interrogation. The first rarely occurs without the second. . . . The connection between the physical act and the verbal act, between body and voice, is often misstated or misunderstood. Although the information sought in an interrogation is almost never credited with being a *just* motive for torture, it is repeatedly credited with being the motive for torture. (Scarry 1985, 28, emphasis in the original)

The rituals of interrogation are “repeated acts of display . . . having as its purpose the production of a fantastic illusion of power” (Scarry 1985, 28). That the audience was supposed to be limited to the prison, the “intelligence community,” and persons occupying top levels in the Bush administration does not change its character.

The Abu Ghraib pictures also call to mind René Girard's theory that ritual violence built around actual or substitutionary human sacrifice functions to draw a community together, especially when it feels itself to be under threat from outside (1977). Sacrifices break the bodies of victims before the eyes of the community in rituals that remind its members of the core values they share. Ritualized criminality “create[s] a climate in which other [such acts], even when unaccompanied by ritual, seem legitimate” (Brundage 1993, 440). One example from American history was

elite-sanctioned and guided “sacrificial lynching” (Patterson 1998), which gave permission for entrepreneurial imitations such as vigilante lynching and the many “normal” acts of domination such as expropriations, beatings, and rapes that members of the community could engage in with impunity as long as the perpetrators were white and the victims were black. Even after slavery was legally abolished, a tacit, *de facto* version of the South’s “peculiar institution” and the methods used to reproduce its values and practices persisted throughout much of the twentieth century (Ehrenhaus and Owen 2005; McWhorter 2001).

The Abu Ghraib photographs do not record ritual sacrifice; they show vigilantes imitating the criminal behavior enacted in ritual interrogations.<sup>4</sup> The perpetrators of the acts recorded in the pictures were subalterns who knew that their behavior was “wrong” in some sense but also knew that it was tacitly sanctioned and sometimes openly encouraged as an instrumental contribution to the “success” of interrogations. The photos also show that the way interrogations were—*are?*—conducted was accepted by the prison “community” (CBS News 2004b; Danner 2004a; Dratel 2005; Frontline 2005; Greenberg 2005). The full set of uncropped photographs also reveals the public nature of the crimes committed, contradicting assertions that instances of vigilantism and ritual interrogation at Abu Ghraib were the sole responsibility of “a few bad apples.” Several include images of spectators and bystanders. Like harem postcards, lynching postcards (Allen 2000; Ehrenhaus and Owen 2005), and the photos of mutilated Vietnamese corpses that circulated furtively among adolescent acquaintances of Douglas Kahn, the Abu Ghraib photos widened the scope of normalization as they circulated among select groups of colleagues and friends. They were “commodities” within the prison walls—one of the computers in Abu Ghraib’s office of military intelligence even used the now-famous image of naked detainees arranged in a pyramid as a screen saver (Fay 2004, 514)—and knowledge and stories about the photos were propagated outside Abu Ghraib as personnel cycled in and out and news about the events was shared with e-mail correspondents (Hersh 2004). Insofar as their existence went unreported or, when reported, ignored, the Abu Ghraib photos show that vigilantism as well as the torture of prisoners during interrogation were accepted if not condoned beyond the individuals involved and also beyond the walls of Abu Ghraib.

## The Sexual Politics of Abu Ghraib

At last we arrive at the sexual politics of Abu Ghraib, which has an inside dimension relating to the acts themselves, and an outside dimension that has shaped social responses in the United States since the photographs became public. Inside, women were used to humiliate and torment

prisoners in the vigilante acts captured by the photos. Narratives and other documents reveal that women were similarly used to extract “information” from prisoners in interrogation settings.<sup>5</sup> Outside, the participation of women domesticated these acts, making them seem trivial rather than criminal. Reporters and commentators fastened their attention on the women, deflecting attention from both those who organized the torture events and those who endured them.

The Abu Ghraib images and documents describe violations of the captives’ bodily integrity, masculine self-image, and religious rules about cleanliness. Photos show naked victims arranged in piles, smeared with filth, and forced to simulate sexual acts. Their manhood is disparaged in many ways. Indeed, they are feminized—unmanned—by the gaze of their captors who strip them, scrutinize and manipulate their bodies, taunt them, and create pornography out of their humiliation by taking pictures of them.<sup>6</sup> Documents from and about Abu Ghraib and other U.S. prisons holding Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) captives speak repeatedly of prisoners being stripped and interrogated for long periods of time by women as well as by men; being forced to wear women’s panties on their heads; and being physically violated, beaten and sodomized, and subjected to women’s intrusions on their bodily privacy. The prisoners’ spiritual integrity also is assaulted, by being unable to pray when they are bound, naked, or dirty; by being forced to simulate sinful sexual acts; and by the actions of female guards and interrogators intended to create other near occasions of sin and contamination, all of which evoke religious dread in those who are devout.<sup>7</sup>

Women are even more useful outside, where they focus popular outrage away from the men responsible for the GWOT prison system and from the conduct of U.S. personnel stationed there. The image of Private Lynndie England dressed in her t-shirt, camouflage pants, and Army boots became the logo of the Abu Ghraib scandal (Cagle n.d.). The mainstream press featured her in their stories (CBS News 2004a); cartoonists and commentators speculated on her upbringing, education, intelligence, and morals (Cagle n.d.; San Francisco Bay Area Independent Media Center 2004); when lists of participants were compiled, her name usually appeared at the top (Hirsh and Barry 2005). Private Charles Graner, identified in the narratives and in court martial testimony as the orchestrator of the photographed prisoner abuse, also received his share of criticism, but the image of Lynndie England is one of the two instantly recognizable icons of the scandal.

The psychology of deflection by Lynndie is clearly illustrated in an editorial written by an Oklahoma publisher following the rejection of England’s guilty plea at her court martial in May 2005.

Thank goodness a military court judge had the wisdom and courage to throw out the guilty plea by the U.S. army girl private that she “abused” those

murderous Abu Ghraib war criminals. Somebody had convinced PFC Lynndie England she had committed a terrible wrong worth 16 years imprisonment. Sending that young lady to prison for, at worst, humiliating those Saddam soldiers out to kill Americans, would have been one of the worst injustices ever to occur in our military judicial system. . . . There was no torture, no abuse, no physical injury of any kind, no scandal. . . . Actually, our guards and interrogators should have done something that would have scared the hell out of them until they talked and revealed the names and location of ringleaders of current lethal insurgencies. Let's get it straight. There was not one drop of blood lost by any of those prisoners. Not a bone was broken. Not a bruise was inflicted. Not a scratch. (Gourley 2005, n.p.)

The Gourley editorial is an egregious example of seeing and not seeing. Appearing to be solicitous of her welfare in praising the judge for rejecting England's guilty plea, Gourley omits the fact that her lawyers believed it was her "best shot at leniency." He also fails to report that her chances to limit her time in prison were "ruined" by the testimony of the man who had fathered a child with her during her time at Abu Ghraib—Charles Graner (Zernike 2005).<sup>8</sup> To anyone who had seen the photos of prisoners being squashed, beaten, and mocked after death (Danner 2004b, 217, 221–4; 2004a), Gourley's omissions are heightened by the obvious falseness of his statement that "not one drop of blood [was] lost. . . . Not a bone was broken. . . . Not a bruise [or a] . . . scratch." For Gourley, the sum total of U.S. actions at Abu Ghraib is contained in the photos of Lynndie England, smoking, smirking, and touching, but never wounding the bodies of prisoners.

Lynndie England is the popular face of the scandal. Another woman, General Janis Karpinski, is the official scapegoat:

Although some 10 Pentagon investigations have highlighted "systemic" problems in the Iraqi operation, they found that higher-level officials issued no policies nor orders that could have led to the prisoner abuses that were aired around the world in a series of graphic photos. Only two senior officers with direct command responsibility for Abu Ghraib—Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski and Col. Thomas Pappas—have been reprimanded, but not prosecuted, for their oversight of the facility. (Bowers 2005)

Janis Karpinski believed even before the photos became public that she would be saddled with command responsibility for the crimes committed at Abu Ghraib. In her sworn statement to General Antonio Taguba, on 11 February 2004, she said:

I think that General Sanchez is [pause] I think that his ego will not allow him to accept a Reserve Brigade, a Reserve General Officer and certainly not a female succeeding in a combat environment. And I think he looked at the 800th MP Brigade as the opportunity to find a scapegoat for anything that his active component MI Brigade or his active component MP Brigade was failing at. And if I

was not capable, why didn't he tell me? Why didn't somebody tell me sit down and let me give you some suggestions because when DEPSECDEF Wolfowitz came into the theater, the first time he came out to Baghdad Central he stayed an extra hour and forty-five minutes because he was so proud of me and what the MPs were doing. (quoted in Greenberg and Dratel 2005, 542)

Those who chose to focus on the sex of General Karpinski, like those who chose to focus on that of Lynndie England, could reframe the meaning of the torture and humiliation taking place at Abu Ghraib as nothing more than what might have been expected from putting a woman in charge of a group of impressionable young men. As she does on other issues, Ann Coulter takes the prize for the most colorful expressions of such scorn,

I think the other point that no one is making about the abuse photos is just the disproportionate number of women involved, including a girl general running the entire operation. I mean, this is lesson, you know, one million and 47 on why women shouldn't be in the military. In addition to not being able to carry even a medium-sized backpack, women are too vicious. (quoted in People for the American Way 2004)

A third woman completed the domestication of Abu Ghraib when she was sent to clean up the diplomatic mess resulting from the scandal. In December 2005, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice traveled in Europe where she had to respond at every stop to questions about prisoner interrogation. Despite her repeated insistence that "the United States does not permit, tolerate or condone torture," the U.S. position remained at best ambiguous because Rice failed to respond to queries about what constitutes torture in the eyes of the Bush administration. Even so, after a difficult week, an Associated Press photo published on 9 December 2005, showed Rice at the center of a large group of smiling NATO foreign ministers. The Dutch foreign minister, Ben Bot, reflected some of the thoughts behind those smiles when he told *New York Times* reporter Joel Brinkley, "I think we have gotten . . . all the satisfactory answers we can hope for" (A6).

## Making Sense of Abu Ghraib

It is not clear that we can make more sense of Abu Ghraib than the Dutch foreign minister, at least, not yet. As I have tried to show, the scandal is symptomatic of Americans' moral confusion and unwillingness either to confront problems in U.S. leadership and policy or to examine the role of the United States in the world. Those who dismiss the vigilantism at Abu Ghraib as trivial or understandable deny the reality of the ritual interrogation that informs it. Indeed, although most Americans accept the idea that torture and abuse are horrible, a majority believe that torture is part of the

price we have to pay to keep ourselves safe (Kull et al. 2004; Pew Research Center 2005; Bowden 2003; Lelyveld 2005). U.S. personnel serving at Abu Ghraib are a microcosm of America. Not all of the individuals witnessing or participating in these activities condoned them, but most did. Whistle-blower, Specialist Joseph Darby was the only one at Abu Ghraib who stood against what he saw as illegal acts, a confirmation of the success of ritual violence as a strategy for normalization. Following the release of Darby's name, Associated Press and Reuters reported that he and his wife had to be placed in protective custody, and that members of his family in the United States had received death threats.

The numbed acceptance of what the photos and narratives reveal is a response to the always-present threat of vigilante action, such as the death threats against the Darbys, and to the denial that emanates from the top level of the U.S. government. Together, they induce moral and political paralysis (see Danner 2005b). Despite the wide exposure of the Abu Ghraib scandal in the press, and the streams of supporting documents, testimonies, and reports, American political culture seems to be paralyzed—unable to demand both a full and unbiased account of how prisoners are treated at U.S. detention facilities, and a set of transparent procedures for the future. Meanwhile, like the statements by Condoleezza Rice, official responses to the scandal have been either cosmetic or artfully strategic (Amnesty International 2005a). The rules governing interrogation were officially modified on 30 December 2004, prior to U.S. Senate hearings on the appointment of Alberto Gonzalez, the man who had dismissed the Geneva Conventions as “quaint” (U.S. Department of Justice 2004), to the position of attorney general. But news reports since then confirm that prisoner torture continues at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere in the GWOT system. When Gonzalez was confirmed by the U.S. Senate, Mark Danner wrote, “we are all torturers now” (Danner 2005).

Some Americans may prefer to deny the existence of ritual torture and the significance of prisoner abuse because they sense that it is part of the apparatus of what Campbell Craig calls “American imperialism,” a policy that promises safety from terrorists, continued cheap oil, and a buy-now-pay-later lifestyle that few expect to be billed for in their lifetimes (Craig 2004, 161, 166). Yet like white citizens at a lynching, Americans contemplating Abu Ghraib may have mixed feelings about the violence committed in their names. Yes, torture is a scandal when news of it penetrates the media and outsiders criticize us by comparing our words to our actions. At the same time, we remain convinced that it is the price we have to pay for that full shopping cart, abundant gasoline, and victory in the global war on terror. However it plays outside the United States or on television sets across the country, the spectacle of Abu Ghraib is an outward sign of the hidden rituals that, since 9/11, distinguish Americans from others. Abu Ghraib has brought us together. And yes, we are all torturers now.

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## Notes

1. Several photos of stacked bodies in destroyed hamlets were shown by the photographer-veteran to one of my classes in 1987. I own copies of a short series of photos of the interrogation and its aftermath given to me by a relative of another photographer.
2. The president had complained to Condoleezza Rice that responding to individual al-Qaeda attacks, such as the one on the *USS Cole* made shortly before he took office, was like "swatting flies," and that he was tired of it. He told her he preferred to take a "comprehensive" approach (Rice 2004).
3. "Seeing and not-seeing" is analogous to Stanley Cohen's "knowing and not-knowing." Information is "somehow repressed, disavowed, pushed aside or reinterpreted . . . or . . . 'registers' well enough, but its implications—cognitive, emotion or moral—are evaded, neutralized, or rationalized away" (Cohen 2001,1).
4. The strenuous efforts of the Bush administration to establish counterarguments defending the legality of their interrogation practices shows that these practices were believed to be potentially, if not actually, criminal (Ashcroft 2002/2004; Bush 2001/2004; Bybee 2002/2004; Gonzalez 2002/2004; Yoo 2002/2004).
5. I put "information" in quotes to express my doubts about the instrumental value of what prisoners tell those who torture them. In this, I agree with the interrogators described in Bowden (2003) and Mayer (2005) who believe that skill trumps torture in producing useful information. A pertinent example can be found in the 9 December 2005 story in the *New York Times* by Douglas Jehl that summarizes previous piecemeal and now discredited reports tying Saddam Hussein to al-Qaeda as having come from a prisoner who was tortured and subsequently recanted his story.
6. Many such sessions are described in the statements in Greenberg and Dratel (2005, 471–527). On page 505, you can read testimony about a tormented son

forced to watch his father stripped and humiliated. Few sources available when this paper was written—one exception is Hersh (2004)—offered much information about the systematic rape and torture of female prisoners, now seeping into public media thanks to the capture of Jill Carroll, a reporter for the *Christian Science Monitor*, whose captors offered to release her after all female prisoners at Abu Ghraib were freed. At this writing, women remain at Abu Ghraib although Jill Carroll was released unharmed on 30 March 2006.

7. One account from Guantánamo Bay tells of a prisoner who was smeared with a red liquid by a female interrogator who told him it was menstrual blood. The legality of such techniques is questionable under both the Geneva Conventions and the Uniform Code of Military Justice (Bazelon, Carter, and Lithwick 2005; Gebhardt 2005).
8. Two days earlier, Lynndie England had learned that her lover had married another Abu Ghraib vigilante, Megan M. Ambuhl, who had pleaded guilty to the two lesser of four violations and been discharged from the Army (Zernike 2005). On 26 September 2005, England received a three-year sentence for her participation in the Abu Ghraib vigilantism. Graner is serving ten years for his part in these crimes.

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