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Tortured Logic

by Michael Coblenz

It is the policy of the Bush administration that terrorists are evil and not entitled to the protections of the laws of war or the laws of the United States, yet they acted outraged when American soldiers abused prisoners in Iraq. Do they really think they can have it both ways?

The statements of outrage over the abuse of Iraqi prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad were predictable. After the story broke on Sixty Minutes II, President Bush said, "I shared a deep disgust that those prisoners were treated the way they were treated. Their treatment does not reflect the nature of the American people. That's not the way we do things in America." Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, appeared Sunday on CBS's Face the Nation and said the abuse of detainees was isolated, and asserted that it was not representative of the U.S. military policy. "It's important to realize," he said by way of justification, "that it was American soldiers that turned these people in, and that as soon as we found out about it, we took very quick action to investigate that situation." Everyone seems to believe that these acts were done by poorly trained and poorly led soldiers, if not by rouge soldiers acting against orders.

I am also very surprised by this incident, but for a different reason. When I was in the Air Force, I was told that the military considers physical torture ineffective and often counterproductive. I was a B-52 navigator, and during training learned about various interrogation methods. The purpose was to prepare us crew should we ever be shot down and captured. We learned that physical intimidation and torture was common, but fairly ineffective. We were told that the most effective forms of interrogation involved sensory deprivation (constant light, dark, cold, hot, etc.) was a great way to disorient a prisoner and reduce resistance, and that sleep deprivation was one of the best ways to confuse a prisoner and gain valuable information from him.

This information was recently reiterated in a cover story in the Atlantic Monthly ("The Dark Art of Interrogation" by Mark Bowden; The Atlantic Monthly; Oct 2003; Vol. 292, Iss. 3:). Recently separated military interrogators stated that physical harassment and torture was not part of military standard operating procedures. So in a way I am very surprised that the guards at Abu Ghraib acted this way.

But on the other hand I am not surprised at all. I spent seven years in the military and the vast majority of the people I served with during that time were deeply conservative. One element of their worldview was a tendency to see the world in Manichean terms, as a struggle of good versus evil. In their view the United States was 'good,' much of the rest of the world was bad, and certain parts of the world were 'evil.' That's what President Reagan meant when he called the Soviet Union the "Evil Empire."

The Soviet Union is long gone, but international terrorism has replaced communism as the evil force in the world that threatens the United States. Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, President Bush has repeatedly called the terrorists evil.

There are two problems when confronted with an enemy that is considered evil. The first is that evil does not play by the same rules as good, and the second is that someone who is evil can easily be considered less than human. Both play into the possible willingness of American forces to abuse prisoners.

It is axiomatic that evil does not play by, or more importantly fight by, the same rules as good. Countries that believe in the rule of law follow the rules set out by various laws. The United States and all nations adhere to the Geneva Convention, which is a United Nations document that sets out the basic rules of law. The United States has adopted the Geneva Convention as an international treaty, and as such it has the weight of law. Terrorist organizations are not nations and do not adhere to the laws of nations. Al Qaeda is not a signatory to the U.N. Charter or the Geneva Convention.

In fighting terrorism the United States is confined by the rules of war, but the terrorists are not. Some believe that because of this, the United States is effectively fighting terrorism with one hand tied behind its back. The Bush administration accepts this view, which is why it has been taking suspected terrorists to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The Bush Administration tacitly admits that it is detaining terror suspects at Guantanamo so they are beyond the jurisdiction of American courts.

The validity of this idea is currently before the United States Supreme Court. But whether or not the Bush Administration wins the case, they have clearly asserted that terrorists should not be afforded the protections of the Geneva Convention.

The other issue is that someone evil can easily be seen as less than human. This is particularly true when those people have engaged in heinous acts that shock the human conscious. How would you treat someone who is evil and trying to destroy your society? Most of us would be hard pressed to treat them decently. It is not difficult to imagine, therefore, that soldiers who are confronted daily by attacks might bear some animosity towards their attackers, and might view them as less than human.

Most soldiers probably bore little animosity towards the Iraqi soldiers they encountered during the initial invasion of Iraq. But this new insurgency is something quite different, and it is easy to equate the insurgents with terrorists. In fact, President Bush has called them terrorists. From the

news reports I have read, the prisoners who were abused were housed in a special wing of the Abu Ghraib prison that was reserved for suspected terrorists.

It is possible that the soldiers who abuse prisoners might just be bad apples. Or they might be poorly trained. But if the problem is leadership, it runs all the way to the top. Maybe immediate supervisors (or intelligence officers in the prison) told the guards that it was acceptable to mistreat prisoners, or perhaps they said not to abuse the prisoners. We shall eventually learn what immediate supervisors told the soldiers.

We know that the Commander in Chief told these soldiers that the prisoners are evil, and that they did not deserve to be treated properly. We also know that he is once again trying to disavow the impact of his words. But given that President Bush has continually called terrorists evil and has asserted that they should not be afforded treatment according to the rule of law, is it any wonder that some soldiers take him at his word?

Michael Coblenz is a writer and attorney from Lexington, Kentucky. He served in the United States Air Force from 1983 to 1990.

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