

What Did You Expect? *Roger Buehl*

News reports about abuses by U.S. soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison captured the attention of the nation and the world. There were some related news reports noting abuses and even deaths at the twenty Afghani prisons and questioning the harsh conditions and interrogation tactics being employed at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility. But the primary news focus has been on the Abu Ghraib prison abuses because graphic details and photos supported those reports. Over the past months we heard the stories about atrocities and coercive interrogation tactics, and we have seen the photos of soldiers grinning, gesticulating and standing atop bound and dead prisoners. The guilty-plea statement by Spc. Jeremy Sivits detailing what he witnessed during his one visit to the Abu Ghraib prison is truly shocking. The general public and many in the U.S. Congress have expressed surprise, disgust and outrage at the soldiers' conduct, and rightfully so. In contrast, the reaction and "apology" by the president and his cabinet appeared insincere and contrived, directed more to "damage control" than anything else. What astounds me is that Americans generally, and the politicians in particular, did not anticipate or expect that this sort of thing was going on!

As a state prisoner of twenty-plus years, there was absolutely no question in my mind that alleged Al-Qaeda, Taliban and Iraqi prisoners and detainees were being subjected to severe conditions and coercive interrogation tactics. Anyone familiar with human nature in the prison context, and even slightly cynical about the many confessions obtained, could have arrived at the same conclusion. My own experiences and observations in the state prison system have taught me how many otherwise normal individuals can become vicious, even intoxicated, with the power and control they exercise over prisoners' lives. But the prison policy makers, administrators and supervisors ultimately control what is considered acceptable, regardless of legal limits, because prison guards almost always test the bounds of their "authority" to demean, degrade and abuse those in their custody.

In the late 1980s a major riot and some smaller riots occurred in Pennsylvania prisons. Those incidents, together with the general "get tough on crime" rage at the time, resulted in the enactment of ever-stricter sentencing laws and harsher punitive measures. The anti-prisoner fervor inspired guards to mistreat prisoners in any way they wanted — not because the laws allowed for abuse, which they did not, but because public outrage, righteous indignation and retributive impulses drove the unofficial policy to permit it.

(It is no mere coincidence that Spc. Charles Graner — one of the soldiers at the center of the Iraqi abuse scandal — was a guard at Pennsylvania’s State Correctional Institution-Greene during some of the worst abuses there.) Of course, prisoners, their families and prisoner advocacy organizations reported the abuses, but the majority of such reports or complaints were disregarded, buried or, at best, given cursory and deferential review. It was not until the “get tough on crime” attitude relented and incontrovertible proof (including videos) of abuse was publicly exposed that the systemic abuse and mistreatment of state prisoners was curbed. A similar theme appears to be playing out now in current international events.

After the 9-11 attacks the president characterized the “war” as a good-versus-evil fight wherein “anything goes” in getting the bad guys. The comfortable bubble of denial has been burst wide open with pictures of U.S. soldiers abusing and degrading prisoners, using snarling, biting dogs, compelling sexual acts, taunting, degrading poses and deprivations of basic human needs. And really, what did Americans expect?!

In an effort to maintain the fiction that the U. S. abhors the abuse and murder of enemy prisoners, the president promised that those responsible would be held accountable. No doubt some of the soldiers who served at or supervised the Abu Ghraib prison and a general or two (perhaps Sanchez and /or Karpinski) will have been disciplined by the time this article is published. But they are just scapegoats, offered up to divert attention from those who are ultimately responsible.¹

Clearly the atrocities and coercive interrogations were not some isolated incidents at one prison; they are merely representative of the systemic norm engendered by the “anything goes” attitude, which has prevailed since the 9-11 attacks. Those truly responsible (i.e., the Bush Administration) played on American’s outrage and fears, and ordered or at least condoned those harsh conditions and abusive, coercive interrogation tactics employed by soldiers and intelligence officers. To identify those individuals we need only look to who has taken advantage of the 9-11 attacks for political gain. Who ignored the many reports and complaints about the atrocities? Who suppressed or delayed the news media reports, and who even now denies, spins or minimizes the truth? (Any parole board would find such denials and evasions indicative of an unwillingness to take responsibility, implying a lack of remorse and rendering the applicant unfit for release into our society!)

Perhaps our society is changing, willing now to elevate “necessity” over morality and old values. If that is true, then maybe we should be honest about it and commend those responsible for doing the distasteful, dirty deeds necessary to preserve national security against a fanatic, deadly enemy, instead of sacrificing them upon the altar of hypocrisy.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ For more information see: <http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=05/10/26/1423248>

The author is 46 and has served 23 years on a life sentence. He is a paralegal employed as a legal aide at SCI-Albion’s law library. He can be contacted by writing to: Roger Buehl, AM-7936, SCI-Albion, 10745 Route 18, Albion, PA 16475.