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Sunday, July 11, 2004

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perspective

## POWs: A step toward barbarism

The Sunday Denver Post reaches about 800,000 readers.

By Brad Chittim

### Editor's note::

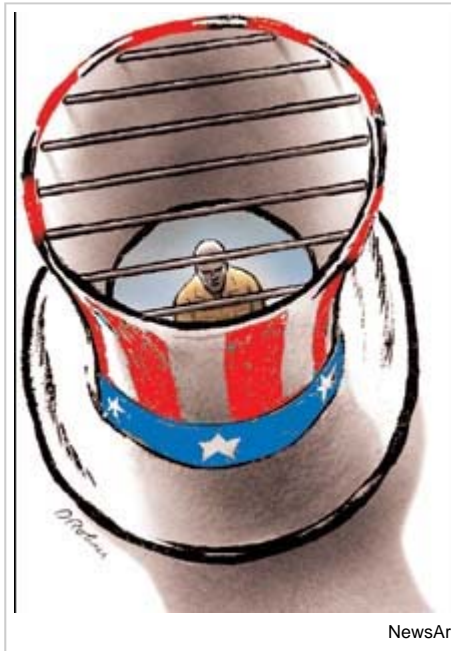
The video of Saddam Hussein in the dock has momentarily pushed aside the images of grinning American soldiers and naked Iraqi prisoners, but the abuse of prisoners in Iraq is a story that hasn't gone away.

Reporting by Post writers Arthur Kane and Miles Moffeit has found that interrogation techniques banned at the Guantanamo Bay detention center were used across Iraq, and a hearing is expected this month on charges against four Fort Carson soldiers accused in the drowning death of an Iraqi detainee.

The treatment of prisoners in Iraq started an uncomfortable debate in this country - people don't even agree on whether "abuse" or "torture" should be used to describe what happened.

Today's Perspective adds two Colorado voices to the discussion, University of Colorado history professor Padraic Kenney and former Army interrogator Brad Chittim.

We'd like to hear what you have to say as well. See the instructions on page 2E and send us a letter to the editor. We'll publish a selection in next week's Perspective.



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- *Todd Engdahl, Perspective Editor*

As a former Army interrogator, I was shocked to see the reports and photographs coming from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

But, before rushing to judgment about the practices at Abu Ghraib, Americans should take a minute to gain a better understanding of interrogation as it is supposed to be practiced in the U.S. Army.

Military intelligence soldiers train at Fort Huachuca in Arizona. In 1991, I spent about 75 days in classes and field training learning to get information from enemy prisoners of war.

Nothing in the Army interrogation training I received in the early 1990s - before deployment to Europe during the waning days of the Cold War - would have condoned many of the acts committed by soldiers at Abu Ghraib toward the prisoners there. Clearly lines were crossed.

The big black line, never to be violated, was beating, torturing, sexually abusing or causing the death of a prisoner. These principles are encoded in the documents we studied: Army Field Manual 27-10, The Law of Land Warfare, and the Geneva Convention.

On the other hand, we were taught that certain techniques, what you might call "mind games," are acceptable.

A good interrogator is a cross between a used-car salesman and a journalist. A good interrogator will say or do almost anything to get a prisoner to talk - then pursue mundane questioning focused on the who, what, where, when, why and how of the prisoner's knowledge.

The operative words are "almost anything." The Army I served in was unambiguously clear as to what was acceptable behavior from its interrogators. There were no "good ol' boy" winks, nods or elbow pokes in the ribs.

I served in Germany with many Gulf War veterans. They relayed that the overwhelming majority of prisoners there "broke" on direct questioning. Sometimes, though, coercion is required to get prisoners talking.

And humiliation is an acceptable tactic to achieve this.

War is a dirty business. In some people's minds, humiliation is torture. But I believe that it's naive to think that a prisoner won't be insulted, both verbally and behaviorally. In reality, his captors will denigrate him, his

comrades, his mother, his sister and his God if that's what it takes to get him to talk.

The prisoner will be made to strip and be searched. And by searched, I mean surgical-glove-clad hands exploring every body cavity. He'll be forced to wear distinctive clothing, to sit for endless hours in stress positions, and be subjected to "white noise" recordings.

He'll be bound, hooded and segregated from his comrades to prevent collaboration in the creation of escape plans. His sleep and eating schedules will be varied. And he'll be interrogated for interminable hours. All these things are designed to break down the will to resist. That brings us to Abu Ghraib prison.

My concern with the pictures coming out of Abu Ghraib is that they hurt our war effort. The taking and circulation of the pictures was a bad tactical mistake. These pictures also detailed what I perceive to be a decided lack of professionalism among the soldiers. They appeared to be playing a game. Apparently they felt that the prisoners at Abu Ghraib were there for their personal amusement.

The comments I've heard in the news from the accused at Abu Ghraib prison aren't comforting, either. "I was just following orders," and "I didn't know." These statements point to woefully inadequate training. American military tenets state that it is not only a soldier's right to refuse an unlawful order, but an obligation to do so. Training should have, at the very least, imparted the knowledge that it was unacceptable to torture, beat, sexually abuse or cause the death of a prisoner.

Ultimately, what happened is a poor reflection on the Army leadership. These soldiers were failed by their leaders during training, and failed again during daily operations at Abu Ghraib. It is reasonable to expect that the leadership should have known about these activities and moved to stop them.

Even more troubling to me is that these activities were not limited to Abu Ghraib. A prisoner died during an interrogation at a detention facility some 200 miles away, in Qaim, Iraq.

The purpose of intelligence is to collect information that will aid in the defeat of the enemy and save American lives.

There are those who suggest that the ends justify the means, that the consequences of not getting the information could be catastrophic, resulting in a massive loss of American lives. If the stakes are really that high, why would the only strategy available to us be the torture of prisoners? If the consequences of failure to obtain

information are that dire, doesn't it make sense to implement many, and far more effective, strategies to get intelligence?

Morally, I believe that making torture acceptable will move us toward barbarism. It also will stifle the creativity required to create and implement better solutions for gathering usable intelligence. It will harm our efforts by outraging the local populace - with good reason. It will defile the very principles of this country. It's un-American.

I believe that the Army will act decisively, doling out harsh punishments, and restore professional standards in the treatment of prisoners. And I believe that our leaders will ultimately create and deploy more effective strategies to gather the intelligence we need.

*Brad Chittim is an Army veteran with master's degree in international relations from Boston University; freelance writer in Denver.*

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