

# This torture started at the very top

## A profound racism infects the US and British establishments

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The media in this country is politely shocked at photos of Iraqis being tortured and humiliated by US and British soldiers. A BBC1 news presenter says the pictures seem to have been "merely mementos". That's all right, then. The folks at home will have a good laugh and paste them into the family album.

In the first half of the last century, the French in Algeria and Morocco used to send home postcards of prostitutes posing sullenly, with breasts bared and skirts pulled up to their thighs, over captions like "Le harem Arabe" or "Fille Mauresque". The Americans have pushed it further: their pornography of occupation is at once more childish, playful, crude and sinister than that of "old Europe". Also, we assume the prostitutes were paid.

BBC commentators and British politicians have been reminding us that the soldiers' activities "do not compare with Saddam Hussein's systematic tortures and executions". Hussein is now the moral compass of the west.

The media are fearful that these images will go down badly in the Arab world because "they show Muslim men being humiliated by American women". Again the not-so-subtle reduction of the Arab world to an entity that reacts only to religious prodding. Actually the photographs have confirmed people's belief that the US and Britain are not in Iraq as an act of goodwill. They have strengthened the feeling that there is a deep racism underlying the occupiers' attitudes to Arabs, Muslims and the third world generally.

It was only a matter of time. In the past year the world has seen photos of many Iraqis stripped with their wrists tied behind their backs with plastic cord. At first we could look into their eyes and bear witness to what was happening. Then they were bagged. At no point was there an outcry.

We have grown used to seeing Arab men bound and hooded, in the occupied territories and Gaza. Israel advises the US on how to control civilians and interrogate them. Ariel Sharon has made the Israeli army's "rules of engagement" available to the US military. The world notes the similarity between the practices of the US army in Iraq and those of the Israeli army in Palestine. There is evidence that scenes like the ones now shocking the world have been common in "Facility 1391" (Israel's secret prison), and some say in other jails. We just haven't seen the photos.

It is no use for US spokesmen to talk about "rogue elements", how "contractors"

are not answerable to the military and how Staff Sergeant Chip Frederick had not read the Geneva conventions before taking charge of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. This abuse is going to turn out to be widespread. Amnesty International has already said it is systematic.

The acts in the photos being flashed across the networks would not have taken place but for the profound racism that infects the American and British establishments. At squaddie level, Sarah Oliver reports in the Mail on Sunday that "the British soldiers loathe the dirtiness of Iraq and the native population's slothfulness, kleptomania and determination to do as little as possible for themselves".

There have been reports of US troops outside Falluja talking of the fun of being a sniper, of the different ways to kill people, of the "rat's nest" that needs cleaning out. Some will say soldiers will be soldiers. But that language has been used by neocons at the heart of the US administration; both Kenneth Adelman and Paul Wolfowitz have spoken of "snakes" and "draining the swamps" in the "uncivilised parts of the world". It is implicit in the US administration's position that anyone who does not agree that all of history has been moving towards a glorious pinnacle expressed in the US political, ideological and economic system has "rejected modernity"; that it is America's mission to civilise and to punish.

I've seen a photo of a young American soldier with two Iraqi boys. There is no nakedness or torture, but it is no less nasty for that. The boys are holding a cardboard sign. They and the soldier are smiling and doing a thumbs up. He is pointing at the cardboard sign, on which he's written: "Lcpl Boudreaux killed my Dad. then he knocked up my sister!" Imagine the scene: Lance Corporal Boudreaux, a soldier on a liberating, civilising mission, asks the natives to pose for a "memento". He gives them the sign to hold. What lie did he tell them about its message? "Iraq is liberated", or "Mission accomplished"? And who, in this scene, is the more civilised?

The one good thing in all of this is that there are soldiers in the US and British armies who could not live with what was happening and who blew the whistle. The world needs to see the photos coming out of Iraq not as "deviant" but as an authentic message from the heart of the thought system that is seeking to control our planet.