

# A Debacle in the Battle for Hearts and Minds

By Pascale Combelles Siegel | May 13, 2004

A major battle in the “War on Terror” was lost last month and not a shot was fired.

It was lost when the now all-too-familiar images of Americans torturing and humiliating Iraqi prisoners were seared into the minds of thinking persons around the world. These images show a sort of mistreatment tailor-made for creating outrage in the Arab world: naked Iraqi bodies piled in a miserable human pyramid, simulated sexual acts directed by an American female soldier.

Defeating terrorism is directly dependent on the conversion of hearts and minds—to the winning over of the majority of Arab and Islamic individuals so terrorists will lose their base of support and source of future recruits.

However, goodwill to the United States—already under significant strain—has now plummeted throughout the Arab and Islamic communities, and through much of the rest of the world. Our oft-proclaimed lofty objectives and high ideals seem a mockery in light of evidence of systemic mistreatment of Iraqis in those very same facilities in which Saddam’s henchmen tortured and executed thousands.

All thoughtful Americans should share dismay over the abuse of prisoners by the U.S. Army and U.S. contractors in Iraq, the mounting international reaction to the images, and the long-term damage this will undoubtedly do to the standing of the United States around the world.

Due to my experience working with the U.S. military—including deployed time in Bosnia—I feel certain that these “incidents” represent an exception, rather than the rule, to the normal behavior of our military personnel. This, though, is not necessarily the view shared around the world and the “damage control” efforts to date are unlikely to convince many otherwise.

Sadly, the damage done has only been magnified by the Bush Administration’s inept response to the situation. As part of the *60 Minutes* report of April 28, Dan Rather confessed that CBS had delayed reporting this story for a week at the personal request of General Richard Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Since the broadcast, Gen. Myers told a talk show that he had yet to read the Army’s investigative reports into prison abuse. On May 3, the Pentagon’s press spokesman, Larry DiRita, told the nation that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had yet to read the reports—or even be briefed on them!

Perhaps the Defense Department did not view this as a serious issue in the war on terrorism. That in itself suggests a fundamental lack of understanding of a fundamental element of the war. General Myers, however, did think enough of it to make the extremely unusual request for a delayed broadcast.

He told ABC’s *This Week* he did so because he “thought it would be particularly inflammatory at the time.” But what did the Administration do with the extra time. After the disastrous footage finally aired, there was no clear Pentagon or, more critically, overall U.S. government, approach to the situation to extinguish the firestorm of predictable outrage.

They could have initiated large-scale suspensions of involved personnel, or sent civilian experts in incarceration to Iraq, or even appeal to international organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross, Human Rights Watch, and the Arab League to join in an open investigation into the treatment of prisoners. Instead of some form of comprehensive and aggressive response, there was an effort to blame the most junior personnel with a seeming whitewashing of any responsibility by senior military officers or their civilian overseers. Secretary

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Rumsfeld's testimony before Congress last Friday, despite his apology, did nothing substantial to address any of these issues.

Either the Department of Defense did not warn anyone of the looming crisis, or else the entire Administration failed to connect the dots. What happened during that week-plus broadcasting delay? What meetings did the Bush Administration hold to develop plans to minimize the damage that would occur when the world press picked up the images and the furor began?

There is no sign that they did anything to prepare. The Administration's befuddled response to outrage around the world is transforming a defeat in the battle for hearts and minds into a debacle.

Let us face facts: Americans will die due to this debacle. They will die in the short term through attacks by outraged Iraqis on our forces or civilians in Iraq. In the long term, Americans will die at the hands of terrorists supported by those outraged at the images. The failure of the Administration to mount an integrated effort to minimize the damage increases that future body count.

While we must wait for investigations to reveal who bears responsibility for the direct abusive acts on prisoners, larger admissions of responsibility must be made.

Harry Truman had a sign on his desk: "The Buck Stops Here." Mr. President, where were you? When

will you take responsibility for your Administration's failures?

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