

# Outsourcing Torture and the Problems of “Quality Control”

By Charles Knight | May 18, 2004

In October 2001 a Yemeni student by the name of Jamil Qasim Saeed Mohammed, who was suspected of involvement in the bombing of the USS Cole, was captured and turned over to the United States by Pakistan. U.S. authorities then flew him to Jordan for interrogation. Other “high-value” prisoners in our “Global War on Terrorism” have been shipped off to Egypt, Morocco and Syria at the request of the United States.

What all four countries have in common is a history of using torture to extract information from suspected enemies of the state.

Amnesty International, in a November 14, 2003 briefing, cited “persistent reports and rumors of detainees being secretly ‘rendered’ to countries with a record of abusing suspects in order to extract information.” Amnesty further reported that “Officials ... have openly stated that the USA may deliberately send some detainees to countries where they are abused during interrogation.”

This practice can aptly be described as “outsourcing torture.” Through this scheme the Bush administration apparently hopes to maintain our image globally as “the good cop” while still getting the benefits of forcefully extracted intelligence from hired “bad cops.” Much of this “rendering” of prisoners appears to be done by covert units of the CIA and Pentagon intelligence agencies, providing the dual benefits of the standard covert operations “deniability” and the arms-length deniability that comes by having the dirty work done in a foreign country. We have to assume that our government is paying top dollar for the cooperation of these foreign “intelligence specialists.”

Now the cover on the U.S. practice of torture has been blown by the publication of dozens of photos of unmistakable brutality in an Iraqi prison. Several things are notable about this incident:

- \* The numbers of prisoners for processing in Iraq are so great that the professionals began to rely on

the assistance of under-trained and youthful soldiers who were so “shockingly undisciplined” that they took photos of their activities to send home. This is yet another indicator of how poorly prepared for a large scale occupation the United States was before going into Iraq;

- \* The Pentagon hired private contractors to help extract intelligence information from prisoners. These incidents neatly illustrate the most fundamental problems of accountability when private contractors do work that involves force. Apparently, even though the Secretary of Defense is surely the prime contractor, he is not really responsible for any abuses encouraged or condoned by private sub-contractors. Beware the rogue state in action.

On May 6, President Bush told King Abdullah II of Jordan that he was “sorry for the humiliation suffered by Iraqi prisoners, and the humiliation suffered by their families.” Many have questioned why Mr. Bush chose to apologize to the King of Jordan rather than directly to Iraqis. To understand this particular piece of diplomacy it helps to remember that for the neo-conservative advisors to President Bush, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is the favored compliant Arab country, and they would like nothing better than for a relative of King Abdullah to take over in Iraq.

What was not reported about the May 6 Rose Garden photo session with the King of Jordan was whether a White House physician stood at the ready in case either leader suffered facial spasms from exces-



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sive winking when the subject turned to “abuse of prisoners.”

Issues of clever “deniability” and pipe dreams of Jordanian hegemony over Iraq aside, these points remain: the issue of the United States as a state sponsor of torture, perpetrated or exported to foreign stooges, is having a ripple effect globally that will damage American diplomacy for a long time to come. Second, the issue of command control and responsibility, when it relates to allowing prisoners to be tortured by our people or our paid foreign henchmen, is one that deserves serious national scrutiny and major policy debate. It cannot come too soon.

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