

## **The Underlying Dynamic of Post-9/11 America**

### **Exhibitionistic Revenge at Abu Ghraib**

By PETER WOLSON, Ph. D.

**W**hat is, perhaps, most horrific and incomprehensible about the Abu Ghraib photos are the photos themselves. Why would American prison guards take pictures of themselves smiling triumphantly and making fun of Iraqi prisoners as they humiliated, tortured, and in some instances, raped them? Was this a result of following orders in the dangerous, overcrowded, undisciplined prison milieu of Abu Ghraib, haphazardly trickling down from a chain of command that extended up to Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, as Seymour Hersch's New Yorker article suggests? Or was it due to some insidious psychological dynamic that not only affected these lower echelon prison guards, but also the Bush administration's approach to Iraq?

The answer might ultimately lie in the dynamics of exhibitionism: the basic human need to show one's self and be seen. Many psychoanalysts have concluded that the development and preservation of one's fundamental sense of self depends on the need to receive accurate, empathic mirroring. In other words, "I am seen, therefore I am." Humiliating blows to the self-image not only shatters self-esteem and self-confidence, but on the deepest level, can threaten psychic survival. Such narcissistic wounding often unleashes overwhelming rage and the need for revenge, to restore one's pride and self-integrity. Throughout history, this defensive revenge has taken the form of displaying sadistic triumph over a humiliated enemy.

For example, it was commonplace for the ancient Romans to display their defeated scourged, enemies nailed to crosses, for European conquerors during the middle ages to parade the heads of their enemies on pikes, and for American Indians and United States cavalry to wear the scalps of their adversaries as cosmetic ornaments. In addition, there have been innumerable wars in which soldiers have murdered their male adversaries and raped their women so that the children born of these unconscionable unions would serve as living exhibits of the conqueror's triumphal image for future generations to come.

Saddam Hussein intimidated his enemies, not only by torturing, raping and murdering them, but by plastering enormous self-aggrandizing pictures of himself on buildings throughout Iraq, as did Mao Tze Tung in China, Joseph Stalin in Russia and Adolph Hitler in Nazi Germany. An awesome publicly exhibited photograph psychologically broadcasts the despot's power, and is intended to intimidate his adversaries and ensure his political survival.

It was therefore not surprising when American soldiers entering Iraqi cities immediately removed Saddam's posters from buildings and encouraged the populace

to topple his statues, to destroy the influence of these exhibitionistic symbols. The ultimate revenge for Saddam's defiance of America was showing photographs of his humiliating capture and videos of him as a defeated, confused, disheveled old man with bad teeth. The videos demonstrated that he had lost his bite.

The same dynamics were evident when Saddam sympathizers in Fallouja mockingly displayed the burned, severed, hanging corpses of American soldiers and construction workers, while dancing triumphantly in the streets. This horrific act of revenge, in addition to instilling terror, was intended to humiliate and destroy America's invincible image and to salvage the shattered pride of Saddam's supporters.

Similarly, the American Abu Ghraib guards were in a frightening, overcrowded prison in which they could have been killed at any moment, within or outside its walls. Although it now appears that some of them may have been operating under orders, their obvious pleasure in photographing themselves triumphantly humiliating these Iraqi prisoners, as if they had nothing to fear, was clearly, compensatory for their endangered self-esteem and threatened lives. Emasculating and humiliating Iraqi men by posing them hooded and electrically wired, or engaged in homosexual acts, or having them lie on one another nude, or raping them with broom handles and chemical lights, or treating them like animals, wearing dog collars, while laughing and mocking them, gave the impression that these Americans were in total control of a weak, impotent enemy and had nothing to fear. Even if ordered to do this, the psychological drive to take photographs of this sadistic domination must have been so strong that it overrode the obvious judgment that these practices resembled Saddam's and undermined the humanity of America's mission in Iraq.

Subsequently, Al Qaeda's exhibitionistic retaliation was through an internationally accessible video of the beheading of American contractor, Nicholas Berg. The executioner declared that the beheading was an act of revenge for the humiliation of Arabs at Abu Ghraib, and intended to redeem Arab dignity. The conspicuous absence of condemnation from most Arab leaders suggested a widespread empathy for this viewpoint. Following Abu Ghraib, a poll indicated that eighty-two percent of Iraqis wanted the United States to end its occupation immediately.

Now we have learned, from Seymour Hersch's investigation reported on Meet the Press on May 16th, that the photography spree at Abu Ghraib might have been inspired by representatives of a secret undercover contingent of elite operatives, sanctioned by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, which had used humiliating photographs of Al Qaeda suspects in Afghanistan and other hot spots to extract vital intelligence data from the suspects' families.

With this possible link to the Bush administration, one wonders to what extent the vengeful exhibitionism at Abu Ghraib might represent, in microcosm, a symptom of America's underlying dynamic after 9/11. After having been profoundly humiliated as the world's greatest superpower by 19 Arab terrorists, the Bush administration has attempted to restore America's wounded pride by humiliating and destroying the Arab world's most powerful despot, Saddam Hussein, and by aggressively and unilaterally imposing democracy on a reluctant, defeated Iraq. How can America establish democracy in the Arab world if its underlying motivation is revenge?

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