Inconvenient Evidence:
Iraqi Prison Photographs from Abu Ghraib
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Curated by Brian Wallis
at the International Center of Photography;
by Jessica Gogan and Thomas Sokolowski
at The Andy Warhol Museum
With text by Seymour M. Hersh

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Remember Abu Ghraib
Brian Wallis

On April 28, 2004, television viewers of the CBS news magazine 60 Minutes II were shocked by the broadcast of photographs that apparently exposed American soldiers torturing and humiliating Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad. Among the digital snapshots, clearly taken by participants, were ones showing an Iraqi man wearing a hood and standing on a box with what appear to be electrodes attached to his fingers; two naked Iraqi men forced to simulate a sex act; a male and female soldier standing grinning behind a pile of six or seven naked Iraqis; and on and on. In their evidence of crude violence and sexual intimidation, these pixelated photographs confirmed reports that had been circulating at least since January of dire human rights abuses by U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Just days after the 60 Minutes II program aired, veteran journalist Seymour M. Hersh published in the The New Yorker a more comprehensive account of the circumstances surrounding the horrifying pictures. Hersh quoted from a secret report by Major General Antonio M. Taguba that graphically detailed “sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuse” at Abu Ghraib between October and December 2003. Taguba’s report had been prompted in January by the emergence of photographs of the abuse that had been downloaded from the computer of Specialist Charles Graner Jr. by Specialist Joseph M. Darby, who then turned them over to his superior officers. Taguba vividly described the photographs in his report, but did not publish them.

Following the 60 Minutes II and The New Yorker revelations, magazines and newspapers throughout the world published the photos, eliciting an international outcry against the human rights violations
depicted. The publication of the photographs and the information from the classified documents clearly caught the U.S. government off guard, and the president and his advisers immediately sought to distance themselves from the incidents. President Bush, when asked about the pictures of the Iraqis being tortured, said, “Their treatment does not reflect the nature of the American people…I didn’t like it one bit.” Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld added that the pictures never should have been published and banned the used of cameras by the U.S. military in Iraq. During a three-hour, closed-door session on May 12, members of Congress were shown over 1,800 photographs and videos, including ones depicting soldiers posing with dead Iraqis, using attack dogs to intimidate detainees, engaging in various sex acts with prisoners and amongst themselves, and purportedly even involving possible cases of rape and murder.

Aside from the atrocities they depict, as photographs, the images from Abu Ghraib contradict the studied heroics of twentieth-century war photography that have been updated to the current conflict. Away from the photojournalistic flourishes designed to make war palatable—the heroic flag-raisings, the dogged foot soldiers close to the action, the sense of shared humanity among combatants, and the search for visual evidence that war is universal and inevitable—the often-banal JPEGs from Iraq proffer a very different picture: war is systematic cruelty enforced at the level of everyday torture. In this regard, the Abu Ghraib images undercut both of the Bush administration’s high-minded visual strategies in selling the Iraqi War: on the one hand, to suppress all unpleasant or unplanned images (of Iraqi civilian deaths or flag-draped coffins of dead U.S. soldiers), and, on the other hand, to promulgate highly theatrical and carefully scripted photographs of good news (Iraqis toppling statues and cheering their “liberators” or the commander in chief landing on the deck of an aircraft carrier in a flight suit).

Consequently, the U.S. government has sought to suppress this inconvenient evidence and to disguise its original motives. According to Hersh, one of the overt purposes of the photographs was not simply to record the interrogations, but to intimidate and to humiliate the Arab prisoners, in apparent violation of the Geneva conventions governing the treatment of prisoners of war, by transgressing specific cultural prohibitions against nudity and homosexuality. It was not just the images that were used to coerce prisoners but also the act of photographing; detainees mentioned the flash of the cameras as a part of the intimidation. These tactics were designed to shame the detainees into revealing useful information about the enemy and to create, through fear, an “army of informants,” who could infiltrate the local population. Whatever the original miscalculations of this policy, the Abu Ghraib pictures remain, on one level, monstrous propaganda photographs, intended to assert cultural dominance locally and to restore racial and political hierarchies globally.

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In his report [on the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison, Major General Antonio M.] Taguba singled out only three military men for praise. One of them, Master-at-Arms William J. Kimbro, a Navy dog handler, should be commended, Taguba wrote, because he “knew his duties and refused to participate in improper interrogations despite significant pressure from the MI personnel at Abu Ghraib.” Elsewhere in the report it became clear what Kimbro would not do: American soldiers, Taguba said, used “military working dogs to frighten and intimidate detainees with threats of attack, and in one instance actually biting a detainee.”

In the week after the scandal broke, I was given a second set of digital photographs, which had been in the possession of a member of the 320th. The reservist had returned home from a tour of duty at Abu Ghraib in the spring of 2003, inexplicably sullen and withdrawn. A family member, looking through the files on a computer the soldier had had with her in Iraq, stumbled across images from the prison. More browsing led to a horrendous sequence that seemed to explain, or merely make comprehensible, the mental condition of the Iraqi veteran.

According to a time sequence embedded in the digital files, the photographs were taken by two different cameras over a twelve-minute period on the evening of December 12, 2003, two months after the military-police unit was assigned to Abu Ghraib. One of them shows a young soldier, wearing a dark jacket over his uniform and smiling into the camera, in the corridor of the jail. In the background are two Army dog handlers, in full camouflage combat gear, restraining two German shepherds. The dogs are barking at a man who is partly obscured from the camera’s view by the smiling soldier. Another image shows that the
man, an Iraqi prisoner, is naked. His hands are clasped behind his neck and he is leaning against the door to a cell, contorted with terror, as the dogs bark a few feet away. Other photographs show the dogs straining at their leashes and snarling at the prisoner. In another, taken a few minutes later, the Iraqi is lying on the ground, writhing in pain, with a soldier sitting on top of him, knee pressed to his back. Blood is streaming from the inmate’s leg. Another photograph is a closeup of the naked prisoner, from his waist to his ankles, lying on the floor. On his right thigh is what appears to be a bite or a deep scratch. There is another, larger wound on his left leg, covered in blood.

There had been at least one other report of violence involving American soldiers, an Army dog, and Iraqi citizens prior to this, although it was not in Abu Ghraib. Cliff Kindy, a member of the Christian Peacemaker Teams, a church-supported group that had been monitoring the situation in Iraq, told me that in November 2003 G.I.s unleashed a military dog on a group of civilians during a sweep in Ramadi, about thirty miles west of Falluja. At first, Kindy told me, “the soldiers went house to house, and arrested thirty people.” (One of them was Saad al-Khashab, an attorney with the Organization for Human Rights in Iraq, who told Kindy about the incident.) While the thirty detainees were being handcuffed and laid on the ground, a firefight broke out nearby; when it ended, the Iraqis were shoved into a house. Khashab told Kindy that the American soldiers then “turned the dog loose inside the house, and several people were bitten.”

When I asked retired Major General Charles Hines, who was commandant of the Army’s military-police school during a twenty-eight-year career in military law enforcement, about these reports, he reacted with dismay. “Turning a dog loose in a room of people? Loosing dogs on prisoners of war? I’ve never heard of it, and it would never have been tolerated,” Hines said. He added that trained police dogs have long been a presence in Army prisons, where they are used for sniffing out narcotics and other contraband among the prisoners, and, occasionally, for riot control. But, he said, “I would never have authorized it for interrogating or coercing prisoners. If I had, I’d have been put in jail or kicked out of the Army.”

As the Army’s investigation into Abu Ghraib deepened, it became clear that the use of unmuzzled dogs to frighten and intimidate prisoners was a routine practice—one that the prison guards believed had been authorized by senior commanders. Military investigative records, made public in June 2004, by the Washington Post, showed that dogs were repeatedly used during interrogations, and not always to elicit intelligence. One military intelligence witness, Specialist John Harold Ketzer, told Army investigators that he watched a dog team corner two male prisoners against a wall at Abu Ghraib, with one hiding behind the other and screaming. No interrogation was going on. “When I asked what was going on in the cell, the handler stated that...he and another of the handlers was having a contest to see how many detainees they could get to urinate on themselves.”

Colonel Thomas Pappas, commander of the intelligence unit at Abu Ghraib, told the investigators that authorization had come from General Sanchez. But Sanchez, in an appearance in May 2004 before the Senate Armed Services Committee, denied doing so. Asked how the troops at Abu Ghraib had come to believe that there was authorization, the three-star general passed the buck. “You’ll have to ask the commander,” Sanchez told a senator.

Two months later, however, USA Today reported that it had obtained classified documents showing that Sanchez had issued orders the previous fall authorizing military interrogators to use dogs at their own discretion, without his prior approval. Sanchez’s order required the dogs to be muzzled and in control of a handler when in interrogation rooms but put no restrictions on the use of dogs in other settings.

Taguba strongly suggested that there was a pattern of activity linking the interrogation process in Afghanistan and the abuses at Abu Ghraib. One parallel, not discussed by Taguba, was the handling of John Walker Lindh, who was accused of training with Al Qaeda terrorists and conspiring to kill Americans. A few days after his arrest, according to a federal-court affidavit filed by his attorney, James Brosnahan, a group of armed American soldiers “blindfolded Mr. Lindh, and took several pictures of Mr. Lindh and themselves with Mr. Lindh. In one, the soldiers scrawled ‘shithead’ across Mr. Lindh’s blindfold and posed with him. . . . Another
told Mr. Lindh that he was ‘going to hang’ for his actions and that after he was dead, the soldiers would sell the photographs and give the money to a Christian organization.” Some of the photographs later made their way to the American media. Lindh was stripped naked, bound to a stretcher with duct tape, and placed in a windowless shipping container. Once again, the affidavit said, “military personnel photographed Mr. Lindh as he lay on the stretcher.” On July 15, 2002, Lindh agreed to plead guilty to carrying a gun while serving in the Taliban and received a twenty-year jail term. During that process, Brosnahan told me, “the Department of Defense insisted that we state that there was ‘no deliberate’ mistreatment of John.” His client agreed to do so, but, the attorney noted, “Against that, you have that photograph of a naked John on that stretcher.”

The photographing of prisoners, both in Afghanistan and in Iraq, seems to have been not random but, rather, part of the dehumanizing interrogation process. The New York Times subsequently published an interview with Hayder Sabbar Abd, who claimed, convincingly, to be one of the mistreated Iraqi prisoners in the Abu Ghraib photographs. Abd told Ian Fisher, the Times reporter, that his ordeal had been recorded, almost constantly, by cameras, which added to his humiliation. He remembered how the camera flashed repeatedly as soldiers told to him to masturbate and beat him when he refused.

[. . . .]

The government consultant said that there may have been a serious goal, in the beginning, behind the sexual humiliation and the posed photographs. It was thought that some prisoners would do anything—including spying on their associates—to avoid dissemination of the shameful photos to family and friends. The government consultant said, “I was told that the purpose of the photographs was to create an army of informants, people you could insert back in the population.” The idea was that they would be motivated by fear of exposure, and gather information about pending insurgency action, the consultant said. If so, it wasn’t effective; the insurgency continued to grow.

This text is excerpted from Seymour M. Hersh, Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib (New York: HarperCollins, 2004)

Naked and hooded Iraqi detainees forced to simulate sex acts, late October 2003.
First published in The New Yorker.
TOP Iraqi detainee lying on the ground with a soldier sitting on top of him with his knee pressed into his back. Blood is streaming from the detainee’s leg, mid-December 2003.
First published in The New Yorker.

BOTTOM An Iraqi detainee appears to be restrained after suffering injuries on both legs. The injuries may have been caused by dog bites, mid-December 2003.

A hooded Iraqi detainee at Abu Ghraib appears cuffed at the ankles and chained to a door handle while being made to balance on two boxes, November 29, 2003.
Abu Ghraib Timeline

October 15, 2003 372nd Military Police Company (part of the 320th MP Battalion, 800th MP Brigade) takes over Tiers 1A and 1B at Abu Ghraib.

October-December, 2003 During this period, most of the “sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses” were inflicted on detainees in Tier 1A at Abu Ghraib by military police from the 372nd MP Company.

October 25, 2003 Private First Class Lynndie England of the 372nd MP Company poses for a photograph holding a leash tied to the neck of a naked detainee lying on the floor.

November 4, 2003 Detainee Manadel Al-Jamadi dies during interrogation. He was reportedly resisting arrest and a SEAL Team member struck him on the side of the head with the butt of his gun. His body was packed on ice for 24 hours and eventually taken out of the prison on a stretcher with fake intravenous drip in his arm. According to Captain Donald Reese, Colonel Pappas, Lieutenant Colonel Steven L. Jordan, and a female major were present during the interrogation. Specialist Charles L. Graner and Specialist Sabrina Harman of the 372nd MP Company pose for photographs with Al-Jamadi’s body.

November 8, 2003 Seven prisoners were brought into Tier 1A for allegedly starting a riot in the outside tents in the prison’s compound. Many of the most infamous abuses, including stacking naked Iraqis into a human pyramid and forcing prisoners to perform or simulate sex acts, occur.

November 2003 Spc. Harman brings photos of the abuse back to her home in Virginia while on leave.

December 12, 2003 Date stamped on photographs of Iraqi detainees being harassed by Army dogs. Colonel Thomas M. Pappas approved the use of dogs for interrogations.

January 13, 2004 Specialist Joseph M. Darby, a soldier in 372nd MP Company at Abu Ghraib, leaves a disc of abuse photographs on the bed of a military investigator. The photographs were being swapped from computer to computer throughout the 320th Battalion. General John Abizaid, the head of U.S. command in Iraq, called Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld and told him about the images.

January 31, 2004 Major General Antonio M. Taguba appointed to conduct formal investigation into 800th MP Brigade.

February 23, 2004 Seventeen U.S. soldiers are suspended from duties pending outcome of investigation.

March 2004 Staff Sergeant Frederick’s uncle William Lawson sends an e-mail about the abuses and their documentation to retired colonel David Hackworth’s website. That e-mail eventually put Lawson in touch with people at CBS’s 60 Minutes II. Lawson also contacted seventeen members of Congress with virtually no response.

March 20, 2004 Brig Gen. Mark Kimmit announces that charges have been filed against six soldiers: Staff Sergeant Ivan “Chip” L. Frederick II; Specialist Charles A. Graner;
May 3, 2004 White House spokesman Scott McClellan says that President Bush still has not seen or been briefed on the Taguba report. Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John W. Warner (R-Va.) asks Pentagon officials to testify before his committee the next day.

May 4, 2004 Rumsfeld says those responsible will be brought to justice and widens investigations of prisons outside Iraq and Afghanistan. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice tells the Arab world that the abuses will be investigated and the perpetrators punished. Army officials give Senate committee a private briefing.

May 5, 2004 President Bush appears on two Arab television channels, saying those responsible for the abuses will be brought to justice.

Pfc. England, pregnant with Spc. Graner’s child, is transferred to Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, North Carolina before being charged.

May 6, 2004 The Washington Post publishes four additional abuse photographs dated December 12, 2003. Conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh dismisses photos taken of prisoners at Abu Ghraib saying, “it is no different than what happens at the Skull and Bones initiation.”

May 7, 2004 Seventh soldier, Pfc. England, is charged. Rumsfeld testifies before a Senate panel and confirms that the existence of videotapes of abuses at Abu Ghraib as well as numerous additional photos of an American soldier beating one prisoner almost to death, apparently raping a female prisoner, and acting inappropriately with a dead body.

May 9, 2004 Hersh’s “Chain of Command” appears on The New Yorker’s website (May 17, 2004 issue).

May 10, 2004 Posters of Abu Ghraib abuse photographs covered with swastikas are attached to British and Indian graves at the Commonwealth military cemetery in Gaza City. Thirty-two graves of soldiers killed in World War I are desecrated or destroyed.

May 12, 2004 Senators and representatives see slide show of unreleased images of forced sodomy, Pfc. England having sex with other U.S. soldiers in front of prisoners, prisoners cowering in front of attack dogs, Iraqi women being forced to expose their breasts, naked prisoners tied up together, a prisoner repeatedly smashing his head against a wall.

May 15, 2004 Hersh’s “The Gray Zone” appears on The New Yorker’s website (May 24, 2004 issue).


ABC News obtains two new photos taken by Staff Sgt. Frederick of Spcs. Graner and Harman giving the thumbs-up sign over the body of Manadel Al-Jamadi.

May 21, 2004 Video of prison violence, mentioned in Taguba’s report, is released. The Washington Post publishes excerpts from reports of previously secret mid-January 2004 interrogation of thirteen detainees that describe how some of the photographs were staged. The Post also obtains hundreds of so-far-unreleased photos and short digital videos. On the Washington Post website, Executive Editor Leonard Downie Jr. describes the newspaper’s decision not to publish many of the images of abuse either in the paper or on the website because they are “so shocking and in such bad taste, especially the extensive nudity.”

May 22, 2004 The Washington Post publishes statements from U.S. soldiers accused of prison abuses in Abu Ghraib. In these statements, the soldiers describe photographing detainees on the night of November 8, 2003.

May 27, 2004 NBC News obtains additional photographs of three naked male detainees being interrogated.

May 31, 2004 Newsweek reports on a January 9, 2002 memo written by Department of Justice lawyers John Yoo and Robert J. Delahunty on its website. The memo argues that no international laws—including the normally observed laws of war—applied to the United States at all because they did not have any status under federal law.

June 11, 2004 Documents obtained by the Washington Post show that Lt. Gen. Ricardo S. Sanchez authorized the use of military dogs, temperature extremes, reversed sleep patterns, and sensory deprivation as interrogation techniques at Abu Ghraib.

June 23, 2004 White House disavows the Bush administration’s denial about policies that are said to be responsible for prisoner abuses.

August 24, 2004 An independent panel headed by James R. Schlesinger, the former defense secretary, is the first to assign responsibility for the abuse of prisoners in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantánamo Bay, Cuba to senior Pentagon officials including Defense Secretary Rumsfeld. The report states that officials were aware of the problems at the detention facilities and failed to address them.

August 30, 2004 Defense attorneys for Pfc. Lynndie England use the two Pentagon reports released the previous week to show that their client and other low-ranking MPs were following approved military intelligence procedures. The Article 32 hearing will investigate the nineteen charges against England. If convicted, England could face up to thirty-eight years in prison.

Compiled by Erin Barnett
Suggested reading


Fay, George R. Investigation of the Abu Ghraib Detention Facility and 205th Military Intelligence Brigade (available at Findlaw.com and other websites).


Taguba, Antonio M. Article 15-6 Investigation of the 800th Military Police Brigade (available at Findlaw.com and other websites).

Websites

www.antiwar.com

www.findlaw.com

www.thememoryhole.com

www.newyorker.com

www.washingtonpost.com

INSIDE FRONT COVER Abdou Hussain Saad Falah, nicknamed Gilligan by U.S. soldiers, was made to stand on a box for about an hour. Specialist Sabrina Harman told him that he would be electrocuted if he fell, November 4, 2003.

First published in The New Yorker.

OPPOSITE Specialist Charles Graner giving the thumbs-up sign over the body of Manadel Al-Jamadi, an Iraqi detainee killed by a SEAL Team member during a CIA investigation on November 4, 2003. The photograph was allegedly taken by Staff Sergeant Ivan “Chip” Frederick. ABC News, May 19, 2004.
International Center of Photography

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