

May 24, 2009

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Abu Ghraib We Cannot See

By PHILIP GOUREVITCH

IN mid-October of 2003, Specialist Sabrina Harman of the 372nd Military Police Company was assigned guard duty on the military intelligence cellblock at Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad. That was the block where prisoners of the American occupation forces were held pending and during interrogation. The M.P.'s had no military training as prison guards, and they were told to do whatever the interrogators — a mix of military intelligence and C.I.A. officers and civilian contractors — asked them to do to the prisoners.

Specialist Harman and her comrades were astonished to find a number of prisoners on the block naked and trussed to the bars in painful "stress positions," their heads hooded by sandbags, or by women's panties. In civilian life, Specialist Harman aspired to become a police crime-scene photographer, and so at Abu Ghraib she set to work at once, snapping away with her digital camera.

What were the pictures for? "Just to show what was going on," Ms. Harman said. To say, "Look, I have proof, you can't deny it." Sometimes she and her fellow guards posed alongside their abused wards, but most of her photos from Abu Ghraib have a purely documentary quality — solitary prisoners, stripped and manacled in their cells, stretched over bed frames or forced to balance on a box. Cpl. Charles Graner, the M.P. in charge of the night shift on the intelligence block that fall, also took photographs. And Corporal Graner, too, spoke of his snapshots as a form of "proof." He showed the pictures to his superior officers, medics, lawyers.

Later, he told Army investigators how he had routinely beat up prisoners for interrogators, or kept them up all night, making them crawl naked back and forth across the floor. "Was all this stuff wrong?" he said. "Yeah." But his point was that it was no secret. He kept getting praised for his work.

Six months later, in April 2004, when the Harman and Graner photographs were leaked to the press, they shocked the world's conscience. They also performed a great public service. They told us something about ourselves that we might have suspected but did not fully know — that the Bush administration had decided to fight terror with terror, and torture with torture.

We did not fully know this before the photographs came out, because our leaders hid it from us, and when it was revealed they denied it. "We do not torture," Mr. Bush kept saying, even as a stream of official documents leaked to the press contradicted him.

Had a journalist taken the photos, there would have been prizes. Instead, the photographs were used by the administration and the military to frame the soldiers who took and appeared in them as rogues acting out of their own individual perversity. In this way, the exposé became the cover-up: the soldiers who revealed our corruption to us were made scapegoats and thrown in prison.

Five years later, America is again caught up in a debate about the release of photographs that show our soldiers using Bush administration “interrogation techniques” at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere.

Barack Obama, whose first act as president was to re-criminalize torture, initially favored making the pictures public. Then Mr. Obama changed his mind. His critics (civil libertarians, human rights advocates and press commentators) are saying that this makes him no different from his predecessor.

They are mistaken. Just as it was a public service to release the Abu Ghraib photographs five years ago, Mr. Obama is right today to say we don’t need more of them.

The president claims that a new round of images of prisoner abuse flashing around the globe would enflame America’s enemies and endanger our troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. There’s no doubt about it: the policies that the photographs depict have already done terrible damage to America’s cause.

But there’s another critical consideration. Releasing additional photographs would not be telling us anything that we don’t already know. We don’t need to see a picture to know that American interrogators used waterboarding — a crime our military has prosecuted as torture for more than a century — when we can see former Vice President Dick Cheney taking credit for having people waterboarded.

Mr. Obama is not suppressing information when he opposes the release of more photographs. After all, he just made public a series of Bush administration torture policy memos that authorize the very methods for inflicting pain and suffering that the Abu Ghraib photographs represent. In fact, it is because of Mr. Obama’s leadership in bringing these dark practices to light that the press and the public — having for too long been passive to the point of complicity on the issue — are now agitating for more sensational imagery. Who are we trying to fool, if not ourselves, if we pretend that we need more photos to know what has been going on?

Crime-scene photographs, for all their power to reveal, can also serve as a distraction, even a deterrent, from precise understanding of the events they depict. Photographs cannot show us a chain of command, or Washington decision making. Photographs cannot tell stories. They can only provide evidence of stories, and evidence is mute; it demands investigation and interpretation.

I spent more than a year living with the photographs from Abu Ghraib while writing a book about

the soldiers who took them and appeared in them. I saw many more pictures than were ever published in the press, including, I believe, many — if not most — of the photos that the president would now prefer that you don't see.

Yet in order to tell the story of the pictures most effectively, I decided not to include any of them in the book. I had more than two million words of interviews to work with, and as many words again of government paperwork, and in this way I could show that most of the worst things that happened at Abu Ghraib were never photographed. What those soldier-photographers revealed to us with their cameras was just a hint of what they have to tell us if only we would listen.

Some of the most disturbing photographs from Abu Ghraib are not photographs of torture. Rather, they are photographs that show our soldiers trying — without the proper training or equipment — to do their jobs. One of the most gruesome images shows an empty cell, sticky with blood. It is an image of pure gore, like a snapshot of an abattoir floor, and if one comes upon it in a sequence of torture photographs it seems self-evidently a picture of unspeakable aftermath.

But the soldiers who served at Abu Ghraib can speak, and the story they tell of that picture is one of professional military conduct. One night an Iraqi guard at the prison smuggled a loaded pistol to a prisoner. An informant tipped off the guards. When the M.P.'s went to recover the gun, the prisoner began shooting, and the soldiers shot him in the legs. The blood in the photo is the prisoner's, and nobody else was hurt. Meanwhile, prisoners were regularly beaten bloody in the showers during interrogation, and there are no photographs of that.

Today, with all that we know about the Bush administration's torture policy, the discussion about the release of more photos is a sideshow. Yet, in his eagerness to move on, Mr. Obama himself sometimes seems to forget what the memos he has released tell us about the pictures he is holding back.

Several times, in the past week, he has revived the old "bad apples" theory that blames a few low-ranking "individuals" for doing what our highest leaders asked of them. Photographs can't show us that the real bad apples were at the top of the civilian chain of command in Washington, but that is what we need to know — or, rather, since we've known it and gone along with it for a long time, that is what we need to come to terms with now.

Philip Gourevitch, the editor of The Paris Review, is the author, with Errol Morris, of "The Ballad of Abu Ghraib."

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