

# But what of the horrors we

By David Aaronovitch

*The question has to be asked — are these kinds of abuses inevitable, and if so, do they represent a standing argument against military interventions of this kind?*

**W**HEN I was a child, we had a big book of black-and-white photographs at home. One has always haunted me, though it was only much later that I found out where and when it was taken. It's a night-time scene of two black men in rags, hanging from a tree. Below is a crowd, including a man with a moustache who is pointing up at the corpses, a younger man in white shirt and tie and two smart young women. It turned out to be a postcard of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana on August 7, 1930. And what is so dreadful about the picture is that these four citizens of Marion are all smiling.

There they were again, in the pictures from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, those smiles. In Abu Ghraib, for God's sake! The place where Saddam executed so many Iraqis. Smiles, as hooded, naked detainees, are sexually humiliated, being forced to climb over each other; smiles, as a woman prison officer points demeaningly at the genitals of the men. And all recorded for the camera, as some kind of souvenir.

The beleaguered mother of the woman involved — reservist Lynndie R England — told a journalist that these abuses were just 'stupid, kid

things — pranks'. And she added the rhetorical question: 'And what [the Iraqis] do to our men and women are just?' You can see that it's just as well that a US whistle-blower told the authorities about these abuses last January. It's a small hop from humiliating and dehumanising prisoners to torturing them, and from there to murder, and all covered by the reasoning that, after all, they do worse things to us.

No smiles in the Mirror pictures of British soldiers grotesquely abusing an Iraqi detainee. If the story that accompanies the pictures is true, what we're witnessing here is in some ways worse than the Abu Ghraib scenes. If this man was indeed a looter who they thought would not be punished by the Iraqi authorities, and who therefore could be pissed on, beaten, kicked and severely injured, then I'd say pretty much every human right the man had has been violated. And other cases are already under investigation.

Of course, the British and American authorities have pointed out that they loathe these crimes, and that such actions are not the norm among most servicemen in Iraq. And this is simultaneously true and inadequate. The rest of us have to ask questions that go way beyond the idea of 'rogue elements'. Such as, are these kinds of abuses inevitable, and therefore a standing argument against such military interventions?

Former Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd may not have had the terrible pictures in mind when he launched his attack yesterday on the 'basic mistake' of the invasion and occupation

If you take human rights seriously — if it genuinely is a first-order consideration — then you will train your prison staff properly. You'll get them to recognise the possibility of abuse, and teach them how to avoid it. And you'll take action at the first sign of trouble. This is the lesson to be learned from Iraq

of Iraq, but I am sure that he would add it to the list of inescapable risks. You take soldiers, trained to kill, send them to a foreign land where they understand nothing and where they see their comrades killed or wounded, and then expect them to show restraint and constant decency. Is that realistic?

Well, it may be, depending on the systems in place. I attracted a lot of flak a couple of weeks ago when talking about the restraint I had witnessed on the part of US troops in Baghdad. The ones I saw at the airport and at other checkpoints were more courteous to local inhabitants than British troops I encountered in Northern Ireland, let alone Israeli troops in occupied Palestine. (That was just an observation — the US military still blasted civilians in Fallujah.)

But in Abu Ghraib, a different kind of psychology seemed to be at work. It is reported that prison guards alleged that 'prisoners were sometimes confined naked for three consecutive days without toilets, in damp, unventilated cells...'. Much derision has greeted the claim by some of

those in the photographs that they were inadequately trained. What training does one need to know that it's a bad thing to force naked prisoners to simulate sex acts with each other?

Yet, if you take human rights seriously — if it genuinely is a first-order consideration — then you will train your prison staff properly. You'll get them to recognise the possibility of abuse, and teach them how to avoid it. And you'll take action at the first sign of trouble. This didn't happen in Iraq (although you can bet it will now).

Last year, Human Rights Watch (HRW) complained that the coalition had 'treated human rights issues as matters of secondary importance, demonstrating ambivalence towards human rights and humanitarian law concerns. They have too often set aside lessons from past international interventions that demonstrate the importance of rights' monitoring and protection.' And, another thought here — the penal system in America often seems brutal enough, but add to it the total arbitrariness of Guantanamo, and you have a human rights nightmare in the making.

# don't see?

This week, Brigadier Mark Kimmitt, the deputy director of coalition operations, made the point that, 'If we can't hold ourselves up as an example of how to treat people with dignity and respect, we can't ask that other nations do that to our soldiers.'

In other words, Lynndie England's actions will lead to the deaths of her comrades, as surely as if she'd pulled the trigger herself. The editor-in-chief of al Jazeera, Ahmed al-Sheik predicted - surely correctly - that the photographs would cause immense trouble. On Newsnight he claimed that the scenes were 'humiliating not only to the Iraqis, but to every Arab citizen around the world'. And yet, as HRW suggests, it wasn't a necessary outcome of fighting a war in Iraq.

Yet there are some other hard facts to contemplate. The most obvious is that much worse torture has been - and in some cases still is - used by countries with whom we have good relations and whose human rights abuses never make it to the front page. And the editor-in-chief of Al Jazeera may like to contemplate that much of this happens in Arab countries, as well as in Israel.

I could find nothing on al-Jazeera's English website, for example, covering the story, carried in the Guardian on Thursday, that the head of the Iranian judiciary has just issued an order banning the use of torture in Iranian prisons. Amnesty recently took up the case of Arzhang Davoodi, 'who has been imprisoned, tortured and denied medical treatment after he talked to a Channel 4 Dispatches television team about the war'. The team

was making a documentary about the death in custody of an Iranian woman journalist.

Torture of dissidents has been routine in Tunisia, where al-Jazeera does not maintain an office. Just two months ago, HRW reported: 'The Egyptian government continues to arrest and routinely torture men suspected of consensual homosexual conduct.' The report contained testimonies of torture victims who were tied up, suspended in painful positions, burnt with cigarettes, submerged in ice-cold water, and given electric shocks to arms, legs and genitals.

And I haven't even mentioned Saudi Arabia, Syria or what goes in the cellars of various militias, from Lebanon to Afghanistan. There is some selective horror being expressed here. It is unconvincing, to say the least, to complain that there is something particularly horrible about non-Arabs treating Arabs badly, if little is said about Arabs treating other Arabs even worse.

But it is precisely the Arabs who do complain about their own governments who are so undermined by our failures. One Arab democrat recently told a Bush official: 'Every dictator in the region is pointing to America's example [over Guantanamo] as an excuse to crack down on dissent.' A postscript here, for Douglas Hurd and others - and something that is beyond conjecture. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the invasion of Iraq, this much is certain: had it not been for this 'basic mistake', far worse things would be happening to Iraqis in Abu Ghraib every single day. Unphotographed. —Courtesy The Observer