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An Indefensible Outcome

Editorial
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PRIVATE LYNN DIE England's guilty plea yesterday on charges she abused and humiliated Iraqi prisoners is the most recent of several from the low-ranking soldiers most immediately responsible for what happened at Abu Ghraib. But there has been no independent outside inquiry into the role that directives from higher military and civilian officials played in the mistreatment of prisoners at Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and other detention facilities in Iraq and Afghanistan. If the United States wants to be a leader in defending human rights, Congress must appoint an independent commission that will spell out the full extent of the abuse and name names of those in the chain of command who encouraged it or turned a blind eye.

England's plea comes one year after the publication of photos showing her and others with naked, cowering Iraqi prisoners. Since then, reports by the military, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the International Committee of the Red Cross have made clear that US military and civilian interrogators went far beyond the late-night attempts of reservist guards at Abu Ghraib to "soften up" detainees for interrogation.

Military officials have investigated at least 28 suspicious detainee deaths as well as beatings, near-drownings, the use of temperature extremes, and sexually abusive behavior by female interrogators. The absence of photographs has meant that these more extreme abuses have gotten less media attention, but their sheer numbers, and the fact that they occurred in several locations, undercut attempts by the Bush administration to dismiss any acts of mistreatment of captives in US detention facilities as the work of a few isolated bad apples. Of the deaths of detainees, just one occurred at Abu Ghraib.

Late last month the Army inspector general, Lieutenant General Stanley Green, completed a review of American treatment of prisoners in Iraq that exonerated all four of the top officers whose involvement had come under question in other investigations, including an inquiry last summer led by former defense secretary James Schlesinger. So far, the only high-ranking officer who has been punished in any way for the breakdown of order at Abu Ghraib is reserve Brigadier General Janis Karpinski.

The Schlesinger report of last August has been the only high-level civilian review of prisoner mistreatment. But all four members of that panel were members of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's Defense Policy Board, and their report came before the full extent of abuses was clear. Congress must put partisanship aside and appoint a blue-ribbon commission including members of Congress and human rights advocates to prove to a world increasingly cynical about US ideals that the nation can -- fairly and unflinchingly -- examine and correct its own human rights abuses.