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Hearts, minds and shameful pictures

Editorial
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It is not enough just to punish the immediate perpetrators of military abuses pictures, as has been known for thousands of years, can possess a power that mere words struggle to match. That was why, despite months of rumbling complaints from human-rights organisations, it took the photographs of abuse of prisoners at Iraq's Abu Ghraib jail to send people's blood boiling about the behaviour of American troops and, by extension, about what was going on in Guantánamo Bay. That is also why the appalling photographs that were released this week by a British court-martial sent the blood to boiling point—even though the offences by British soldiers near Basra that they illustrated had also been known about for some time. The worldwide distribution of such images at least makes America and Britain a true coalition of the shameful. Yet the allies are together in another way too. Both are evading proper accountability for what has occurred.

Nevertheless, America and Britain do also share a common line of defence. It is that soldiers are trained to use violence, and that when they are sent into action a few abuses will always occur. Such things have happened in every war, from Vietnam to Iraq, from the Balkans to the UN peacekeeping operation in Congo, and they happen with domestic policing too, whether in Northern Ireland or Los Angeles. What matters is how they are then dealt with. As Colin Powell, the outgoing American secretary of state, said after Abu Ghraib: "Watch how America will do the right thing."

If you think the "right thing" is to find and punish those directly involved with the abuse, then that is indeed what America has done. The conviction and sentencing on January 15th of Specialist Charles Graner, said to be the ringleader for the Abu Ghraib abuses, represented just that (see article). That is also what Britain is doing: the court-martials at a British base in Germany from which this week's pictures emanated are still under way, but their aim is the same (see article). Like his American equivalents before him, General Sir Mike Jackson, head of the British army, made a noble public statement condemning the abuses shown in the photos, but saying that they were not typical of his troops, whether in Iraq or elsewhere.

Right, but not enough

Yet, although such investigation and punishment is necessary, it is far from sufficient. It is insufficient on two grounds. One is the need to ensure that the danger of such abuses being repeated is minimised by eliminating any systemic weaknesses of discipline or command. The other is the need to counter the reputational and political damage the abuses have caused. So far, the American and British governments have failed on both of those counts.

In one sense, America has handled the fallout from the abuses better than Britain. It at least responded by setting up an investigation into what lay behind them, the results of which were made public. Britain has not, relying on the typically British tactic of saying, in effect, "trust us, we're decent fellows and we won't let it happen again." Given that the abuses show precisely that some soldiers are not decent fellows, and given that in the court-martial it has been disclosed that the abusers' quarter master gave an order capable of being interpreted as a licence for violence, such a reaction is not good enough. An inquiry, with publicly disclosed evidence and results, should have been set up long ago—and should still be.

If America dealt with its problem more openly, however, it has compounded the damage to its reputation. In essence, it ignored the findings of the Abu Ghraib enquiry conducted by Major-

General Antonio Taguba, in which he spoke of “systemic” problems at Abu Ghraib, since punishment was not imposed far up the chain of command. It has also sought to ignore consistent evidence that torture has been used in Guantánamo and to avoid confronting the unjust legal limbo in which prisoners there have been kept for almost three years. And the man who commissioned memos justifying torture, Alberto Gonzales, has been punished by being nominated by George Bush as his new attorney-general. He is likely to be confirmed even with the support of Democrats. They don't appear to care about his association with torture. They support him simply on the grounds that he is a Latino.

The worst sin, though, is the one that goes right to the top. Neither Mr Bush nor Tony Blair is willing to accept blame for what has occurred, nor to demand accountability for it from their cabinets. That is to imply that, for all their condemnations of the abuses, they think them politically unimportant. At least in international politics, they are wrong.