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## **A Woman With Her Work Cut Out For Her**

MARIE COCCO (columnist)  
New York Newsday  
September 30, 2005

The matriarch of image management finally has let one slip.

“I'm probably not going to change many minds,” Undersecretary of State Karen Hughes told the entourage of journalists who went on her public relations tour of the Middle East. Isn't that what we're paying Hughes to do?

Changing minds is supposed to be the mission of this new czar of public diplomacy, picked for her mastery of the art of message control and her closeness to the president.

The message Hughes is charged with bringing to the world, particularly the Muslim world, is that the United States is really not an evil empire intent on subjugating nations, humiliating their people and stealing their resources.

The burden became apparent just as Hughes unpacked on her tour of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. There, she was supposed to star in just the sort of feel-good, scripted events she once staged for the White House. But the unscripted intruded.

In Saudi Arabia, many women challenged Hughes on what they said was the American assumption that because they wear religious garb and aren't allowed to drive, they are oppressed and unhappy.

In Egypt, Hughes deliberately avoided interaction with irritated opposition groups who want the United States to halt its support for undemocratic rulers -- including the oppressive Egypt President Hosni Mubarak, a staunch American ally.

Still, the truth does not quite penetrate the confines of the controlled diplomatic tour.

It comes at us with the messy, daily digest of grim news that exposes the shame of America's current moral posture.

A West Point graduate and veteran of Afghanistan and Iraq has emerged, with two unnamed sergeants of the Army's 82nd Airborne Division, to describe what they say were systematic beatings, humiliations and other abuses of detainees in Iraq in 2003 and 2004. Capt. Ian Fishback, in a plaintive letter to Republican Sen. John McCain of Arizona, published in Wednesday's Washington Post, took on the government's official argument that in this new war on terror, new and ill-defined rules for torture -- essentially, anything goes unless you're caught -- must apply.

Just as the Pentagon issued one of its routinely emphatic pledges to fully investigate these new abuse allegations, it was forced to commit to yet another probe: Some U.S. soldiers have been trading gruesome pictures of dead Iraqis -- heads blown apart, entrails spilling from abdomens, bodies blackened and mangled -- in exchange for pornography on an Internet site.

There also is word from Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, that another mass hunger strike has been under way among detainees who've been held there for nearly four years without charge, without trials and without seeing evidence against them.

The military says only 30 hunger strikers are currently refusing food, down from more than 100 it acknowledged a few weeks ago. Lawyers for detainees question the number. They say some prisoners take their trays and throw meals away, or eat sporadically to avoid forced, intravenous feeding by the authorities. The military defines a fast as refusal of nine consecutive meals.

Tom Wilner, a lawyer for Kuwaiti detainees who visited the detention camp in mid-September, says five of his 11 clients are on strike. Some are hospitalized. "These guys look like pictures from the Sudan," Wilner told me in an interview. One of his clients, Fawzi al Odah, was brought to him on a stretcher. "He has a tube up his nose that goes down into his stomach. He was bleeding from the nose. He hadn't eaten since Aug. 8."

Another, Abdullah Aziz al-Shamari, was so thin and weak he had to lean on a walker to prop himself up in a chair.

The fast is not meant to address a grievance of daily prison life. It is a deeper protest of the policy that keeps these men, most of them Muslim, incarcerated and essentially incommunicado, forever. "If I eat, I condone what is going on here," Wilner says al Odah told him.

So Karen Hughes has spoken the truth. She cannot change Muslim minds. She has at her disposal only the apparatus of public relations -- the staged photo-op, the perfectly calibrated speech. The world is likely to reject her message because it has seen our behavior, and it knows our talk is cheap.

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