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The Joy of Being Blameless

Editorial
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The contrast could not have been more stark, nor the message more clear. On the day that a court-martial imposed justice on a 24-year-old Army sergeant for tormenting detainees at Abu Ghraib with his dog, President Bush said once again that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, whose benighted policies and managerial incompetence led to the prisoner abuse scandal, was doing a "fine job" and should stay at his post.

We've seen this sorry pattern for nearly two years now, since the Abu Ghraib horrors first shocked the world: President Bush has clung to the fiction that the abuse of prisoners was just the work of a few rotten apples, despite report after report after report demonstrating that it was organized and systematic, and flowed from policies written by top officials in his administration.

Just this week, Eric Schmitt and Carolyn Marshall provided a bloodcurdling account in the Times of how a Special Operations unit converted an Iraqi military base into a torture chamber, even using prisoners as paintball targets, in its frenzy to counter a widely predicted insurgency for which Mr. Rumsfeld had refused to prepare. In early 2004, an 18-year-old man suspected of selling cars to members of a terrorist network was arrested and beaten repeatedly. Another man said he had been forced to strip, punched in the spine until he fainted, put in front of an air-conditioner while cold water was poured on him and kicked in the stomach until he vomited. His crime? His father had worked for Saddam Hussein.

These accounts are tragically familiar. The names and dates change, but the basic pattern is the same, including the fact that this bestiality produced little or no useful intelligence. The Bush administration decided to go outside the law to deal with prisoners, and soldiers carried out that policy. Those who committed these atrocities deserve the punishment they are getting, but virtually all high-ranking soldiers have escaped unscathed. And not a single policy maker has been called to account.

Col. Thomas Pappas, the former intelligence chief at Abu Ghraib, testified at the dog handler's trial that the use of dogs had grown out of conversations he had had with military jailers from Guantanamo Bay led by Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller, who had been sent to Iraq to instruct soldiers there in the interrogation techniques refined at Gitmo under Mr. Rumsfeld's torture-is-legal policy. Colonel Pappas said General Miller had explained how to use the "Arab fear of dogs" to set up interrogations.

What of General Miller? He invoked his right against self-incrimination to avoid testifying, and Time magazine reported this week that he was exonerated by an Army whitewash. Apparently he was not responsible for the actions of soldiers operating under rules he put in place.

About the only high-ranking officer whose career has suffered over Abu Ghraib is Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, who was the commander in Iraq at the time. General Sanchez should certainly take responsibility, but he was also a victim of administration blunders.

General Sanchez was vaulted inappropriately from head of the First Armored Division to overall commander because Mr. Bush declared "mission accomplished": the war's over. He was then denied the staff, soldiers and equipment he needed to deal with the insurgency that quickly broke out and produced thousands of prisoners.

Mr. Bush has refused to hold himself or any of his top political appointees accountable for those catastrophic errors. Indeed, he has promoted many of them. And this is not an isolated problem. It's just one example, among many, of how this president's men run no risk of being blamed for anything that happens, not matter how egregious.