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Prisoner Abuse; A stain that won't Fade

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It was an image flashed 'round the world last week: a man sandwiched face-down into a contraption that looked like a painful cross between a Flexible Flyer sled and a roof rack.

American luger, Turin Winter Olympics? Nope.

Iraqi prisoner, in U.S. military jail.

Even though this photo and others of detainees abused by American authorities at Baghdad's notorious Abu Ghraib prison dated from 2003, their recent broadcast should turn up the heat on U.S. detention policies.

The scenes first shown on Australian TV are "absolutely disgusting" - and that's what the U.S. State Department said of them.

Bush administration officials are wrong, though, in contending that this latest graphic evidence of abuse offers no reason to alter course.

On their own, the photos may not add much to what's known about prisoner abuse by U.S. soldiers and other personnel at Abu Ghraib.

But it's a reminder of how such abuse violates American values. It underlines how absurd it is that only a handful of soldiers far down the chain of command have been punished for this systematic abuse, while military higher-ups and their policy-setting civilian overseers skate.

The photos also are a reminder of how morally obtuse was the legal hair-splitting that Bush administration officials used to claim these harsh techniques were not "torture."

The photos came out at a bad time, hard on the heels of the Danish cartoon furor. But the timing is good in another way, in that the debate over the detainees at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, is heating up again.

A damning United Nations report was released Thursday on the mistreatment of dozens of detainees by U.S. authorities at Guantanamo. U.N. investigators believe the abuse amounts to torture, a view vehemently denied by U.S. officials.

If investigators are right, a roving photographer might record equally disturbing images at Gitmo: prisoners roughed up while force-fed through the nose, shackled, chained, hooded, naked, threatened with dogs.

What a travesty that this nation's antiterror effort has become so mired in abuse allegations. Remember, this all started post-9/11 as a righteous effort to protect innocent Americans. How did it lapse into these abuses that violate American values, damage America's image and put American citizens at more risk, by recruiting more Muslims into the terrorist camp?

Many Americans have contented themselves with the notion: Hey, they're terrorists. They meant to kill us. Who cares what's done to them?

The more that's learned about the Gitmo detainees, the less sound even that amoral assumption seems. A recent National Journal article (read it at go.philly.com/ideas) and other disclosures by U.S. officials reveal that many detainees are no more al-Qaeda terrorists than the Americans mistakenly put on no-fly lists. Many were handed over to U.S. authorities in Afghanistan by rivals in exchange for bounties or to settle old scores.

Similarly, many of the thousands who passed through Abu Ghraib were innocent civilians who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time amid the post-invasion chaos.

The U.S. policy of open-ended detentions at Gitmo is unsustainable.

Yet the Bush administration is trying to solidify its grip there by seeking Supreme Court approval to scuttle all prisoners' legal appeals over their detentions. The court should defend the Constitution against this overreaching.

This nation should behave better than its enemies. It's that simple - and that hard.