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## **Worldview | Abu Ghraib Lesson: Shift the Blame**

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Webster's dictionary defines the word accountable as being "responsible" for one's acts. It is striking how absent that word is from political discourse in Washington.

Does anyone at high levels hold himself accountable for gross mistakes that have harmed America's interests?

The only time I recall a senior administration official saying, "I am accountable; I take full responsibility," was Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, at Senate hearings a year ago on the Abu Ghraib scandal. So let's look at what Rumsfeld's use of "accountable" meant.

Back then, the world got a glimpse of the hideous photos of Iraqi prisoners hooded, naked, piled in a pyramid, led around on a leash.

These revolting images blackened America's reputation in Arab countries, where the Bush administration wants to promote democracy. They became a recruiting poster for Islamic radicals; I saw them painted on a wall last spring in the Baghdad slum of Sadr City, where Shiite radicals used them to gin up attacks on U.S. forces.

After a year of various investigations, a high-level Army probe has now issued the final word on who was responsible. It was (almost) all the grunts' fault.

Four out of the five top Army officers overseeing prison operations and policies were cleared of any responsibility. This includes the then-U.S. commander in Iraq, Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez. Sanchez had been criticized by a previous army investigation and by an independent report headed by former Defense Secretary James. R. Schlesinger.

One Army Reserve officer, Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski, who commanded the military police unit at Abu Ghraib, was reprimanded (she claims she was scapegoated), and a handful of reservists have been court-martialed. The pathetic poster girl for Abu Ghraib who held the leash - Pfc. Lynndie England - just pleaded guilty. The Army is issuing a new interrogation manual.

But no one at the top - not military officers, certainly not Pentagon civilians - is blamed for wrongdoing. Never mind that a climate was fostered from the top down that tolerated, even encouraged, the abuse at Abu Ghraib.

Reams have been written about the creation of that climate. A few examples: Rumsfeld famously disparaged the Geneva Conventions when it came to the Guantánamo Bay detention center. A Guantánamo commander, Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller, was sent to Abu Ghraib and recommended that military prison guards - such as England - "set the conditions" for interrogations. Gen. Sanchez gave approval for harsh interrogation techniques - then rescinded it.

Surely someone many pay grades above England should pay a price for encouraging policies that harmed America's global standing and undercut our basic principles. But accountability is not a buzzword in the Bush administration.

The problem with lack of accountability is that it encourages more of the same behavior. If those who created the climate for the abuse at Abu Ghraib are not punished, must we not conclude that higher-ups don't believe they were wrong? And that similar abuses will happen elsewhere?

More and more reports are trickling out about abuse at Guantánamo, and about U.S. "rendition" of uncharged suspects to the prisons of U.S. allies who practice torture. Why should we expect otherwise if no one on high is held responsible for Abu Ghraib?

The standard for nonaccountability was set last year when President Bush awarded the Medal of Freedom to former director of central intelligence, George Tenet. Tenet, you recall, told the President that it was a "slam-dunk" case that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. The U.S. team investigating whether Iraq possessed such weapons has just concluded that there were none.

An administration that rewards Tenet for one of the more massive U.S. intelligence failures is clearly not one where officials will take blame for mistakes.

If you use the Tenet standard, you can understand why Bush nominated John Bolton for the U.S. ambassadorship to the United Nations. Bolton has a track record - according to a stream of officials who worked with him - of pressuring intelligence analysts to inflate the threat posed by U.S. foes such as North Korea, Syria, and Cuba. And of trying to remove such analysts from their posts.

You might think in the wake of the huge U.S. intelligence failure on Iraq, when efforts are under way to reform our intelligence operations, a man who wanted to cook the intel would be sidelined. But Bolton has been rewarded with a nomination to a job where accurate assessment of intelligence will be crucial. Especially in deciding how to deal with North Korea, Syria, Cuba - and Iran.

According to the Tenet standard, Bolton is just the man for the job.

After all, no one has taken responsibility for Pentagon failures to plan for postwar Iraq that have cost thousands of U.S. and Iraqi lives and bogged down 140,000 U.S. troops there. Irresponsibility is acceptable, not a problem. In today's Washington, it may even win you a prize.