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## **Editorial: Safe at the top**

Is it 'case closed' on Abu Ghraib?

Editorial  
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Rule One for any institution seeking to immunize itself for any future wrongdoing: Be sure that the final decision about who is held accountable is made in-house.

In the case of the abuse of U.S.-held prisoners in Iraq, what may be the final word has come from the Army's inspector general: With a single exception, no high-ranking officer - including Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, former commander of U.S. troops in Iraq who at one point approved harsh interrogation techniques that were later banned - should be punished. It follows that no one in the Pentagon, which is responsible for actions down the chain of command, will be held accountable.

The only exception is Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski, an Army reservist who commanded the military police unit at the Abu Ghraib prison. She was found guilty of dereliction of duty for not preventing low-level personnel from humiliating, threatening and otherwise abusing Iraqi prisoners in their charge. She was relieved of her command, given a written reprimand, then demoted to colonel, effectively ending her military career.

Why was Karpinski, who calls herself a scapegoat, held responsible for the actions of those under her command but those at a higher level were not? Good question.

Apart from Karpinski, only enlisted personnel and a few junior officers and enlisted personnel have been disciplined; among them was a sergeant who headed a guard crew at Abu Ghraib who got a 10-year sentence.

Whatever the rationale, the decision to exonerate most high-ranking officers and civilian officials appears to disregard the findings of other investigative bodies. One, headed by former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, said senior Pentagon officials were indirectly responsible because "the weaknesses at Abu Ghraib were well-known" and that "corrective action could have been taken and should have been taken." But those panels had no authority to recommend punishment.

Human rights advocates want a special prosecutor to be named to look into high-level responsibility for what happened at Abu Ghraib, as well as detention centers in Afghanistan and at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. That's unlikely. Nor are senators who at first said this scandal must not end with only low-level people being punished singing that tune today.

Case closed? Not for those, in this country and abroad, who see this as another case of a high command protecting itself and tossing a few expendable figures over the side. It's in the nature of things, one might say. But that doesn't make it right. Nor does the belated issuance of new interrogation guidelines that bar the kind of abuses that occurred undo the damage.

For the foreseeable future, the administration's reputation for shrugging off mistakes or letting low-level "bad apples" take the rap remains intact.

"Stuff happens," Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once said. So it does, but in this administration neither he nor any other high-ranking loyalist need worry much about the consequences, as so many others do.

