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What Rumsfeld Knew

Interviews with high-ranking military officials shed new light on the role Rumsfeld played in the harsh treatment of a Guantánamo detainee.

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Apr. 14, 2006 | Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was personally involved in the late 2002 interrogation of a high-value al-Qaida detainee known in intelligence circles as "the 20th hijacker." He also communicated weekly with the man in charge of the interrogation, Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller, the controversial commander of the Guantánamo Bay detention center.

During the same period, detainee Mohammed al-Kahtani suffered from what Army investigators have called "degrading and abusive" treatment by soldiers who were following the interrogation plan Rumsfeld had approved. Kahtani was forced to stand naked in front of a female interrogator, was accused of being a homosexual, and was forced to wear women's underwear and to perform "dog tricks" on a leash. He received 18-to-20-hour interrogations during 48 of 54 days.

Little more than two years later, during an investigation into the mistreatment of prisoners at Guantánamo, Rumsfeld expressed puzzlement at the notion that his policies had caused the abuse. "He was going, 'My God, you know, did I authorize putting a bra and underwear on this guy's head?'" recalled Lt. Gen. Randall M. Schmidt, an investigator who interviewed Rumsfeld twice in early 2005.

These disclosures are contained in a Dec. 20, 2005, Army inspector general's report on Miller's conduct, which was obtained this week by Salon through the Freedom of Information Act. The 391-page document -- which has long passages blacked out by the government -- concludes that Miller should not be punished for his oversight role in detainee operations, a fact that was reported last month by Time magazine. But the never-before-released full report also includes the transcripts of interviews with high-ranking military officials that shed new light on the role that Rumsfeld and Miller played in the harsh treatment of Kahtani, who had met with Osama bin Laden on several occasions and received terrorist training in al-Qaida camps.

In a sworn statement to the inspector general, Schmidt described Rumsfeld as "personally involved" in the interrogation and said that the defense secretary was "talking weekly" with Miller. Schmidt said he concluded that Rumsfeld did not specifically prescribe the more "creative" interrogation methods used on Kahtani. But he added that the open-ended policies Rumsfeld approved, and that the apparent lack of supervision of day-to-day interrogations permitted the abusive conduct to take place. "Where is the throttle on this stuff?" asked Schmidt, an Air Force fighter pilot, who said in his interview under oath with the inspector general that he had concerns about the length and repetition of the harsh interrogation methods. "There were no limits."

Schmidt also saw close parallels between the interrogations at Guantánamo, and the photographic evidence of abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. "Just for the lack of a camera, it would sure look like Abu Ghraib," Schmidt told the inspector general, in the interview that was conducted in August 2005. At the direction of Pentagon officials, Miller led a mission to Iraq in August 2003 to review detainee operations at Abu Ghraib -- a visit that critics say precipitated the abuse of prisoners there.

In April 2005, Schmidt completed his report on detainee abuse at Guantánamo, which he co-authored with Brig. Gen. John T. Furlow. They recommended that Miller be "admonished" and "held accountable" for the alleged abuse of Kahtani. But that recommendation was rejected by

Gen. Bantz J. Craddock, the current head of the Southern Command, who said Miller had not violated any law or policy.

On Dec. 2, 2002, Rumsfeld approved 16 harsher interrogation strategies for use against Kahtani, including the use of forced nudity, stress positions and the removal of religious items. In public statements, however, Rumsfeld has maintained that none of the policies at Guantánamo led to "inhumane" treatment of detainees. Jeffrey Gordon, a Pentagon spokesman, told Salon Thursday that Kahtani was an al-Qaida terrorist who provided a "treasure trove" of still-classified information during his interrogation. "Al-Kahtani's interrogation was guided by a very detailed plan, conducted by trained professionals in a controlled environment, and with active supervision and oversight," Gordon said in an e-mail statement. "Nothing was done randomly."

Miller -- who has invoked his right against self-incrimination in courts-martial of Abu Ghraib soldiers -- said that he did not know all the details of Kahtani's interrogation. But Schmidt told the inspector general that he found that claim "hard to believe" in light of Miller's knowledge of Rumsfeld's continuing interest in Kahtani. "The secretary of defense is personally involved in the interrogation of one person, and the entire General Counsel system of all the departments of the military," Schmidt said. "There is just not a too-busy alibi there for that."

The harsh interrogation of Kahtani came to an abrupt end in mid-January 2003. Gen. James T. Hill, Craddock's predecessor as the head of Southern Command, recalled in his interview with the inspector general that he received a call from Rumsfeld on a January weekend asking about the progress of Kahtani's interrogation. "Someone had come to him and suggested that it needed to be looked at," Hill said of Rumsfeld. "He said, 'What do you think?' And I said, 'Why don't [you] let me call General Miller.'"

According to Hill's account of that call, Miller advised that the harsh interrogation of Kahtani should continue, using the techniques Rumsfeld had previously approved. "We think we're right on the verge of making a breakthrough," Hill remembered Miller saying. Hill said he called Rumsfeld back with the news. "The secretary said, 'Fine,'" Hill remembered.

Nonetheless, several days later Rumsfeld revoked the harsher interrogation methods, apparently responding to military lawyers who had raised concerns that they may constitute cruel and unusual punishment or torture.

"My attitude on that was, 'Great!'" said Hill. The general recalled thinking about Rumsfeld and the decision to halt the harsh interrogation, "All I'm trying to do is what you want us to do in the first place and doing it the right way."

The harsher methods were not approved again.