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Saying Nothing is Torture in Itself

Jeff Jacoby
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THE LATEST allegation of prisoner abuse by the US military comes from Erik Saar, a former Army sergeant and translator at the American naval base at Guantanamo. In a forthcoming book, Saar describes the use of female sexuality as a tactic against Muslim detainees, for many of whom modesty between the sexes is a deeply ingrained religious requirement.

According to the Associated Press, Saar writes of one female interrogator who attempted to "break" a devout Saudi prisoner. She removed her top to reveal a tight T-shirt, then taunted the man by fondling herself, rubbing her breasts against his back, and commenting on his erection. When that didn't work, she smeared red ink on her fingers and pretended it was menstrual blood.

"As she circled around him he could see that she was taking her hand out of her pants. When it became visible, the detainee saw what appeared to be red blood on her hand. . . . She then wiped the red ink on his face. He shouted at the top of his lungs, spat at her, and lunged forward." Then he began to cry, prompting the interrogator to mock him: "Have a fun night in your cell without any water to clean yourself."

Writes Saar: "The concept was to make the detainee feel that . . . he was unclean and was unable to go before his God in prayer and gain strength."

Are Americans OK with using religious humiliation as tools of war?

How about religious torture?

In Abu Ghraib, the cruelties inflicted on prisoners by Specialist Charles Graner and his little band of sadists weren't limited to the sexual. Inmates told investigators they were forced to swallow pork and liquor -- both are forbidden to Muslims -- and to denounce Islam.

"They stripped me naked," said a detainee named Ameen Saeed Al-Sheik. "They asked me, 'Do you pray to Allah?' I said yes. They said, '[Expletive] you. And [expletive] him.' They ordered me to curse Islam and because they started to hit my broken leg, I cursed my religion. They ordered me to thank Jesus that I'm alive. And I did what they ordered me. This is against my belief."

Graner has since been sentenced to 10 years in prison for his crimes, and four other Abu Ghraib soldiers have pleaded guilty. But the charges keep spilling forth.

Last month the ACLU obtained documents in which FBI agents repeatedly complain about the mistreatment of prisoners in military custody. One report to the FBI director transmits allegations of "numerous serious physical abuse incidents of Iraqi civilian detainees," including "strangulation, beatings, placement of lit cigarettes into the detainees' ear openings, and unauthorized interrogations." In August, an agent reported seeing Muslim detainees in Guantanamo chained hand and foot in a fetal position "with no chair, food, or water. Most times they had urinated or defecated on themselves, and had been left for 18 to 24 hours or more." A document released by the US Navy alleges that Marines touched live electrical wires to an Iraqi inmate's shoulders. The victim, it was said, "danced as he was shocked."

Granted, these are only allegations. But there are a lot of them -- enough to fill this whole page, never mind this column. That is too many to dismiss as unfounded. Too many to shrug off as the

deeds of a few rogues on the night shift. And too many to make excuses for in the name of political or ideological loyalty.

As regular readers know, I write as a war hawk. I strongly support the mission in Iraq. I voted for President Bush. I believe the struggle against Islamist totalitarianism is the most urgent conflict of our time.

But none of that justifies the administration's apparent willingness to countenance -- under at least some circumstances -- the indecent abuse of prisoners in military custody. Something is very wrong when the Justice Department advises the president's legal adviser that a wartime president is not bound by the international Convention Against Torture or the US laws incorporating it. Or when that legal adviser tells the Senate, as Alberto Gonzales did last week, that "there is no legal prohibition under the Convention Against Torture on cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment with respect to aliens overseas."

If this were happening on a Democratic president's watch, the criticism from Republicans and conservatives would be deafening. Why the near-silence now? Who has better reason to be outraged by this scandal than those of us who support the war? More than anyone, it is the war hawks who should be infuriated by it. It shouldn't have taken me this long to say so.