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The Pentagon ducks, covers and fails

Editorial
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NOTHING stronger than weak tea and milquetoast are in the latest Pentagon report looking at prisoner abuses in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

No one above, say, the rank of staff sergeant appears worthy of blame, according to the unclassified portions of the 10th investigation of outrages at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and other locations. The vice admiral who led the study of studies averted his eyes from higher up the chain of command and broadly acquitted them all. This just stinks, and the odor is not masked by whitewash.

The duty to push the hunt for responsibility falls back to Congress and the tenacity of Senate Armed Services Committee members.

The report speaks roundly of a little hair being mussed, but nothing that any policymaker can be held accountable for.

Other messy bits: One policy might explicitly prohibit certain techniques but, as with earlier policies, it "contains several ambiguities, which although they would not permit abuse, could obscure commanders' oversight of techniques being employed... "

In Iraq, the investigation found "poor unit-level compliance with approved policy memoranda even when those units were aware of the relevant memoranda." No fault of the brass, though.

No explanation for how similar problems — and troubling techniques — migrated from theater to theater.

The report glides by the role of pressure to produce intelligence results, the role of independent contractors and OGA — other government agencies, a euphemism for unnamed, initialed agencies.

Add it all up and still no links between policies, interrogation techniques and detainee abuses.

None of this passes muster with those who know the territory. Not even a little bit.

"There has not been a finality in terms of the assessments of accountability of either senior policy people or senior officers," said Sen. John Warner, the Virginia Republican who chairs the committee and is a former secretary of the Navy.

Last summer, an independent panel of experienced hands laid a path toward Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. In language all the more blunt in contrast to last week's tepid prose, they put heavy blame on the failure to anticipate a major insurgency or to adapt to armed clashes and civic upheavals.

With detainees overwhelming guards at 75 to 1, the links between planning, policy and catastrophic results were all the more evident.

The August report was produced by two former secretaries of defense, the general who commanded the 1991 Gulf air war, and the woman who investigated the sex scandals at the U.S. Air Force Academy. They understood the power and instincts of senior officials to duck and cover from blame.

It falls to Congress to brush last week's report aside.