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The buck never stops at the top

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WASHINGTON -- The FBI has blown the whistle on the Defense Department's military investigators by accusing them of abusive treatment of prisoners of war in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The FBI was especially outraged that the interrogators of suspected terrorists had posed as FBI agents.

Administration officials usually are pretty clubby folks who close ranks in times of trouble. But apparently, the FBI was not ready to take the fall for the Pentagon's atrocious treatment of some prisoners of war.

The International Committee of the Red Cross has labeled the Pentagon's behavior as "tantamount to torture."

The big question is why President Bush has tolerated inhumane treatment of detainees and why he has not ordered a full stop to this shaming of the United States.

He has to accept some of the blame for rejecting the Geneva Conventions on humane treatment of prisoners of war for so-called enemy combatants at Guantanamo Bay, site of a U.S. Navy base and the prison holding some 550 people from 40 different nations.

There are indications that prison guards and interrogators thought they were following orders from higher ups when they abused some detainees.

The FBI didn't complain publicly against the Department of Defense but a lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union has smoked out memos written by FBI agents about the treatment of the detainees.

The records claimed the FBI learned that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had approved the impersonation of the FBI.

An ACLU attorney said the methods adopted by the military were "illegal, immoral and counterproductive."

The documents showed that FBI agents were particularly upset with what they saw as physical and mental abuse of the detainees, including the sticking of lighted cigarettes in their ears, choking, beatings, temperature changes, hooding, the use of dogs and other forms of harassment.

One detainee was wrapped in an Israeli flag.

One of the agents complained that the military's aggressive interrogation was "beyond the bounds of standard FBI practice."

In Iraq, an agent observed "serious abuses of civilian detainees," including strangulation, beatings and other physical harm and humiliations.

One detainee was described as "almost unconscious on the floor, with a pile of hair next to him." The agent surmised that the prisoner "had apparently been literally pulling his own hair."

Another report said soldiers at Guantanamo spat upon a detainee and beat him when he tried to protect himself. At one point, the soldiers beating the prisoner "grabbed his head and beat it into the cell floor," knocking him unconscious, the report said.

Describing an assault on a detainee, an agent wrote: "If this detainee is ever released or his story made public," the Defense Department will not be held accountable and the FBI will be left "holding the bag."

The morbid accounts run counter to the administration's claim there has been no torture at the Guantanamo prison. It's incredible that the abuses continued even after the photos of the mistreatment of the Abu Ghraib prisoners shocked the world.

The administration has blamed free lancing by low-ranking reservists for the brutality. No top commander has been fingered for the disgrace.

This is an administration where the buck never stops at the top. Neither the Pentagon nor the White House acknowledges condoning such practices.

White House press secretary Scott McClellan told reporters last Tuesday that the president "expects that any allegations of abuse are taken seriously and fully investigated, and that corrective measures are taken to make sure that abuse does not occur again. That's what the president expects."

McClellan added the president has made it clear that, "We are a nation of laws and a nation of values, and we adhere to our laws and values."

He also said Bush feels that "people need to be held accountable and brought to justice if they're involved in wrongdoing" and that corrective measures are in place to prevent it from happening again.

American taxpayers have spent millions to improve the U.S. image in the Middle East and to win the hearts and minds of the Arab world, which opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

But it will all be for naught unless the president makes an unequivocal statement that all prisoners and detainees we hold anywhere will be treated humanely in accordance with the Geneva Conventions and the standards of the Red Cross.