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## **The torture memos**

Editorial  
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THE PHOTOS released last spring of US soldiers abusing Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib brought that issue to the world's attention. So far just a few low-ranking guards have been punished for what the administration has tried to pass off as isolated actions. But the real extent of the abuse at both Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo is made clear in Defense Department and FBI papers released last month as a result of Freedom of Information suits by human-rights organizations.

The documents reveal high-level awareness of the problem long before last spring's disclosures, and they point to continued mistreatment of prisoners since then. The Bush administration should take stronger steps to stop it. The memos also reveal an apparent misapprehension among US interrogators that orders from Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz or President Bush himself authorized abusive techniques in interrogation. The administration denies that any such orders exist.

Neither the administration nor the Republican-run Congress has been aggressive in finding out what led US interrogators to think they could use techniques described by the International Red Cross as "tantamount to torture." The only opportunity Congress might have to clarify this question will be the confirmation hearing of Bush's nominee for attorney general, Alberto Gonzales, who as White House counsel wrote a memo calling the Geneva Convention protections for prisoners of war "obsolete." The ranking Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, Patrick Leahy of Vermont, has said he will use the Gonzales hearing to pursue this issue, as well he should.

The new memos, which describe US captors putting a lit cigarette into a detainee's ear and fatally shooting one for minor infractions, come not from visiting Red Cross inspectors but from military and FBI personnel. FBI agents expressed concern about the harsh treatment of the prisoners and the danger that the agency would be unfairly blamed for some of it, since military interrogators sometimes told detainees that they were FBI agents. The FBI agents also express doubts about the effectiveness of abusive interrogation methods.

While the worst of the actions by US personnel may pale in comparison to what Saddam Hussein's thugs did to prisoners in Abu Ghraib, that is not the standard the United States should be measured by as it fights for a democracy under rule of law in Iraq. Also, setting aside Geneva Convention rules, as the United States did with its Afghan war captives, or ignoring them, as US interrogators have done in Iraq, invites future adversaries of the United States to behave in a similar way with US servicemen or women they capture. The Bush administration must make clear to its forces and to the world at large that prisoner abuse will never be tolerated.