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The Truth About Abu Ghraib

Editorial
Washington Post
July 29, 2005

FOR 15 MONTHS now the Bush administration has insisted that the horrific photographs of abuse from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq were the result of freelance behavior by low-level personnel and had nothing to do with its policies. In this the White House has been enthusiastically supported by the Army brass, which has conducted investigations documenting hundreds of cases of prisoner mistreatment in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, but denies that any of its senior officers are culpable. For some time these implacable positions have been glaringly at odds with the known facts. In the past few days, those facts have grown harder to ignore.

The latest evidence has emerged from hearings at Fort Meade about two of those low-level Abu Ghraib guards who are charged with using dogs to terrorize Iraqi detainees. On Wednesday, the former warden of Abu Ghraib, Maj. David DiNenna, testified that the use of dogs for interrogation was recommended by Maj. Gen. Geoffrey D. Miller, the former commander of the Guantanamo Bay prison who was dispatched by the Pentagon to Abu Ghraib in August 2003 to review the handling and interrogation of prisoners. On Tuesday, a military interrogator testified that he had been trained in using dogs by a team sent to Iraq by Gen. Miller.

In statements to investigators and in sworn testimony to Congress last year, Gen. Miller denied that he recommended the use of dogs for interrogation, or that they had been used at Guantanamo. "No methods contrary to the Geneva Convention were presented at any time by the assistance team that I took to [Iraq]," he said under oath on May 19, 2004. Yet Army investigators reported to Congress this month that, under Gen. Miller's supervision at Guantanamo, an al Qaeda suspect named Mohamed Qahtani was threatened with snarling dogs, forced to wear women's underwear on his head and led by a leash attached to his chains -- the very abuse documented in the Abu Ghraib photographs.

The court evidence strongly suggests that Gen. Miller lied about his actions, and it merits further investigation by prosecutors and Congress. But the Guantanamo commander was not acting on his own: The interrogation of Mr. Qahtani, investigators found, was carried out under rules approved by Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld on Dec. 2, 2002. After strong protests from military lawyers, the Rumsfeld standards -- which explicitly allowed nudity, the use of dogs and shackling -- were revised in April 2003. Yet the same practices were later adopted at Abu Ghraib, at least in part at the direct instigation of Gen. Miller. "We understood," Maj. DiNenna testified, "that [Gen. Miller] was sent over by the secretary of defense."

The White House and Pentagon have gotten away with their stonewalling largely because of Republican control of Congress. When the Abu Ghraib scandal erupted, GOP leaders such as Sen. John W. Warner (Va.) loudly vowed to get to the bottom of the matter -- but once the bottom started to come into view late last year, Mr. Warner's demands for accountability ceased. Mr. Rumsfeld and other senior officials have never been the subject of an independent investigation. A recommendation by the latest Army probe that Gen. Miller be reprimanded for his role in the Qahtani interrogation was rejected by Gen. Bantz Craddock of Southern Command.

The only good news in this shameful story is that a group of Republican senators, though resisting justified Democratic demands for an independent investigation, are attempting to reform the policy of abuse to which the administration still adheres. Six GOP senators led by John McCain (Ariz.) and Lindsey O. Graham (S.C.) have backed an amendment to the defense

operations bill that would exclude exceptional interrogation techniques at Guantanamo Bay and ban the use of "cruel, inhumane and degrading" treatment for all prisoners held by the United States. The administration contends that detainees held abroad may be subject to such abuse. Attempts by the White House and Mr. Warner to block or gut the legislation failed, and on Tuesday the GOP leadership pulled the defense bill from the floor rather than allow a vote. The administration probably will spend the next month trying to quell this rebellion of conscience and good sense. The nation would be better served if President Bush instead accepted, at last, the truth about Abu Ghraib.