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Blaming the Messenger

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"It's appalling that this story got out there," said the secretary of state. "Shaky from the very get-go," thundered the White House spokesman. "We've not found any wrongdoing on the part of U.S. servicemembers," declared the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Outrage filled the airwaves this week as administration officials took turns denouncing Newsweek's brief report of alleged desecrations of the Koran at Guantanamo Bay. But among the many declarations of shock, shock, shock, among the multiple expressions of self-righteous horror at the riots the story sparked in Afghanistan, only one reflected any hint of self-reflection, any sense that this story might be more than just another mainstream media screw-up. "People need to be very careful about what they say," said the secretary of defense, "just as they need to be very careful about what they do."

Now, it is possible that no interrogator at Guantanamo Bay ever flushed pages of the Koran down the toilet, as the now-retracted Newsweek story reported -- although several former Guantanamo detainees have alleged just that. It is also possible that Newsweek reporters relied too much on an uncertain source, or that the magazine confused the story with (confirmed) reports that prisoners themselves used Korans to block toilets as a form of protest.

But surely the larger point is not the story itself but that it was so eminently plausible, in Pakistan, Afghanistan and everywhere else. And it was plausible precisely because interrogation techniques designed to be offensive to Muslims were used in Iraq and Guantanamo, as administration and military officials have also confirmed. For example:

* Dogs. Military interrogators deployed them specifically because they knew Muslims consider dogs unclean. In a memo signed by Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez in September 2003, and available online, the then-commander in Iraq actually approved using the technique to "exploit Arab fear of dogs."

* Nudity. We know (and the Muslim world knows) from the Abu Ghraib photographs that nudity has been used to humiliate Muslim men. More important, we know that nudity was also approved as an interrogation technique by Donald Rumsfeld himself. He signed off on a November 2002 policy memo, later revised but also available online, that specifically listed "removal of clothing" as a permissible, "category II" interrogation technique, along with "removal of facial hair," also a technique designed to offend Muslims who wear beards.

* Sexual harassment. The military's investigation of U.S. detention and interrogation practices, led by Vice Adm. Albert T. Church III, stated that at Guantanamo there were "two female interrogators who, on their own initiative, touched and spoke to detainees in a sexually suggestive manner in order to incur stress based on the detainees' religious beliefs." Although the report said both had been reprimanded, there is no doubt, again, that the tactic was designed for men whose religion prohibits them from having contact with women other than their wives.

* Fake menstrual blood. When former detainees began claiming that they had been smeared with menstrual blood intended to make them "unclean" and therefore unable to pray, their lawyers initially dismissed the story as implausible. But the story has been confirmed by Army Sgt. Erik Saar, a former Guantanamo translator, who told the Associated Press that in a forthcoming book he will describe a female interrogator who smeared a prisoner with red ink, claimed it was

menstrual blood and left, saying, "Have a fun night in your cell without any water to clean yourself."

There is no question that these were tactics designed to offend, no question that they were put in place after 2001 and no question that many considered them justified. Since the Afghan invasion, public supporters of "exceptional" interrogation methods have argued that in the special, unusual case of the war on terrorism, we may have to suspend our fussy legality, ignore our high ideals and resort to some unpleasant tactics that our military had never used. Opponents of these methods, among them some of the military's own interrogation experts, have argued, on the contrary, that "special methods" are not only ineffective but counterproductive: They might actually inspire Muslim terrorists instead of helping to defeat them. They might also make it easier, say, for fanatics in Jalalabad to use two lines of a magazine article to incite riots.

Blaming the messenger, even for a bungled message, doesn't get the administration off the hook. Yes, to paraphrase Rumsfeld, people need to be very careful, not only about what they say but about what they do. And, yes, people whose military and diplomatic priorities include the defeat of Islamic fanaticism and the spread of democratic values in the Muslim world need to be very, very careful, not only about what they say but about what they do to the Muslims they hold in captivity.