

A strange and bitter crop: the spectacle of torture

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About the author

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This article contains images that may be disturbing.

The most severe impact of Abu Ghraib for the United States government has been the fact that the actions there of its military personnel and civilian contractors have been seen across the world. The dissemination of images by western and Arab [media](#), including the internet, meant that the scandal, as well as being seen as a legal violation and moral outrage, was played and replayed in the hearts and minds of citizens in every country.

For American citizens to understand and address this impact requires more serious self-reflection than their current administration seems capable of undertaking, and a deeper process of engagement even than current inquiries and legal investigations allow. The question above all that citizens need to ask is: what do the Abu Ghraib images, and the abuse they reveal, tell us about what [Anatol Lieven](#) has called the “demons in America’s cellar”?

An anatomy of torture

Seymour Hersh reported in *The New Yorker* some months before the Abu Ghraib pictures were released that there were “several thousand prisoners, including women and teenagers” in the recently refurbished Baghdad prison. Most he [describes](#) as “civilians, many of whom had been picked up in random military sweeps and at highway checkpoints.”

Hersh cites a [report](#), *Article 15-6 Investigation of the 800th Military Police Brigade*, written by Major General Antonio M. Taguba, whose front page declares that it is “secret” and not for “foreign dissemination”. Luckily, for those concerned with the truth, this report has been made widely available.

Taguba describes a chilling litany of intentional “abuse of detainees” by military police personnel, including:

- punching, slapping, and kicking detainees
- jumping on their naked feet
- videotaping and photographing naked male and female detainees
- forcibly arranging detainees in various sexually explicit positions for photographing
- forcing detainees to remove their clothing and keeping them naked for several days at a time
- forcing naked male detainees to wear women’s underwear
- forcing groups of male detainees to masturbate themselves while being photographed and videotaped
- arranging naked male detainees in a pile and then jumping on them
- positioning a naked detainee on a meal ready-to-eat (MRE) box, with a sandbag on his head, and attaching wires to his fingers, toes, and penis to simulate electric torture

- writing “I am a Rapest” (sic) on the leg of a detainee alleged to have forcibly raped a 15-year old fellow detainee, and then photographing him naked
- placing a dog chain or strap around a naked detainee’s neck and having a female soldier pose for a picture
- a male MP guard having sex with a female detainee
- using military working dogs (without muzzles) to intimidate and frighten detainees, and in at least one case biting and severely injuring a detainee
- taking photographs of dead Iraqi detainees.

In addition, [Taguba](#) found “credible” further reports from prisoners, whose testimony included:

- breaking chemical lights and pouring the phosphoric liquid on detainees
- threatening detainees with a charged 9mm pistol
- pouring cold water on naked detainees
- beating detainees with a broom handle and a chair
- threatening male detainees with rape
- allowing a military police guard to stitch the wound of a detainee who was injured after being slammed against the wall in his cell
- sodomising a detainee with a chemical light and perhaps a broomstick

Where can we begin to provide a historical context for understanding this litany of “abuse”?

America’s two faces

Within the United States, torture in Iraq has been presented as the acts of a few “bad apples” – or a “perverse, kinky group” mixing interrogation manuals “with S&M techniques” – in an otherwise wholesome [American pie](#). The implication is that the acts need to be understood as external to “the American character” and in opposition to the beliefs and practices of American democracy. But this is an exercise in historical amnesia, a denial of how integral the torture of brown bodies has been to the building of “the land of the free.”

The starting-point of a recovery of memory is awareness of the unacknowledged but intimate interdependence between two currents in American history: the enlightenment principles of individual freedom, as embedded in the original constitution of the United States; and the horrors of non-freedom, of the enslavement and dispossession of the not-fully-human who were excluded from the constitution drawn up by the “founding fathers”.

It is these enslaved and dispossessed – who were brutally slaughtered and driven from their lands, or dragged in chains across the Atlantic to build the foundation of wealth upon which the modern United States of America rests – who have lived the consequences of this Janus face of American freedom and non-freedom.

As slavery gave way to “emancipation” and “freedom” as a result of social struggles and amendments to the US constitution, the crucial territory of this double-edge America – the tortured black and brown body – moved from the hidden domain of the plantation into public view. The racialised [anxiety](#) this caused in the psyche of white America has led repeatedly to the debasement of the black and brown body in symbolic spectacle, especially through photography. There is a direct, but hidden, line connecting Abu Ghraib, the [Rodney King](#) video, and the photographs and “postcards” of lynchings which circulated widely in the early 20th century.

The history of the [lynching](#) of African Americans and the physical, mental and sexual abuse of prisoners perpetrated daily in federal and state penitentiaries is continually being erased from, and represented to, the American imagination – precisely because these brutal techniques remain central to the attempt to control the unassimilable others (non-whites) in its midst.

In short, from where I stand, the images from [Abu Ghraib](#) are all too familiar and all too American.

Torture as spectacle

The techniques used on the Abu Ghraib prisoners are familiar from a long history of similar incidents on American soil. In 1997, in a Brooklyn police station, a young Haitian immigrant called [Abner Louima](#) was tortured by police officers – one of whom, Justin Volpe, sodomised him with a broom-handle. Although the details of this assault were eventually uncovered, there was no visual evidence of it. Why, after all, would a perpetrator want to take pictures of their crime? But in that case, why was the Abu Ghraib torture recorded on film?

Susan Sontag, in an [article](#) in the *New York Times Magazine*, asks: “How can someone grin at the sufferings and humiliation of another human being?” This question, posed by one of America’s foremost intellectuals, is evidence that even the best-educated have learned little from the history of American racialised violence. While Sontag acknowledges that Americans torture “when they are told, or made to feel, that those over whom they have absolute power deserve to be humiliated, tormented” and “when they are led to believe that the people they are torturing belong to an inferior race or religion,” she cannot quite grasp that the practice of torture in Abu Ghraib, and the recording of it on film, is not a contemporary phenomenon.

While reaching for something comparable to the photographs from Abu Ghraib, Sontag understands that it would be lynching photographs “which show Americans grinning beneath the naked mutilated body of a black man or woman hanging behind them from a tree.” At the same time, Sontag wants to maintain a distinction between images of lynching and those from Abu Ghraib. She argues that lynching photographs were trophies “taken by a photographer in order to be collected” and “stored in albums”.

The pictures taken in Abu Ghraib, Sontag argues, are different; they “reflect a shift in the use made of pictures – less objects to be saved than messages to be disseminated, circulated”. She prefers to believe that the Abu Ghraib images are “inspired by the vast repertory of pornographic imagery available on the internet” and evidence of the “increasing acceptance of brutality in American life” like the “video games of boys”.

But the contrary is true: the importance of spectacles of abuse, the taking of photographs and videos, the preservation and the *circulation* of the visual image of the tortured/lynched body, the erotic sexual exploitation which produced pleasure in the torturers – all these practices are *continuities* in the history of American racism. An examination of evidence of the spectacle of American racial subordination makes this clear.

They’re selling postcards of the hanging

A crowd at a lynching

There were almost 5,000 documented instances of lynching in the United States between post-civil war “reconstruction” and the mid-20th century. Tortured bodies were always hung and sometimes set alight for public display [see James Allen (ed), *Without Sanctuary: lynching photography in America* (Santa Fe, [Twin Palms Publishers](#), 2000). The photographs of these bodies were not designed merely for storage, but rather functioned as public documents with both overt and covert messages: overtly they were used as adverts and postcards, covertly they functioned both to reinforce white supremacy and to send a clear message to black Americans to “keep their place or suffer these consequences”.

Lynching with photographer’s ad

A postcard could be used as an advertisement for a business, as where (for example) the photographer’s name is painted in large letters on the tree from which the body hung. The postcards were also “wish you were here” communications to friends and relatives. Some postcards even had personal messages beginning: “Dear John, this

is a token of a great day out we had...”.

Front and back of postcard

Lynching was a tool of a racialised subjection that was frequently sanctioned by local, state and civil authority. For black Americans, lynched bodies carried an unambiguous message: any attempt to assert or claim civil rights, to seek economic, political, or social justice and equality, would be rewarded by torture and death. Lynching was also an intervention in the **struggle** for access to economic resources in the form of land, business and capital, and access to political power through the ballot.

The pictures of the tortured bodies of Iraqis, rather than being unique or novel, are the direct descendants of the postcards of lynched black **bodies** both are images and messages to be shared – in celebration or as a warning. The digital form in which the Abu Ghraib images circulated is new, but the message they are designed to convey is as old as racism itself: this is material evidence of the wielding of power, of the performance of conquest over an enemy.

Spectators: two images side by side

This continuity of message is revealed in photographs where participants in a lynching stand grinning beside the bodies of African Americans, exhibiting pleasure and pride in their participation in torture. The fact that in these images the bodies are often very carefully posed emphasises that pleasure is not produced spontaneously; rather, in both lynching photographs and in the photographs from Abu Ghraib we can see a consciously staged and highly ritualised performance as if the actors were following a script.

Two images of performance

The **torture** at Abu Ghraib is also about violence perpetrated upon eroticised bodies, and this too has ample precedents in American history. Lynchers mutilated genitals, stuffed penises in the mouths of their victims and displayed them in the windows of shops. Those who came to watch scrambled through the ashes for body-parts to take home.

The element of display extends to facial expressions, including smiles of pride in accomplishment, as if the torturers have truly dispensed justice. The fact that the Abu Ghraib torture was photographed and filmed is a crucial historical link to the practice of lynching as spectacle – and acknowledging this link is the first stage in understanding its deep meaning inside American life and culture.

The pre-history of dehumanization

The direct testimony of violations appears in the annexes to the Taguba report, but within the main body of this document one haunting direct description remains. Its source is **Adel L. Nakhla**, a US civilian contract translator who responded to questions about the treatment of several prisoners accused of rape:

“They (detainees) were all naked, a bunch of people from MI [military intelligence], the MP [military police] were there that night and the inmates were ordered by SGT [Sergeant] Granier and SGT Frederick ordered the guys while questioning them to admit what they did. They made them do strange exercises by sliding on their stomach, jump up and down, throw water on them and made them some wet, called them all kinds of names such as ‘gays’ do they like to make love to guys, then they handcuffed their hands together and their legs with shackles and started to stack them on top of each other by insuring that the bottom guy’s penis will touch the guy on top’s butt.”

The body pyramid

The young soldiers in the Abu Ghraib photos resemble high-school kids on their first trip abroad, smiling self-consciously while announcing to the natives that they have arrived, assuring themselves of their superiority and their right to dominate while saying “hi” to mom back home. They could be American tourists in a fantasyland where exoticised bodies become the conduit for expressing and acting upon racist desires that can be fully realised only in the contact zones of the other.

But to assume such apparent innocence would be a mistake, for the invaders have created, and reinforced time and again in popular texts, the image of the peoples they expected to find.

American popular culture is laced with racist representations that mutate according to the enemy of the moment. Its contemporary, [anti-Arab](#) variation is reflected in a vast repertoire of popular stereotype, from the Disney film *Aladdin* to the Rambo series, from video-game iconography to the notorious book by Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind* (used in the [training](#) of US military personnel). This culture contains rich imaginative sources that make it possible for Americans to regard Arabs as inferior, and as legitimate objects of violence.

The combination of brutal violence and desire that characterised lynching was developed and refined on the landscape of colonialism, has been taught by the US military to death squads in Latin America, and is to be found today in the prisons and precinct houses of the homeland. From lynching to Abu Ghraib, the continuous aim is the transformation of peoples from subjects into objects, what [Frantz Fanon](#) called “decerebralisation”. In the shadow of the flag, of the Pentagon, and of an imperial democracy, lies the other’s tortured body.