

# Prison abuse reflects administration views

Like the rest of the world, I was horrified and ashamed to see the photographic evidence of human rights abuses of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison last week. The long-term effects of these transgressions of international law and basic moral decency are incalculable. Tragically, they've already resulted in the death of an American businessman, Nick Berg, who was beheaded "in retribution." For an idea of the impact on the already dismal view of our country in the Arab world, go to <http://www.aljazeera.info> and click on "Cartoons." You'll find that the hypocrisy and double standards practiced by this administration are apparent to everyone but the right-wing media and portions of the American public.

As much as the government and the Pentagon would like us to believe that these were isolated incidents performed by a group of rogue reservists, this is clearly not the case. According to Pierre Kraehenbuehl, director of operations at the International Committee for the Red Cross, "our findings do not allow us to conclude that what we were dealing with ... were isolated acts of coalition forces. What we have described is a pattern and a broad system."

The responsibility for these grave abuses goes way beyond the seven accused soldiers. Ultimately, the buck for this travesty stops squarely on the desks of Messrs. Rumsfeld and Bush.

In his testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee the week before last, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said: "I feel terrible about what happened to these Iraqi detainees. They are human beings. They were in U.S. custody. Our country had an obligation to treat them right. We didn't. And that was wrong ... it was inconsistent with the values of our nation. It was inconsistent of the teachings of the military to the men and women of the armed forces. And it was certainly fundamentally un-American."



**Sarah Littman**

Yes, the abuses were all of these things, as well as contrary to international laws and conventions. Yet this is from the Donald Rumsfeld who in January 2002 said "to be in an 8-by-8 cell in sunny Guantanamo, Cuba, is not inhumane treatment," this despite protests from the ICRC, Amnesty International and the Human Rights Watch.

As for President Bush, by framing this conflict as a struggle of good versus evil, he rationalized the "anything goes in the war on terror" philosophy, pushing this country down the slippery slope that led to the horrors of Abu Ghraib. I still find it astonishing how so many otherwise intelligent Americans believe it acceptable for the United States to hold prisoners indefinitely at Guan-

tanamo Bay. Because once the principle that international law is for other people (but not us) is established, it's not such a big leap to the "serious violations of international humanitarian law ... in some cases tantamount to torture" documented by the ICRC. History proved that when you start to consider others as *untersmenschen*, humanity goes out the window.

"The U.S. administration has shown a consistent disregard for the Geneva Conventions and basic principles of law, human rights and decency," states Irene Khan, secretary general of Amnesty International. "This has created a climate in which U.S. soldiers feel they can dehumanize and degrade prisoners with impunity. ... What we now see in Iraq is the logical consequence of the relentless pursuit of the 'war on terror' regardless of the costs to human rights and the rules of war."

When the accused soldiers are court-martialed, will we hear echoes of Nuremberg: "We were just obeying orders"? Bystanders to immoral actions also bear responsibility — if they remain silent. As Thomas Paine observed back in 1776: "He that would make his own liberty secure must guard even his enemy from oppression, for if he violates this duty, he establishes a precedent that will reach to himself."

The true hero of this debacle is Army Spc. Joseph Darby, a reservist from Maryland. He had the courage to take a stand against the morally reprehensible actions of his colleagues and superiors. Sometimes it takes the small steps of a reluctant hero to galvanize us into confronting the facts; facts of which a frighteningly large part of this nation would rather remain ignorant.

We Americans need to wake up and fight against the insidious attempts by this administration to erode the foundation of human rights and the tripartite system of checks and balances upon which our nation was founded.

Otherwise, to paraphrase "Pogo" cartoonist Walt Kelly, "We shall meet the enemy, and he is us."

*Sarah Littman, who lives in Greenwich, is author of "Confessions of a Closet Catholic," to be published in spring 2005 by Dutton Children's Books. E-mail her at [sarahlittman@hotmail.com](mailto:sarahlittman@hotmail.com).*