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The Gray Zone

How a secret Pentagon program came to Abu Ghraib.

by Seymour M. Hersh

The roots of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal lie not in the criminal inclinations of a few Army reservists but in a decision, approved last year by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, to expand a highly secret operation, which had been focussed on the hunt for Al Qaeda, to the interrogation of prisoners in Iraq. Rumsfeld's decision embittered the American intelligence community, damaged the effectiveness of elite combat units, and hurt America's prospects in the war on terror.

According to interviews with several past and present American intelligence officials, the Pentagon's operation, known inside the intelligence community by several code words, including Copper Green, encouraged physical coercion and sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners in an effort to generate more intelligence about the growing insurgency in Iraq. A senior C.I.A. official, in confirming the details of this account last week, said that the operation stemmed from Rumsfeld's long-standing desire to wrest control of America's clandestine and paramilitary operations from the C.I.A.

Rumsfeld, during appearances last week before Congress to testify about Abu Ghraib, was precluded by law from explicitly mentioning highly secret matters in an unclassified session. But he conveyed the message that he was telling the public all that he knew about the story. He said, "Any suggestion that there is not a full, deep awareness of what has happened, and the damage it has done, I think, would be a misunderstanding." The senior C.I.A. official, asked about Rumsfeld's testimony and that of Stephen Cambone, his Under-Secretary for Intelligence, said, "Some people think you can bullshit anyone."

The Abu Ghraib story began, in a sense, just weeks after the September 11, 2001, attacks, with the American bombing of Afghanistan. Almost from the start, the Administration's search for Al Qaeda members in the war zone, and its worldwide search for terrorists, came up against major command-and-control problems. For example, combat forces that had Al Qaeda targets in sight had to obtain legal clearance before firing on them. On October 7th, the night the bombing began, an unmanned Predator aircraft tracked an automobile convoy that, American intelligence believed, contained Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taliban leader. A lawyer on duty at the United States Central Command headquarters, in Tampa, Florida, refused to authorize a strike. By the time an attack was approved, the target was out of reach. Rumsfeld was apoplectic over what he saw as a self-defeating hesitation to attack that was due to political correctness. One officer described him to me that fall as "kicking a lot of glass and breaking doors." In November, the *Washington Post* reported that, as many as ten times since early October, Air Force pilots believed they'd had senior Al Qaeda and Taliban members in their sights but had been unable to act in time because of legalistic hurdles. There were similar problems throughout the world, as American Special Forces units seeking to move quickly against suspected terrorist cells were compelled to get prior approval from local American ambassadors and brief their superiors in the chain of command.

Rumsfeld reacted in his usual direct fashion: he authorized the establishment of a highly secret program that was given blanket advance approval to kill or capture and, if possible, interrogate "high value" targets in the Bush Administration's war on terror. A special-access program, or SAP—subject to the Defense Department's most stringent level of security—was set up, with an office in a secure area of the Pentagon. The program would recruit operatives and acquire the necessary equipment, including aircraft, and would keep its activities under wraps. America's most successful intelligence operations during the Cold War had been SAPs, including the Navy's submarine penetration

of underwater cables used by the Soviet high command and construction of the Air Force's stealth bomber. All the so-called "black" programs had one element in common: the Secretary of Defense, or his deputy, had to conclude that the normal military classification restraints did not provide enough security.

"Rumsfeld's goal was to get a capability in place to take on a high-value target—a standup group to hit quickly," a former high-level intelligence official told me. "He got all the agencies together—the C.I.A. and the N.S.A.—to get pre-approval in place. Just say the code word and go." The operation had across-the-board approval from Rumsfeld and from Condoleezza Rice, the national-security adviser. President Bush was informed of the existence of the program, the former intelligence official said.

The people assigned to the program worked by the book, the former intelligence official told me. They created code words, and recruited, after careful screening, highly trained commandos and operatives from America's elite forces—Navy SEALs, the Army's Delta Force, and the C.I.A.'s paramilitary experts. They also asked some basic questions: "Do the people working the problem have to use aliases? Yes. Do we need dead drops for the mail? Yes. No traceability and no budget. And some special-access programs are never fully briefed to Congress."

In theory, the operation enabled the Bush Administration to respond immediately to time-sensitive intelligence: commandos crossed borders without visas and could interrogate terrorism suspects deemed too important for transfer to the military's facilities at Guantánamo, Cuba. They carried out instant interrogations—using force if necessary—at secret C.I.A. detention centers scattered around the world. The intelligence would be relayed to the SAP command center in the Pentagon in real time, and sifted for those pieces of information critical to the "white," or overt, world.

Fewer than two hundred operatives and officials, including Rumsfeld and General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, were "completely read into the program," the former intelligence official said. The goal was to keep the operation protected. "We're not going to read more people than necessary into our heart of darkness," he said. "The rules are 'Grab whom you must. Do what you want.'"

One Pentagon official who was deeply involved in the program was Stephen Cambone, who was named Under-Secretary of Defense for Intelligence in March, 2003. The office was new; it was created as part of Rumsfeld's reorganization of the Pentagon. Cambone was unpopular among military and civilian intelligence bureaucrats in the Pentagon, essentially because he had little experience in running intelligence programs, though in 1998 he had served as staff director for a committee, headed by Rumsfeld, that warned of an emerging ballistic-missile threat to the United States. He was known instead for his closeness to Rumsfeld. "Remember Henry II—'Who will rid me of this meddlesome priest?'" the senior C.I.A. official said to me, with a laugh, last week. "Whatever Rumsfeld whimsically says, Cambone will do ten times that much."

Cambone was a strong advocate for war against Iraq. He shared Rumsfeld's disdain for the analysis and assessments proffered by the C.I.A., viewing them as too cautious, and chafed, as did Rumsfeld, at the C.I.A.'s inability, before the Iraq war, to state conclusively that Saddam Hussein harbored weapons of mass destruction. Cambone's military assistant, Army Lieutenant General William G. (Jerry) Boykin, was also controversial. Last fall, he generated unwanted headlines after it was reported that, in a speech at an Oregon church, he equated the Muslim world with Satan.

Early in his tenure, Cambone provoked a bureaucratic battle within the Pentagon by insisting that he be given control of all special-access programs that were relevant to the war on terror. Those programs, which had been viewed by many in the Pentagon as sacrosanct, were monitored by Kenneth deGraffenreid, who had experience in counter-intelligence programs. Cambone got control, and deGraffenreid subsequently left the Pentagon. Asked for comment on this story, a Pentagon spokesman said, "I will

not discuss any covert programs; however, Dr. Cambone did not assume his position as the Under-Secretary of Defense for Intelligence until March 7, 2003, and had no involvement in the decision-making process regarding interrogation procedures in Iraq or anywhere else.”

In mid-2003, the special-access program was regarded in the Pentagon as one of the success stories of the war on terror. “It was an active program,” the former intelligence official told me. “It’s been the most important capability we have for dealing with an imminent threat. If we discover where Osama bin Laden is, we can get him. And we can remove an existing threat with a real capability to hit the United States—and do so without visibility.” Some of its methods were troubling and could not bear close scrutiny, however.

By then, the war in Iraq had begun. The SAP was involved in some assignments in Iraq, the former official said. C.I.A. and other American Special Forces operatives secretly teamed up to hunt for Saddam Hussein and—without success—for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. But they weren’t able to stop the evolving insurgency.

In the first months after the fall of Baghdad, Rumsfeld and his aides still had a limited view of the insurgency, seeing it as little more than the work of Baathist “dead-enders,” criminal gangs, and foreign terrorists who were Al Qaeda followers. The Administration measured its success in the war by how many of those on its list of the fifty-five most wanted members of the old regime—reproduced on playing cards—had been captured. Then, in August, 2003, terror bombings in Baghdad hit the Jordanian Embassy, killing nineteen people, and the United Nations headquarters, killing twenty-three people, including Sergio Vieira de Mello, the head of the U.N. mission. On August 25th, less than a week after the U.N. bombing, Rumsfeld acknowledged, in a talk before the Veterans of Foreign Wars, that “the dead-enders are still with us.” He went on, “There are some today who are surprised that there are still pockets of resistance in Iraq, and they suggest that this represents some sort of failure on the part of the Coalition. But this is not the case.” Rumsfeld compared the insurgents with those true believers who “fought on during and after the defeat of the Nazi regime in Germany.” A few weeks later—and five months after the fall of Baghdad—the Defense Secretary declared, “It is, in my view, better to be dealing with terrorists in Iraq than in the United States.”

Inside the Pentagon, there was a growing realization that the war was going badly. The increasingly beleaguered and baffled Army leadership was telling reporters that the insurgents consisted of five thousand Baathists loyal to Saddam Hussein. “When you understand that they’re organized in a cellular structure,” General John Abizaid, the head of the Central Command, declared, “that . . . they have access to a lot of money and a lot of ammunition, you’ll understand how dangerous they are.”

The American military and intelligence communities were having little success in penetrating the insurgency. One internal report prepared for the U.S. military, made available to me, concluded that the insurgents’ “strategic and operational intelligence has proven to be quite good.” According to the study:

Their ability to attack convoys, other vulnerable targets and particular individuals has been the result of painstaking surveillance and reconnaissance. Inside information has been passed on to insurgent cells about convoy/troop movements and daily habits of Iraqis working with coalition from within the Iraqi security services, primarily the Iraqi Police force which is rife with sympathy for the insurgents, Iraqi ministries and from within pro-insurgent individuals working with the CPA’s so-called Green Zone.

The study concluded, “Politically, the U.S. has failed to date. Insurgencies can be fixed or ameliorated by dealing with what caused them in the first place. The disaster

that is the reconstruction of Iraq has been the key cause of the insurgency. There is no legitimate government, and it behooves the Coalition Provisional Authority to absorb the sad but unvarnished fact that most Iraqis do not see the Governing Council”—the Iraqi body appointed by the C.P.A.—“as the legitimate authority. Indeed, they know that the true power is the CPA.”

By the fall, a military analyst told me, the extent of the Pentagon’s political and military misjudgments was clear. Donald Rumsfeld’s “dead-enders” now included not only Baathists but many marginal figures as well—thugs and criminals who were among the tens of thousands of prisoners freed the previous fall by Saddam as part of a prewar general amnesty. Their desperation was not driving the insurgency; it simply made them easy recruits for those who were. The analyst said, “We’d killed and captured guys who had been given two or three hundred dollars to ‘pray and spray’”—that is, shoot randomly and hope for the best. “They weren’t really insurgents but down-and-outers who were paid by wealthy individuals sympathetic to the insurgency.” In many cases, the paymasters were Sunnis who had been members of the Baath Party. The analyst said that the insurgents “spent three or four months figuring out how we operated and developing their own countermeasures. If that meant putting up a hapless guy to go and attack a convoy and see how the American troops responded, they’d do it.” Then, the analyst said, “the clever ones began to get in on the action.”

By contrast, according to the military report, the American and Coalition forces knew little about the insurgency: “Human intelligence is poor or lacking . . . due to the dearth of competence and expertise. . . . The intelligence effort is not coordinated since either too many groups are involved in gathering intelligence or the final product does not get to the troops in the field in a timely manner.” The success of the war was at risk; something had to be done to change the dynamic.

The solution, endorsed by Rumsfeld and carried out by Stephen Cambone, was to get tough with those Iraqis in the Army prison system who were suspected of being insurgents. A key player was Major General Geoffrey Miller, the commander of the detention and interrogation center at Guantánamo, who had been summoned to Baghdad in late August to review prison interrogation procedures. The internal Army report on the abuse charges, written by Major General Antonio Taguba in February, revealed that Miller urged that the commanders in Baghdad change policy and place military intelligence in charge of the prison. The report quoted Miller as recommending that “detention operations must act as an enabler for interrogation.”

Miller’s concept, as it emerged in recent Senate hearings, was to “Gitmoize” the prison system in Iraq—to make it more focussed on interrogation. He also briefed military commanders in Iraq on the interrogation methods used in Cuba—methods that could, with special approval, include sleep deprivation, exposure to extremes of cold and heat, and placing prisoners in “stress positions” for agonizing lengths of time. (The Bush Administration had unilaterally declared Al Qaeda and other captured members of international terrorist networks to be illegal combatants, and not eligible for the protection of the Geneva Conventions.)

Rumsfeld and Cambone went a step further, however: they expanded the scope of the SAP, bringing its unconventional methods to Abu Ghraib. The commandos were to operate in Iraq as they had in Afghanistan. The male prisoners could be treated roughly, and exposed to sexual humiliation.

“They weren’t getting anything substantive from the detainees in Iraq,” the former intelligence official told me. “No names. Nothing that they could hang their hat on. Cambone says, I’ve got to crack this thing and I’m tired of working through the normal chain of command. I’ve got this apparatus set up—the black special-access program—and I’m going in hot. So he pulls the switch, and the electricity begins flowing last summer. And it’s working. We’re getting a picture of the insurgency in Iraq and the

intelligence is flowing into the white world. We're getting good stuff. But we've got more targets"—prisoners in Iraqi jails—"than people who can handle them."

Cambone then made another crucial decision, the former intelligence official told me: not only would he bring the SAP's rules into the prisons; he would bring some of the Army military-intelligence officers working inside the Iraqi prisons under the SAP's auspices. "So here are fundamentally good soldiers—military-intelligence guys—being told that no rules apply," the former official, who has extensive knowledge of the special-access programs, added. "And, as far as they're concerned, this is a covert operation, and it's to be kept within Defense Department channels."

The military-police prison guards, the former official said, included "recycled hillbillies from Cumberland, Maryland." He was referring to members of the 372nd Military Police Company. Seven members of the company are now facing charges for their role in the abuse at Abu Ghraib. "How are these guys from Cumberland going to know anything? The Army Reserve doesn't know what it's doing."

Who was in charge of Abu Ghraib—whether military police or military intelligence—was no longer the only question that mattered. Hard-core special operatives, some of them with aliases, were working in the prison. The military police assigned to guard the prisoners wore uniforms, but many others—military intelligence officers, contract interpreters, C.I.A. officers, and the men from the special-access program—wore civilian clothes. It was not clear who was who, even to Brigadier General Janis Karpinski, then the commander of the 800th Military Police Brigade, and the officer ostensibly in charge. "I thought most of the civilians there were interpreters, but there were some civilians that I didn't know," Karpinski told me. "I called them the disappearing ghosts. I'd seen them once in a while at Abu Ghraib and then I'd see them months later. They were nice—they'd always call out to me and say, 'Hey, remember me? How are you doing?'" The mysterious civilians, she said, were "always bringing in somebody for interrogation or waiting to collect somebody going out." Karpinski added that she had no idea who was operating in her prison system. (General Taguba found that Karpinski's leadership failures contributed to the abuses.)

By fall, according to the former intelligence official, the senior leadership of the C.I.A. had had enough. "They said, 'No way. We signed up for the core program in Afghanistan—pre-approved for operations against high-value terrorist targets—and now you want to use it for cabdrivers, brothers-in-law, and people pulled off the streets'"—the sort of prisoners who populate the Iraqi jails. "The C.I.A.'s legal people objected," and the agency ended its SAP involvement in Abu Ghraib, the former official said.

The C.I.A.'s complaints were echoed throughout the intelligence community. There was fear that the situation at Abu Ghraib would lead to the exposure of the secret SAP, and thereby bring an end to what had been, before Iraq, a valuable cover operation. "This was stupidity," a government consultant told me. "You're taking a program that was operating in the chaos of Afghanistan against Al Qaeda, a stateless terror group, and bringing it into a structured, traditional war zone. Sooner or later, the commandos would bump into the legal and moral procedures of a conventional war with an Army of a hundred and thirty-five thousand soldiers."

The former senior intelligence official blamed hubris for the Abu Ghraib disaster. "There's nothing more exhilarating for a pissant Pentagon civilian than dealing with an important national security issue without dealing with military planners, who are always worried about risk," he told me. "What could be more boring than needing the cooperation of logistical planners?" The only difficulty, the former official added, is that, "as soon as you enlarge the secret program beyond the oversight capability of experienced people, you lose control. We've never had a case where a special-access program went sour—and this goes back to the Cold War."

In a separate interview, a Pentagon consultant, who spent much of his career directly involved with special-access programs, spread the blame. "The White House sub-

contracted this to the Pentagon, and the Pentagon subcontracted it to Cambone,” he said. “This is Cambone’s deal, but Rumsfeld and Myers approved the program.” When it came to the interrogation operation at Abu Ghraib, he said, Rumsfeld left the details to Cambone. Rumsfeld may not be personally culpable, the consultant added, “but he’s responsible for the checks and balances. The issue is that, since 9/11, we’ve changed the rules on how we deal with terrorism, and created conditions where the ends justify the means.”

Last week, statements made by one of the seven accused M.P.s, Specialist Jeremy Livits, who is expected to plead guilty, were released. In them, he claimed that senior commanders in his unit would have stopped the abuse had they witnessed it. One of the questions that will be explored at any trial, however, is why a group of Army Reserve military policemen, most of them from small towns, tormented their prisoners as they did, in a manner that was especially humiliating for Iraqi men.

The notion that Arabs are particularly vulnerable to sexual humiliation became a talking point among pro-war Washington conservatives in the months before the March, 2003, invasion of Iraq. One book that was frequently cited was “The Arab Mind,” a study of Arab culture and psychology, first published in 1973, by Raphael Patai, a cultural anthropologist who taught at, among other universities, Columbia and Princeton, and who died in 1996. The book includes a twenty-five-page chapter on Arabs and sex, depicting sex as a taboo vested with shame and repression. “The segregation of the sexes, the veiling of the women . . . and all the other minute rules that govern and restrict contact between men and women, have the effect of making sex a prime mental preoccupation in the Arab world,” Patai wrote. Homosexual activity, “or any indication of homosexual leanings, as with all other expressions of sexuality, is never given any publicity. These are private affairs and remain in private.” The Patai book, an academic told me, was “the bible of the neocons on Arab behavior.” In their discussions, he said, two themes emerged—“one, that Arabs only understand force and, two, that the biggest weakness of Arabs is shame and humiliation.”

The government consultant said that there may have been a serious goal, in the beginning, behind the sexual humiliation and the posed photographs. It was thought that some prisoners would do anything—including spying on their associates—to avoid dissemination of the shameful photos to family and friends. The government consultant said, “I was told that the purpose of the photographs was to create an army of informants, people you could insert back in the population.” The idea was that they would be motivated by fear of exposure, and gather information about pending insurgency action, the consultant said. If so, it wasn’t effective; the insurgency continued to grow.

“This shit has been brewing for months,” the Pentagon consultant who has dealt with SAPs told me. “You don’t keep prisoners naked in their cell and then let them get bitten by dogs. This is sick.” The consultant explained that he and his colleagues, all of whom had served for years on active duty in the military, had been appalled by the misuse of Army guard dogs inside Abu Ghraib. “We don’t raise kids to do things like that. When you go after Mullah Omar, that’s one thing. But when you give the authority to kids who don’t know the rules, that’s another.”

In 2003, Rumsfeld’s apparent disregard for the requirements of the Geneva Conventions while carrying out the war on terror had led a group of senior military legal officers from the Judge Advocate General’s (JAG) Corps to pay two surprise visits within five months to Scott Horton, who was then chairman of the New York City Bar Association’s Committee on International Human Rights. “They wanted us to challenge the Bush Administration about its standards for detentions and interrogation,” Horton told me. “They were urging us to get involved and speak in a very loud voice. It came pretty much out of the blue. The message was that conditions are ripe for abuse, and it’s going to occur.” The military officials were most alarmed about the growing use

of civilian contractors in the interrogation process, Horton recalled. “They said there was an atmosphere of legal ambiguity being created as a result of a policy decision at the highest levels in the Pentagon. The JAG officers were being cut out of the policy formulation process.” They told him that, with the war on terror, a fifty-year history of exemplary application of the Geneva Conventions had come to an end.

The abuses at Abu Ghraib were exposed on January 13th, when Joseph Darby, a young military policeman assigned to Abu Ghraib, reported the wrongdoing to the Army’s Criminal Investigations Division. He also turned over a CD full of photographs. Within three days, a report made its way to Donald Rumsfeld, who informed President Bush.

The inquiry presented a dilemma for the Pentagon. The C.I.D. had to be allowed to continue, the former intelligence official said. “You can’t cover it up. You have to prosecute these guys for being off the reservation. But how do you prosecute them when they were covered by the special-access program? So you hope that maybe it’ll go away.” The Pentagon’s attitude last January, he said, was “Somebody got caught with some photos. What’s the big deal? Take care of it.” Rumsfeld’s explanation to the White House, the official added, was reassuring: “‘We’ve got a glitch in the program. We’ll prosecute it.’ The cover story was that some kids got out of control.”

In their testimony before Congress last week, Rumsfeld and Cambone struggled to convince the legislators that Miller’s visit to Baghdad in late August had nothing to do with the subsequent abuse. Cambone sought to assure the Senate Armed Services Committee that the interplay between Miller and Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, the top U.S. commander in Iraq, had only a casual connection to his office. Miller’s recommendations, Cambone said, were made to Sanchez. His own role, he said, was mainly to insure that the “flow of intelligence back to the commands” was “efficient and effective.” He added that Miller’s goal was “to provide a safe, secure and humane environment that supports the expeditious collection of intelligence.”

It was a hard sell. Senator Hillary Clinton, Democrat of New York, posed the essential question facing the senators:

If, indeed, General Miller was sent from Guantánamo to Iraq for the purpose of acquiring more actionable intelligence from detainees, then it is fair to conclude that the actions that are at point here in your report [on abuses at Abu Ghraib] are in some way connected to General Miller’s arrival and his specific orders, however they were interpreted, by those MPs and the military intelligence that were involved. . . . Therefore, I for one don’t believe I yet have adequate information from Mr. Cambone and the Defense Department as to exactly what General Miller’s orders were . . . how he carried out those orders, and the connection between his arrival in the fall of ’03 and the intensity of the abuses that occurred afterward.

Sometime before the Abu Ghraib abuses became public, the former intelligence official told me, Miller was “read in”—that is, briefed—on the special-access operation. In April, Miller returned to Baghdad to assume control of the Iraqi prisons; once the scandal hit, with its glaring headlines, General Sanchez presented him to the American and international media as the general who would clean up the Iraqi prison system and instill respect for the Geneva Conventions. “His job is to save what he can,” the former official said. “He’s there to protect the program while limiting any loss of core capability.” As for Antonio Taguba, the former intelligence official added, “He goes into it not knowing shit. And then: ‘Holy cow! What’s going on?’”

If General Miller had been summoned by Congress to testify, he, like Rumsfeld and Cambone, would not have been able to mention the special-access program. “If you

give away the fact that a special-access program exists,” the former intelligence official told me, “you blow the whole quick-reaction program.”

One puzzling aspect of Rumsfeld’s account of his initial reaction to news of the Abu Ghraib investigation was his lack of alarm and lack of curiosity. One factor may have been recent history: there had been many previous complaints of prisoner abuse from organization like Human Rights Watch and the International Red Cross, and the Pentagon had weathered them with ease. Rumsfeld told the Senate Armed Services Committee that he had not been provided with details of alleged abuses until late March, when he read the specific charges. “You read it, as I say, it’s one thing. You see these photographs and it’s just unbelievable. . . . It wasn’t three-dimensional. It wasn’t video. It wasn’t color. It was quite a different thing.” The former intelligence official said that, in his view, Rumsfeld and other senior Pentagon officials had not studied the photographs because “they thought what was in there was permitted under the rules of engagement,” as applied to the SAP. “The photos,” he added, “turned out to be the result of the program run amok.”

The former intelligence official made it clear that he was not alleging that Rumsfeld or General Myers knew that atrocities were committed. But, he said, “it was their permission granted to do the SAP, generically, and there was enough ambiguity, which permitted the abuses.”

This official went on, “The black guys”—those in the Pentagon’s secret program—“say we’ve got to accept the prosecution. They’re vaccinated from the reality.” The SAP is still active, and “the United States is picking up guys for interrogation. The question is, how do they protect the quick-reaction force without blowing its cover?” The program was protected by the fact that no one on the outside was allowed to know of its existence. “If you even give a hint that you’re aware of a black program that you’re not read into, you lose your clearances,” the former official said. “Nobody will talk. So the only people left to prosecute are those who are undefended—the poor kids at the end of the food chain.”

The most vulnerable senior official is Cambone. “The Pentagon is trying now to protect Cambone, and doesn’t know how to do it,” the former intelligence official said.

Last week, the government consultant, who has close ties to many conservatives, defended the Administration’s continued secrecy about the special-access program in Abu Ghraib. “Why keep it black?” the consultant asked. “Because the process is unpleasant. It’s like making sausage—you like the result but you don’t want to know how it was made. Also, you don’t want the Iraqi public, and the Arab world, to know. Remember, we went to Iraq to democratize the Middle East. The last thing you want to do is let the Arab world know how you treat Arab males in prison.”

The former intelligence official told me he feared that one of the disastrous effects of the prison-abuse scandal would be the undermining of legitimate operations in the war on terror, which had already suffered from the draining of resources into Iraq. He portrayed Abu Ghraib as “a tumor” on the war on terror. He said, “As long as it’s benign and contained, the Pentagon can deal with the photo crisis without jeopardizing the secret program. As soon as it begins to grow, with nobody to diagnose it—it becomes a malignant tumor.”

The Pentagon consultant made a similar point. Cambone and his superiors, the consultant said, “created the conditions that allowed transgressions to take place. And now we’re going to end up with another Church Commission”—the 1975 Senate committee on intelligence, headed by Senator Frank Church, of Idaho, which investigated C.I.A. abuses during the previous two decades. Abu Ghraib had sent the message that the Pentagon leadership was unable to handle its discretionary power. “When the shit hits the fan, as it did on 9/11, how do you push the pedal?” the consultant asked. “You do it selectively and with intelligence.”

“Congress is going to get to the bottom of this,” the Pentagon consultant said. “You have to demonstrate that there are checks and balances in the system.” He added, “When you live in a world of gray zones, you have to have very clear red lines.”

Senator John McCain, of Arizona, said, “If this is true, it certainly increases the dimension of this issue and deserves significant scrutiny. I will do all possible to get to the bottom of this, and all other allegations.”

“In an odd way,” Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, said, “the sexual abuses at Abu Ghraib have become a diversion for the prisoner abuse and the violation of the Geneva Conventions that is authorized.” Since September 11th, Roth added, the military has systematically used third-degree techniques around the world on detainees. “Some JAGs hate this and are horrified that the tolerance of mistreatment will come back and haunt us in the next war,” Roth told me. “We’re giving the world a ready-made excuse to ignore the Geneva Conventions. Rumsfeld has lowered the bar.”