

## WAR STORIES

**Locked in Abu Ghraib**

The prison scandal keeps getting worse for the Bush administration.

By Fred Kaplan

The White House is about to get hit by the biggest tsunami since the Iran-Contra affair, maybe since Watergate. President George W. Bush is trapped inside the compound, immobilized by his own stay-the-course campaign strategy. Can he escape the massive tidal waves? Maybe. But at this point, it's not clear how.

If today's investigative shockers—Seymour Hersh's latest article in *The New Yorker* and a three-part piece in *Newsweek*—are true, it's hard to avoid concluding that responsibility for the Abu Ghraib atrocities goes straight to the top, both in the Pentagon and the White House, and that varying degrees of blame can be ascribed to officials up and down the chain of command.

Both stories are worth reading in full. The gist is that last year, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld put in place a secret operation that, in Hersh's words, "encouraged physical coercion and sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners in an effort to generate more intelligence about the growing insurgency in Iraq."

This operation stemmed from an earlier supersecret program involving interrogation of suspected al-Qaida and Taliban fighters in Afghanistan. A memo to President Bush from White House counsel Alberto Gonzales—excerpted in *Newsweek*—rationalized the program by noting that we need "to quickly obtain information from captured terrorists and their sponsors in order to avoid further atrocities against American citizens." This new sort of war, he went on, renders the Geneva Conventions' limitations on interrogating enemy prisoners "obsolete" and "quaint."

This program, Hersh reports, was approved by the CIA, the National Security Agency, and the National Security Council. President Bush was "informed" of it. Hersh also notes that its harsh techniques yielded results; terrorists were rounded up as a result. So, last spring, after Saddam's regime fell in Iraq and Rumsfeld grew frustrated over the failure to find weapons of mass destruction or to learn anything about the insurgents who continued to resist the U.S.-led occupation, he put the same program in motion in Iraq.

That's when all hell broke loose, and conventional prisoners of war—whose wardens had up to that point been following Geneva rules—were suddenly treated like terrorists whose deadly secrets must immediately be squeezed out. Hence, the ensuing torture.

Read together, the magazine articles spell out an elaborate, all-inclusive chain of command in this scandal. Bush knew about it. Rumsfeld ordered it. His undersecretary of defense for intelligence, Steven Cambone, administered it. Cambone's deputy, Lt. Gen. William Boykin, instructed Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller, who had been executing the program involving al-Qaida suspects at Guantanamo, to go do the same at Abu Ghraib. Miller told Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski, who was in charge of the 800th Military Brigade, that the prison would now be dedicated to gathering intelligence. Douglas Feith, the undersecretary of defense for policy, also seems to have had a hand in this sequence, as did William Haynes, the Pentagon's general counsel. Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, learned about the improper interrogations—from the International Committee of the Red Cross, if not from anyone else—but said or did nothing about it for two months, until it was clear that photographs were coming out. Meanwhile, those involved in the interrogations included officers from military intelligence, the CIA, and private contractors, as well as the mysterious figures from the Pentagon's secret operation.

That's a lot more people than the seven low-grade soldiers and reservists currently facing courts-martial.

So, what happens next?

First, members of the Senate Armed Services Committee have said they will keep their hearings going until they "get to the bottom of this." Republicans as well as Democrats are behaving in an unusually—and unexpectedly—aggressive fashion on the question of how high up the blame should go.

Second, the courts could get involved. *Newsweek* reports that the Justice Department is likely to investigate three deaths that occurred during CIA interrogations, possibly with an eye toward charges of homicide. War-crimes charges, for willful violation of the Geneva Conventions, are not out of the question. Rumsfeld and Cambone could conceivably face perjury charges; if the latest news stories are true, their testimony before the armed services committees—taken under oath—will certainly be examined carefully.

Third, Seymour Hersh seems to be on his hottest roll as an investigative reporter in 30 years, and the editors of every major U.S. daily newspaper aren't going to stand for it. "We're having our lunch handed to us by a *weekly magazine*!" one can imagine them shouting in their morning meetings. Scoops and counterscoops will be the order of the day.

All of these hound-hunts will be fueled by the extraordinary levels of internecine feuding that have marked this administration for years. Until recently, Rumsfeld, with White House assistance, has quelled dissenters, but the already-rattling lid is almost certain to blow off soon. As has been noted, Secretary of State Colin Powell, tiring of his good-soldier routine, is attacking his adversaries in the White House and Pentagon with eyebrow-raising openness. Hersh's story states that Rumsfeld's secret operation stemmed from his "longstanding desire to wrest control of America's clandestine and paramilitary operations from the CIA." Hersh's sources—many of them identified as intelligence officials—seem to be spilling, in part, to wrest back control. Uniformed military officers, who have long disliked Rumsfeld and his E-Ring crew for a lot of reasons, are also speaking out. Hersh and *Newsweek* both report that senior officers from the Judge Advocate General's Corps went berserk when they found out about Rumsfeld's secret operation, to the point of taking their concerns to the New York Bar Association's committee on international human rights.

The knives are out all over Washington—lots of knives, unsheathed and sharpened in many different backroom parlors, for many motives and many throats. In short, this story is not going away.

What is Bush to do? There's not much he can do. Many, including loyal Republicans worried about the election, are urging him to fire Rumsfeld. But that move probably wouldn't stop the investigations. In fact, the confirmation hearings for Rummy's replacement would serve as yet another forum for all the questions—about Abu Ghraib, the war in Iraq, and military policy generally—that the administration is trying to stave off. More than that, Bush has said repeatedly that he won't get rid of Rumsfeld. If he did, especially if he did so under political pressure, he would undermine his most appealing campaign slogan—that he stays the course, doesn't buckle, says what he means and does what he says.

If lesser officials are sacrificed—Cambone, Feith, and so forth—there is no guarantee that they will go gently, especially if they face possible criminal charges. The same, by the way, is true of Rumsfeld himself, a savvy survivor who can be expected to take some interesting memos with him—for possible widespread circulation—if he were forced to leave the building.

Much is at stake here—budgets, bailiwicks, careers, reputations, re-elections, to say nothing of national security and the future of Iraq. Get ready for a bumpy ride.