

Cheney-Rumsfeld Push Torture Scandal Coverup

by Edward Spannaus

The Bush-Cheney Administration is in a frantic mobilization to discredit the explosive account of the origins of the prison torture scandal—and of how Vice President Dick Cheney attempted to cover it up—which is contained in the just-published book *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib*, by veteran investigative reporter Seymour Hersh. The publication of the Hersh book is extremely timely, coming just after a group of retired generals and admirals issued a call on Sept. 8 for the creation of an independent commission to investigate the prison torture scandal. As reported in the Sept. 17 *EIR*, a spokesman for the group said that there are so many ongoing investigations, that crucial issues are falling between the cracks, and one comprehensive, and completely independent, investigation is urgently needed.

The Sept. 9 revelation by Gen. Paul Kern, the appointed officer for the Fay-Jones investigation of Abu Ghraib, that there were “dozens and perhaps up to 100” ghost detainees at the prison, has given further impetus for the calls for an independent commission, and has also sparked some low-level sniping between the CIA and the Pentagon.

But it is the account in Hersh’s book that puts all this all in context, and this is what the Administration is so desperate to suppress. Hersh describes the origins of the prison torture scandal, as found in the creation of a highly secret program set up by President Bush, Cheney himself, and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, shortly after the 9/11 attacks, for the assassination, or the capture and secret interrogation, of suspected terrorists.

Hunter-Killer Teams

Hersh’s book draws on his earlier reporting, beginning in late 2002 in the *New Yorker* magazine, on Rumsfeld’s plans to create special hunter-killer teams within the military, which would hunt down and assassinate al-Qaeda members. Hersh also reported intense opposition within the military, against turning military Special Forces into assassination teams.

In late 2003, after the U.S. invasion of Iraq had given rise to a major insurgency against U.S. occupying forces, Hersh reported that Rumsfeld had created a new Special Forces group in Iraq, called Task Force 121, consisting of Army Delta Force members, Navy SEALs, and CIA paramilitary operators, for the purpose of neutralizing Iraq insurgents by

capture or assassination. Hersh quoted one U.S. advisor in Iraq who described the new approach as: “Guerrilla versus guerrilla. Terrorism versus terrorism. We’ve got to scare the Iraqis into submission.”

Hersh identified Stephen Cambone, the new Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence, as deeply involved in developing the new Special Forces program, along with his military assistant, Lt. Gen. William “Jerry” Boykin.

In early November 2003, the *New York Times* had reported on the creation of Task Force 121, which combined Task Force 5 in Afghanistan, and Task Force 20 in Iraq. The *Times* cited military officials as praising the new Task Force as combining intelligence and Special Operations firepower in one organization which could operate throughout the entire region. Task Force 20 was reported by others to have been central in the search for Saddam Hussein, and in the killing of Saddam’s sons.

It is intriguing that the Fay Report on the investigation of the role of Military Intelligence in the Abu Ghraib incidents, states that when Guantanamo commander Gen. Geoffrey Miller visited Abu Ghraib in August-September 2003, he was also tasked to visit Task Force 20, “to discuss current theatre ability to exploit internees rapidly for actionable intelligence.”

Special Access Program

Hersh continued to receive leaked information on these programs, which gave rise to his series of articles on torture at Abu Ghraib, starting at the end of April. The most explosive was his article “The Gray Zone,” published in the May 24, 2004 issue of the *New Yorker*, which linked the Abu Ghraib scandal to the programs Hersh had earlier reported, albeit in a more limited manner.

In “The Gray Zone,” Hersh described the torture at Abu Ghraib as the consequence of Rumsfeld’s decision to expand his Special Forces hunter-killer team operation, into the interrogation of prisoners in Iraq. Hersh said the operation, a “Special Access Program” (SAP) known as Copper Green, “encouraged physical coercion and sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners in an effort to generate more intelligence about the growing insurgency in Iraq.” It was also described as part of Rumsfeld’s efforts to seize control of clandestine and paramilitary operations from the CIA.

Hersh’s earlier series of articles are incorporated and elaborated in his new book. He reports that this top-secret “SAP” for capturing or killing “high-value” al-Qaeda suspects, was authorized through a formal finding by President Bush at the end of 2001 or early 2002, and that a series of secret interrogation centers were set up in allied countries in Asia.

In 2002, the program was focussed on Afghanistan and Guantanamo, and then it was brought into Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison in the Summer of 2003—where things got so out of hand that the CIA pulled its people out of the program in the Fall of 2003. According to one source, the CIA said: “We’re

not going to use our guys to do this. We've been there before"—referring to the Phoenix assassination program in Vietnam.

The Cheney Coverup

The new material in Hersh's book includes documentation of the role of Vice President Dick Cheney, and Cheney's top lawyer, David Addington, in attempting to block any investigation which would expose the underlying causes of the Abu Ghraib prison torture scandal.

Also new, is the report on the aftermath of a visit to Guantanamo by a CIA analyst in the Summer of 2002, who came back convinced, according to a colleague, that the U.S. was committing war crimes at the prison there. His report made its way into the hands of Gen. John A. Gordon, a deputy to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, who was very distressed by the report. Gordon arranged for the analyst to brief a number of officials, but Addington made it clear to Gordon (a retired four-star general), that the prisoners at Guantanamo were all "illegal combatants," and therefore not entitled to any protections from the Geneva Conventions or any other laws or international treaties.

Finally, Rice agreed to call a high-level meeting to review the report from the CIA analyst, who was concerned not only about torture and abuse, but also that there was no reason for many of those at Guantanamo even to be there.

A young Pentagon official, Michael Billingslea, the acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, was assigned to make the presentation, which included his arguing that there was a need for "separating the wheat from the chaff" at Guantanamo. The meeting turned contentious, according to a former Administration official, who added that "David Addington wanted to take the guy's head off" for even bringing the subject up for discussion.

Later, Cheney directly intervened to organize the coverup after the infamous Abu Ghraib photographs came to light in April 2004. Hersh reports that Cheney had "taken charge" of the Administration's stonewalling when the Abu Ghraib scandal peaked in May. Cheney told Rumsfeld: "No resignations. We're going to hunker down and tough it out."

"Cheney's involvement in trying to conceal the import of Abu Ghraib was not unusual," Hersh explains, for although Rumsfeld would take the heat, Bush and Cheney had been in it with him all the way. They are "a team."

Administration Pressure on CIA

The report on the CIA analyst's visit to Guantanamo, and his alerting of Administration officials to what was being done there, is a particular focus of Administration cover-up efforts at this moment. This effort is reflected in an article posted on *National Review Online* by Joel Babbin Sept. 17, which labels Hersh "the Kitty Kelly of Abu Ghraib." What Hersh writes about a top-secret program called "Copper Green" can't be

true, Babbin claims, because the Pentagon has issued a statement denying it. "What's more," Babbin writes, "intelligence-community sources told me Tuesday [Sept. 14] that the CIA is so angry at Hersh's fabrication that it may release a statement about it."

However, Scott Horton, an official of the New York City Bar Association, who has been involved with military lawyers who opposed the policies of the Pentagon civilians leadership, told *EIR* that he has spoken with a number of sources, including someone at the National Security Council, who confirmed that Hersh's account is absolutely accurate. Horton said that several sources have told him that enormous pressure is being applied to intelligence community personnel to repudiate Hersh's account, and to give out a falsified version of what occurred around the CIA analyst's report-back on his visit to Guantanamo in 2002, in order to back up the Administration's spin.

The Idema Caper

Further indications of the existence of these Pentagon-run covert hunter-killer operations, and Boykin's role, emerged on Sept. 15, during the trial in Afghanistan of three American mercenaries, who were charged and convicted of running a private jail and torturing prisoners in Kabul. The leader of the three is Jonathan "Jack" Idema, a "former" Army Special Forces operative.

According to the description in the *New York Times*, videotapes which Idema attempted to introduce into evidence, show him talking on two occasions to people in Boykin's office. In one conversation, Idema tells Jorge Shim, an aide to Boykin, that he is close to rounding up a whole cell of terrorists.

The aide responds: "I told General Boykin that you called. I gave him the information and to the DIA," that is, the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Another conversation apparently took place just days before the three Americans were arrested by Afghan authorities. Idema is asking for some help, and Boykin's aides explain that they had been trying to separate Boykin from Idema's activities, to avoid attracting attention from the news media.

Another official in Boykin's office says that they had passed all of Idema's information into the J2 (intelligence) staff and to the DIA, and he explains that "we were trying to protect our boss from getting associated with it, because he does not need any other scrutiny right now by the press. . . . [W]e are trying to put a firewall between your efforts and him because we did not want to connect anything there and there is no need to do that."

Lawyers for the three Americans said that they had been abandoned by the U.S. government, and left to their fates in an Afghan court, so as to avoid the far greater publicity of an American trial. Caraballo's lawyer asked: "Is this a secret that the Americans have secret ops? How many other Jacks [Idemas] do they have floating around?"