

Standard Operating Procedure: A War Story by Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris
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In April 2004 a series of photographs was published in the *New Yorker* magazine and elsewhere, showing literally a heap of prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, naked, blindfolded, one on a dog leash, being taunted, terrorised with dogs and placed in sexual positions by a group of American soldiers, both male and female, the tormentors adopting various poses of bravado and gung-ho exuberance for the benefit of the camera.

The photographs appalled the world: if this was how the war was being fought, what was it being fought for? George W Bush declared the day of their publication the worst day of the war, and promised swift retribution against those responsible. The seven soldiers taking and posing in the photographs, all Military Police members on night shift in the MI [Military Intelligence] block of the prison, were duly court-martialled and handed prison sentences ranging from six months to ten years. No soldier above the rank of sergeant received a prison sentence.

Standard Operating Procedure, though written by Philip Gourevitch, is based on hundreds of hours of interviews conducted by Errol Morris with the soldier-photographers for his documentary film of the same name. The book, like the film, attempts to answer not only the question of What made them do it? but, more important, Who was ultimately responsible for such a catastrophic failure of moral purpose?

The world has been told that the acts recorded in the photographs were committed by seven junior members of the Military Police in Abu Ghraib. The impression deliberately created was that these were isolated incidents committed by a few out-of-control individuals – whereas, Gourevitch shows us, the soldiers were as much victims as perpetrators -- victims of the same faceless military chain of command as actively encouraged the abuse of prisoners.

Gourevitch fascinatingly traces the process by which extreme actions are made possible and palatable through the manipulation of language. In its simplest form, this consisted, at Abu Ghraib, in the systematic attempt to present the torture and humiliation of prisoners as “standard operating procedure”. The prescriptions of the Geneva Convention regarding the treatment of prisoners were rendered ineffectual by the simple linguistic trick of renaming the prisoners “security detainees”, and thus unprotected by Geneva.

Furthermore, at the request of the White House, the Assistant Attorney General more or less defined “torture” out of existence, so that very little of the “cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment” meted out in interrogation could “rise to the level of torture.”

When, under pressure from the Red Cross new rules of conduct were promulgated, all that changed was the terminology: “for instance, isolation, which was no longer listed as an approved technique, was now described as ‘segregation,’ and presented not as a special approach but as a standard practice.”

The perpetrators of the photographs, in other words, more or less had carte blanche, indeed believed themselves to be under orders to treat their prisoners as inhumanely as possible. The position was exacerbated by the fact that these soldiers were part of the Military Police structure, whereas the interrogations were conducted by Military Intelligence – and MPs were told that they were subject to the wishes of MI, which was

that the prisoners be “softened up” as much as possible for interrogation, the interrogators themselves being “under mounting pressure from higher for actionable intelligence.” Not that the MPs were averse to the power that was handed them. Living in cramped, dirty quarters, subjected to shelling from insurgents, faced with vast over-crowding caused by “daily truckloads of new prisoners rounded up by the 4th Infantry Division’s increasingly aggressive and indiscriminate security sweeps”, tired, scared, demoralised, bored, they, perhaps not surprisingly, lost their moral compass. As Charles Graner, who received the heaviest sentence of all, admitted: “The Christian in me knows it’s wrong, but the corrections officer in me can’t help but love to make a grown man piss himself.” Amongst other things, the book chronicles the transformation of an army of liberation into an occupying force, the change in attitude of ordinary soldiers who thought they were there to help the Iraqis but grew to hate and maltreat them—although, as Gourevitch points out, the vast majority of the detainees were guilty only of being in the vicinity when the army came by.

It is not in contention that the seven junior soldiers committed the acts they were found guilty of; what is at issue is the blanket exoneration of everybody else that the action against these seven made possible: as Gourevitch says, “The exposé became the cover-up.” What was covered up was “the self-deception and the cowardice, the indiscipline and the incompetence [that] infected every link in the chain of command that ran from the MI block to the Pentagon and the White House.”

The old adage that in war, truth is the first casualty, has, despite being well-worn, retained its force, because each new war devises new ways of lying about itself. The war that Sarah Palin has proclaimed to be ordained by God has perhaps produced more than its share of lies, exactly because it claims the sanction of God and “civilisation”.

Standard Operating Procedure lays bare the “reckless and slapdash ineptitude” that has characterised this war since its inception and characterises it to this day.