

## *Opinion*

### **Torture is a blight on America's image**

**By Linda S. Heard**

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October 17, 2005—On October 6, Glen Beck, the host of a US syndicated radio show, received a call from a former “intelligence officer” called Mitch, who claimed to have personally tortured foreign detainees by burning their retinas with high-powered Halogen lamps and bursting their eardrums using high-pressure water and air.

“I’ve got to tell you I appreciate your service,” said Beck before asking whether the caller had problems sleeping at night.

Mitch said “No” and Beck’s response was “Good for you... I have to tell you when all’s said and done I’m glad people like you are on our side.” He neglected to say whose side that was.

Beck asked the proud torturer whether he had actually killed somebody in the course of his work. Mitch’s response was “No, but I made them wish they were dead”.

If that’s truly the aim of Mitch and his colleagues, then they’ve succeeded. Hundreds of detainees at America’s Guantanamo gulag are on a prolonged hunger strike in a mass protest against conditions there. Many long for death to put an end to their suffering.

Earlier this month, 21 near-to-death hunger strikers were shackled to their beds and force-fed down tubes pushed through their noses and into their stomachs.

Most of these men have been incarcerated for more than three years, without access to lawyers or loved ones, and have yet to be charged with any crime.

Some of those who got away—often due to government-brokered deals—return home as broken men or with altered personalities, such as the recently-released Egyptian national Dr Sami Abdulaziz Salim Al Laithy, who upon arrival at Cairo airport had to be whisked off to a nearby hospital.

After being tortured and beaten in Kandahar and Guantanamo, Al Laithy suffered a complete psychological breakdown, ending up in a military psychiatric facility where he was injected with unknown substances.

Al Laithy says that even after he was cleared by a military tribunal of any wrongdoing, he was transferred to a tiny, windowless “cage” and kept in isolation.

Today Al Laithy is wheelchair bound and his mother, between tears of joy and sorrow, says she hardly recognises this physically and mentally shattered individual as her son. Mitch and his friends must surely be proud of their handiwork.

However, a growing number of Americans are outraged not only by similar reports from ex-Guantanamo detainees but also over the physical and sexual abuses that were photographed for posterity at Abu Ghraib.

## Lurid Photographs

If federal Judge Alvin K. Hellerstein has his way, the world will soon be assailed with yet more lurid photographs and videos, said to depict rapes and beatings carried out by American soldiers and “contractors” against detainees.

At the end of last month, the judge ruled under the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act that these must be made available to the public, while allowing the federal government 20 days to appeal.

The Pentagon fears that releasing such images will further inflame the Muslim world, but has done little to stop such practices other than jail a few mentally challenged lowlifes and in the case of torture’s poster girl, Lynndie England, for a derisory three years.

Adding to the angst of Americans concerned at what is being done in their name is the publicity over an American pornographic website, whose owner, Chris Wilson a former policeman, encouraged US soldiers to swap photographs and video of charred and limbless Iraqi war dead for membership in his sickening site.

When news of the site whipped around the Internet, Wilson was arrested on one felony and 300 misdemeanour indecency counts relating to the gruesome Iraq pictures; some showing internal organs spilling out from torn bodies alongside disgusting captions, which read “Bad day for this dude,” “Die haji! Die!” and “Cooked Iraqi”.

Wilson may be in trouble but the soldiers who submitted the images are likely to escape censor, according to military spokespersons, whose superiors seem bent on flouting the Geneva Conventions, which prohibit assaults on the enemy’s personal dignity and provides for remains to be respectfully interred.

Thankfully, though, not everyone in authority has such a laissez faire attitude towards this blight on America’s reputation.

While legislating on a \$440 billion (Dh1.6 trillion) defence-spending bill, 90 congressmen—led by the Republican Senators John McCain and Bill Frist—insisted on a crucial amendment prohibiting the “cruel, inhumane or degrading” treatment of prisoners.

A shocked White House plans to veto the legislation, even if it means leaving the military cash-strapped.

It is surely ironic that President George W. Bush has sent his close friend and confidante Karen Hughes around the Arab world on a “winning hearts and minds” exercise when he steadfastly ignores the roots of the current discord between the US and the Islamic world.

As long as Muslims continue to witness the mistreatment of their fellows at the hands of the US military splashed nightly across their screens, then, bereft of moral high-ground, the mumsy Hughes can expect more jeers than cheers.

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