

Getting clear picture of prison abuse

By ROBERT GANGI

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I was initially surprised by the extent and the intensity of the furor that greeted the revelations about the brutal treatment of Iraqi prisoners. The common wisdom in this country has long been that it's nearly impossible to stir an outcry about prison abuses because the American public doesn't care about inmates, an unpopular, even despised, class of human beings, if there ever was one. So why the terrific uproar about the incidents at Abu Ghraib?

The principal reason, obviously, is the pictures. So graphic, so perversely compelling, and so dramatic in their power to shock and shame us. They pack an undeniable emotional wallop.

Those pictures drew on a deep reservoir of moral concern and outrage. Prison reformers are often counseled to stress practical considerations when promoting their issues. Appeal to the public's enlightened self-interest, well-meaning people tell us. But Americans reacted so strongly to the abuses at Abu Ghraib not because of fiscal considerations, because the prison was too expensive or because they were concerned about safe streets. People reacted because what they saw, what they understood to have happened was wrong, objectionable, and un-American. It violated fundamental humanitarian principles.

Another point underscored by this episode is not just the importance of outside monitors, but of outside monitors who issue public reports when appropriate. Access is critical, but of limited value when not accompanied by the practice of making findings available to external constituencies. As we understand, the Red Cross issued reports, but only to internal authorities and nothing was done. Only when the photos, in effect the report to the public, hit the media were steps taken.

A comment from Martin Luther King speaks to this dynamic: "Like a boil that cannot be cured as long as it is covered up, but must be opened with its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, so must injustice be exposed, with all the tension exposure creates, to the air of public opinion and the light of human conscience before it can be cured."

Another lesson is the value of sustained follow-up investigations and advocacy to accomplishing meaningful change. Even with the extraordinary attention and public discussion given to the Iraqi prisoner abuse, with the flagging focus of the media, one gets the creeping feeling that the called-for probes will falter and that at least some of the needed improvements in conditions and operations will not happen.

For example, will the officials who, either through their direct or indirect actions, helped create the institutional culture that fostered or permitted the brutality be held responsible for what occurred

on their watch?

What is needed is a constituency or designated organization that is committed to the issue, that is going to maintain the pressure for accountability and for change. That was the role played by the victims' families who drove the work of the 9/11 Commission. It is where America's prison reform organizations come in, organizations whose efforts focus attention on serious conditions breakdowns that might otherwise be ignored.

Abu Ghraib also reminds us that imprisonment, like war I suppose, can unleash the worst kinds of human behavior imaginable. Interestingly enough, the prison abuses we at the Correctional Association of New York are most concerned about are not the kinds of brutality carried out by the renegade soldiers at Abu Ghraib.

What is most disturbing are the day-to-day, accepted-as-a-matter-of-course practices that represent an inhumanity that is endemic to the system. The findings of our recent report on mental health issues, for example, revealed that every day hundreds of severely mentally ill people are locked up in punitive segregation units in New York's prisons for 23 hours a day, for weeks, months, sometimes years at a time in isolated and harrowing conditions that amount to a form of torture.

The political reality is that, and this point underscores again the importance of having independent monitors that issue public reports, this mistreatment is tolerated partly or mainly because the people affected have little or no leverage to influence the ways that government does business.

Given the capacity of those photos to spotlight prisoner abuse, it's too bad, isn't it, that independent prison monitors in the United States cannot bring cameras behind the walls. Even absent that ability, however, we strive to fill that role, to function as society's camera. Through an effective and dramatic use of words based on what we see on our visits and included in our published reports and press statements, we seek to conjure up images meant to expose hard truths about prison conditions to the public and political leaders. And through follow-up advocacy, the reports and the coalition-building and publicity efforts to promote their findings and recommendations, we also become, in effect, society's conscience -- an activist conscience, nagging, prodding until the problem, moral or otherwise, is resolved.

Get the picture?

Robert Gangi is executive director of the Correctional Association of New York. This article is excerpted from a presentation he gave last week at a panel discussion, "Reflections of Abu Ghraib: Use and Abuse of Prison Power in the United States," sponsored by the Correctional Association, New School University, The Nation Institute and the National Council for Research on Women.

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