

Tourists and Torturers

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So now we think we know who took some of the photographs at Abu Ghraib. The works attributed to Specialist Jeremy Sivits are fated to remain among the indelible images of our time. They will have changed the course of history; just how much we do not yet know. It is arguable that without them, news of what happened within the walls of that prison would never have emerged from the fog of classified internal memos. We owe their circulation and perhaps their existence to the popular technology of our day, to digital cameras and JPEG files and e-mail. Photographs can now be disseminated as quickly and widely as rumors. It's possible that even if Specialist Joseph M. Darby hadn't gone to his superiors in January and "60 Minutes II" hadn't broken the story last month, some of those pictures would sooner or later have found their way onto the Web and so into the public record.

Leaving aside the question of how anyone could have perpetrated the horrors depicted in those pictures, you can't help but wonder why American soldiers would incriminate themselves by posing next to their handiwork. Americans don't seem to have a long tradition of that sort of thing. I can't offhand recall having seen comparable images from any recent wars, although before the digital era amateur photographs were harder to spread. There have been many atrocity photographs over the years, of course - the worst I've ever seen were taken in Algeria in 1961, and once when I was a child another kid found and showed off his father's cache of pictures from the Pacific Theater in World War II, which shook me so badly that I can't remember with any certainty what they depicted. I'm pretty sure, though, that they did not show anyone grinning and making self-congratulatory gestures.

The pictures from Abu Ghraib are trophy shots. The American soldiers included in them look exactly as if they were standing next to a gutted buck or a 10-foot marlin. That incongruity is not the least striking aspect of the pictures. The first shot I saw, of Specialist Charles A.

Graner and Pfc. Lynndie R. England flashing thumbs up behind a pile of their naked victims, was so jarring that for a few seconds I took it for a montage. When I registered what I was seeing, I was reminded of something. There was something familiar about that jaunty insouciance, that unabashed triumph at having inflicted misery upon other humans. And then I remembered: the last time I had seen that conjunction of elements was in photographs of lynchings.

In photographs that were taken and often printed as postcards in the American heartland in the first four decades of the 20th century, black men are shown hanging from trees or light fixtures or maybe being burned alive, while below them white people are laughing and pointing for the benefit of the camera. There are some pictures of whites being lynched, too, but these tend not to feature the holiday crowd. Often the spectators at lynchings of African-Americans are so effusive in their mugging that they all seem to be vying for credit. Before seeing such pictures you might expect the faces in them to express some kind of collective rage; instead the mood is giddy, often verging on hysterical, with a distinct sexual undercurrent.

Like the lynching crowds, the Americans at Abu Ghraib felt free to parade their triumph and glee not because they were psychopaths but because the thought of censure probably never crossed their minds. In both cases a contagious collective frenzy perhaps overruled the scruples of some people otherwise known for their gentleness and sympathy - but isn't the abandonment of such scruples possible only if the victims are considered less than human? After all, it is one thing for a boxer to lift his hands over his head in triumph beside the fallen body of his rival, quite another to strike a comparable pose next to the bodies of strangers you have arranged in quasi-pornographic tableaux. The Americans in the photographs are not enacting hatred; hatred can coexist with respect, however strained. What they display, instead, is contempt: their victims are merely objects.

It is conceivable that such events might have occurred in a war in which the enemy looked like us —certainly, there are Americans to whom all foreigners are irredeemably Other. Still, it is striking how, in wartime, a fundamental lack

of respect for the enemy's body becomes an issue only when the enemy is perceived as being of another race. You might have heard about the strings of human ears collected by some soldiers in Vietnam, or read the story, reported in Life during World War II, about the G.I. who blithely mailed his girlfriend in Brooklyn a Japanese skull as a Christmas present. And the concept of the human trophy is not restricted to warfare, but permeates the history of colonialism, from the Congo to Australia, Mexico to India. Treating those we deem our equals as game animals, however, has been out of fashion for quite a few centuries.

Of course the violence at Abu Ghraib was primarily psychological - hey, only a few people were killed - and the trophies were pictorial, like the results of a photo safari. Some commentators have made a point of noting this very relative nonviolence, contrasting it with the lynching of the four American military contractors in Falluja last month. This line of argument is notable for what it leaves out: there is a difference between the rage of a people who feel themselves invaded and the contempt of a victorious nation for a civilian population whom it has ostensibly liberated.

That prison guards would pose captives - primarily noncombatants, low-level riffraff - in re-enactments of cable TV smut for the benefit of their friends back home emerges from the mode of thinking that has prevented an accounting of civilian deaths in Iraq since the beginning of the war. If civilian deaths are not recorded, let alone published, it must be because they do not matter, and if they do not matter it must be because the Iraqis are beneath notice. And that must mean that anything done to them is permissible, as long as it does not create publicity that would embarrass the Bush administration. The possible consequences of the Abu Ghraib archive are numerous, many of them horrifying. Perhaps, though, the digital camera will haunt the future career of George W. Bush the way the tape recorder sealed the fate of Richard Nixon.

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