

Author: Sontag, Susan.

Title: Regarding the torture of others.

Source: New York Times Magazine. 23.05.2004. New York 2004.

Published with kind permission of the author.

Susan Sontag

Regarding the torture of others

For a long time --- at least six decades --- photographs have laid down the tracks of how important conflicts are judged and remembered. The memory museum is now mostly a visual one. Photographs have an insuperable power to determine what we recall of events, and it now seems likely that the defining association of people everywhere with the rotten war that the United States launched preemptively in Iraq last year will be photographs of the torture of Iraqi prisoners in the most infamous of Saddam Hussein's prisons, Abu Ghraib.

The Bush administration and its defenders have chiefly sought to limit a public relations disaster --- the dissemination of the photographs --- rather than deal with the complex crimes of leadership and of policy revealed by the pictures. There was, first of all, the displacement of the reality onto the photographs themselves. The administration's initial response was to say that the president was shocked and disgusted by the photographs --- as if the fault or horror lay in the images, not in what they depict. There was also the avoidance of the word torture. The prisoners had possibly been the objects of "abuse," eventually of "humiliation" --- that was the most to be admitted. "My impression is that what has been charged thus far is abuse, which I believe technically is different from torture," Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said at a press conference. "And therefore I'm not going to address the torture word."

Words alter, words add, words subtract. It was the strenuous avoidance of the word "genocide" while the more than 800,000 Tutsis in Rwanda were being slaughtered, over a few weeks' time, by their Hutu neighbors ten years ago that indicated the American government had no intention of doing anything. To refuse to call torture what took place in

Abu Ghraib --- and in other prisons in Iraq and in Afghanistan, and in "Camp X-ray" in Guantánamo Bay --- is as outrageous as the refusal to call what happened in Rwanda a genocide. Here is the standard definition of torture featured in international laws and conventions to which the United States is signatory: "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession." (The definition comes from the 1984 Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and exists in more or less the same wording in earlier customary law and in treaties, starting with Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, and in many recent international human rights covenants, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European, African and Inter-American Conventions on Human Rights.) The 1984 Convention specially declares: "No exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture." And all covenants on torture specify that torture includes treatment intended to humiliate the victim, like leaving prisoners naked in cells and corridors.

Whatever actions this administration undertakes to limit the damage of the widening revelations of the torture of prisoners in Abu Ghraib and elsewhere --- trials, courts martial, dishonorable discharges, resignation of senior military figures and responsible cabinet officials, and substantial reparations to the victims --- it is likely that the "torture" word will continue to be banned. To acknowledge that Americans torture their prisoners would contradict everything this administration has invited the public to believe about the virtue of American intentions and the universality of American values, which is the ultimate, triumphalist justification of America's right to unilateral action on the world stage in defense of its interests and its security.

Even when the president was finally compelled, as the damage to America's reputation everywhere in the world widened and deepened, to use the "sorry" word, the focus of regret still seemed the damage to America's claim to moral superiority, to its hegemonic goal of bringing "freedom and democracy" to the benighted Middle East. Yes, Mr. Bush said in Washington on May 6th, standing alongside King Abdullah II of Jordan, he was "sorry for the humiliation suffered by the Iraqi prisoners and the humiliation suffered by

their families." But, he went on, he was "as equally sorry that people seeing these pictures didn't understand the true nature and heart of America."

To have the American effort in Iraq summed up by these images must seem, to those who saw some justification in a war that did overthrow one of the monster tyrants of modern times, "unfair." A war, an occupation, is inevitably a huge tapestry of actions. What makes some actions representative and others not? The question is not whether the torture was the work of a few individuals (rather than by "everybody") --- all acts are done by individuals --- but whether it was systematic. Authorized. Condoned. It was --- all of the above. The issue is not whether a majority or a minority of Americans performs such acts but whether the nature of the policies prosecuted by this administration and the hierarchies deployed to carry them out makes such acts likely.

Considered in this light, the photographs *are* us. That is, they are representative of distinctive policies of this administration and of the fundamental corruptions of colonial rule. The Belgians in the Congo, the French in Algeria committed identical atrocities and practiced torture and sexual humiliation on despised recalcitrant natives. Add to this generic corruption, the mystifying, near-total unpreparedness of the American rulers of Iraq to deal with the complex realities of the country after its "liberation" -- that is, conquest. And add to that the over-arching doctrines of the Bush administration, namely that the United States has embarked on an endless war (against a protean enemy called "terrorism"), and that those detained in this war are, if the president so decides, "unlawful combatants" --- a policy enunciated by Donald Rumsfeld as early as January 2002 --- and therefore, as Rumsfeld said, "technically" they "do not have any rights" under the Geneva Convention, and you have a perfect recipe for the cruelties and crimes committed against the thousands incarcerated without charges and access to lawyers in American-run prisons that have been set up since the attack of September 11th, 2001.

So, then, is the real issue not the photographs themselves but what the photographs reveal to have happened to "suspects" in American custody? No: the horror of what is shown in the photographs cannot be separated from the horror that the photographs were taken --- with the perpetrators posing, gloating, over their helpless captives. German soldiers in the Second World War took photographs of the atrocities they were committing in Poland and Russia, but snapshots in which the executioners placed themselves among their victims are exceedingly rare, as may be seen in a book just published,

Photographing the Holocaust by Janina Struk. If there is something comparable to what these pictures show it would be some of the photographs of black victims of lynching taken between the 1880s and 1930s, which show small-town Americans grinning beneath the naked mutilated body of a black man or woman hanging from a tree. The lynching photographs were souvenirs of a collective action whose participants felt perfectly justified in what they had done. So are the pictures from Abu Ghraib.

If there is a difference, it is a difference created by the increasing ubiquity of photographic actions. The lynching pictures were in the nature of photographs as trophies --- taken by a photographer, in order to be collected, stored in albums; turned into postcards; displayed. The pictures taken by American soldiers in Abu Ghraib reflect a shift in the use made of pictures --- less objects to be saved than messages to be disseminated, circulated. Most soldiers possess a digital camera. Where once photographing war was the province of photo-journalists, now the soldiers themselves are all photographers --- recording their war, their fun, their observations of what they find picturesque, their atrocities --- and swapping images among themselves, and e-mailing them around the globe.

There is more and more recording of what people do, by themselves. At least or especially in America, Andy Warhol's ideal of filming real events in real time ---life isn't edited, why should its record be edited? --- has become a norm for millions of webcasts, in which people record their day, each in his or her own reality show. Here I am --- waking and yawning and stretching, brushing my teeth, making breakfast, getting the kids off to school. People record all aspects of their lives, store them in computer files, and send the files around. Family life goes with the recording of family life --- even when, or especially when, the family is in the throes of crisis and disgrace. Surely the dedicated, incessant home-videoing of one another, in conversation and monologue, over many years was the most astonishing material in *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), Andrew Jarecki's documentary about a Long Island family embroiled in pedophilia charges.

An erotic life is, for more and more people, what can be captured in digital photographs and on video. And perhaps the torture is more attractive, as something to record, when it has a sexual component. It is surely revealing, as more Abu Ghraib photographs enter public view, that torture photographs are interleaved with pornographic images: of American soldiers having sex with each other, as well as with Iraqi prisoners, and the coercing of the prisoners to have, or simulate, sexual acts among themselves. In fact,

most of the torture photographs have a sexual theme. (One exception, already canonical, is the photograph of the man made to stand on the box, hooded and sprouting wires, presumably told he would be electrocuted if he fell off.) Yet pictures of prisoners bound for many hours in painful positions, or made to stand for hours, with outstretched arms, are relatively infrequent. That they count as torture cannot be doubted: one has only to look at terror on the victims' face. But most of the pictures seem part of a larger confluence of torture and pornography; a young woman leading a naked man around on a leash is classic dominatrix imagery. And one wonders how much of the sexual tortures inflicted on the inmates of Abu Ghraib was inspired by the vast repertory of pornographic imagery available on the internet, and which ordinary people now webcasting themselves attempt to emulate.

To live is to be photographed, to have a record of one's life, and therefore, to go on with one's life, oblivious, or claiming to be oblivious, to the camera's non-stop attentions --- or to stop, and pose. To act is to share in the community of actions recorded as images. The expression of satisfaction at the acts of torture being inflicted on helpless, trussed, naked victims is only part of the story. There is the primal satisfaction of being photographed, to which one is now more inclined to respond not with a stiff, direct gaze (as in former times) but with glee. The events are in part designed to be photographed. The grin is a grin for the camera. There would be something missing if, after stacking the naked men, you couldn't take a picture of them.

Looking at these pictures, you ask yourself how someone can grin at the sufferings and humiliation of another human being? Set guard dogs at the genitals and legs of cowering naked prisoners? Rape and sodomize prisoners? Force shackled hooded prisoners to masturbate or commit sexual acts with each other? And you feel naive in asking, since the answer is, self-evidently: people do these things to other people. Rape and pain inflicted on the genitals are among the most common forms of torture. Not just in Nazi concentration camps and in Abu Ghraib when it was run by Saddam Hussein. Americans, too, have done and do them, when they are told or made to feel that those over whom they have absolute power deserve to be mistreated, humiliated, tormented. They do them when they are led to believe that the people they are torturing belong to an inferior, despicable race or religion. For the meaning of these pictures is not just that these acts

were performed, but that their perpetrators had no sense that there was anything wrong in what the pictures show. Even more appalling, since the pictures were meant to be circulated and seen by many people, it was all fun. And this idea of fun is, alas, more and more --- contrary to what Mr. Bush is telling the world --- part of "the true nature and heart of America."

It is hard to measure the increasing acceptance of brutality in American life, but its evidence is everywhere, starting with the video games of killing that are a principal entertainment of boys --- can the video game "Interrogating the Terrorists" be far behind? --- to the violence that has become endemic in the group rites of youth on an exuberant kick. Violent crime is down, yet the easy delight taken in violence has grown. From the harsh torments inflicted on incoming students in many American suburban high schools --- depicted in Richard Linklater's film *Dazed and Confused* (1993) --- to the hazing rituals of physical brutality and sexual humiliation institutionalized in colleges and universities and on sports teams --- America has become a country in which the fantasies and the practice of violence are seen as good entertainment, fun.

What formerly was segregated as pornography, as the exercise of extreme sado-masochistic longings --- as in Pasolini's last, near-unwatchable film, *Saló* (1975), depicting orgies of torture in the fascist redoubt in northern Italy at the end of the Mussolini era --- is now being normalized, by the apostles of the new, bellicose, imperial America, as high spirited prankishness or venting. To "stack naked men" is like a college fraternity prank, said a caller to Rush Limbaugh and the twenty million Americans who listen to his radio show. Had the caller, one wonders, seen the photographs? No matter. The observation, or is it the fantasy, was on the mark. What may still be capable of shocking some Americans was Limbaugh's response: "Exactly!" he exclaimed. "Exactly my point. This is no different than what happens at the Skull and Bones initiation and we're going to ruin people's lives over it and we're going to hamper our military effort, and then we are going to really hammer them because they had a good time." "They" are the American soldiers, the torturers. And Limbaugh went on: "You know, these people are being fired at every day. I'm talking about people having a good time, these people. You ever heard of emotional release?"

It's likely that quite a large number of Americans would rather think that it is all right to torture and humiliate other human beings --- who, as our putative or suspected enemies,

have forfeited all their rights --- than to acknowledge the folly and ineptitude and fraud of the American venture in Iraq. As for torture and sexual humiliation as fun, there seems little to oppose this tendency while America continues to turn itself into a garrison state, in which patriots are defined as those with unconditional respect for armed might and the necessity of maximal domestic surveillance. Shock and awe were what our military promised the Iraqis who resisted their American liberators. And shock and the awful are what these photographs announce to the world that the Americans have delivered: a pattern of criminal behavior in open defiance and contempt of international humanitarian conventions. Soldiers now pose, thumbs up, before the atrocities they commit, and send off the pictures to their buddies and family. Should we be entirely surprised? Ours is a society in which secrets of private life that, formerly, you would have given nearly anything to conceal you now clamor to be invited on a television show to reveal. What is illustrated by these photographs is as much the culture of shamelessness as the reigning admiration for unapologetic brutality.

The notion that "apologies" or professions of "disgust" and "abhorrence" by the president and the secretary of defense are a sufficient response to the systematic torture of prisoners revealed at Abu Ghraib is an insult to one's historical and moral sense. The torture of prisoners is not an aberration. It is a direct consequence of the with-us-or-against-us ideology of world struggle with which the Bush administration has sought to change, charge radically, the international stance of the United States and to recast many domestic institutions and prerogatives. The Bush administration has committed the country to a pseudo-religious doctrine of war, *endless war* --- for "the war on terror" is nothing less than that. What has happened in the new, international carceral empire run by the United States military goes beyond even the notorious procedures in France's Devil's Island and Soviet Russia's Gulag system, which in the case of the French penal island had, first, both trials and sentences, and in the case of the Russian prison empire a charge of some kind and a sentence for a specific number of years. Endless war is taken to justify endless incarcerations --- without charges, without the release of prisoners' names or any access to family members and lawyers, without trials, without sentences. Those held in the extra-legal American penal empire are "detainees"; "prisoners," a newly obsolete word, might suggest that they have the rights accorded by international law and the laws of all civilized countries. This "Global War on Terror" (GWOT) --- into which both the justifiable invasion of Afghanistan and the unwinnable folly in Iraq have been folded by

Pentagon decree ---inevitably leads to the dehumanizing of anyone declared by the Bush administration to be a possible terrorist: a definition that is not up for debate and is usually made in secret.

The charges against most of the people detained in the prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan being non-existent --- the International Committee of the Red Cross reports that seventy to ninety percent of those being held seem to have committed no crime other than simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time, caught up in some sweep of "suspects" --- the principal justification for holding them is "interrogation." Interrogation about what? About anything. Whatever the detainee might know. If interrogation is the point of detaining prisoners indefinitely, then physical coercion, humiliation, and torture become inevitable.

Remember: we are not talking about that rarest of situations, the "ticking time-bomb" scenario, which is sometimes used as a limiting case that justifies torture of prisoners who have knowledge of an imminent attack. This is general or non-specific information-gathering authorized by American military and civilian administrators to learn more of a shadowy empire of evildoers about which Americans know virtually nothing, in countries about which they are singularly ignorant: in principle, *any* "information" at all might be useful. An interrogation that produced no information (whatever information might consist of) would count as a failure. All the more justification for preparing prisoners to talk. Softening them up, stressing them out --- these are the usual euphemisms for the bestial practices that have become rampant in American prisons where "suspected terrorists" are being held. Unfortunately, it seems, more than a few got "too stressed out" and died.

The pictures will not go away. That is the nature of the digital world in which we live. Indeed, it seems they were necessary to get America's leaders to acknowledge that they had a problem on their hands. After all, the report submitted by the International Committee of the Red Cross, and other reports by journalists and protests by humanitarian organizations about the atrocious punishments inflicted on "detainees" and "suspected terrorists" in prisons run by the American military, have been circulating for over a year. It seems doubtful that any of these reports were read by Mr. Bush or Mr. Cheney or Ms. Rice or Mr. Rumsfeld. Apparently it took the photographs to get their attention, when it became clear they could not be suppressed; it was the photographs that made all this "real" to the president and his associates. Up to then, there had been only

words, which are easier to cover up in our age of infinite digital self-reproduction and self-dissemination, and easier to forget.

So now the pictures will continue to "assault" us --- as many Americans are bound to feel. Will people get used to them? Some Americans are already saying they have seen "enough." Not, however, the rest of the world. Endless war: endless stream of photographs. Will American newspaper, magazine, and television editors now debate whether showing more of them, or showing them uncropped (which, with some of the best known images, gives a different and in some instances more appalling view of the atrocities committed at Abu Ghraib), would be in "bad taste" or too implicitly political? By "political," read: critical of the Bush administration's endless war. For there can be no doubt that the photographs damage, as Mr. Rumsfeld testified, the reputation of "the honorable men and women of the armed forces who are courageously and responsibly and professionally protecting our freedoms across the globe." This damage ---to our reputation, our image, our success as an imperial power --- is what the Bush administration principally deplores. How the protection of "our freedoms" --- and he is talking here about the freedom of Americans only, five percent of the population of the planet --- came to require having American soldiers in any country where it chooses to be ("across the globe") is hardly debated by our elected officials. America sees itself as the victim of potential or future terror. America is only defending itself, against implacable, furtive enemies.

Already the backlash has begun. Americans are being warned against indulging in an orgy of self-condemnation. The continuing publication of the pictures is being taken by many Americans as suggesting that we do not have the right to defend ourselves. After all, they (the terrorists, the fanatics) started it. They --- Osama bin Laden? Saddam Hussein? what's the difference? --- attacked us first. James Inhofe, a Republican member, from Oklahoma, of the Senate Armed Services Committee, before which Secretary Rumsfeld testified, avowed that he was sure he was not the only member of the committee "more outraged by the outrage" over what the photographs show. "These prisoners," Senator Inhofe explained, "you know they're not there for traffic violations. If they're in cellblock 1-A or 1-B, these prisoners, they're murderers, they're terrorists, they're insurgents. Many of them probably have American blood on their hands and here we're so concerned about the treatment of those individuals." It's the fault of "the media" --- usually

called "the liberal media" --- who are provoking, and will continue to provoke, further violence against Americans around the world. "They" will take revenge on "us." More Americans will die. Because of these photos. And photos will breed more photos, "their" answer to "ours."

It would be a great mistake to let these revelations of the American military and civilian authorization of torture in the "global war against terrorism" to become a story of the war of --- and against --- the images. It is not because of the photographs but of what the photographs reveal to be happening, happening at the behest of and with the complicity of a chain of command that reaches up to the highest level of the Bush administration. But the distinction --- between photograph and reality, between policy and spin --- can easily evaporate. And that is what the administration hopes will happen.

"There are a lot more photographs and videos that exist," Mr. Rumsfeld acknowledged in his testimony. "If these are released to the public, obviously, it is going to make matters worse." Worse for the administration and its programs, presumably, not for those who are the actual and potential victims of torture. The media may self-censor, as is its wont. But, as Mr. Rumsfeld acknowledged, it's hard to censor soldiers overseas who don't write letters home, as in the old days, that can be opened by military censors who ink out unacceptable lines, but, instead, function like tourists --- in Mr. Rumsfeld's words, "running around with digital cameras and taking these unbelievable photographs and then passing them off, against the law, to the media, to our surprise." The administration's effort to stem the tide of the photographs is proceeding along several fronts. Currently, the argument is taking a legalistic turn: now the photographs are classified as "evidence" in future criminal cases, whose outcome may be prejudiced if they are made public. There will always be the argument that the newer images, reportedly containing horrendous images of violence against prisoners and sexual humiliation, not be released. The Republican chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, John Warner from Virginia, after viewing with other legislators the May 12th slide show of more horrendous images of sexual humiliation and violence against Iraqi prisoners, said that he felt "very strongly" that the newer photographs "should not be made public. I feel that it could possibly endanger the men and women of the armed forces as they are serving and at great risk."

But the real push to limit the accessibility of the photographs will come from the ongoing effort to protect the Bush administration and cover up American misrule in Iraq --- to

identify "outrage" over the photographs with a campaign to undermine American military might and the purposes it currently serves. Just as it was regarded by many as an implicit criticism of the war to show on television photographs of American soldiers who have been killed in the course of the invasion and occupation of Iraq, it will increasingly be thought unpatriotic to disseminate the new photographs and further tarnish the reputation --- that is, the image --- of America.

After all, we're at war. Endless war. And war is hell. "I don't care what the international lawyers say, we're going to kick some ass." (George W. Bush, September 11, 2001.) Hey, we were only having fun. In our digital hall of mirrors, the pictures aren't going to go away. Yes, it seems that one picture is worth a thousand words. And even if our leaders chose not to look at them, there will be thousands more snapshots and videos. Unstoppable.

This work, and any part of it, is copyright. Putting any part of this work to any unauthorised use is a punishable offence and liable to prosecution. This applies in particular to reproduction, translation, copying, micro-filming, electronic storage or any other electronic re-working.