



Douglas Pryer's The Fight for the High Ground

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MOST AMERICANS VIEW U.S. Army interrogations in Iraq in 2003–2004 through the lens of Abu Ghraib. As Douglas Pryer points out in *The Fight for the High Ground: The U.S. Army and Interrogation During Operation Iraqi Freedom, May 2003–April 2004* (CGSC Foundation Press, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2009), this view is distorted and potentially dangerous. In this well written and thoroughly researched book, Pryer examines the shortcomings of U.S. Army interrogation doctrine, the deficiencies of its counterintelligence force structure, and the inadequate training that led to the promulgation of harsh interrogation policies and the abuse of detainees in Iraq during the first, crucial year of the conflict. Pryer, an active duty counterintelligence officer who served in Iraq during the conflict's first year, is well qualified to analyze these matters. The mistakes made in Iraq during this period, epitomized by the criminal actions of U.S. Soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison, have had long-term consequences for the international image of the United States and its military forces. Pryer reminds us that Americans should and must aspire to higher ideals. His excellent study is an essential step along a journey of understanding to repair the damage to the U.S. Army and its core values and to ensure that such policies and practices that led to prisoner abuse in Iraq do not occur again.

Intelligence is the coin of the realm in counterinsurgency warfare, and the best intelligence is normally gained from human sources. Yet despite the fact that a well-trained interrogator can elicit information willingly from most prisoners, far too many U.S. military personnel in Iraq thought that harsh treatment would somehow lead to better results. This attitude reflected outright ignorance of the basics of interrogation doctrine—a specialized area routinely ignored in pre-command courses and at the Army's combat training centers. Ironically, the one school that many Army leaders attended in this regard was the Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) School—a course intended to teach military personnel how to resist interrogation by an enemy that did not follow the Geneva Conventions regarding the ethical treatment of prisoners.

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America's political leaders were even less well informed in these matters. They increasingly advocated for brutality in the name of saving American lives, aided by the dubious opinions of a coterie of legal advisers who had spent the majority of their careers inside the Beltway. The administration redefined torture to enable interrogators to inflict temporary physical and psychological pain, and then adopted interrogation techniques used at SERE schools. These techniques were first used at Guantanamo Bay, soon migrated to Afghanistan, and from there transferred to Iraq.

Pryer details the moral descent of the U.S. Army in Iraq in 2003 as frustration and casualties mounted. In August 2003 Combined Joint Task Force 7, the highest military headquarters in Iraq, encouraged subordinate units to "take the gloves off" and treat detainees harshly in an attempt to pry additional and more useful information from them. The astonishing fact is that some interrogators approved of this order to engage in harsh interrogation practices despite reams of historical evidence that harsh treatment rarely results in good intelligence. Regardless of the tactical information gained, the strategic cost of these policies was certainly not worth the price of obtaining it. Regrettably, some leaders did not see the irony in their attempts to turn U.S. human intelligence personnel into the 21st-century version of the Gestapo.

Pryer details instances of detainee abuse by some capturing units as well as the broader context of ethical conduct by the vast majority of combat units in Iraq. Inconsistent Army doctrine, vague and changing guidance, and lack of effective training contributed to massive variations in interrogation standards, and in some cases to abuse of detainees. Some interpretations of approaches such as "Fear-up (Harsh)" led to mental and physical abuse and even death. To complement this sad tale of woe,

there is no evidence that these abusive interrogation procedures actually worked. No intelligence of value came out of the criminal abuses at Abu Ghraib. Abusive approaches led to strategic consequences, most often with nothing to show for the effort other than damaging photographs and a few broken corpses.

Ethical decision making, in Pryer's view, is one of the foundations of a unit's strategic effectiveness in counterinsurgency operations. One can sum up the key difference between those units that maintained the moral high ground and those that faltered in a single word—leadership. Few units were immune to detainee abuse, but the best commanders dealt with such abuses as did occur firmly and rapidly.

Pryer offers sensible recommendations to improve U.S. Army detention and interrogation doctrine and procedures. He argues that the Army must increase the number of HUMINT analysts and interrogators with the requisite language and cultural skills to make a difference. The Army must also address the ethical education of its officers and noncommissioned officers. He also offers a stark warning regarding what will happen if the Army fails to do so. "If uncorrected," Pryer writes, "high operational tempo coupled with poor ethical training will once again fertilize the darkest embryo of the human soul, and one of history's greatest armies will give birth to yet another Abu Ghraib or My Lai. When this occurs, we Army leaders will have only ourselves to blame." Pryer's warning should be a wake-up call to the Army leadership. I highly recommend that every officer read this book for the lessons and warnings it offers. At the very minimum, *The Fight for the High Ground* should be part of professional military education curriculum. The alternative to better education—to bump merrily along hoping that Army values instruction will prevent future abuse—is unacceptable. **MR**



“Lament of the Frontier Guard”

Rihaku, 8th century

By the North Gate, the wind blows full of sand,
Lonely from the beginning of time until now!
Trees fall, the grass goes yellow with autumn.
I climb the towers and towers
 to watch out the barbarous land:
Desolate castle, the sky, the wide desert.
There is no wall left to this village.
Bones white with a thousand frosts,
High heaps, covered with trees and grass;
Who brought this to pass?
Who was brought the flaming imperial anger?
Who has brought the army with drums
 and with kettle-drums?
Barbarous kings.
A gracious spring, turned to blood-ravenous autumn,
A turmoil of wars-men, spread over the middle
 kingdom,
Three hundred and sixty thousand,
And sorrow, sorrow like rain.
Sorrow to go, and sorrow, sorrow returning.
Desolate, desolate fields,
And no children of warfare upon them,
 No longer the men for offence and defense.
Ah, how shall you know the dreary sorrow
 at the North Gate,
With Rihaku’s name forgotten
And we guardsmen fed to the tigers.

Rihaku is the Japanese name for Chinese poet Li Bai, also known as Li Po, who lived 701-762 during the Tang dynasty, the “golden age” of Chinese poetry. He died near the end of the An Lushan Rebellion (755-763), a conflict that ripped Tang China apart and killed an estimated 36 million people (the total world population at the time was around 224 million). This adaptation is from Ezra Pound’s 1915 collection of poetry entitled *Cathay*.

Emperor Minghuang’s Journey to Sichuan, Chinese handscroll, Ming Dynasty (1494-1552), depicting the Tang emperor fleeing the violence of the An Lushan Rebellion.