

Right-Wing Radio Explains (Away) Torture

By Mark T. Harris

Right-wing talk radio is a fantasy land of endless grievances against the "liberal media establishment" and its perceived biases and double standards. Across the nation from hour to hour in any media market, you'll find some sort of right-wing loudness blaring about the outrages of America's non-conservative thinkers and other subversives.

In Chicago, listeners of WLS-AM can enjoy nonstop entertainment as the station's loaded roster of right-wing hosts takes on topics ranging from Michael Moore's disgusting bloviatingness to Sen. Dick Durbin's (D-IL) shocking attempt to compare the chaining of prisoners at Guantanamo Naval Base in cold cells, deprived of food and water, to the actions of Nazis and Stalinists who chained prisoners in cold cells, deprived of food and water. The latter issue caused morning host Don Wade to heat up just short of spontaneous combustion following last year's interview with the Senator. Apparently, Durbin had failed to grovel sufficiently in mortification for his "anti-American" remarks.

For another WLS host, Eileen Byrne, the release of new photos of torture and abuse by U.S. military personnel at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison is more cause for outrage.

But don't get the wrong idea. Byrne's outrage is aimed more at the torture being exposed than the torture being done. The publication of a new round of images from Abu Ghraib is just more evidence of the liberal media's irresponsibility in a time of war, Byrne recently told listeners.

As far as this WLS host is concerned, the new photos add nothing to a "three-year-old" story, other than (insert Byrne's customary tone of aggrieved irritation here) "to inflame the Middle East once again and put our men and women, American soldiers, in harm's way." Yet instead the liberal media chose to "repackage" the drearily dated Abu Ghraib story just to pile discredit upon the Bush Administration and the just cause of the U.S. forces occupying Iraq. Or so we're supposed to believe.

But reality on the right-wing media circuit is always an elusive companion. When the show's studio announcer interjected that perhaps the photos weren't that inflammatory, since Iraqi insurgents were already inflamed enough to be planting roadside bombs, Byrne moderated her observation to say the insurgents would use the new photos as another excuse for more roadside bombings. She then attacked the American Civil

Liberties Union and Amnesty International for seeking release of the previously unreleased images. "They think nothing has been done. Yet Lyndie England and Charles Granier and eight people are now in prison as a result of the Abu Ghraib photographs and what happened there." End of story.

See No Torture, Hear No Torture

There is a good word to describe the reaction of thinking people to this argument. It is incredulity. Byrne is forced to obliterate all context to make her case that publishing new Abu Ghraib photos serves no purpose other than to fuel anti-Bush, anti-American sentiment. Never mind that the new Abu Ghraib images come to light against a growing folder of evidence, far greater than in 2003, that the U.S. military has engaged in systematic abuse of detainees at multiple sites not only in Iraq, but in Guantanamo and Afghanistan. Never mind the evidence about "rendering" some detainees in American custody to countries like Egypt and Jordan where torture by security forces is practiced. Never mind that Vice President Cheney recently lobbied Congress to vote down a measure banning all "cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment" of prisoners. Never mind that Amnesty International's newly released report on Iraq documents continued widespread torture and imprisonment of "security internees" without charge or trial.

Indeed, the March 6 Amnesty International report, "Beyond Abu Ghraib: Detention and Torture in Iraq," describes an emerging picture of Iraqi authorities "systematically violating the rights of detainees in breach of guarantees both in Iraqi legislation and in international law and standards—including the right not to be tortured and to be promptly brought before a judge." Last year, Human Rights Watch issued a similar report documenting beatings and mistreatment of detainees during interrogations at the 82nd Airborne Division base. New details continue to come out about human rights abuses in 2003-04 at Camp Nama, the secret headquarters of a military unit near Baghdad Airport (since moved) known as Task Force 6-26.

Apparently, the "shock and awe" of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq has morphed into just shock and cables, the electrical torture kind and the beating kind. Of course, U.S. authorities say they have taken measures to safeguard against further human rights abuses, beyond punishing the mostly lower echelon personnel directly involved in the prison scandal. But last year Army investigators shut down an inquiry into abuse allegations at Camp Nama because Task Force 6-26 refused to identify soldiers suspected of abuses, as the New York Times reports this week (March 20, 2006). Task Force 6-26 also claimed it had "lost" a majority of its computer files. Clearly, torture under U.S. auspices is an issue that

reaches far beyond a rogue few.

What underlies the harshness of U.S. policy in Iraq is the failure of the Americans to solve the acute crisis of an Iraqi society bled by years of dictatorship, sanctions, invasions and war. The M16-driven "democracy" now in place has failed to establish a stable economic infrastructure, to provide jobs and development or even regular electricity. This hasn't exactly fulfilled the radio propagandists' once optimistic pre-war expectations. The picture of the promised free-market paradise, grateful natives and all, turned out to be as elusive as the cache of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) used to justify the invasion.

Of course, the right-wing media blames everything on the insurgency, which is another way of saying they blame the Iraqi people. If only those pesky natives would just cooperate with the occupation, the neo-con dream of a fire sale on the Iraqi economy for the benefit of foreign investors could have proceeded according to plan. Instead, they just have the fire of a devastated society and an armed resistance to occupation that shows no signs of abating.

No small factor in fueling the resistance are the thousands of civilian deaths attributable to the results of U.S. bombing raids and other military assaults in civilian areas. The U.K.-based Iraq Body Count's (IBC) latest estimate, which is limited to journalistic reports, puts

the number of civilians killed by violence at 37,754 in the three years since the invasion. The British medical journal *Lancet's* October 2004 report concluded that a much higher figure of 100,000 Iraqi civilians had at that time died of war-related causes since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. What's notable is that air strikes and fire from helicopter gunships accounted for a majority of the violent deaths. Even as sectarian violence claims more lives, the Iraqi Health Ministry acknowledges that deaths attributable to U.S. and U.K. military actions exceed those caused by insurgents by a margin of two-to-one. But you won't hear the Eileen Byrne's of radioland in a moral uproar over U.S. bombing raids that rain their indiscriminate sorrow upon Iraqi families.

In right-wing radioland the moral measure of right and wrong, good versus evil, East versus West, all seems to come down to comparing "our" bad deeds as Americans to "their bad deeds" as Muslims or terrorists or whoever happens at the moment to be "against us." Thus, Byrne sees a double standard in the American media's willingness to publish photos of U.S. military personnel engaged in human rights violations, but not cartoons from Denmark intended to insult the entire Islamic faith. Likewise, the usual retort to those who condemn the Bush Administration's mistreatment and denial of due process to "suspected terrorists" is to compare such actions

to the beheading of hostages by clandestine Iraqi groups. This is a circuitous way of saying Byrne prefers her own low standard for defining human rights over some "liberal" media double standard. Besides, we Americans mean well.

Of course, right-wing radio generally opposed the release of more Abu Ghraib images because that was the position of the Pentagon. Nationally syndicated radio and TV host Sean Hannity initially even tried to suggest that the Democratic National Committee (DNC) was behind the scandal's expose. But as much as pro-Bush media pundits don't want world opinion to be reminded of the moral gutter the torture story represents for U.S. policy, they also seek to paint opposition to the U. S. occupation in blood colors of kidnappings, car bombs, and beheadings. Not for them is the vexing reality that a decisive majority of Iraqi citizens oppose the presence of foreign troops in their country, as Washington Post and other polls report. It's ironic but also no surprise that our "freedom-loving" radio hosts as a rule pay little attention to such popular Iraqi opinion.

It's all par for the course among the right-wing punditocracy. Liberal Alan Colmes of Fox TV's Hannity & Colmes, for example, recently confronted the ultra right Ann Coulter about the White House's deceptions in the build-up to the 2003 invasion. Then Americans were told, falsely, that Iraq's

unaccounted for WMDs and nuclear weapons plans made invasion an issue of imminent national security. Coulter the soundbitetress is never at a loss for words. But she sidetracked Colmes' question by asking if he denied that Saddam Hussein built rape rooms for dissidents. In other words, wasn't it true that Hussein was a bad guy? What Coulter was really saying was that it didn't matter if the Bush Administration deceived the American public, as long as their lies got the invasion they (and she) wanted.

'Good News' About a Bad War?

As for the Eileen Byrne Show, she's been known to describe her WLS program as "the show that brings you the good news about Iraq when no one else will." It's fitting blather from a partisan Republican who sees nothing but good in the U.S. military presence in Iraq. Indeed, there appears to be no limit to the cheerleading, even on the rare occasion when you might reasonably expect some discernment. When Lt. Gen. James Mattis embarrassed the White House last year by remarking that he found it "fun" to shoot people in Afghanistan and Iraq, Byrne was quick to defend the general. In an on-air exchange with Ahmed Rehab of the Chicago chapter of the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), she castigated the group's call for disciplinary action against the general as shameful. We should instead all be thanking him for his service to his country, said

Byrne. You would think a supporter of the war could at least distance herself from remarks that veer into the land of the sociopathic.

Then again, the entire case for invading Iraq was always tinged with pathology, at least as far as the reasons the public was given for the war's necessity. But how do you convince a father or mother that their child should risk their life for the geo-political agenda of neo-con ideologues whose primary concern is asserting American control over an oil-rich economy? How do you convince a soldier they should sacrifice for the noble flag of Exxon-Mobil? One way is by turning to media moralists whose particular skill is translating the most cynical agenda into the high talk of patriotic virtue.

But it's a hypocritical path our radio host travels. As much as Byrne is willing now to sacrifice young men and women to the dangers of a tour of duty in Iraq, she'll dismiss in passing the Reagan Administration's support to Saddam Hussein in the 1980s. In those days Iran was at war with Iraq and Iran was our enemy, we are told, so supporting Hussein was expedient. Next topic. Yet in the build-up to the war in 2002-03, Byrne liked to portray war opponents as appeasers of Saddam's evil.

Right-wing radio remains as vocally ramped up as ever. But the rhetoric today has shifted from the triumphalist saber rattling of conservatism's halcyon days of "mission accomplished." Today, the

tenor of the talk is far more defensive, if no less combative. But what should we expect from media pundits who must constantly explain away a U.S. administration that will be forever remembered as architects of the war that brought the "torture option" into the open as an instrument of foreign policy?