

THE BRUTALITY CONNECTION: ABU GHRAIB AND AMERICA'S PRISONS

There are about 9 million people residing in prisons around the world. With only one quarter of the world's population the U.S., Russia, and China have half the world's inmates. Adjusted for population, the U.S. has highest incarceration rate in the world. Since 1997 the number of inmates in America's local jails has risen 4.3 percent, a rate of 1,000 each week. In 2002 there were 668 prisoners for every 100,000 Americans, while there were only 59 per 100,000 locked up in Norway, Finland, and Denmark.

While Europe's criminal justice system returns fewer people to prison, the U. S. recidivism rate is increasing. A recent study of 16,000 released prisoners found that two-thirds of them had been rearrested, and that 20 percent of them had committed violent crimes. Some commentators have said that America's prisons serve as a "graduate school of crime."

This result is most likely because America's prisons have a shameful reputation for harsh and violent conditions. In 1999 charges of mock execution of prisoners in a Sacramento jail resulted in a successful class action suit against the sheriff. In Arizona's Maricopa County jails the use of stun guns and restraint chairs, as well as forcing inmates to wear pink underwear, is standard procedure.

A training video for Texas' Barzoria County Detention Center encourages the use of dogs to intimidate prisoners. Recently, U.S. Army Sgt. Michael J. Smith was found guilty for using unmuzzled dogs to threaten detainees at Abu Ghraib. It is certainly not a coincidence that the CIA has learned that Muslim prisoners are particularly terrified of dogs and very protective of their masculine identities.

In January 2005, Army Specialist Charles Graner, one of the leaders in the abuse of Abu Ghraib prisoners, was sentenced to a 10-year sentence. The 36-year-old former Marine used to work as a security guard at a supermax prison in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania. In 1998 12 officers at this facility lost their jobs after being charged with beating and sodomizing prisoners. In a separate incident, an inmate filed a lawsuit (afterwards dismissed) that accused Graner of beating him. Graner's ex-wife also filed charges of spousal abuse, including being threatened by a gun.

Lane McCotter was director of the Utah State Prison system when Michael Valent died after 16 hours in a restraint chair. Also during McCotter's tenure, Amnesty International reported a case in which a Utah prisoner was bound to a four point restraint board for 12 weeks. McCotter resigned his post, but six years later he was hired to rebuild Abu Ghraib, which President Bush promised would become a model prison.

There have also been increasing incidents of rape against new and weaker prisoners. While overtly sexual, power rape is the prison bullies' way of maintaining

their top male status and controlling those below them by humiliation and terror. Such action has nothing to do with the love that gay men express for each other.

The story of Roderick Johnson's experience at Texas' notorious Allred Unit is a dramatic example of this particular aspect of prison brutality. As a gentle black gay man Johnson was an easy target for top males who bought and sold him as a sex slave. Johnson's repeated requests to be moved to a safe unit were denied and prison officials who did an internal investigation were surprised that a homosexual man would complain about having sex with other men. (Evidently, some American men are still having a problem understanding consensual sex.) One official also could not understand how Johnson could be a Christian let alone appeal to his faith as a way of preserving his dignity.

Why do these horrific incidents happen in the U.S. and disreputable third world countries? Anne-Marie Cusac, who has investigated American prison conditions for the last ten years, argues that too many Americans harbor the same unfounded opinions: "people who land in jail deserve to be there; criminals are bad people—almost subhuman—who can't be rehabilitated; therefore, punishment can be as harsh as possible."

I would add one more unfounded assumption: namely, the belief that human beings are violent by nature. Many studies have been done on this topic, but the one I like is the experiment that a Dutch scientist did with monkeys. He took babies from a peaceful species and gave them to mother's of a more aggressive species. Those monkeys learned violence from their mothers, just as babies given to the pacifist mothers grew up less aggressive.

While governor of Texas President Bush presided over 198 executions, and in 1998 he rejected Karla Faye Tucker's appeal for clemency. Bush publicly mocked her eloquent confession of how she had remade herself and had established a prison ministry. Americans must rise up and reject Bush's culture of fear, intimidation, and brutality that has made a once respected nation a pariah in the world.

Sources for this essay were drawn from Sasha Abramsky, "Breeding Violence," *Mother Jones* (July 10, 2001); Sasha Abramsky, "The Seeds of Abu Ghraib," *The Nation* (December 26, 2005); Adam Liptak, "Ex-Inmates Suit Offers View into Sexual Slavery in Prisons," *New York Times* (October 16, 2004); Anne-Marie Cusac, "Abu Ghraib, USA," *The Progressive* (July, 2004).