

# On the Night Shift: From Lynndie England to Copper Green

## Mike Small

### Liberty for Sale, 25 August 2004

"I have just come home from work and think back over my workday. I mix with refugees from evil and tyranny from all over the world, including those who fled apartheid. I drink my coffee with Muslims and Mandarins, Pakistanis and Indians, all breathing the fresh air of freedom. You have the nerve to depict our beloved Lady, Miss Liberty as a cheap, cigarette smoking slut, dragging an Iraqi by a collar. You insult our symbol of freedom and liberation from fear and evil. You make a mockery of the Statue that has greeted millions who sought shelter from the darkness of Europe and Asia. You vilify the Smile of welcome that greeted millions of our heroes as they returned from wars that guaranteed your freedom."<sup>1</sup>

### Susie Q, American posting, Open Letter to Jonathan Shapiro, US cartoonist who depicted the Statue of Liberty in the same pose as Lynndie England

It's exactly a year to the day that Ali Ismail Abbas's family were bombed and today the report by James Schlesinger on the torture at Abu Ghraib jail is released—heading an 'independent' team appointed by Donald Rumsfeld the report admitted that 'indirect responsibility' for the conditions that led to these and other abuses go right to the top of the Pentagon's chain of command.

The report ('Final Report of the Independent Panel To Review DoD Detention Operations August 2004') states:

"The events of October through December 2003 on the night shift of Tier 1 at Abu Ghraib prison were acts of brutality and purposeless sadism. We know these abuses occurred at the hands of both military police and military intelligence personnel. The pictured abuses, unacceptable even in wartime, were not part of authorised interrogations nor were they even directed at intelligence targets. They represent deviant behaviour and a failure of military leadership and discipline."

It was the photos of Lynndie England that really woke the world, then, a few days later, slowly America woke up to what they were doing.

It was reported that Private Lynndie England, at a military hearing in Fort Bragg, North Carolina showed no alarm when confronted with pictures of her gloating over naked and cowering Iraqi prisoners.

Instead, her first reaction to news that she was under investigation for abuse was: "It was just for fun."

As military witnesses were brought forward like school children caught thieving at the shops, the banality of the torture emerged. Chief Warrant Officer Paul Arthur told the court: "They didn't think it was that serious. They were just joking around and having some fun during the night shift," later adding: "From the get-go, it was jokes and frustration."

Private England giggled nervously at the front of the court. The prosecutions case (though it's not entirely clear who's being prosecuted) is largely from photographs, with more than 280 images of abuse of detainees, and of Private England engaged in sex acts with Corporal Graner.

But there's no doubt the story is less about the personal culpability of Lynndie and the rest of the cannon-fodder Blair and Bush used in the war, than the long term legal and geo-political implications of having a rogue state on the loose. But it's worth also looking at the broader picture of how it feels working with US allies like this; what consuming coverage of this does and feels like. The backdrop to this is a supine Labour Party who's been led into this unending war by the noses, and the affect on all of us of consuming war-porn, Labour lies and military spin.

### 'Little Ali' Gets a Football Shirt, 15 October 2003

"...those few who were still able to tell right from wrong

went really only by their own judgments, and the did so freely; there were no rules to be abided by, under which the particular cases with which they were confronted could be subsumed. They had to decide each instance as it arose, because no rules existed for the unprecedented."<sup>2</sup>

### Hannah Arendt

The feeling of real shame to be associated with Iraq started with 'Little Ali'. There's no point being self-righteous about Dubya, Lynndie England or Guantánamo Bay. This was our war too, we were the double-act dubbed the 'Coalition of the Willing' and British military intelligence officers were interrogating prisoners in the notorious Abu Ghraib jail in Iraq even as the first reports of abuses at the prison came to light.

Like it or not, this *was* in our name. Remember that as your hand marks the cross for Tony next year—whether it's fear of the revenge of Tory Middle England with the UKIP, or the Trots with their dangerous school-lunch-socialism motivating your bout of dubious self-preservation at the ballot.

It's the end of the news the night of the England-Turkey game. We needed a funny little story to cheer us up after all that serious investigative reporting that's come before. What's it to be tonight? A dog in a tree? A really big pie in Guernsey? A man who found a budgie in his pizza? No. Tonight it was 'Little Ali'.

Ali Ismail Abbas—you might remember him, we killed his mum Azhar who was seven months pregnant, his dad, his ten year old brother Abbas and thirteen other members of his family and blew his arms off.<sup>3</sup> Then we got all doe-eyed and Princess Di-Memorial about it, so we flew him over to Britain. Like a latter day freak show he was soon doing the rounds, and got a new pair of arms courtesy of the 'big hearted readers' of the *Daily Mirror*.

We liked the wee guy. He seemed, well he seemed plucky, not having any arms and all, you know he still smiled a lot. So we gave him a bunch of surgery and tonight he was the funny story at the end of the news.

'Little Ali' became the subject of some classic pieces of the most crass journalism. In one the BBC turned the story on its head, asking 'Could Ali type with his new hands?'<sup>4</sup> In a brilliant feat of journalism the story was turned from a neo-imperialist tragedy into a triumph of Western technology.

Never mind the human face of the war, or the language-lies of military jargon ('Little Ali' was a classic case of 'collateral damage'), here was a great science and technology story. The underlying message was really this: 'we may have bombed his family and maimed him but we can also rebuild him'. It's great being omnipotent.

The recurring wording in online and newspaper sources ('Little Ali' played well in the tabloids) was stuff like: "The world has been gripped by the plight of 13-year-old Ali Abbas since he lost both arms in the Iraq war."

'Lost', sort of careless then? Responsibility for action was absent.

Back to ITV. Somebody somewhere in some media office asked though, 'What's the hook?' The hook? He's a 'Man U' fan. So the England team, led by David Beckham, all signed a shirt for him. I didn't see whether it was long-sleeved or short, or whether it was adult-sized, you know maybe one of the team's (maybe even David's?) or a child-sized one, they didn't really cover that, I can't remember. Later it was widely reported he asked for a Man U tattoo on his false arm.



Watching ITV News normally makes me feel like a pervert, but tonight it made me feel that we were all becoming degraded, subjugated, contemptible.

But it wore off, and I was bored and numb again soon.

### April 2004

Then in April of this year four American 'civilian security contractors' were shot and burnt in their cars in Falluja, before a cheering crowd dismembered the corpses, dragged them through the streets and hung two of them from a bridge. It's difficult to relate to death, even when your granny dies you can't really handle it. A war is unimaginable to most of us. At the time of the first exposure to Abu Ghraib a few rugged, gum chewing hacks came out with a sort of trite statement: "It's just the middle classes who'll never see a war, this is what happens..." they'd trail off knowingly. And it's true, wars are (probably) unimaginably horrible, full of desperate dishonourable acts. How would I know?

Watching the telly hasn't helped. Nor has reading the newspapers (even the grown up ones). First the double standard of *Al-Jazeera* being condemned for showing US dead on television. Then the *Daily Mirror* which published pictures of someone spraying water on someone in the back of a transit van, or was it a Luton? Then in San Francisco Benjamin Vanderford pretended to chop his own head off as part of his campaign for local office. Then Britain said it would accept convictions from prisoners who's confessions it knew were elicited by torture—an extraordinary legal departure for Britain to take, and this under a Labour Government? Robin Cook and his 'ethical foreign policy' seem a long way off now don't they—if they ever really amounted to anything? I don't know if any of those in the torture pictures we've seen come under this specifically, or whether they are relating to those from Guantanamo Bay but other countries, such as Denmark, have specifically withdraw from this deeming it to be a violation of their sovereign laws.

Then the start of the Premiership. Would Chelsea win it again? What's happening with Sol Campbell? See that Alex Rae!

### Copper Green, September 2004

"If anyone still thinks that the only people who dreamt up the idea about torturing prisoners were just some privates and corporals at Abu Ghraib, this document should put that myth to rest."

### Tom Malinowski, Washington, Director of Human Rights Watch.

I suppose one has to shake-off the feeling of shame and take a look at what's happened. It's predictable perhaps that the top brass are ducking the allegations of a review body appointed by Torturer in Chief Donald Rumsfeld, cheered to the rafters on his sneak visit to Iraq after Abu Ghraib first blew open.

The facts are plain and depressingly simple. After witnessing acts of physical and psychological abuse during a visit to Abu Ghraib in October 2003, Red Cross delegates queried US military officers at the prison about the practice of keeping some prisoners naked, in completely bare and unlit cells. According to the report:

“The military officer in charge of the interrogation explained that this practice was ‘part of the process.’”

Most prisoners at Abu Ghraib have not been charged with any crime and are being held without trial. A report released by human rights group *Amnesty International* in March observed that, “families waiting outside Abu Ghraib prison say most of their relatives were picked up in indiscriminate raids” aimed at netting some suspected supporters of Iraqi resistance attacks on US occupation troops.

In some cases, the detainee has simply been related to an Iraqi whom the US invader army wants to detain—spouses and children being arrested to “encourage” people sought by the US occupiers to come forward, a blatant violation of international law.

But this is not isolated to one jail in Iraq, cases against the Coalition of the Willing are being pressed for incidents in unknown sites across the country and in numerous secret camps throughout the world.<sup>5</sup> In December 2002, the *Washington Post* revealed that suspected Taliban and al Qaeda fighters held at the US-controlled Bagram air base in Afghanistan were being tortured. It reported:

“Those who refuse to cooperate inside this secret CIA interrogation center are sometimes kept standing or kneeling for hours, in black hoods or spray-painted goggles, according to intelligence specialists familiar with CIA interrogation methods.”

The debate becomes centred around not whether this happened, nor how widespread it was, but whether it was part of a systematic programme or a general failure of control, a collapse of moral authority, or the assertion of an immoral one. It becomes increasingly clear that the only sensible analysis is that it was the latter. As Seymour Hersh has written:

“The roots of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal lie not in the criminal inclinations of a few Army reservists but in a decision, approved last year by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, to expand a highly secret operation, which had been focussed on the hunt for Al Qaeda, to the interrogation of prisoners in Iraq. Rumsfeld’s decision embittered the American intelligence community, damaged the effectiveness of elite combat units, and hurt America’s prospects in the war on terror.”

According to interviews with American intelligence officials, the Pentagon’s operation, known inside the intelligence community by several code words, including Copper Green, encouraged physical coercion and sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners in an effort to generate more intelligence about the growing insurgency in Iraq.

According to Hersh:

“A senior C.I.A. official, in confirming the details of this account last week, said that the operation stemmed from Rumsfeld’s long-standing desire to wrest control of America’s clandestine and paramilitary operations from the C.I.A.”

Although the new report into the abuse of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison is expected to incriminate at least a further two dozen military personnel it states clearly:

“...there was no official policy of abuse at the jail.”

It’s not so much a cover up as a dumb-down.

“The report will show that these actions were bad, illegal, unauthorised, and some of it was sadistic,” a defence department official told the *Washington Post*.

Bad actions. Unauthorised actions.

“But it will show that they were the actions of a few, actions that went unnoticed because of leadership failures,” he added.

Crucially, and here’s the centre of the storm, according to Mr Schlesinger, it would be wrong for the Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, to resign: “His resignation would be a boon to all of America’s enemies.”

Neither did the four man panel think the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard Myers, should resign.

No surprise there then. But while Hutton, Butler and now Schlesinger get these thugs a Get Out of

Jail in the short term, their evasion erodes remaining confidence in the elite rule they represent. Even functionaries like Hoon, normally anonymous in state torture, suddenly become more prominent, as do their apologists and escapologists in the media.

Lounge columnist and war-enthusiast Christopher Hitchens is one who’s feeling embarrassed.<sup>6</sup> Columns like his ‘Moral Chernobyl’—prepare for the worst on Abu Ghraib’ are almost enough to elicit sympathy for his compromised position. You can almost feel him squirm after a heavy Washington lunch when he writes:

“So in a distressing sense...we face something like a collective responsibility, if not exactly a collective guilt.”

I suspect those of us who warned of this moral chaos and descent into darkness share less of the collective guilt than the adopted US cheerleaders.

But Hitchens’ ramblings get even scarier when he provides us with his analysis of the Irish Question:

“They didn’t win because their idea of bombing a large Protestant community into joining a united Catholic Ireland was a bit mad to begin with. And they also didn’t win because security methods became tremendously more professional.”

Yet as the Medical Foundation which cares for victims of torture has stated:

“The United Kingdom is no stranger to such issues. Thirty years ago British security forces in Belfast decided to use five interrogation techniques, which had been finessed by the KGB, against IRA suspects. These were hooding, noise bombardment, food and water deprivation, sleep deprivation and being forced to stand for long periods spreadeagle against a wall. Fourteen Republican suspects were rounded up and endured several weeks of such treatment, before being released without charge, with some suffering acute psychological illness.”

In the ensuing controversy, the then Prime Minister Edward Heath, after setting up two enquiries, endorsed a minority report by Privy Councillor Lord Gardiner who held that there was nothing in domestic law that permitted members of the security forces to act in such a manner, and no officer or politician had the right to authorise it.

But the US has exempted itself from international war crimes, and acts as a rogue state with Blair and cohorts. We were promised a breakthrough in the ‘road map’ for peace in the Middle East, and instead we have Israel threatening Iran with military action and practicing ethnic cleansing against the Palestinians. We were promised weapons of mass destruction, but they don’t exist. We were promised democracy in Iraq and we have appointed rulers and *Al-Jazeera* banned. We were promised stability and we have Najaf.

Attacks on US troops are running at dozens a day, frequently accompanied by looting, burning and stoning. It is generally believed in Baghdad that around 1,000 Iraqis leave the country every day for Jordan and Syria because the security situation is intolerable. According to the Iraqi media, gunmen have killed roughly 750 in the last year. Friends of the Americans such as Ahmad Chalabi are discredited; enemies such as the young Shia firebrand Moqtada al-Sadr are in the ascendancy.

We were promised an investigation, soul-searching, honesty, then John Scarlett is appointed the new head of MI6 and investigations into the killing of Iraqi civilians by British troops are fundamentally flawed. Many have not even resulted in autopsies of the victims.<sup>7</sup>

But judgment day comes—whether it’s from a generation politicised by lying politicians who preach morality as they send soldiers to do their dirty work and preach scripture as they sanction torture—or from the MPs who have announced plans to have Blair impeached for “high crimes and misdemeanours” in taking Britain to war against Iraq.<sup>8</sup>

Good luck to them but the real test has to be to change the way the state works towards war like a cancer seeking healthy cells. We need to learn real lessons from what happened in Iraq about the collapse of legal structure, the impotence of parliament, the moral bankruptcy of the Labour government and the inadequacies of the anti-war movement. A few heads on platters would be a reassuring but ultimately pyrrhic victory.

Yet Rumsfeld deserves different than the cheers he received on his trip to Iraq. A classified

Pentagon report, adding to the investigative work of Hersh and contributing to the emerging picture from the Schlesinger Report highlights a series of legal arguments apparently intended to justify abuses and torture against detainees, appears to undermine public assurances by senior US officials, including President George W Bush, that the military would never resort to such practices in the “war on terrorism”.

Short excerpts of the report, which was drafted by Defense Department lawyers, were published in the *Wall Street Journal* in August. The report claims that the president, in his position as commander-in-chief, has virtually unlimited power to wage war, even in violation of US law and international treaties.

“The breadth of authority in the report is wholly unprecedented,” says Avi Cover, a senior attorney with the US Law and Security program of *Human Rights First*, formerly known as *Lawyers Committee for Human Rights*. “Until now, we’ve used the rhetoric of a president who is ‘above the law’, but this document makes that [assertion] explicit; it’s not a metaphor anymore,” he added.

While it is unknown whether Bush himself ever saw or approved the report, it was classified “secret” by Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld on March 6, 2003, the eve of the US invasion of Iraq, according to the *Journal*. The collapse of legal authority—or its exposure—has stood hand-in-hand with the mercenary armies, the private security guards holding hands with the SiS in Abu Ghraib, and the whole sorry picture being presented to us by a Labour government sick and staggering on with its pitiful inheritance of neo-liberal dogma.

As the economist JK Galbraith has written:

“As the corporate interest moves to power in what was the public sector, it serves the corporate interest. It is most clearly evident in the largest such movement, that of nominally private firms into the defence establishment. From this comes a primary influence on the military budget, on foreign policy, military commitment and, ultimately, military action. War. Although this is a normal and expected use of money and its power, the full effect is disguised by almost all conventional expression.”

What we have seen is the descent into barbarism. Where leaders rule without moral restraint, legal redress or ethical direction but ‘Little Ali’ gets a Manchester United tattoo on his artificial arm.

#### Notes

- 1 Open Letter to Jonathan Shapiro, US cartoonist who depicted the Statue of Liberty in the same pose as Lynndie England. See <http://forum.mg.co.za/printthread.php?Cat=&Board=mediaissues&main=108254&type=thread> for the original image
- 2 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the Banality of Evil*
- 3 The 13-year-old lost both arms and suffered 60 per cent burns in a coalition attack on Baghdad early in the Gulf War which claimed the lives of his parents, a brother and 13 other family members.
- 4 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/3146771.stm>
- 5 *Amnesty’s* report cites the example of Abdallah Khudhran al Shamran, a Saudi Arabian national detained by occupation troops in April 2003 while travelling to Baghdad: “On reaching an unknown site, he said he was beaten, given electric shocks, suspended by his legs, had his penis tied and was subjected to sleep deprivation.”  
Also see: ‘America’s gulag’, Stephen Grey, *Newstatesman*, 17/5/04. In which “Stephen Grey uncovers a secret global network of prisons and planes that allows the US to hand over its enemies for interrogation, and sometimes torture, by the agents of its more unsavoury allies.”  
[http://www.newstatesman.com/site.php3?newTemplate=NSArticle\\_NS&newDisplayURN=200405170016](http://www.newstatesman.com/site.php3?newTemplate=NSArticle_NS&newDisplayURN=200405170016)
- 6 ‘A Moral Chernobyl, Prepare for the worst of Abu Ghraib’, *Slate Magazine*  
<http://slate.msn.com/id/2102373/>
- 7 ‘Report to the High Court’, Friday July 30, 2004
- 8 Reviving an ancient practice last used against Lord Palmerston more than 150 years ago. Eleven MPs led by Adam Price, Plaid Cymru MP for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr, and including Elfyn Llwyd, and Alex Salmond are to table a motion when Parliament returns that will force the Prime Minister to appear before the Commons to defend his record in the run-up to the war.