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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Just Trust Us

By PAUL KRUGMAN

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Didn't you know, in your gut, that something like Abu Ghraib would eventually come to light?

When the world first learned about the abuse of prisoners, President Bush said that it "does not reflect the nature of the American people." He's right, of course: a great majority of Americans are decent and good. But so are a great majority of people everywhere. If America's record is better than that of most countries — and it is — it's because of our system: our tradition of openness, and checks and balances.

Yet Mr. Bush, despite all his talk of good and evil, doesn't believe in that system. From the day his administration took office, its slogan has been "just trust us." No administration since Nixon has been so insistent that it has the right to operate without oversight or accountability, and no administration since Nixon has shown itself to be so little deserving of that trust. Out of a misplaced sense of patriotism, Congress has deferred to the administration's demands. Sooner or later, a moral catastrophe was inevitable.

Just trust us, John Ashcroft said, as he demanded that Congress pass the Patriot Act, no questions asked. After two and a half years, during which he arrested and secretly detained more than a thousand people, Mr. Ashcroft has yet to convict any actual terrorists. (Look at the actual trials of what Dahlia Lithwick of Slate calls "disaffected bozos who watch cheesy training videos," and you'll see what I mean.)

Just trust us, George Bush said, as he insisted that Iraq, which hadn't attacked us and posed no obvious threat, was the place to go in the war on terror. When we got there, we found no weapons of mass destruction and no new evidence of links to Al Qaeda.

Just trust us, Paul Bremer said, as he took over in Iraq. What is the legal basis for Mr. Bremer's authority? You may imagine that the Coalition Provisional Authority is an arm of the government, subject to U.S. law. But it turns out that no law or presidential directive has ever established the authority's status. Mr. Bremer, as far as we can tell, answers to nobody except Mr. Bush, which makes Iraq a sort of personal fief. In that fief, there has been nothing that Americans would recognize as the rule of law. For example, Ahmad Chalabi, the Pentagon's erstwhile favorite, was allowed to gain control of Saddam's files — the better to blackmail his potential rivals.

And finally: Just trust us, Donald Rumsfeld said early in 2002, when he declared that "enemy combatants" — a term that turned out to mean anyone, including American citizens, the administration chose to so designate — don't have rights under the Geneva Convention. Now people around the world talk of an "American gulag," and Seymour Hersh is exposing My Lai all over again.

Did top officials order the use of torture? It depends on the meaning of the words "order" and "torture." Last August Mr. Rumsfeld's top intelligence official sent Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller, the commander of the Guantánamo prison, to Iraq. General

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Miller recommended that the guards help interrogators, including private contractors, by handling prisoners in a way that "sets the conditions" for "successful interrogation and exploitation." What did he and his superiors think would happen?

To their credit, some supporters of the administration are speaking out. "This is about system failure," said Senator Lindsey Graham, a Republican from South Carolina. But do Mr. Graham, John McCain and other appalled lawmakers understand their own role in that failure? By deferring to the administration at every step, by blocking every effort to make officials accountable, they set the nation up for this disaster. You can't prevent any serious inquiry into why George Bush led us to war to eliminate W.M.D. that didn't exist and to punish Saddam for imaginary ties to Al Qaeda, then express shock when Mr. Bush's administration fails to follow the rules on other matters.

Meanwhile, Abu Ghraib will remain in use, under its new commander: General Miller of Guantánamo. Donald Rumsfeld has "accepted responsibility" — an action that apparently does not mean paying any price at all. And Dick Cheney says, "Don Rumsfeld is the best secretary of defense the United States has ever had. . . . People should get off his case and let him do his job." In other words: Just trust us.

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