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An ugly prison record

Given the way it treats its own inmates, America shouldn't be shocked at the abuse of Iraqis, *by Christopher Reed*

For a nation founded on slavery and genocide, Americans retain an astonishingly enduring faith in their continuing righteousness. They are sounding this note again as the prison torture scandal continues in Iraq.

In a column in the New York Times last week, Middle East analyst Thomas Friedman warned that the revelations created the "danger of losing America as an instrument of moral authority and inspiration in the world."

Does he not read the world's newspapers? Uncle Sam as moral authority?

Other U.S. pundits similarly harrumphed about America's endangered integrity and leadership. President George W. Bush himself said the prison mistreatments were not the American way.

But they were, and they are.

Friedman's column was headlined, "Restoring our honour," but the abuse of prisoners surprises nobody who reads newspapers or scans the Internet. Americans have been mistreating and torturing their fellow Americans in their own lock-ups for decades. What honour is there to restore?

In "liberal" California, horror stories have appeared for years from hellholes such as Pelican Bay prison, where they house "the worst of the worst" — and also inflict the worst brutalities. A prisoner dumped in scalding water so his skin peeled off like old varnish; prisoners left naked outside in rainy and bitter weather for days; multiple beatings and rapes; several unexplained deaths.

In Corcoran prison, California, guards held their own Roman gladiator games with prisoners pitted against each other in fights to the near death. A disliked and defenceless prisoner was placed in the same cell as the biggest and baddest sex criminal — known as the Booty Bandit — to be duly raped to the amusement of the prisoner's supposed guardians.

Pelican Bay is such a fearful place, with prisoners kept under perpetual scrutiny

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while unable to see any other human being, a psychiatrist told a court that many were going insane.

A federal judge finally ordered reforms, as did another over Corcoran, but there is little evidence that either have become proper places even to house the worst.

Similar reports surface across America. Texas is especially bad.

Significantly, private, for-profit prisons have some of the worst records.

They often have such poor medical facilities that prisoners die from curable conditions, as Harper's magazine revealed in an exhaustive inquiry last year.

California holds more prisoners than Britain, France, Germany, and Canada combined, yet jails are still grossly overcrowded. Conditions in many southern U.S. prisons resemble some of the worst of the developing world, with prisoners sleeping on filthy floors overrun by rats.

In 1999, it was reported that 13 women at California's state-run Chowchilla female detention centre had died the previous year from negligent, or non-existent, medical care. Amnesty International reported in 1999 that male guards in several U.S. states routinely raped female prisoners.

*In a book published in 2001, *Going Up The River*, former Wall Street Journal reporter Joseph Hallinan told of visiting a prison in Alabama where chained inmates still broke boulders with sledgehammers.*

The sheriff of Phoenix, Ariz. was re-elected by loyal voters after bringing in female convict chain gangs. All this has been going on since Saddam Hussein was a young man.

It has worsened in recent years, despite a massive prison-building program that now incarcerates 2 million, the world's largest prison population.

Yet Americans have mostly ignored the disgrace of their penal system.

They became so fearful of crime, they lost consideration for the lives of criminals. Any idea of rehabilitation has been abandoned. Even when scandals over mistreatment do emerge, many say the inmates deserve it.

This does not excuse commentators such as Friedman, or the shocked, shocked, dememeanour of U.S. news anchors and commentators.

Yet the details from Iraq itself support the view that prisoner abuse in Iraq was inevitable.

At Abu Ghraib prison, the alleged main perpetrator is staff sergeant Ivan "Chip" Frederick, 37, the senior of six non-officers charged with cruelty and other mistreatment. He is a part-time military policeman called up last year for service in Baghdad — and was a prison guard for six years in Virginia.

Another reflection on the role of private enterprise in U.S. incarceration is the background of Brigadier-General Janis Karpinski, also a military police reservist in Iraq.

When she was put in command of Abu Ghraib and its thousands of Iraqi inmates last year, she had never done penal work before. In the army she was an intelligence officer and in private life, a business consultant.

Shortly before her suspension from duty she told a Florida newspaper that her prisoners were living so well, she was worried they wouldn't want to return home.

Another American living in dreamland.

Christopher Reed is a Los Angeles-based reporter who has written extensively on prison conditions in the United States.

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