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CBS' "60 Minutes" expose on killings in Afghanistan

Former aide to Powell: authorization for torture came from "the very top"

By Joanne Laurier
7 March 2006

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The CBS News program, "60 Minutes", broadcast a segment Sunday night examining the brutal deaths of two Afghan prisoners at the hands of American military jailers in December 2002. The program included the accusation that authorization for the murderous abuse came from the "very top of the United States government."

"60 Minutes" correspondent Scott Pelley interviewed retired Army Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, who was appointed chief of staff by Secretary of State Colin Powell in 2002, during George W. Bush's first administration. Willie Brand, a soldier convicted of assault and maiming in the deaths of the two prisoners, and Brand's commanding officer, Capt. Christopher Beiring, were also featured in the program.

In December 2002, two Afghan detainees, Dilawar and Habibullah, were found dead in their cells, hanging from their chains, within days of each other at the Bagram Collection Point in Afghanistan. They had been shackled by their wrists to the ceiling and severely beaten—one had been "pulpified" by blows, according to a medical examiner—by American soldiers. The Bagram facility was a clearinghouse for prisoners captured

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in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere, and by all accounts a hell-hole.

An army report said that attacks on Mr. Dilawar, a 22-year-old farmer and part-time taxi driver, were so severe that “even if he had survived, both legs would have had to be amputated.” The military also admitted that the death of Mullah Habibullah, aged about 30, was attributed to a blunt force injury, in addition to a blood clot in the lung.

Although both deaths were labeled “homicide,” an army spokesman in Afghanistan told the media that the men had died of natural causes. After an investigation, the army acknowledged the deaths were murders.

Wilkerson told “60 Minutes” the he could “smell” a cover-up and was asked by Powell to investigate how American soldiers had come to use torture.

“I was developing the picture as to how this all got started in the first place, and that alarmed me as much as the abuse itself because it looked like authorization for the abuse went to the very top of the United States government,” said Wilkerson.

President Bush’s February 2002 directive stating that the Geneva Conventions did not apply to Al Qaeda or Taliban fighters led to pervasive torture, first in Afghanistan and later at Abu Ghraib prison and elsewhere in Iraq.

Wilkerson disclosed that the directive tried to have it to both ways, ordering that the “armed forces shall continue to treat detainees humanely” but that Geneva would apply only “to the extent appropriate and consistent with military necessity.”

According to Wilkerson, the army chose to ignore the Geneva Conventions when it issued new rules for interrogation in Afghanistan and Iraq.

“That essentially says to the troops at the bottom of the rung that you have a new game,” the retired colonel told the CBS news program. “You can use

the methods that aren't in accordance with Geneva. You can use methods that are other than when you've been taught, trained and told you could use. That . . . is an invitation, a license to go beyond that, especially when you're also putting on them tremendous pressure to produce intelligence.”

Before Dilawar died, US interrogators had ascertained that he was innocent. The taxi driver had been arrested only because, according to “60 Minutes”, he was at the wrong place at the wrong time.

“And so we killed an innocent man, and that's something else that got me as I went through this, got me very concerned as to not just what we are doing to perhaps Al Qaeda or Al Qaeda-like terrorists or even insurgents when we come to Iraq, but what we're doing to innocents,” commented Wilkerson.

Remarkably, he made known that as the Abu Ghraib torture scandal was breaking, Powell “raise[d] his voice” in anger in a phone call to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

“And he essentially said, ‘Don [Rumsfeld], don't you know what you're doing to our credibility around the world, don't you know what you're doing to our image?’” reported the former Powell aide.

When “60 Minutes” asked Beiring whether anyone up the chain of army command had been aware that prisoners were being shackled with their hands overhead, he said: “Several of my leaders knew because we had them like that. You know, there was probably one or two like that in any given day. And we didn't change the procedure if someone came through whether they were a colonel or a general, we left them the same. They seen (sic) what was going on.”

Brand was also asked if army leaders knew what was going on. When told that top officers in Afghanistan General Daniel McNeill, Geneneral

Theodore Nicholas and Lieutenant Colonel Ronald Stallings denied knowing or denied outright that prisoners were being shackled overhead for 24 hours or more, Brand asserted they were lying. The three officers refused to be interviewed by “60 Minutes”.

Beiring also said that much of what was going on was kept hidden from the International Committee of the Red Cross during their inspection tours at the prison because “we didn’t want them to know.”

Brand, a young black soldier from Cincinnati who volunteered to be a guard at Bagram, seemed confused as to why, at the time of the “60 Minutes” interview, he was facing a court-martial for the deaths of Habibullah and Dilawar.

“I didn’t understand how they could do this after they had trained you to do this stuff and they turn around and say you’ve been bad; you shouldn’t have done this stuff and now they’re going to charge you with assault, maiming and ‘involuntary’ manslaughter. How can this be when they trained you to do it and they condoned it while you were doing it?” Brand asked rhetorically. “This is what we were trained to do, and this is what we did. And not only that, I was not the only one. There were many other people hitting them—and this was going on a daily basis and nothing was said about it.”

Another acceptable form of brutally controlling prisoners, Brand explained, is a knee to the common peroneal nerve in the leg, causing the victim to lose muscle control and collapse in pain.

According to CBS News, “A confidential report by the Army’s criminal investigation division accuses dozens of soldiers of abuse, including ‘slamming [a prisoner] into walls [and a] table,’ ‘forcing water into his mouth until he could not breathe,’ giving ‘kicks to the groin’ and once, according to the report, a soldier ‘threatened to rape a male detainee.’ Soldiers even earned

nicknames including ‘King of Torture’ and ‘Knee of Death.’”

However, Brand’s commanding officer, Beiring, expressed no remorse, defending the policy of torture and abuse. “They brought death upon themselves, as far as I’m concerned. They weren’t in pain. They weren’t, as far as I’m concerned—they weren’t abused. It seemed OK to me. If I was a prisoner, I would think that would probably be acceptable.” Beiring was charged with dereliction of duty, a charge that was later dropped.

Asked if he had any sympathy for Habibullah and Dilawar, Beiring replied: “Sure, I have some sympathy. I wish they were born American.”

Brand was convicted at his court martial. But rather than the 16 years in prison he was facing from the charges brought against him, he was given nothing more than a reduction in his rank. To date, only 15 soldiers have been charged in the Bagram murders, one of the worst episodes of American abuse in the so-called war on terror. The sentences range from letters of reprimand to five months in jail. No one above the rank of captain has been charged.

The airing of open accusations on one of the highest rated news programs against the Secretary of Defense for authorizing torture resulting in the deaths of detainees such as Habibullah and Dilawar, delivered by a former high-level military and government official, ought to occasion outrage, as well as calls for criminal charges to be laid.

What is actually likely to come of the revelations in the “60 Minutes” report? Given the outcomes of many similar exposures of criminal behavior by the Bush administration, it is fair to say—nothing. A quick scan of the media reveals not so much as a peep from any leading pundit, media outlet or luminary in the nominal opposition—the Democratic Party—about Wilkerson’s damning comments on “60 Minutes”. This is at a time

when support for the military aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan is at an all-time low.

While “60 Minutes” revelations were ignored, the media did not skip a beat in hailing Bush’s ludicrous pronouncements about the progress of Afghan “democracy” during the president’s maiden trip to that country. On a surprise first stop of his South Asian trip, Bush held a press conference with the head of the American puppet regime, President Hamid Karzai, during which he claimed that democracy was taking hold in Afghanistan. At the same time, the US military says that violence in the country increased by 20 percent last year.

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