

The Humiliation of Bradley Manning

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The pre-trial hearing on Pvt. Bradley Manning's court martial for leaking classified documents about U.S. government wrongdoing has turned up evidence that even Manning's Marine jailers were worried about the controversy over his degrading treatment in their custody.

It is a bitter irony that Army Pvt. Bradley Manning, whose conscience compelled him to leak evidence about the U.S. military brass ignoring evidence of torture in Iraq, was himself the victim of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment while other military officers privately took note but did nothing.

That was one of the revelations at Manning's pre-trial hearing at Ft. Meade, Maryland, on Tuesday, as Manning's defense counsel David Coombs used e-mail exchanges to show Marine officers grouching that the Marines had been left holding the bag on Manning's detention at their base in Quantico, Virginia, though he was an Army soldier.



A protester marching in support of Pvt. Bradley Manning. (Photo credit: [bradleymanning.org](#))

At Quantico, Manning, who is accused of giving hundreds of thousands of pages of classified material to WikiLeaks, was subjected to harsh treatment. He was locked in a 6-foot-by-8-foot cell for 23 hours a day and was kept naked for long periods. His incarceration led the UN Rapporteur for Torture to complain that Manning was being subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

According to the e-mail evidence, the controversy over the rough handling of Manning

prompted Quantico commander, Marine Col. Daniel Choike, to complain bitterly that not one Army officer was in the chain of blame. Choike's lament prompted an e-mail reply from his commander, Lt. Gen. George Flynn, offering assurances that Choike and Quantico would not be left "holding the bag."

However, concerns about possible repercussions from softening up Manning did little to ease the conditions that Manning faced. His Marine captors seemed eager to give him the business and make him an example to any other prospective whistleblowers. Only after a sustained public outcry was Manning transferred to the Army prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Though his treatment was less harsh there, Manning still has faced 2 ½ years of incarceration without trial and could face up to life imprisonment after a court martial into his act of conscience, i.e. releasing extensive evidence of wrongdoing by the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan and questionable foreign policies carried out by the U.S. State Department.

The release of the documents led to hundreds of news stories, including some that revealed the willful inaction of U.S. military brass when informed of torture inflicted on Iraqi prisoners held by the U.S.-backed Iraqi military.

Manning's Conscience

As a young intelligence analyst in Iraq, Pvt. Manning grew disgusted with evidence passing through his computer terminal revealing the secretive dark side of the U.S. military occupation, including this pattern of high-level disinterest in Iraqi-on-Iraqi torture, which resulted from a directive known as Frago 242, guidelines from senior Pentagon officials not to interfere with abusive treatment of Iraqi government detainees.

As the UK Guardian [reported](#) in 2010 based on the leaked documents, Frago 242 was a "fragmentary order" summarizing a complex requirement, in this case, one issued in June 2004 ordering American troops not to investigate torture violations unless they involved members of the occupying coalition led by the United States.

When alleged abuse was inflicted by Iraqis on Iraqis, "only an initial report will be made ... No further investigation will be required unless directed by HQ," the Guardian reported, adding: "Frago 242 appears to have been issued as part of the wider political effort to pass the management of security from the coalition to Iraqi hands. In effect, it means that the [Iraqi] regime has been forced to change its political constitution but allowed to retain its use of torture."

Some cases of torture were flagrant, according to the disregarded "initial" reports. For instance, the Guardian cited a log report of "a man who was detained by Iraqi soldiers in an underground bunker [and] reported that he had been subjected to the notoriously painful strappado position: with his hands tied behind his back, he was suspended from the ceiling by his wrists.

"The soldiers had then whipped him with plastic piping and used electric drills on him. The log records that the man was treated by US medics; the paperwork was sent through the necessary channels; but yet again, no investigation was required. ...

“Hundreds of the leaked war logs reflect the fertile imagination of the torturer faced with the entirely helpless victim – bound, gagged, blindfolded and isolated – who is whipped by men in uniforms using wire cables, metal rods, rubber hoses, wooden stakes, TV antennae, plastic water pipes, engine fan belts or chains.

“At the torturer’s whim, the logs reveal, the victim can be hung by his wrists or by his ankles; knotted up in stress positions; sexually molested or raped; tormented with hot peppers, cigarettes, acid, pliers or boiling water – and always with little fear of retribution since, far more often than not, if the Iraqi official is assaulting an Iraqi civilian, no further investigation will be required.

“Most of the victims are young men, but there are also logs which record serious and sexual assaults on women; on young people, including a boy of 16 who was hung from the ceiling and beaten; the old and vulnerable, including a disabled man whose damaged leg was deliberately attacked. The logs identify perpetrators from every corner of the Iraqi security apparatus – soldiers, police officers, prison guards, border enforcement patrols.

“There is no question of the coalition forces not knowing that their Iraqi comrades are doing this: the leaked war logs are the internal records of those forces. There is no question of the allegations all being false. Some clearly are, but most are supported by medical evidence and some involve incidents that were witnessed directly by coalition forces.”

Possessing such evidence – and knowing that the U.S. high command was systematically ignoring these and other crimes – Manning was driven by a sense of morality to get the evidence to the American people and to the world.

Punishing Morality

For his act of conscience, Manning has become the subject of harsh incarceration himself, as some U.S. pundits and even members of Congress have called for his execution as a traitor. At minimum, however, he has been made an example to anyone else tempted to tell hard truths.

Many in Official Washington find nothing wrong with humiliating Manning with forced nudity and breaking down his psychiatric health through prolonged isolation. After all, they say, his release of classified information might have put the lives of some U.S. allies at risk (although there is no known evidence to support that concern).

There also are legal constraints upon the United States dishing out particularly nasty treatment to Pvt. Manning. Cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of prisoners is expressly banned by the UN Convention Against Torture, which was signed by President Ronald Reagan in 1988 and ratified by the Senate in 1994.

And there are no exceptions for “wartime” whistleblowers like Manning. Here’s what the Convention says: “No exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat or war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture” and “an order from a superior officer or a public authority may not be invoked as a justification of torture” (Art. 2 (2-3)).”

Personally, when I attended the Tuesday proceeding, I dreaded sitting through another “pre-trial hearing,” having been bored stiff at earlier sessions. But it was a welcome surprise to witness first-hand proof that military courts can still hold orderly proceedings bereft (on

Tuesday, at least) of “command influence.”

Most illuminating at Tuesday’s hearing was the central fact that the virtually indestructible nature of e-mail facilitates the kind of documentary evidence that lawyers lust after – whether they be attorneys, FBI investigators or just plain folks fed up with lies and faux history.

To the Marine Corps’ credit, I suppose, there was no evidence at the hearing that anyone had tried to expunge the e-mail correspondence revealing the fears about being left “holding the bag” on the harsh treatment of Manning.

E-Mail vs. Petraeus

So the availability of e-mail is the major new reality playing out in several major ways. As we have seen, former Gen. David Petraeus is a notable recent victim of the truth that can turn up in e-mail.

I used to call him “Petraeus ex Machina” for the faux-success of the celebrated “surge” in Iraq, which cost almost 1,000 additional U.S. troops dead (and many more Iraqis) to buy a “decent interval” for George W. Bush and Dick Cheney to get out of town without a clear-cut military defeat hung around their necks.

As it turned out, “Petraeus ex Machina,” after a little more than a year as CIA director, was undone in a sex scandal exposed by the modern “machine” of e-mail.

More to the point, the torrent of e-mail and the “Collateral Murder” video that Manning now acknowledges giving to WikiLeaks as a matter of conscience were, of course, highly illuminating to students of real history. And the e-mails (and State Department cables) also were rather unflattering regarding the aims of U.S. policy and military actions around the globe.

So how did the White House, the State Department and military brass respond? There was a strongly felt need to make an object lesson of Bradley Manning to show what happens to people whose conscience prompts them to expose deceit and serious wrongdoing, especially through official documents that can’t be denied or spun.

In Manning’s case, he was delivered to the Marines, famous for their hard-headed determination to follow orders and to get the job done. So, his jailers took Manning’s clothes away and made him stand naked, supposedly out of concern that otherwise he might be “a risk to himself.” To further “protect” him, he was kept in a 23-hour lockdown in a tiny cell.

The treatment of Manning at Quantico was too much for State Department spokesman P. J. Crowley, a 26-year Air Force veteran and former colonel. Crowley was of the old school on the treatment of prisoners; his father, a B-17 pilot spent two years in a German POW camp.

On March 10, 2011, Crowley went public, telling an audience that Manning was being “mistreated” by the Defense Department; Crowley branded Manning’s treatment “ridiculous and counterproductive and stupid.”

Three days later, Crowley resigned with this parting shot: “The exercise of power in today’s challenging times and relentless media environment must be prudent and consistent with our laws and values.”

At Ft. Meade, the pre-trial hearings are continuing, including testimony about how the advice of health professionals regarding Manning was disregarded by the Marine officers and his jailers at Quantico. Later this week, Manning himself is expected to take the stand.

Again, the fair and orderly manner in which Tuesday's hearing was conducted was a reassuring sign that not everyone is prepared to cave before "command influence." The judge, Col. Denise Lind, upon whom all depends, listened attentively and asked several good questions at the end.

Let's hope the kangaroos can be kept at bay.

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