

J'accuse

by

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Ten years have passed since American soldiers tortured Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib and proudly photographed themselves in the act. The following year those pictures became public and triggered an international scandal whose consequences are being felt to this day.

Worse than the torture itself was the deftly orchestrated campaign of the US government to assign blame solely to the low-ranking soldiers at the prison itself. Supposedly Chip Frederick, Charles Graner and Lynndie England acted on their own initiative, not under orders. No officer was ever punished for Abu Ghraib.

I have a special relationship to Abu Ghraib because prior to his military service, the ring-leader of the torturers, Sergeant Chip Frederick, had been a sergeant at the prison in which I am currently incarcerated: Buckingham Correctional Center in Dillwyn, Virginia. His accomplice at Abu Ghraib, Charles Graner, had been a guard at a Pennsylvania prison prior to his military service, too.

Because I am so closely acquainted with the world view, training and professional history of Sergeant Frederick, I can confirm the plausibility of the US government's subsequent assertion that no one directly ordered him and his accomplices to commit acts of torture. In fact, it was simply not necessary to give Frederick such an order. What the night shift at Abu Ghraib did really was no more than a slightly exaggerated version of standard operating procedures at a typical civilian prison in the United States. In essence, I myself have experienced everything that happened at Abu Ghraib during the 27 years of my own incarceration.

Item 1: Lynndie England and her famous dog leash, with which she led around bound and half-naked prisoners. These dog leashes for humans are standard equipment in every disciplinary segregation unit (the "hole"), of which every correctional center has at least one. Whenever an inmate leaves his cell, he must be handcuffed and shackled, after which the dog leash is attached to the handcuffs behind his back. If he is being taken to the shower cage, the only thing he wears besides his chains and the leash is his underwear--much as in the photos from Abu Ghraib.

I know all this from personal experience because in the fall of 2004 I myself spent

six weeks in a disciplinary segregation unit. Virginia's newspaper of record, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, had just published a positive review of my second book about prison reform, and for this attack on the regime I was literally put on the leash.

Item 2: Naked Iraqis who were forced to build human pyramids. While all American prisons regularly conduct strip searches, including some in groups, I want to tell you about a special experience. About four years ago we inmates were led to the prison gym in groups of twelve, accompanied by an enormous German shepherd that barked hysterically. (These attack dogs can also be seen in many of the photos from Abu Ghraib.) In the gym we had to undress completely and stand in a circle. Then we were surrounded by a second circle of big guards wearing black uniforms. Next we inmates had to perform a naked dance, always moving in unison: Turn to the inside, bend over, spread the cheeks, stand up, show the soles of the feet, turn to the outside, with the right hand pull the penis to the right, with the left hand pull the testicles to the left, lift both arms, open the mouth, wiggle the tongue. Throughout all this we were recorded on video and the attack dog outside barked hysterically, as if someone were torturing it.

Item 3: Threat of electrocution. At Abu Ghraib inmates were placed on wooden boxes and hooded while electric wires were attached to their hands. This was not done to me. But for two-and-a-half-years, from January 1987 to July 1989, I was under direct threats of execution in the electric chair. Even my own attorneys told me that at most they could delay my death; I would definitely be executed. And I believed them, I was a "dead man walking." In the end I "only" got life, but in the US this amounts to capital punishment on the installment plan. I am supposed to spend the rest of my life, until death, behind bars: an existence without meaning or purpose, without friendship or love, without hope. In the United States many now boast that this punishment is much crueler than a quick, painless death by lethal injection. Which is true.

I want to emphasize that all three examples above are not exceptional but commonplace in America. An estimated 70,000 inmates are housed in disciplinary segregation units throughout the country, nearly all prisoners must perform naked dances for guards at some point, and approximately 140,000 lifers wait hopelessly for death. So, from the point of view of former Sergeant Chip Frederick of Buckingham Correctional Center --"my" prison-- it was perfectly reasonable to continue in the same vein in Iraq: leading humans around on dog leashes, degrading them sexually, and threatening them with death. Abu Ghraib was not an

isolated case, but a symptom of a systemic problem affecting all of the 2.4 million prisoners in the United States.

With me there is the additional problem that I simply do not deserve this inhumane treatment. My case is fairly well known, and anyone can form his own opinion, we still have freedom of thought. But there are two central facts that are beyond doubt or question:

- In 2009 the Virginia Department of Forensic Sciences released the results of DNA tests, according to which not a single drop of my blood was found at the crime scene. That is truly remarkable, since I supposedly cut my hand twice with the knife while committing this especially brutal double murder.
But there is more: Eleven blood samples were found at the scene of the crime which definitely did not belong to me. The identify of the person who left this blood could not be determined. However, someone other than me definitely did bleed at the crime scene, and that fact cannot be reconciled with the prosecution's theory of the case and the jury's verdict, according to which I was the sole perpetrator.
- In 2011 the original investigator in this case, Chuck Reid, said in a TV interview that in 1985 the FBI had produced a "profile," according to which the double murder had been committed by a female who was acquainted with the victims. I am male and only met the victims once, for about twenty minutes.
Of course the prosecution suppressed this "profile"; we heard of it for the first time in 2011, twenty-six years later. And of course the local sheriff's department and the FBI denied our FOIA-requests for the profile.

I repeat: There can be no doubt or question about these two facts. Naturally one can interpret them in different ways, and everyone has a right to his own opinion. But what is not a matter of opinion is this: In light of the DNA test results and the suppressed FBI "profile," my conviction no longer meets the "Reasonable doubt" standard. There are reasonable doubts about my guilt. So I am being unjustly and illegally led around on dog leashes, forced to dance naked, and threatened with capital punishment on the installment plan.

Hence this "J'accuse!". President Barack Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry, Attorney General Eric Holder, Ambassador Philip Murphy -- I accuse you of violating my rights and denying me justice. I am a human being; free me!

You claimed and promised that during your term of office, there would be no more scandals like Abu Ghraib. I admit: I am only a single person, not a whole prison full, as in Iraq. But in essence my case is no different. And this time it is not the Bush administration that is responsible, but you!

The DNA test and the FBI "profile" came to light during your administration, in 2009 and 2011. Nevertheless I remain incarcerated, and your FBI -- which is directly under your authority! -- refuses to give us the "profile" that has been suppressed since 1985. Just like your predecessors you are treating me like an Iraqi without rights. J'accuse! Give us the "profile" and give me my freedom!

I also turn to Berlin and ask -- no, plead and cry for help:

- Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU), you told one of my supporters that you think of me every day.
- Justice Minister Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger (FDP), you sent me a particularly kind Christmas letter.
- Chancellor candidate Katrin Goring-Eckardt (Green Party), you wrote me several times very compassionately after reading my eighth book.
- President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz (SPD), you directly intervened on my behalf with Virginia's Governor.
- Chancellor candidate Gregor Gysi (Left Party), you wrote me several times personally.
- Members of Parliament Christoph Straesser (SPD), Peter Beyer (CDU), Volker Beck (Green Party), and Human Rights Commissioner Markus Loening (FDP) -- each of you has fought for me in different ways, in part for years and very extensively.

I thank all of you very much. I know that no one owes me anything, I have no right to make any demands, and I am not doing so now. But I ask you: Help me, rescue me! When President Barack Obama comes to Berlin in June, please help to reach my freedom. I am human! And I am a German, one of you, one of us. Bring me home!