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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The 'Good Germans' Among Us

By FRANK RICH

“BUSH lies” doesn’t cut it anymore. It’s time to confront the darker reality that we are lying to ourselves.

Ten days ago The Times unearthed yet another round of [secret Department of Justice memos](#) countenancing torture. President Bush gave his [standard response](#): “This government does not torture people.” Of course, it all depends on what the meaning of “torture” is. The whole point of these memos is to repeatedly recalibrate the definition so Mr. Bush can keep pleading innocent.

By any legal standards except those rubber-stamped by Alberto Gonzales, we are practicing torture, and we have known we are doing so ever since photographic proof emerged from Abu Ghraib more than three years ago. As Andrew Sullivan, once a Bush cheerleader, [observed last weekend](#) in The Sunday Times of London, America’s “enhanced interrogation” techniques have a grotesque provenance: “Verschärfte Vernehmung, enhanced or intensified interrogation, was the exact term innovated by the Gestapo to describe what became known as the ‘third degree.’ It left no marks. It included hypothermia, stress positions and long-time sleep deprivation.”

Still, the drill remains the same. The administration gives its alibi (Abu Ghraib was just a few bad apples). A few members of Congress squawk. The debate is labeled “politics.” We turn the page.

There has been scarcely more response to the similarly recurrent story of apparent war crimes committed by our contractors in Iraq. Call me cynical, but when Laura Bush [spoke up last week](#) about the human rights atrocities in Burma, it seemed less an act of selfless humanitarianism than another administration maneuver to change the subject from its own abuses.

As Mrs. Bush spoke, two women, both Armenian Christians, [were gunned down in Baghdad](#) by contractors underwritten by American taxpayers. On this matter, the White House has been silent. That incident followed the [Sept. 16 massacre](#) in Baghdad’s Nisour Square, where 17 Iraqis were killed by security forces from Blackwater USA, which had [already been implicated](#) in nearly 200 other shooting incidents since 2005. There has been no accountability. The State Department, Blackwater’s sugar daddy for most of its [billion dollars in contracts](#), won’t even [share its investigative findings](#) with the United States military and the Iraqi government, both of which have [deemed the killings criminal](#).

The gunmen who mowed down the two Christian women worked for a Dubai-based company managed by Australians, registered in Singapore and enlisted as a subcontractor by an American contractor headquartered in North Carolina. This is a plot out of “Syriana” by way of “Chinatown.” There will be no trial. We will never find out what happened. A new bill [passed by the House](#) to regulate contractor behavior will have little effect, even if it becomes law in its current form.

We can continue to blame the Bush administration for the horrors of Iraq — and should. Paul Bremer, our post-invasion viceroy and the [recipient](#) of a Presidential Medal of Freedom for his efforts, [issued the order](#) that allows contractors to elude Iraqi law, a folly second only to his disbanding of the Iraqi Army. But we must also examine our own responsibility for the hideous acts committed in our name in a war where we have now fought longer than we did in the one that put *Verschärft* Vernehmung on the map.

I have always maintained that the American public was the least culpable of the players during the run-up to Iraq. The war was sold by a brilliant and fear-fueled White House propaganda campaign designed to stampede a nation still shellshocked by 9/11. Both Congress and the press — the powerful institutions that should have provided the checks, balances and due diligence of the administration's case — failed to do their job. Had they done so, more Americans might have raised more objections. This perfect storm of democratic failure began at the top.

As the war has dragged on, it is hard to give Americans en masse a pass. We are too slow to notice, let alone protest, the calamities that have followed the original sin.

In April 2004, Stars and Stripes [first reported](#) that our troops were using makeshift vehicle armor fashioned out of sandbags, yet when a soldier [complained](#) to Donald Rumsfeld at a town meeting in Kuwait eight months later, he was successfully pilloried by the right. Proper armor procurement lagged for months more to come. Not until early this year, four years after the war's first casualties, did [a Washington Post investigation](#) finally focus the country's attention on the shoddy treatment of veterans, many of them victims of inadequate armor, at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and other military hospitals.

We first learned of the use of contractors as mercenaries when four Blackwater employees were [strung up](#) in Falluja in March 2004, just weeks before the [first torture photos](#) emerged from Abu Ghraib. We asked few questions. When [reports surfaced](#) early this summer that our contractors in Iraq (180,000, of whom [some 48,000](#) are believed to be security personnel) now outnumber our postsurge troop strength, we yawned. Contractor casualties and contractor-inflicted casualties are kept off the books.

It was always the White House's plan to coax us into a blissful ignorance about the war. Part of this was achieved with the usual Bush-Cheney secretiveness, from the torture memos to the prohibition of photos of military coffins. But the administration also invited our passive complicity by requiring no shared sacrifice. A country that knows there's no such thing as a free lunch was all too easily persuaded there could be a free war.

Instead of taxing us for Iraq, the White House bought us off with tax cuts. Instead of mobilizing the needed troops, it kept a draft off the table by quietly purchasing its auxiliary army of contractors to finesse the overstretched military's holes. With the war's entire weight falling on a small voluntary force, amounting to less than 1 percent of the population, the rest of us were free to look the other way at whatever went down in Iraq.

We ignored the contractor scandal to our own peril. Ever since Falluja this auxiliary army has been a leading indicator of every element of the war's failure: not only our inadequate troop strength but also our alienation of Iraqi hearts and minds and our rampant outsourcing to contractors rife with Bush-Cheney cronies and campaign contributors. Contractors remain a bellwether of the war's progress today. When Blackwater was

[briefly suspended](#) after the Nisour Square catastrophe, American diplomats were flatly forbidden from leaving the fortified Green Zone. So much for the surge's great "success" in bringing security to Baghdad.

Last week Paul Rieckhoff, an Iraq war combat veteran who directs [Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America](#), sketched for me the apocalypse to come. Should Baghdad implode, our contractors, not having to answer to the military chain of command, can simply "drop their guns and go home." Vulnerable American troops could be deserted by those "who deliver their bullets and beans."

This potential scenario is just one example of why it's in our national self-interest to attend to Iraq policy the White House counts on us to ignore. Our national character is on the line too. The extralegal contractors are both a slap at the sovereignty of the self-governing Iraq we supposedly support and an insult to those in uniform receiving as little as [one-sixth the pay](#). Yet it took mass death in Nisour Square to fix even our fleeting attention on this long-metastasizing cancer in our battle plan.

Similarly, it took until December 2005, two and a half years after "Mission Accomplished," for Mr. Bush to feel sufficient public pressure to [acknowledge](#) the large number of Iraqi casualties in the war. Even now, despite his repeated [declaration](#) that "America will not abandon the Iraqi people," he has yet to address or intervene decisively in the tragedy of four million-plus [Iraqi refugees](#), a disproportionate number of them children. He feels no pressure from the American public to do so, but hey, he pays lip service to Darfur.

Our moral trajectory over the Bush years could not be better dramatized than it was by a reunion of an elite group of two dozen World War II veterans in Washington this month. They were participants in a top-secret operation to interrogate some 4,000 Nazi prisoners of war. Until now, they have kept silent, but America's recent record prompted them to [talk to The Washington Post](#).

"We got more information out of a German general with a game of chess or Ping-Pong than they do today, with their torture," said Henry Kolm, 90, an M.I.T. physicist whose interrogation of Rudolf Hess, Hitler's deputy, took place over a chessboard. George Frenkel, 87, recalled that he "never laid hands on anyone" in his many interrogations, adding, "I'm proud to say I never compromised my humanity."

Our humanity has been compromised by those who use Gestapo tactics in our war. The longer we stand idly by while they do so, the more we resemble those "good Germans" who professed ignorance of their own Gestapo. It's up to us to wake up our somnambulant Congress to challenge administration policy every day. Let the war's last supporters filibuster all night if they want to. There is nothing left to lose except whatever remains of our country's good name.

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