

The re-making of the “noble” soldier: A case study of coalition governments’ response to the Abu Ghraib scandal

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Abstract

Media reports about widespread abuse of Iraqi prisoners by US soldiers at Abu Ghraib prompted widespread criticism of the Coalition of the Willing’s use of military engagement to fight terrorism. This paper will utilise a qualitative discursive analysis to investigate the discursive strategies used by the US and Australian government to respond to the Abu Ghraib scandal in the media. I will argue that one of the more successful discursive strategies used by ‘Coalition’ governments was to separate the acts of brutality from the overall representation of the ‘moral’ need for military engagement in Iraq. However, the paper will illustrate that this discursive separation meant that Coalition governments re-presented once “heroic” American soldiers similarly to the terrorist “others” so derided in the media.

Introduction

From Osama bin Laden, to Bali’s “smiling assassin” (Amrozi bin Nurhasyim), both media and government representations of the terrorist are marked by total incomprehensibility of their actions. The sense of complete ideological and moral difference to ‘us’ has framed representations of the terrorist as a source of post-September 11 insecurity. Within a discourse of post-September 11 insecurity, government have argued that the global threat of terrorism would threaten the domestic security of Western nations. As part of the Coalition of the Willing, Australia’s participation in military action in Iraq and Afghanistan has been justified as an attempt to deter the possibility of an attack on Australian soil, and the importation of fundamentalist principles to “home-grown” terrorists (National Security, 2004). In translating these global actions to a local understanding, the Australian government has taken cues from an overall representation of the exceptional moral and political authority of the Coalition of the Willing to forcefully impose democratic virtues onto “rogue” nations. Maintaining hegemony over the representation of terrorism allows government discourse to legitimise its responses to threat. This has been particularly important in Australian government discourse, where the terrorist threat has been centred on imminent danger, rather than actual events of terrorism.

The Coalition of the Willing’s consistently maintained discourse of the sources of, and responses to, post-September 11 insecurity was disrupted in 2004 by a series of disturbing photographs of American soldiers recording their physical and psychological abuse of numerous Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The Abu Ghraib scandal exposed governments engaged with the Coalition

of the Willing to criticism about the moral necessity of military action in Iraq. This paper will investigate the way in which Coalition governments—in particular, the United States and Australia—responded to the Abu Ghraib scandal in the media. I will argue one of the more successful discursive strategies utilised by both governments was to isolate the “unworkable” images of the Abu Ghraib soldiers from the representation of the patriotic virtue of a nation fighting a “noble” war with “moral” soldiers. I will illustrate that both US and Australian governments positioned the Abu Ghraib soldiers as the others or enemies to the ideological principles governing Coalition work in Iraq; a label once given only to those seen as terrorists. More broadly, this government discourse built on a framework of national pride and moral military action, where even unethical action by the military could be excused in the context of post-September 11 insecurity. To do this the paper utilises a qualitative discursive analysis of taken from a much larger project examining government communication and newspaper reportage from 2001 to 2008 based around specific discursive themes related to the “post-September 11 insecurity.” Given the restrictions of a short paper, I will only focus on the analysis of government communication, rather than its interaction with media reportage.

Representations of the terrorist other

While building democratic principles may well have been the ambition for military personnel working in Iraq, the positive representation of military action was also an important discursive strategy to continually re-direct criticism of the Coalition of the Willing in Iraq. In an ideologically driven debate—such as the justification for going to war—a government may utilise discursive frameworks of the exceptional moral authority of governments and their personnel to create an atmosphere permissive of violent action. This avoids discursive recognition of similarities between government violence and the violence of “others” that would reduce the moral justification of their actions. This is important because it allows government authorities to secure ‘arguments’ for both the legitimacy of their actions and their political and cultural authority to initiate those actions. Thus, government discourse situated a representation of Coalition soldiers as noble fighters endowed with the responsibility of bringing democracy to the far regions of the globe. In opposition to the image of the terrorist other, the imagery of soldiers fighting for “our” ideological principles is important because it suggests the notion of shared beliefs within constructs of nationhood

Initial theoretical conceptions of otherness must be attributed to post-colonial theory. Gayatri Spivak describes the Othering process in Lacanian terms, suggesting the other as a crucial aspect of locating the self and in defining what is normal (Spivak, 1988, p. 119). In post-colonial theory, this can refer to the colonised others who are marginalised by imperial discourse and become the focus of anticipated mastery through the identification of their difference (in Ashcroft et al, 2000, p. 170). Edward Said’s conception of Orientalism also illustrates how government and some media utilise themes of otherness within administrative discourse to further generalised Eurocentric prejudices about “the East” (See Said, 1978). More recently, the term has been used by theorists to suggest the ways in which cultural products are used to stereotype representation of Islam (See Ali, 2003; Karim, 2002; Said 1980).

In a post-September 11 context, the definition of an enemy as the other has become complex in an era where the enemy is seemingly unbound by notions of ethnicity, citizenship or religious persuasion. The otherness of terrorism is therefore situated around the threat they place to the particular ways of life that citizenship is meant to guarantee. Terrorists, by the very nature of their activities, reject the political, social and legal dominion of citizenship within a discourse of national identity. This is because their acts are represented as being directed against the structure and legitimacy of particular Western national cultures and people. As a terrorist does not “play by the rules,” the rights given to civilians are altered for a terrorist. The politicisation of this discourse is evident when a suspect of terrorism is not afforded the rights of a civilian but instead assigned the illegitimacy of being an “unlawful combatant”. In this regard, the signification of the terrorist other has become powerful enough to dictate new understanding of the ways in which national culture should be protected.

The context of post-September 11 “insecurity” has meant that local anxieties as diverse as national security, citizenship rights and refugee intake have been implicated in discussion of global responses to terrorism. As Harindranath (2010, p. 2) suggests, discourses about “Anti-terrorism . . . has displayed both disparate and overlapping concerns that reflect both a common project against terrorism as a globally present threat to democracy and national concerns that manifest anxieties about regional security, anti-terror laws and the challenge of multi-ethnic and multi-religious populaces”. What this suggests is that the dominance of a discourse about a global “war on terror” has had repercussions in Australia through involvement in military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq as part of the Coalition of the Willing; however, this involvement has been justified through localised understandings of the domestic threat of terror. Despite the fact that a terror attack has never occurred on Australian soil in the post-September 11 era, the concerns about global terror have had local repercussions symbolically. For example, Australia’s traditional cultural (and mediated) fears about uncontrolled immigration, refugee boats and multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities became re-framed as contributing to possible “home-grown terror” risks. Examples such as the arrest of Australian “terror” suspects David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib and the two Bali bombings seemingly confirmed these new fears (See Williams, 2002; Kampmark, 2003). The post-September 11 era ushered in a new understanding of globally linked, local threats from enemies that were no longer defined as distant others.

Thus, representation of the terrorist other as an enemy has become specifically constitutive of understandings of nationhood. This understanding of terrorism has placed greater importance on the politics of citizenship by defining and scrutinising the actions of “true citizens” against a ubiquitous enemy. When potential terrorists are described, it is to illustrate how different they are to true citizens. This idea of citizenship is based on categories of inclusive and exclusive rights. It is based on the notion of belonging to something when others do not, and the benefits and protections that this may bring. Otherness refers meaning back to these discursive constructions of nationhood, by suggesting acts of terrorism within a system of opposition to constructed national ideals. This framework situates acts of terrorism and their perpetrators as a threat not only to a citizen’s life, but also to the maintenance of national ideals and community. This is because the representation of the terrorist is based on their violent repudiation of the ideals that construct a sense of nationhood. As US president George Bush (2001) argued, the terrorist threat is not simply violent, but ideological: “This new enemy seeks to destroy our freedom and impose its views. We

value life; the terrorists ruthlessly destroy it . . . We wage a war to save civilization, itself.” This is seen as the most dangerous ‘act’ of terrorism because it attempts to dismantle a political and cultural status quo that is revered as a national and cultural identity.

This referral to otherness to situate understanding of terrorism is important because it allows government authorities to justify their use of violence as a form of protection of the nation. Therefore, any negative consequences of the war on terror are thus seen as aberrational in the context of the noble work of the Coalition building democratic principles within ‘rogue’ nations. It is the idea that these nationalistic constructions are worth dying for that makes soldiers seem the unassailable ambassadors of national identity. Military personnel, ground soldiers in particular, are seen as the heroic patriots who risk their own lives for the security and transferral of a nation’s exceptional ideological principles. Government discourses about military action often suggest the possibility of the soldier’s “ultimate sacrifice” on behalf of the nation, inscribing this type of fatality with a kind of moral purity. As Anderson suggests, the soldier’s sacrifice is seen as the ultimate confirmation of the worth and importance of the nation (1991, p. 144). These somewhat nostalgic descriptions have afforded a faultless quality to the image of the soldier. For example, Douglas MacArthur’s description of the American soldier illustrates this idea of moral purity:

I regarded him [the American man at arms] as one of the world’s noblest figures; not only as one of the finest military characters, but also as one of the most stainless. He belongs to posterity as the instructor of future generations in the principles of liberty and freedom. (Cited in Anderson, 1991, p. 10).

This particular description shows that representations of the soldier are not just reflections of the people that serve in the military, but also particularly powerful conceptions of the constitution of national identity.

Anderson (1991, p. 43) has suggested the image of the noble soldier is historically linked to ideas of the nation’s unified ideology and spirit. The imagery of soldiers fighting for “our” ideological principles is important because it suggests the notion of shared beliefs within constructs of nationhood. For example, former Prime Minister Howard was particularly enthusiastic about equating images of the Australian “digger” with his representation of nationalistic values such as “mateship” and a “fair go” (See Das, 2005). Nonetheless, the consistent representation of a moral war executed by noble soldiers by the Coalition of the Willing was disrupted by the photographic evidence of abuse at Abu Ghraib. With those photos came a torrent of criticism that threatened to undermine the very foundations of the discourse through which the Coalition of the Willing maintained their justification for already controversial military engagement in Iraq. The problematic aspect of the scandal was that the seemingly noble soldier was seen to be perversely indulging in the very behaviour that had been represented as the domain of the terrorist other. If the behaviour of the very bastions of national ideological principle could not be distinguished from the terrorist other, how could a war justified by the exceptional moral principles of the Coalition of the Willing continue?

‘Coalition’ governments’ response to Abu Ghraib

The first images of Abu Ghraib were released by *CBS News* and *New Yorker* magazine in April 2004, showing evidence of abuse that had been occurring at the military prison since October 2003 (See Hersh, 2004). The photos showed American soldiers involved in systematic physical and psychological abuse of numerous Iraqi detainees. Many of the photographs showed naked Iraqi detainees being humiliated in various ways, for example by being forced to wear women’s underwear. There were also disturbing depictions of guards using military dogs to intimidate detainees, positioning of naked detainees into simulated sexual poses, images of beatings, as well as images of grinning soldiers posing next to deceased Iraqis. For the Australian government trying to justify its involvement and alliance with the US on moral grounds, the photos were particularly damaging to the credibility of its actions. The representation of the Australian soldier’s (and the nation’s) ethos of mateship was mismatched with the representations of the unethical Abu Ghraib soldier. But more broadly, the images also created a schism in government representation of Australian soldiers helping ‘our mate’ build national principles of democracy in Iraq. This national context for involvement in global military action became problematic in that the actions at Abu Ghraib contradicted the exceptional moral authority referred to by government authorities in what now looked like violent and immoral action in Iraq.

Apart from the condemnation that the images of abuse warranted in the media, the Abu Ghraib scandal also presented an ideological schism for the US government’s discourses understood through the exceptional moral purity of Coalition soldiers liberating Iraq. This schism was further underlined by the location of the abuses. The pictures of abuse came from the same location that Coalition authorities claimed had been at the centre of Saddam Hussein’s atrocities against Iraqi citizens (Abu Ghraib, 2010). In the face of deep-seated cultural belief, the photos of the noble American soldier revelling in the abuse of prisoners presented a sudden paradox in the government verbiage. Thus the ‘shocking’ aspect of the scandal was not just the abuse the photos contained, but also the sudden slippage in what seemed an unambiguous cultural conviction. As Thomas Friedman (2004) argued, with the discovery of the photos, Americans were “in danger of losing something much more important than just the war on Iraq. We [Americans] are in danger of losing America as an instrument of moral authority and inspiration in the world.”

In responding to the events of Abu Ghraib, US government authorities found that previous discourses representing the military war on terror were being increasingly scrutinised. Government authorities were forced to create new discursive responses to combat the effects of the derogatory images on the representation of the military war on terror. These responses were nonetheless hinged on frameworks of exception given the need for government communication to seem consistent and united. One of the more successful discursive techniques used by US government authorities to respond to the Abu Ghraib scandal involved isolating the photographs and the acts they depict, from any interference that might have resulted to maintenance of the representation of a “just” war (Danner, 2005, p. 40).

The initial discursive strategy of the Australian and American governments was to distinguish the abuses committed at Abu Ghraib from the atrocities that Saddam Hussein would have committed if

the Coalition of the Willing had not liberated Iraq. As the Prime Minister Howard (2004a) argued, the abuses at Abu Ghraib 'paled in comparison' to the treatment of prisoners under Saddam Hussein:

People who did far worse than that under Saddam Hussein were promoted, they weren't court marshalled. They were lauded, they were encouraged with an instrument of state policy to do far worse than to murder people and not just to intimidate them, but to actually torture them and mutilate them and kill them. They weren't court marshalled, they were applauded.

Howard's comment reflects the systems of opposition that situate one nation's actions as superior to their 'others'. Despite indulging in the behaviour so derided in Hussein, these "exceptional actions in exceptional circumstances" maintain the moral context of the Coalition's presence in Iraq. American government responses could therefore argue that the photos would upset "honourable, decent" Americans, while ignoring any discussion of the abuse of Iraqis (Best, 2004). This implies that the loss of the cultural belief of the Coalition of the Willing's exceptional morality is a far greater problem than any of the abuses committed at Abu Ghraib. For example, Prime Minister Howard initially responded to the abuses by calling them a "body blow" to the Americans (Howard, 2004a) rather than reflecting on the suffering that the abuses would have caused.

Following from this initial response, government discursive strategies situated the Abu Ghraib scandal as an aberration within the overall moral logic of government action. This was response that was taken from the US response to the photos and translated to the local context. President Bush swiftly established this government position in press conferences saying: "Their [the prisoners] treatment does not reflect the nature of the American people" (US denies, 2004). His staff reinforced his views. The White House spokesperson went on to say, "It does not represent what we stand for" and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff also said: "That is not how the American military acts" (Shock, outrage, 2004). A US Senator, Norm Coleman said "It was pretty disgusting, not what you'd expect from Americans" (Hodge, 2004). Similarly when the Australian Prime Minister John Howard was asked for his reaction to the images, he responded, "That is not the conduct that represents the attitude and the behaviour of the American military" (Howard, 2004a).

Within this discursive response, the images of the Abu Ghraib soldiers were pitted against the well established and therefore, more "true" representations of the noble soldier. Separating the Abu Ghraib soldiers' actions from the moral superiority symbolised by the work of the noble Coalition soldiers allowed both US and Australian governments to isolate the politically unworkable images. Thus the repetitive government message that "this is not what American soldiers would do" isolated Abu Ghraib soldiers from the traditional, "comfortable" imagery of the true Coalition soldier (Abuse scandal terrible, 2004). For example, in an interview for 60 Minutes reporter Dan Rather interviewed former deputy director of Coalition operations in Iraq Mark Kimmitt who said: "These are our fellow soldiers. These are the people we work with every day, and they represent us. They wear the same uniform as us, and they let their fellow soldiers down . . . this is not representative of the 150,000 soldiers that are over here . . . I'd say the same thing to the American people . . . Don't judge your army based on the actions of a few" (Leung, 2004).

This separation allowed the US government authorities to communicate a repetitive but distinct message: while 'we' may have done the crime, the crime wasn't "us." To suggest that the abuses were American would be to discredit the frameworks of exception that situated the war on terror as part of the moral actions of Western nations. Indeed, the evidence of the abuses threatened the very foundations of the discourse of post-September 11 insecurity. Equating the protection of national identity with the abuses would otherwise imply the Coalition force's similarity to the immoral 'otherness' used to describe the terrorist threat through which the war on terror was initially justified.

Thus, in both Australian and US discourse the Abu Ghraib soldier was no longer an American but also became Other. These soldiers were ideologically separated from the moral authority inherent in the description of the culture of the American military and people. While all the soldiers involved in the abuses at Abu Ghraib were American citizens trained to work in American armies, and were distinguished as American by their uniform and allegiances, their actions at Abu Ghraib denied them the moral superiority of *being* American. If discourses about the "true nature and heart of America" could not be morally wrong, then any behaviour that deviated from this discourse could not be publicly acknowledged as part of larger discourse about the morality of Coalition forces (See Shock, outrage, 2004). Thus the Abu Ghraib scandal forced government discourse to create oppositions in discourse between the actions of the Coalition of the Willing and their own military (See Hodge, 2004). Creating a moral opposition between the true American soldier and the Abu Ghraib soldier suggests that government discourse is presented as irrefutable even when their actions belie them. These oppositions present frameworks of exception that government actors use to reject any of the damaging consequences of their actions.

These oppositions were taken up by the media through portrayals of the Abu Ghraib soldiers as uneducated and low-ranking officers, whose individual characters, rather than the entrenched nature of their battalion or the orders of their superiors, allowed them to revel in such inhumanity. This was a particularly successful strategy by both governments, because it created sensational stories that the Australian and American media became distracted by. As the public faces of the scandal, Private Charles Graner and his girlfriend Private Lynndie England were deemed as ringleaders of the abuse. Details of their life were reported in the media—and used by government actors—to show the individual inhumanity of their actions. For example, Graner was described as a "sadistic" soldier who enjoyed the process of "softening" the prisoners for interrogation (Serrano, 2005). He was said to have initiated much of the sexual abuse against the prisoners and disseminated the photos as "souvenirs of the fun" (Sontag, 2004). These descriptions of Graner—as well as details of his affair with Private England—created images of a subversive individual rather than a culture of violence within his battalion. Similarly, during the court hearings before Private England's trial, government prosecutors concentrated on showing England's private life as the conduit for her adverse behaviour at Abu Ghraib. The details of her life were used as a response by government prosecutors to allegations that military investigators had sanctioned the abuses. She was allegedly repeatedly reprimanded for seeing her boyfriend when she should have been sleeping and apparently produced "sloppy" work in her role as a desk clerk (Iraq abuse case, 2004).

US and Australian coverage of the trial subsequently concentrated on the salaciously newsworthy details of England's private behaviour. During the trial, details of an alleged nude swim in her

hometown and the exposure of her breasts near the face of a sleeping former colleague were front-page news in the US and Australia (Serrano, 2005). Finally, England's pregnancy to her "partner-in-abuse," Private Graner was shown as proof of her subversive sexual indiscretions and her new Australian media title as "the trailer trash torturer who shamed the US" (Iraq abuse case, 2004; Riddell, 2004). Given previous media reportage confirming government discourse about national responses to post-September 11 insecurity, Private Lynndie England's actions at Abu Ghraib were similarly represented as damaging not only to military operations in Iraq, but also to the nationalistic principles of each of the nations making up the global Coalition forces. Simultaneously her actions excused the overall structures of military and government from scrutiny over the incident. Private England's 'individual' behaviour at Abu Ghraib was represented as betraying the well-being and prosperity of each Coalition nation's international ambitions. Her individualistic behaviour meant that the Coalition of the Willing could lose control over the discourses perpetuating its moral superiority in the war on terror, and she was therefore rejected as un-American.

Private England was presented as an aberrational soldier not only because of the abuses she participated in, but because she presented a schism in traditional descriptions of the military and government's moral authority. Private England's representation can be compared with media reportage of Private Jessica Lynch's personal life to illustrate this point (The truth, 2003). Private Lynch was the subject of media scrutiny after a controversial, media-directed effort to rescue her in Iraq. In the aftermath of the rescue, Private Lynch's media persona incorporated a small-town upbringing and her proud family's description of her noble reasoning in joining the military (The truth, 2003). This is the perfect extension of the Bush administration's paradoxical prioritisation of non-violent, moralistic roles of American forces liberating Iraq. The careful management of Private Lynch's rescue perpetuated of oft-repeated images of male Coalition soldiers fighting for the freedom of the innocent or meek. The images of a grateful Private Lynch and victorious male colleagues could be used interchangeably with established discourses of the moral coalition forces using exceptional right to violence to liberate Iraq.

In comparison, Private England's representation illustrates government discourses about the aberrant behaviour of the soldiers at Abu Ghraib. The description of the Other American soldier allowed their actions to be individualised to an extent that higher ranking military officers and indeed, the ideology of the Coalition of the Willing remained untouched in the wake of the scandal. This representation was seemingly confirmed by media reportage enamoured with the scandal of a barbaric woman. As long as the mainstream media focussed on the role England played at Abu Ghraib, less time was spent exploring the reports that the abuses were meted out on the orders of higher authorities. As Tarrant (2004) argues:

In the end, the more attention the media gives to Lynndie England, the more it distracts from the fact that there were people in charge at Abu Ghraib with far more training and responsibility than she had. Our outrage over England's behaviour diverts our attention from the real issues at hand.

Private England's representation illustrates government strategies to isolate the aberrant behaviour of the soldiers at Abu Ghraib from nationalistic tropes justifying the presence of the Coalition of the Willing in Iraq. The description of the Other American soldier allowed their actions to be

individualised to an extent that higher ranking military officers and indeed, the ideology of the Coalition of the Willing remained untouched in the wake of the scandal. This representation was seemingly confirmed by media reportage enamoured by the scandal of a “barbaric woman.” As long as the mainstream media focussed on the role England played at Abu Ghraib, less time was spent exploring the reports that the abuses were meted out on the orders of higher authorities. Within initial Australian media representation, the details of Private England’s life proved far more salient and accessible than critique of government response to the abuses at Abu Ghraib. While this might point to an impotency of media reportage around some issues, it also indicates the importance of discursive strategies for government authorities battling against alternative representations in the public sphere.

While the media reported on the “subversive” behaviour of Lynndie England, subsequent reportage also vehemently critiqued both US and Australian governments. In a story that already provided scandal and explosive imagery, the prospect of a high level conspiracy of violence created media interest that government authorities could not stem. For example, interviews and court transcripts with the accused Abu Ghraib guards suggested that the soldiers had participated in approved methods of softening the prisoners for interrogation by higher-ranking military intelligence officers. Private Ivan Frederick, a staff sergeant who was Private Graner’s superior at the prison said after pleading guilty to abuse at Abu Ghraib that “he had consulted six senior officers, ranging from captains to lieutenant-colonels, about the guards’ actions but was never told to stop” (Reid, 2005). Both American and Australian media outlets published Private Frederick’s testimony that senior officers had praised the guards’ “work,” and the defence’s claim that “Through all this [the accused] was following orders” (Reid, 2005). Media analysis was particularly interested in this theme of the soldiers following higher orders, perhaps also because of the highly saleable element of conspiracy. A leaked US military report submitted by Major-General Antonio Taguba (2004) also detailed widespread abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib, ranging from the forced simulation of sexual acts to sodomy. The legitimacy of these official reports, coupled with the explosive photographs of the abuse, allowed journalists to argue that the Abu Ghraib scandal was evidence of systemic violence within the US military.

The US government response to this more aggressive reportage was again to suggest that the abuses were perpetrated by a “few bad apples” in an otherwise glowing democracy, Rumsfeld denied any similarities with the ‘barbarism’ exhibited by their enemies (Howard, 2005). Though leaked media evidence suggested that some of the approved interrogation techniques did not meet Geneva Conventions, Rumsfeld essentially banned the use of torture to describe the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib because: “what has been charged thus far is abuse, which I believe is technically different from torture, and therefore I’m not going to address the ‘torture’ word” (in Sontag, 2004). This semantic challenge again situates understanding of the exceptional moral authority of government action to work outside the norms of legality in order to bring these norms to the “inferior” nation.

Conclusion

The Abu Ghraib images thus presented a problem for government discourse because the “terrorist others” could literally be seen as frightened, unarmed Iraqis being tortured and humiliated by a more powerful force. This paper has argued that one of the discursive strategies used by Coalition governments was to distinguish the the photographs of brutality from the overall representation of the moral need for military engagement in Iraq. This was achieved through a consistent representation of once “heroic” American soldiers as “other” to the otherwise noble aims of the war on terror. This strategy meant that the representation of Abu GHraib soldiers often mimicked that of the terrorist others used to justify the war on terror—a point not lost totally in the media. One Australian journalist went so far as to ask: “Are we all torturers now?” (Wilkinson, 2005). This article suggested that prior to Abu Ghraib, the Coalition of the Willing only presented terrorists as torturers (Wilkinson, 2005). The question posed implies that the dominant cultural discourses could no longer be impervious to the psychological and physical violence so patronisingly condemned to the Other. US writer Susan Sontag (2004) also attributed the abuses to the discourses of insecurity that justified violent responses to demonised others. Within this understanding of government discourses, Sontag argued, “the photos are us” (Sontag, 2004, 42). They are the photographic evidence of a discourse that situated a cultural acceptance of violence against others.

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