

WHO'S LANE MCCOTTER?

By Michael Ventura

May 28, 2004

Who is Lane McCotter, and what exactly was he doing in Iraq?

As of this writing, no congressional committee has asked that question, but sooner or later, they'll have to. It is a question that may bring down the Bush administration. This is why.

George W. Bush promises that all prisoners in Iraq are covered and protected by the Geneva Convention, which states (Section 1, Article 17): "No physical or mental torture, nor any other form of coercion, may be inflicted on prisoners of war to secure from them information of any kind whatever. Prisoners of war who refuse to answer may not be threatened, insulted, or exposed to unpleasant or disadvantageous treatment of any kind."

Yet someone identified by *The New York Times* (May 15) as a "senior military official" at U.S. headquarters in Baghdad says, "There are reasonable people and very intelligent people who can differ on what is authorized, what's permissible under the Geneva Convention." No there aren't. Read it again: "*No physical or mental torture, or any other form of coercion ... unpleasant or disadvantageous treatment of any kind.*" Another provision reads: "Outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment shall be prohibited at any time." There's no room for argument. The "senior military official" in Baghdad was dispensing disinformation – lying.

In that vein, it is interesting that U.S. military lawyers were excluded from determining procedures in Iraq, as the *Los Angeles Times* reported on May 14. Scott Horton, former chairman of the New York City Bar Association committee that filed a brief on Iraqi interrogations earlier this month, said that senior military lawyers "were extremely upset. They said they were being shut out of the process, and that civilian political lawyers, not the military lawyers, were writing these new rules of engagement [for interrogation]." Remember that the chief White House counsel called the Geneva accords "obsolete." The *LA Times* goes on: "The military lawyers complained that the Pentagon was 'creating an atmosphere of legal ambiguity,' Horton said. 'What's happened is not an accident. It is exactly what they [the military lawyers] were warning about a year ago.'"

Which brings us to Lane McCotter. Do a Web search on McCotter and you'll come across an article in the March 4 newsletter *The Utah Sheriff* featuring a photo taken last year of Lane McCotter giving a tour of the Abu Ghraib prison to none other than Donald Rumsfeld's right-hand man Paul Wolfowitz. So: Who's McCotter, and what was he doing in Iraq?

According to a *NY Times* report on May 8, Lane McCotter was an MP in Vietnam who eventually rose to the rank of colonel. His last Army assignment was as warden of the Army's central prison at Fort Leavenworth. In civilian life he eventually became director of the Utah Department of Corrections, a post he resigned under pressure in 1997 "after an inmate died while shackled to a restraining chair for 16 hours. The inmate, who suffered from schizophrenia, was kept naked the whole time." McCotter later became a top executive in a private prison company that ran a Sante Fe jail that was "under investigation by the Justice Department" for "unsafe conditions and lack of medical care for inmates."

Here comes the good part:

While he and his company were under investigation by the Justice Department, the department's chief, Attorney General John Ashcroft, hand-picked McCotter to "rebuild [Iraq's] criminal justice system." (*NY Times*) Inhale that: Ashcroft selected a man his own department was investigating, a man who had to leave the top corrections post in Utah or face scrutiny for what can only be called torture. And *that's* what inner-circle Republicans are so frightened of: If the prison abuse investigation gets to Ashcroft, it gets to the White House.

It would seem that McCotter was chosen not in spite of his record but because of it. It's likely that Ashcroft and Wolfowitz, and the people they report to (Rumsfeld and Bush), knew exactly who they were hiring and what was expected of him. It was McCotter who, in the parlance of *The NY Times*, "directed Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq last year and trained the guards." The guards McCotter trained did the infamous things, took the infamous photographs. What did Ashcroft say when he appointed McCotter? This: "Now all Iraqis can taste liberty in their native land, and we will help make that freedom permanent by assisting them to establish an equitable justice system based on the rule of law and standards of basic human rights." Orwell would chortle. When *The NY Times* (May 8) queried why McCotter was hired even though he was under investigation, the Justice Department didn't return the calls. Hard to blame them. What could Justice possibly say?

Twelve days later, Justice lamely told ABC News that "the department was aware of the background of the men [McCotter and John J. Armstrong, who has an even worse record]. ... The official said they were among the few who were willing to go."

The hiring of McCotter sheds more light on what Gen. Janis Karpinski, nominally in charge of Abu Ghraib, told Aaron Brown on CNN, May 10: "I don't think there was anything improper done. Because there wasn't a violation of procedure. This was something they [the guards] were instructed to do as a new procedure." A general officer in the U.S. Army said that. Those gruesome photos record a procedure the guards were trained to do. By military intelligence? By McCotter? Both? Eventually, McCotter and Ashcroft must be called to testify. Wolfowitz, too. What did he learn on McCotter's tour? If Wolfowitz knew, Rumsfeld did, but what and how much? What Rumsfeld and Ashcroft knew, Bush knew or (just as bad) should have known.

And then other pieces fall into place. *The NY Times*, May 7: Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Human Rights First all report that they complained of Iraqi prisoner maltreatment to Coalition Provisional Authority boss L. Paul Bremer III and Condoleezza Rice, who shined them on – which again takes the abuse case straight to the White House. *The LA Times*, May 9: "[T]he recently resigned, handpicked Iraqi human rights minister was quoted as saying that he notified L. Paul Bremer III, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, in November of possible prisoner abuse, 'but there was no answer.' The minister was not even allowed to visit the prisons." Bremer knew what he would see. When our top commanders in Iraq, Gens. Abizaid and Sanchez, testified to Congress on May 19 that they knew nothing of the Red Cross reports, either they were lying, or top-level civilians like Rice and Bremer kept the reports from them.

And our poor troops? The disregard for our soldiers by this administration is in some ways the greatest disgrace of all. *The NY Times*, May 9: "Army doctrine calls for a military brigade to handle about 4,000 prisoners. But a single battalion – about a third of the size of a brigade – was handling 6,000 to 7,000 prisoners at Abu Ghraib." That's what

happens when Bush refuses to commit the necessary number of troops to Iraq because it would look bad politically. The pressure on our people in uniform was horrendous. Undertrained and mal-trained, and under fire the whole time – Abu Ghraib was regularly the target of bombardments – they were ordered to do the impossible. Instead, they did the unthinkable. And it will hang over them all their lives, as it should, while the people they trusted, the people who put this system in place – Rumsfeld, Ashcroft, Bush, Cheney, Rice, Bremer – spout platitudes and avoid accountability ... so far.

The *LA Times*, May 11: "Most Arrested by 'Mistake' – Coalition Intelligence Put Numbers at 70% to 90% of Iraqi prisoners." The Red Cross, which "made 29 visits to Coalition-run prisons and camps between late March and November of last year, said it repeatedly presented its reports of mistreatment to prison commanders, U.S. military officials in Iraq and members of the Bush administration in Washington." (Why hasn't the Red Cross been called to testify?) In a separate story the same day: "US Army officials have acknowledged detaining women in hopes of persuading male relatives to provide information. ... Interrogators sometimes threatened to kill [the innocent women] detainees."

Kidnapping and threatening people's wives. Blackmail. Indiscriminate arrests. Torture. But when Rumsfeld and his generals are asked who, exactly, was in real command of Abu Ghraib, they claim not to know even that, while their so-called commander in chief claims complete ignorance of every issue in this affair.

If that's the truth, they're incompetent. If it's not, they're war criminals.

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.