

KIDS, PARENTS, PREPARE FOR THE DRAFT

By Michael Ventura

May 14, 2004

The shameful news of American torture at Abu Ghraib prison, and all its implications, has rightly dominated the media. Most Americans are shocked, shocked, do you hear, that their fellow Americans can commit torture – though I doubt such shock is shared by Vietnam vets, or anyone who's done hard time in our prisons (male or female), or people of color who've been arrested in our slums, or even a lot of people in mental hospitals. In fact, anyone who's watched TV shows like *Alias*, *La Femme Nikita*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or *Angel* knows that torture has become a staple of American prime-time entertainment. Any competent history course teaches what the U.S. cavalry did to Native Americans and what the white South did when lynching 5,000-ish African-Americans circa 1900-1950. Torture is nothing new to America, however much we protest our innocence. And the past and present history of other countries – England, France, Italy, Germany, Russia, Spain, China, Israel, Egypt, you name it – proves torture is no stranger anywhere. To be shocked that arrogant power creates situations of torture is to be shocked at an all-too-human capacity for cruelty that all human beings must guard against in themselves. Which doesn't mean that there's any excuse for it. But enough. The week that Abu Ghraib dominated the news, another item got far less airtime and ink; yet, indirectly, this item announced a change that will hit every American family.

On May 5, Bush's Pentagon announced it will keep U.S. troop strength in Iraq at 135,000 through the year 2005. Mark that as the day the United States moved inevitably toward reinstating the draft – no matter who's elected.

How and why?

Since the Reagan era, the Pentagon has claimed we can fight two full-scale wars at once in two different parts of the globe. Iraq has proved that claim false. The premise was that the U.S. could bring overwhelming force to bear against any enemy and win any war quickly. Iraq and Afghanistan have taught that beating an enemy army and actually winning a war can be two very different things. We've learned the U.S. has neither enough combat-ready troops, nor enough supplies, to fight a protracted war – even when we have complete air and weapons superiority. The Pentagon organized its forces for victory, not struggle. Now it's clear that if we can't get in and out quickly, we're in bad trouble. Iraq has proved us vulnerable, and the whole world knows it. This will inevitably require a complete revision of our military, beginning with procurement.

Not that the Bush White House was completely clueless. The *New York Times*, Jan. 29, 2003: "Under the No Child Left Behind law, which was passed more than a year ago ... many schools are only now coming to terms with a little-noticed provision in the law dealing with military recruiters. That provision requires schools that receive federal aid

to give military recruiters the names, addresses, and phone numbers of high school juniors and seniors." Maybe that's what they meant by "no child left behind."

The situation is this: As has been widely reported, we don't have enough troops to sustain the present level of involvement in Iraq for more than another year or so – not while also sustaining troop levels at the thousands of U.S. military bases around the world. We certainly don't have the personnel or materiel to handle another full-scale flare-up (much less more than one) in North Korea, Taiwan, Pakistan, Latin America, or some unexpected place. Los Angeles Times, May 6: North Korea is installing missiles that can hit our bases on Guam, Okinawa, and maybe Hawaii – a true crisis that Bush didn't want revealed until after election day (Korea already has nukes). There's every likelihood that our troops may be needed elsewhere, really needed, and needed fast.

But if Bush is re-elected, he won't give up on Iraq. And if John Kerry is elected, his stated position is now that we're there, we're obligated to stay until we can leave Iraq in a peaceful state. Kerry would enlist the UN and/or NATO in that effort. But the world has made clear that until Iraq calms down nobody's coming to our aid. Only Europe, India, China, and Russia could substantially help us. But the peoples of Europe and India won't stand for it, not as long as Iraq is such a hotbed; Russia, and especially China, enjoy the prospect of the U.S. draining its resources as they grow stronger. So we may be in Iraq for a long time.

The United States won't willingly give up its military superiority, no matter who's president. And that means there will be a draft. Especially if we suffer another 9/11.

On May 4, the very day that Bush announced the commitment of 135,000 troops in Iraq through 2005, The New York Times ran an eloquent, lengthy op-ed by William Broyles Jr., Vietnam vet, author, screenwriter, and founding editor of Texas Monthly. On moral rather than military grounds, Broyles argues for a reinstatement of the draft. (It's worth your time to hit the Web and read it yourself.) His arguments are very like what significant members of both parties have been saying for over a month: The poor shouldn't have to fight a war for SUV-drivers. "Not since the 19th century," he writes, "has America fought a war that lasted longer than a week with an all-volunteer army. ... It is simply not built for protracted major conflict. ... A strictly impartial lottery, with no deferments, can ensure that the draft intake matches military needs." Everybody gets a number. The numbers are picked out of a hat. Everyone who's picked serves.

No deferments – except, I would imagine, physical or psychological incapacity, hardship cases, or pacifism (which is very hard to prove). The talk in Congress is of a military draft plus compulsory national service for both sexes. Everybody's in. At home or overseas, in the military, military support, or domestic service. (Feminism has finally won it all: Women are being considered for the draft in backup and noncombat roles.) The question is, what does this mean for you parents and kids?

For high-school seniors and college students, it's too late to do much about your status. For healthy males, if your number comes up then only a well-documented

and religiously based pacifism will keep you out of uniform.

For middle- and high-school kids, the terrible irony is that the very ones who've worked so hard to assemble excellent résumés for college – demonstrating their intelligence, achievement, talent, athleticism, community service – have also willy-nilly established their excellent qualifications for being drafted. On the other hand, kids with documented learning disabilities, psychiatric histories, substance abuse, antisocial behavior, and criminal records are more likely to be rejected or enlisted into nonmilitary service. Gays won't be welcome either, though they, too, will need documentation. (Suddenly bigotry works for you! Life is weird.)

Parents of sixth-to-11th graders, whether boy or girl, have a lot of work to do if they don't want to see their children in the military in a few years. Documentation will be crucial. Only a fat stack of paper will keep your kid out of this war or the next. If you claim a moral commitment to nonviolence you'll have to prove it. Letters from clergy will be essential, and it'll help to have letters from counselors, teachers, shrinks, doctors. Frequent meetings with clergy, and a record of same, about what your religion teaches regarding "love your neighbor as yourself" and "thou shalt not kill." A history of medical frailties, learning disabilities, drug incidents, psychiatric problems. And the dates on all these documents, to be credible, must be well before your kid has to register. (They'll likely have to do national service either way, so don't count too hard on college.)

As usual, this will be easier for the middle class, the affluent, and the elite. But a kid is a kid, and I don't want to see any of them used, maimed, or killed; nor do I want to see them kill. The injustice of it is that precisely this segment of society – disaffected, unaffected, apolitical, uninvolved – has gotten us here. They are the voices whom politicians listen to, and they are the ones who've been safely silent. They've made their separate peace, or so they've thought, and they make their money and deepen their self-awareness in the delusion that affluence can protect them. They may have a better chance of protecting their kids, but most are about to learn what the poor know by heart:

History is not a spectator sport.

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.