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The Banality of Evil Applies to Everyone

by Jacob G. Hornberger

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One of the aspects of the Iraq War that has fascinated me the most is how CIA agents and U.S. soldiers could actually bring themselves to kill, torture, and sexually abuse Iraqis. After all, don't forget that neither the Iraqi people nor their government participated in the 9/11 attacks. The worst "crime" that any Iraqi committed against any American was resisting an unlawful invasion of his country.

Nonetheless, even though the Iraqi people were innocent of any attacks on the United States, many CIA agents and most U.S. soldiers have been able to bring themselves to kill and maim hundreds of thousands of Iraqis in an invasion and occupation of a country that never attacked the United States, and murder, torture, and sexually abuse dozens of Iraqis detainees and prisoners.

How is a government able to bring men and women to do such things to people who never did anything to harm the United States?

I'm currently reading a fascinating book entitled [Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland](#) by Christopher R. Browning. It's about a police unit from Hamburg, Germany, which was assigned the task of rounding up hundreds of Jews in villages in Poland and shooting them at point-blank range.

What makes the book interesting is that the members of the unit were not hard-core SS troops or Gestapo members but rather ordinary middle-aged German men, many of whom had regular jobs at home and were simply members of a reserve police unit.

When the German unit arrived at a Polish village called Jozefow, it soon learned the nature of its mission from its battalion commander, a 53-year old German captain, Wilhelm Trapp, who was an ordinary career policeman back home.

Trapp explained to his men that they were to search targeted homes in Jozefow for Jews, round them up, march them into the forest, and kill them by shooting them at point-blank range. Elderly Jews and infants were to be killed on the spot in their homes.

Appreciating the difficult nature of this task, Trapp offered his men the opportunity to opt out of the mission, which undoubtedly was one of the reasons that two of his subordinate officers later described him as weak and unmilitary. A few men opted out of the mission.

As the round-ups and shootings proceeded, however, more men began dropping out, unable to stomach the point-blank shootings of defenseless men, women, and children. They were accused of being cowardly and weak by their fellow soldiers who continued to do the shootings.

Most of Unit 101 continued performing their assigned task. They convinced themselves that it was okay to continue following orders because Germany was at war, the Jews were part of the enemy, and the enemy was killing Germans every day.

The Iraqi people never did anything bad to the American people. In fact, many Iraqis admired and respected the United States. Yet, CIA agents and U.S. soldiers had no moral reservations whatsoever in following orders to attack and occupy Iraq and kill and maim hundreds of thousands of Iraqis in the process.

Moreover, the CIA agents and U.S. soldiers at Abu Ghraib obviously had no moral reservations about the murder, torture, and sex abuse committed against Iraqi prisoners, notwithstanding the fact that the Iraqis, again, had never attacked the United States. The thought that Iraqi prisoners should be treated with decency and respect, especially given that they were the defenders, not the attackers, obviously never even entered the minds of the CIA agents and U.S. soldiers at Abu Ghraib.

The rationales for the killings, murders, torture, and sex abuse varied from agent to agent and soldier to soldier. Some said, "We're doing it because Saddam Hussein was about to attack the U.S. with WMDs." Others said, "We're doing it because Islam is at war against the West." Others said, "We're doing it to stop them from killing us here." Others said, "We're doing it to bring democracy to their land." Others said, "We're doing it because of what al-Qaeda did on 9/11." Others said, "We're doing it for freedom." The more honest of them said, "We're doing it because we've been ordered to do it."

Today, many U.S. officials are cavalierly claiming that the invasion and occupation of Iraq — along with the deaths and maiming of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi people — have been worth it because "democracy" has been brought to Iraq. Clearly they would not be saying the same if it had been hundreds of thousands of American soldiers and CIA agents who had been killed, maimed, and tortured instead.

Of course, this mindset of callous indifference toward Iraqi life didn't begin with the U.S. war of aggression on Iraq. Many years ago, it was also reflected by the mindset of U.S. Ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright, who announced to the world that the deaths of half-a-million Iraqi children from the U.S. and UN sanctions on Iraq had been "worth it."

With the phrase "the banality of evil," Hannah Arendt explained that the great evils of history are not executed by evil sociopaths but rather by ordinary people who meekly accept the rationales of their government and who participate in the evil under the belief that their actions are normal.

Arendt's concept applies not just to Germans, but to everyone else as well.