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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Clash of Civilizations

By MAUREEN DOWD

WASHINGTON

Testifying before the Senate yesterday, General Richard Myers admitted that we're checkmated in Iraq.

"There is no way to militarily lose in Iraq," he said, describing the generals' consensus. "There is also no way to militarily win in Iraq."

Talk about the sound of one hand clapping. And they say John Kerry is on both sides of issues.

Sounding like Mr. Kerry, General Myers summed up: "This process has to be internationalized. The U.N. has to play the governance role. That's how we're, in my view, eventually going to win."

The administration's demented quest to conquer Arab hearts and minds has dissolved in a torrent of pornography denigrating other parts of the Arab anatomy. George Bush, who swept into office on a cloud of moral umbrage, now has his own sex scandal — one with far greater implications than titillating cigar jokes.

The Bush hawks, so fixated on making the Middle East look more like America, have made America look un-American. Should we really be reduced to defending ourselves by saying at least we don't behead people?

Gripped in a "I can't look at them — I've got to look at them" state of mind, lawmakers grimly filed into private screening rooms on the Hill to check out the 1,800 grotesque images of sex, humiliation and torture.

"They're disgusting," Senator Dianne Feinstein told me. "If somebody wanted to plan a clash of civilizations, this is how they'd do it. These pictures play into every stereotype of America that Arabs have: America as debauched, America as hypocrites.

"Cheney and Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz act like they know all the answers, almost like a divine right," she said. "They don't have a divine right, and they are wrong."

After 9/11, America had the support and sympathy of the world. Now, awash in digital evidence of uncivilized behavior, America has careered into a war of civilizations. The pictures were clearly meant to use the codebook of Muslim anxieties about nudity and sexual and gender humiliation to break down the prisoners.

Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell said some photographs seemed to show Iraqi women being commanded to expose their breasts — such debasement, after a war that President Bush partly based on women's rights.

The problem, of course, is that the war in Iraq started with lies — that Saddam's W.M.D. were endangering our security and that Saddam was linked to Al Qaeda and 9/11.

In a public relations move that cheapens the heroism of soldiers, the Pentagon merged the medals for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, giving the G.W.O.T. medal, for Global War on Terrorism, in both wars to reinforce the idea that we had to invade Iraq to quell terrorism. The truth is that our invasion of Iraq spurred terrorism there and around the world.

That initial deception — and headlong rush to throw off international conventions and old alliances, and namby-pamby institutions like the U.N. and the Red Cross — led straight to the abuse of Abu Ghraib. Now the question is whether the C.I.A. tortured Al Qaeda operatives.

Officials blurred the lines to justify ideological decisions, calling every Iraqi who opposed us a "terrorist"; conducting rough interrogations, perhaps to find the nonexistent W.M.D. so they would not look foolish; rolling all opposition into one scary terrorist ball that did not require sensitivity to the Geneva Conventions or "humanitarian do-gooders," to use the phrase of Senator James Inhofe, a Republican.

Senator Fritz Hollings made it clear yesterday that Rummy has left us undermanned and undertrained in Iraq — another factor in the torture scandal. "Now, in a country of 25 million, you're trying to secure it with 135,000," he scolded Mr. Rumsfeld, adding: "We're trying to win the hearts and minds as we're killing them and torturing them." At least, he said sarcastically, Gen. William Westmoreland never asked a Vietcong general to take the town, "like we have for Falluja. We've asked the enemy general to take the town."

The hawks, who promised us garlands in Iraq, should have recalled the words of the historian Daniel Boorstin, who warned that planning for the future without a sense of history is like planting cut flowers.

E-mail: liberties@nytimes.com

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