

General Took Guantánamo Rules to Iraq for Handling of Prisoners

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When Maj. Gen. Geoffrey D. Miller arrived in Iraq last August with a team of military police and intelligence specialists, the group was confronted by chaos.

In one prison yard, a detainee was being held in a scorching hot shipping container as punishment, one member of the team recalled. An important communications antenna stood broken and unrepaired. Prisoners walked around barefoot, with sores on their feet and signs of untreated illness. Garbage was everywhere.

Perhaps most important, with the insurgency raging in Iraq, there was no effective system at the prisons for wringing intelligence from the prisoners, officials said.

"They had no rules for interrogations," a military officer who traveled to Iraq with General Miller said. "People were escaping and getting shot. We tried to offer them some very basic recommendations."

According to information from a classified interview with the senior military intelligence officer at Abu Ghraib prison, General Miller's recommendations prompted a shift in the interrogation and detention procedures there. Military intelligence officers were given greater authority in the prison, and military police guards were asked to help gather information about the detainees. Whether those changes contributed to the abuse of prisoners that grew horrifically more serious last fall is now at the center of the widening prison scandal.

General Miller's recommendations were based in large part on his command of the detention camp in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, where he won praise from the Pentagon for improving the flow of intelligence from terrorist suspects and prisoners of the Afghanistan war.

In Iraq, General Miller's team gave officers at the prisons copies of the procedures that had been developed at Guantánamo to interrogate and punish the prisoners, according to the officer who traveled with him. Computer specialists and intelligence analysts explained the systems they had used in Cuba to process information and report it back to the United States. General Miller also recommended streamlining the command structure at the prisons, much as was done when military intelligence and military police units were merged when he took command of Joint Task Force Guantánamo in November 2002.

But to at least a few of the officers who met General Miller in Iraq, the Abu Ghraib crisis was partly rooted in what they described as his determination to apply his Guantánamo experience in Iraq. Senators raised similar concerns on Tuesday at the Armed Services Committee.

General Miller and some of his former aides have dismissed the notion that his visit to Iraq helped unleash the abuses. They argue that if his prescriptions had any link to the problems there, it was because they were misinterpreted by ineffective commanders in a chaotic environment.

"When you don't have rules and you let lower-level people decide things on an arbitrary and capricious basis, you're going to have problems," the officer who accompanied General Miller said. "Our reference to techniques was to say, 'You need a policy.' "

A Democratic Senate aide who reviewed General Miller's report on the Iraqi prisons said he had sought to revamp the intelligence apparatus in Iraq primarily to improve the collection and transmission of broader, strategic information about the insurgency that was particularly important to senior military officials.

To those officials, the work at Guantánamo by General Miller, a former paratrooper from Menard, Tex., made him an obvious candidate for Iraq. By the time he took over in Cuba, most of the detainees there had been in custody for nearly a year. Still, General Miller was credited by Pentagon officials with using interrogations there to produce a valuable historical account of the workings and financing of terrorist training camps in Afghanistan, among other subjects, officials said.

General Miller's hard-charging attitude has also raised questions that go beyond interrogation methods. He was the official most responsible for pressing a case last year against a Muslim chaplain at the base, Capt. James J. Yee, that was initially billed as a major episode of espionage. In March, the military announced that it would drop all charges.

At the Senate hearing on Tuesday, the deputy commander of American forces in the Middle East, Lt. Gen. Lance Smith, said General Miller had made it clear to the officers he briefed on his 10-day visit to Iraq that some of the procedures developed in Cuba could not be applied there. But despite the vast differences between the settings, two officials who worked with General Miller in Cuba suggested that he offered very similar solutions to some problems he found in Iraq.

Maj. Gen. Antonio M. Taguba, in his report on Iraqi prison abuses, said General Miller's recommendation of a guard force that "sets the conditions for the successful interrogation and exploitation of internees/detainees" violated Army doctrine; the report hinted that it may also have contributed to the abuses.

The Taguba report also highlighted General Miller's recommendation that commanders in Iraq form and train a prison guard force "subordinate to the Joint Interrogation Debriefing Center (J.I.D.C.) Commander" that "sets the conditions for the successful interrogation and exploitation of internees/detainees." The former director of that interrogation center, Lt. Col. Steve Jordan, was implicated in the abuses by General Taguba and is under investigation in a separate military inquiry.

At Guantánamo the role of guards in intelligence gathering was largely limited to observing the detainees' behavior and trying to detect their leaders, according to interrogators who worked there.

A fundamental difference between Iraq and Guantánamo was the Bush administration's determination that the Geneva Conventions did not govern the treatment of the detainees in Cuba. However, military officers who served in Cuba said the controls on coercive interrogation methods appeared to have been stronger at Guantánamo than they were in Iraq.

Because the administration had designated the Taliban and Al Qaeda detainees at Guantánamo as "enemy combatants" to whom it would accord humane treatment but not other rights granted by the Conventions military officers in Cuba soon grew concerned that they were operating without clear rules.

"There was no interrogation policy," said one military official who was based at Guantánamo. "The detainees were resistant. They knew we weren't going to torture them, so we needed to come up with Plan B for this small group of people who wouldn't talk and whom we thought did have intelligence."

According to several officers who served at Guantánamo, the methods, begun in early 2002, included depriving detainees of sleep; leaving them in cold, air-conditioned rooms; placing them in "stress positions"; and forcing them to stand or crouch for long periods, sometimes with their arms extended, until exhausted.

Even before General Miller's arrival at Guantánamo, the military lawyer who had taken over as the staff judge advocate there, Lt. Col. Diane Beaver, sought formal clarification of what were acceptable interrogation methods, Pentagon officials said. That request prompted a broad legal review of interrogation techniques by a working group of Pentagon lawyers.

When the review was completed in February 2003, it included a spreadsheet with 24 approved techniques, officials who viewed it said. For each method, the matrix indicated whether it posed problems under various United States and international laws, and at what level of the military bureaucracy it needed to be approved. The following month, a brief document spelling out specific guidelines for approved interrogation techniques was sent to Guantánamo.

General Miller and another officer on his team said they urged commanders in Iraq to draft their own guidelines. A chart of approved techniques, entitled the "Interrogation Rules of Engagement," was drawn up for American forces in Iraq on Oct. 12, 2003, barely a month after General Miller's visit.

Three officials familiar with the methods approved for Guantánamo said they appeared to be more restrictive than those promulgated for Iraq. At Guantánamo, methods like extended isolation and putting detainees into "stress positions" require approval from senior Pentagon officials in Washington; in Iraq, they need only that of the task force commander.

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