

**SITUATION: ABU GHRAIB:
A Comparative Study of Pedagogical Approaches to Faulty
Communication**

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The Iraqi prisoner abuse crisis at Abu Ghraib in 2004 provides a pedagogical opportunity for college students in different communication disciplines to analyze communication theory and communication response strategies of the U.S. military and Bush administration. Courses as diverse as Rhetorical Theory & Criticism and Cases & Problems in Public Relations, both taught at Utica College, use this event to study the perils and pitfalls that confront communication strategists. Using crisis response strategies and mass media theories from a public relations perspective and Lloyd Bitzer's (1968) model of situational analysis used in rhetorical criticism to analyze this incident can provide students with a deeper understanding of the real-world application of communication tactics and strategies. The analysis presented in this study indicates that the investigation and subsequent communication surrounding allegations of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib were, at best, inadequate and mismanaged and, at worst, damaging to the U.S. government's reputation.

In October 2003, 24-year-old Army Spc. Joseph Darby, a member of the 320th Military Police Battalion, arrived in Abu Ghraib. According to the New York Times and military documents, shortly after his arrival, a friend showed him an image captured by a digital camera: The photo showed a naked prisoner chained to his cell, his arms above his head. The soldier told Darby how he enjoyed the abuse (Swann, 2008, note#49). It didn't take long for Darby to discover this was not an isolated incident. Knowing the treatment was morally wrong, he reported the detainee abuse on January 13, 2004; his initial report included a CD full of photos. The next day, the military's Criminal Investigation Division (CID) launched a criminal investigation (Swann, 2008, p.270).

This heralded the beginning of a teachable moment in almost every communication classroom across the nation. Courses as diverse as Rhetorical Theory & Criticism and Cases & Problems in Public Relations, both taught at Utica College, can use this same event to study the perils and pitfalls that confront communication strategists. This research advances the hypothesis that both casework analysis in public relations and Lloyd Bitzer's model of situational analysis will indicate that the investigation and subsequent communication surrounding allegations of

prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib can be seen as inadequate and mismanaged to the point of being labeled “failed communication.”

Abu Ghraib as a rhetorical situation

Introducing undergraduate students to the field of rhetorical criticism is made easier by requiring an understanding of Lloyd Bitzer’s seminal work “The Rhetorical Situation,” written in 1968 (Bitzer, 1968, pp 1-15). Students are usually able to grasp the idea of a rhetorical situation and further understand the components of Bitzer’s basic critical framework of exigence, audience, and constraints. Applying this model to current events provides students with an opportunity to begin a journey of better understanding the world events that shape their lives *and* understanding the often complex realm of rhetorical criticism. Using the discourse that developed in an attempt to “solve” the problem of Abu Ghraib is an excellent “artifact” for this study.

“In order to clarify rhetoric-as-essentially-related-to-situation, we should acknowledge a viewpoint that is commonplace but fundamental; a work of rhetoric is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to *produce action or change in the world* (emphasis added); it performs some task” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 18). Following the January 13, 2004 report by Spc. Darby, initial “situational discourse” appeared on January 16th in the form of a news release from the headquarters of the U.S. Central Command (Centcom) in Baghdad:

An investigation has been initiated into reported incidents of detainee abuse at a Coalition Forces detention facility. The release of specific information concerning the incidents could hinder the investigation, which is in its early stages. The investigation will be conducted in a thorough and professional manner. The Coalition is committed to treating all persons under its control with dignity, respect and humanity. Lt. Gen. Ricardo S. Sanchez, the Commanding General, has reiterated this requirement to all members of CJTF-7 (Swann, 2008, p. 270).

This initial discourse provides an important opportunity to remind students that rhetorical criticism in general and the use of Bitzer’s rhetorical situation in particular cannot simply be applied in cookie-cutter fashion: just plug the components of the theory into the artifact and *voila!* out pops an effective analysis. A discussion of exigence, the first element of Bitzer’s (1968) model begins with a simple definition of “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing other than it should be (p. 20). Most students immediately want to identify the actual prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib as the exigence. The abuse uncovered by photographs and testimony that were eventually made public (whether by design or by unofficial “leaks”) was horrendous and appalling – unbelievable to most Americans (the unbelievable nature of this is important to remember when discussing the nature of the discursive response):

- Videotaping and photographing naked male and female detainees
- Forcibly arranging detainees in various sexually explicit positions for photographing
- Forcing detainees to remove their clothing and keeping them naked for several days at a time
- Forcing naked male detainees to wear women’s underwear

- Forcing groups of male detainees to masturbate themselves while being photographed and videotaped
- Arranging naked male detainees in a pile and then jumping on them
- Placing a dog chain or strap around a naked detainee's neck and having a female soldier pose for a picture
- Using military dogs (without muzzles) to intimidate and frighten detainees and, in at least one case, biting and severely injuring a detainee
- Breaking chemical lights and pouring the phosphoric liquid on detainees
- Threatening detainees with a charged 9 mm pistol
- Sodomizing a detainee with a chemical light and perhaps a broom
- Threatening male detainees with rape (Swann, 2008, p. 273)

It is, after all, a perfect example of “an imperfection marked by urgency.” The light bulb moment (that moment when a teacher sees a visible sense of understanding on a student's face – as if a light bulb has been lit in the cartoon caption above their head!), however, occurs when students recognize the caveat that “(a)n exigence which cannot be modified is not rhetorical...an exigence which can be modified only by means other than discourse is not rhetorical...” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 20). *If* we are identifying the various news releases that came from the military as the discourse in this analysis, the rhetorical exigence that invited the discourse must be seen as both the press coverage that provided a constant stream of news and opinion concerning the abuse and subsequent investigation *and* the public outcry that immediately reached a global roar as soon as the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib became known.

The year was 2004. The tide of opinion in this country and abroad was turning increasingly against the United States government's policy in Iraq. Young men and women were still dying months after President George Bush had proclaimed “Mission Accomplished” on May 1, 2003 (nicolaibrown.com). Following the initial Centcom statement quoted above, official news of the abuse and the investigation led by Major General Antonio Taguba was, to say the least, scarce. For over two months, the military remained relatively silent about Abu Ghraib. The Swann case study indicates that reporters heard rumors and that they “knew something was afoot when 17 U.S. soldiers were suspended from duty pending the outcome of an alleged prisoner abuse investigation...” (Swann, 2008, p. 270). To stem the increasing swell of rumor and conjecture, the military engaged in the first effort at discourse that can be identified as an attempt to modify the rhetorical exigence created by the press and public opinion. The following is the opening statement provided by General Mark Kimmitt during a press briefing held in Baghdad on March 20, 2004 under the auspices of the Coalition Provisional Authority:

As you know, on 14 January 2004, a criminal investigation was initiated to examine allegations of detainee abuse at the Baghdad confinement facility at Abu Ghraib. Shortly thereafter, the commanding general of Combined Joint Task Force Seven requested a separate administrative investigation into systemic issues such as command policies and internal procedures related to detention operations. That administrative investigation is complete, however, the findings and recommendations have not been approved. As a result of the criminal investigation, six military personnel have been charged with criminal offenses to include

conspiracy, dereliction of duty, cruelty and maltreatment, assault, and indecent acts with another.

The coalition takes all reports of detainee abuse seriously, and all allegations of mistreatment are investigated. We are committed to treating all persons under coalition control with dignity, respect and humanity. Coalition personnel are expected to act appropriately, humanely, and in a manner consistent with the Geneva Conventions. Lieutenant General Sanchez has reinforced this requirement to all members of CJTF-7 (Swann, 2008, pp. 270-71).

This opening statement was followed by a barrage of questions that clearly indicated that the initial discourse had done nothing to modify the exigence. Most students find this kind of example helpful in further explaining Bitzer's model in several ways. First, asking them to assume the role of journalists at this briefing helps them understand the idea of a rhetorical exigence. Students will often respond with descriptions that cannot be repeated in polite company if you ask them what they think the military was trying to accomplish with this statement. Most clearly believe that the military was *trying* to convince the assembled journalists and, by extension, the general public that the military was thoroughly and appropriately "handling" the investigation of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib. Further, most students believe that this statement was a complete failure. An investigation into *why* this discourse failed leads students easily to an understanding of Bitzer's (1968) second component of "audience":

*The second constituent is the **audience**. Since rhetorical discourse produces change by influencing the decision and action of persons who function as mediators of change, it follows that rhetoric always requires an audience – even in those cases when a person engages himself or ideal mind as audience. It is clear also that a rhetorical audience must be distinguished from a body of mere hearers or readers: properly speaking, a rhetorical audience consists only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change (p.21).*

The students, still relishing their role as journalists, are likely to appreciate the role of members of the media as "mediators of change." After all, most of these students have taken coursework in the role of the media in contemporary society. They also appreciate inclusion of the general public as a part of the rhetorical audience. In another effort to avoid the cookie cutter approach to rhetorical criticism it becomes important to keep the discussion "looping" back to the question of desired change. If we accept "the military/government" as the umbrella source of the exigence-modifying discourse, students must always be able to return to an understanding of what "they" (the military/government) wanted. One of the important lessons for students to keep foremost in their minds as they construct this analysis is that context is crucial. They must remember that for the most part, Americans (and the media that informed us) still supported the war effort in Iraq but, as mentioned above, the tide was beginning to turn. In March of 2004, people still expected weapons of mass destruction to be found in Iraq; neither Cindy Sheehan (mother of U.S. Army Specialist Casey Sheehan who was killed in Iraq on April 4, 2004) nor John Murtha (U.S. Congressman [D-PA] who had served for 37 years in the U.S. Marine Corps)

had spoken out against the war; Saddam Hussein had been captured only three months earlier; Congress was still overwhelmingly approving bills to fund the war; news of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib prison was only beginning to reach the American people. Surely, both the military hierarchy and executive branch of the federal government realized the potential explosive nature of the events at Abu Ghraib. Surely, these same leaders recognized that the war effort in Iraq was in a precarious position in terms of public support. The importance of the successful handling of this situation cannot be overestimated. From a rhetorical standpoint, the question/answer period that followed General Kimmitt's opening remarks proved to be a pivotal point in this rhetorical situation:

Question: General, when were those six MPs charged? What are they alleged to have done? Were they all in the same unit? And what's the maximum penalty for these crimes? And anything else you want to tell us about it.

General Kimmitt: I'll take the first two questions on. They were charged with those crimes today. Those charges were preferred on them. There were six involved. And as I said in the statement, the charges were, as I said, they were all separate articles in the Uniform Code of Military Justice. We'll be able to provide that after the press conference.

I don't want to at this point because the charges have only been preferred and not referred. In other words, we have not done the military equivalent of a grand jury investigation at this point. That is the point, at the end of that Article 32 investigation, that grand jury, if those charges are referred for trial that would be the point at which we would start providing information with regard to their unit, their names, so on and so forth. But it's just not appropriate to do it at this time.

Question: But they're going to an Article 32, and they're all charged in the same episode, sir?

General Kimmitt: They are all being charged—I don't know if each one is being charged with all the same counts. We can have a lawyer sit down with you perhaps in a day or so and go over which ones are being charged. Nonetheless, I don't believe they're—all six are being charged with all those counts. It's just a range. And, again, I'm not a lawyer—I have no idea what the maximum penalty for all of that is...

Question: Were the six people—were they doing abuse on the same person, or is it six different cases of abuse? And also, what are they—where are they at the moment? Are they being held in detention?

General Kimmitt: We believe that this was a small number of detainees, less than 20, that were involved in this. The persons, as we talked about a couple of months ago, they have been suspended from their duties. They are working administrative duties. They are still here in country, and they have been moved over to other duties pending the outcome of the investigation, and now pending the outcome of any further deliberations.

Question: Sir, it's Guy from CNN. A question for General Kimmitt. What's the reason for the shut down of the Abu-Ghraib prison, not allowing any journalists

in to see what is—what’s actually happening inside? It sort of seems to be getting a similar sort of reputation to what it had during Saddam’s time in the moment.

General Kimmitt: We—we traditionally treat—we don’t legally classify, but we treat the detainees similar to the manner that we would treat enemy prisoners of war. The Geneva Convention, which is our guideline for that, specifically prohibits making detainees, making prisoners of war subject to public curiosity and humiliation, and so that’s why we feel it’s important that we follow the procedures and allow the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] in for routine investigation, routine inspections—health, welfare—to assure that we’re doing everything in accordance with the Geneva Conventions, but it is not a matter of practice to allow journalists into those kinds of facilities.

Question: Just a follow-up—Jim Clancy with CNN. I mean, if you “re treating—are they de facto, then, prisoners of war under the Geneva Conventions? They are not, are they?

General Kimmitt: They are not, but they are being—

Question: Well, then why—you know, in any other democracy, you would allow journalists into a prison to examine the conditions, if there were large public issues involved—and I think that there are large public issues involved just because of this investigation you’ve announced. So—

General Kimmitt: What I would—what I’d ask you to do is go to the International Committee of the Red Cross. They would be more than happy to provide you with their findings, that they do on a regular and routine basis. And I think that you would find from their investigations that that is not the case (Swann, 2008, pp. 271-72).

This discourse, and other briefings, Q&A sessions, and various statements made by government officials ranging from the President of the United States to spokespersons from the State Department and the Department of Defense serve several functions beyond the obvious rhetorical response to the situation. They bring students to the third component of Bitzer’s (1968) model – constraints:

*Besides exigence and audience, every rhetorical situation contains a set of **constraints** made up of persons, events, objects, and relations which are part of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence. Standard sources of constraint include beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives and the like; and when the orator enters the situation, his discourse not only harnesses constraints given by situation but provides additional important constraints – for example his personal character, his logical proofs, and his style. There are two main classes of constraints: (1)those originated or managed by the rhetor and his method (Aristotle called these “artistic proofs”), and (2)those other constraints, in the situation, which may be operative (Aristotle’s “inartistic proofs”). Both classes must be divided so as to separate those constraints that are proper from those that are improper (p. 21).*

It is not unusual for students to develop furrowed brows and quizzical expressions at this point in the conversation. Once again, the context of Abu Ghraib serves to help clarify the theory of Bitzer's method. President George Bush served as another rhetor attempting to modify the exigence created by Abu Ghraib: "Yes, I shared a deep disgust that those prisoners were treated the way they were treated. Their treatment does not reflect the nature of the American people. That's not the way we do things in America. And so I – I didn't like it one bit" (Swann, 2008, p. 276). Other officials from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to U.S. Department of State spokesperson Richard Boucher to Major General Geoffrey Miller, the commander of U.S.-run prisons in Iraq to the above-quoted General Mark Kimmitt held new conferences, appeared on television talk shows, issued statements and provided press releases that essentially echoed the statement made by Bush. Students will usually ascribe an almost instant level of credibility to these statements based on the status of the rhetor. That provides an initial understanding of the nature of constraints – an understanding deepened by further discussion about the "job descriptions" attached to the various people issuing these statements. Looking further into students' political attitudes, their understanding of and allegiance to various news outlets and media personalities, and even whether or not they pay attention to current events provides a deeper understanding of the nature of constraints. Class discussion about *any* kind of controversial statement associated with politics, the military or almost current event can provide clarity. All one has to do is casually "drop" a statement into class discussion: "So, what do you think of President Bush's 'profound' comment – that he didn't like the torture at Abu Ghraib 'one bit'?" Sit back and watch the class erupt into a debate about Bush's effectiveness as Commander-in-Chief *and* as an effective orator. Reign in the conversation and watch the lightbulbs go on in understanding of the nature of constraints. Further discussion of constraints can include factors as diverse as the increasingly strident "conversation" among political ideologues, consideration of people's connections to men and women serving in the military as well as people's connections to the attacks of September 11, 2001, and perceptions of our role as one part of the global community to name only a few.

With an understanding of the three components of the rhetorical situation and an appreciation for the importance of understanding the complexities of "context," students are ready to analyze examples of the discourse issued by various rhetors.

This brings us easily to the very basic premise of this paper: that pedagogy-sharing can serve as a fascinating and useful tool for teaching a plethora of approaches to communication. Patricia Swann's public relations text *Cases in Public Relations Management* (2008) contains a three part case study of the response to Abu Ghraib. For the purpose of conducting criticism using Lloyd Bitzer's theory of rhetoric as a response to a situation, Swann's work is a treasure chest of discourse. From the very first press release issued on January 16, 2004 to official statements made by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to press briefings in Baghdad to comments by President Bush, Swann's three-part case study should provide students in a class in rhetorical theory & criticism with more than enough examples of discourse to apply Bitzer's theory and draw conclusions. Again and again, the discourse points to recurring informational themes: 1) the allegations of torture at Abu Ghraib are terrible and will not be tolerated; 2) a thorough investigation is being conducted by the appropriate military authorities; 3) results of those investigations will be made public when the authorities deem appropriate; 4) the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib was committed by a very small number of misguided individuals and everyone should remember that "...the troops we have overseas are decent, honorable citizens

who care about freedom and peace; that are working daily in Iraq to improve the lives of the Iraqi citizens...” (Swann, 2008, p. 282).

Reading these representative examples of discourse bring the student of rhetorical criticism to draw the conclusion that this was a clear example of failed communication. Although rhetors claimed to be providing adequate and accurate information, the failure to release complete and timely results of the Taguba investigation served to exacerbate the exigency of a perceived cover-up. Many members of the media and the general public also seemed dismayed by what seemed to be a reluctance by the military and government officials to loudly, immediately, and completely condemn the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. After all, Bush’s statement that he “...didn’t like it one bit” (Swann, 2008, p. 276) can hardly be considered a profound condemnation of these allegations. Statement after statement seemed to indicate that neither the military hierarchy nor the upper echelon of the executive branch of the federal government understood the importance of this situation. Even though some of the more “extreme” ideologues tried to offer justification for the abuse inflicted on prisoners at Abu Ghraib (in April of 2004, radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh voiced support of the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib: “You know, these people are being fired at every day. I’m talking about people having a good time, these people, you ever heard of emotional release? You ever heard of need to blow some steam off?” [nicolaibrown.com]). Most Americans seemed to be horrified by the idea of torture, abuse, and degradation being inflicted on prisoners by American soldiers. Americans wanted to believe that this was a just war – that our military personnel were prosecuting this war with honor and dignity as well as with strength and force. The lack of immediate forceful condemnation of the prisoner abuse and the lack of complete transparency about the investigation into the abuse proved to be such an ineffective attempt to modify the exigence of this situation that it is not an overstatement to say that this “rhetorical moment” proved to be a turning point in the public’s opinion about American involvement in Iraq. We could still support our troops, but disagree with our methods, reasons, and justification of continued military presence in Iraq. It was, in a very real sense, a moment of lost innocence. We were no longer completely just or completely pure or completely right.

Abu Ghraib as a Public Relations case study

Public relations shares common interests with communication arts, particularly with the ability to produce and deliver successful messages. Public relations, effectively practiced, is concerned with “establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Cutlip, Center and Broom, 2006, p. 5).

Effective relationships require trust which is built over time by an organization’s actions and its communication. Because of the importance of communication in establishing positive relationships, the study of public relations places importance on rhetorical skills and theory. This case study focuses primarily on the White House and military officials’ actions and communication strategies regarding the Abu Ghraib Iraqi prisoner abuse scandal during the first week following the news media’s expose. The following section examines these actions from a public relations pedagogical perspective.

Case Study Methodology

Case study methodology is an “empirical inquiry” (Babbie, 2005, p. 306) that requires multiple data sources (evidence) such as documentation, archival records, interviews, observation/participation and physical artifacts (such as photographs) to explore and understand a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 1994). The evidence for this case study included interviews with a public affairs officer who worked on the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse incident, news briefing transcripts from federal offices and the military, news releases, as well as news media stories that contained direct and paraphrased quotes from key players. This case study allows students to examine a particular event wherein the specific public actions and communication tactics can be studied.

Reactive Response Strategies

Public relations case study courses often map out the chronological order of important events during a crisis to examine the response time of organizations. When an organization says and does things during a crisis is important because today’s 24/7 nature of the news media can quickly damage an organization’s reputation and sway public opinion against it even if an organization’s intentions are good or the organization is blameless in the crisis incident. Public relations favors a planned and strategic reaction based on facts and made available, when legally possible, on an ongoing basis to the news media (Wilcox, 2007, p. 261). Failure to respond in a timely manner means loss of control over how the story is presented to the public. For example, “no comment” responses or silence from an organization during a crisis leads the public to feel that the organization is guilty of wrongdoing or hiding something (p.261).

Every organization deals with conflicts between itself and its publics. When organizations cannot prevent crises from occurring by resolving the issue before it reaches a crisis phase, public relations attempts to help organizations ride out the storm with appropriate reactive strategies. From a crisis communication perspective, a number of response strategies were used during the first week of the Abu Ghraib crisis beginning with CBS 60 Minutes II’s story when the full extent of the prisoner abuse was exposed. According to Smith (2006, p. 100) organizations can use a range of verbal and behavioral reactions to resolve conflicts and crises. This case provides examples of both verbal and behavioral activities used with varying levels of success.

To analyze the reactive public relations strategies it is instructive to keep in mind the following key actions and their dates while deconstructing this case study:

- January 13, 2004: Army Specialist Joseph Darby reports the prisoner abuse, including a CD of photos.
- January 14, 2004: Military’s Criminal Investigation Division launches its investigation.
- January 16, 2004: Military’s first news releases announces a criminal investigation into “incidents of detainee abuse at a Coalition Forces detention facility.”
- February 23, 2004: 17 U.S. soldiers suspended from duty pending the outcome of the investigation.
- March 20, 2004: Coalition Provisional Authority news briefing announces six military personnel are charged with criminal offenses relating to prisoner abuse.

- April 28, 2004: Coalition Provisional Authority news briefing announces CBS will air a program on Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse.
- CBS 60 Minutes II airs its story about the prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib including some of the abuse photos.
- April 30, 2004: President George Bush responds to a reporter's question about the CBS story on the prisoner abuse scandal; White House spokesperson Scott McClellan briefly responds to the President's statement; Brigadier General Kimmitt discusses the military's response during a Coalition Provisional Authority news briefing; and a U.S. Department of State spokesperson discussed diplomatic efforts.
- May 3, 2004: A U.S. Department of Defense spokesperson admits that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld saw the abuse photos for the first time on television
- May 4, 2004: Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller, recently appointed deputy commanding general of detention operations in Iraq, answered reporters' questions on the investigation.
- Rumsfeld and General Peter Pace, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff read a statement and answered reporters' questions.
- May 5, 2004: A week after the story broke on CBS, President George Bush is interviewed by two Arabic television stations about the prisoner abuse.

Using Smith's (2006, p. 101) Typology of Public Relations Responses, the White House and military's response to the Abu Ghraib crisis following the CBS expose included a preemptive action strategy (prebuttal), an offensive response strategy (shock), diversionary response strategy (disassociation), vocal commiseration strategies (regret and apology) and rectifying behavior strategies (investigation and corrective action).

The preemptive action used was a prebuttal strategy that emerged just hours before CBS-TV's 60 Minutes II broadcast its Abu Ghraib story. This strategy allows an organization to get out in front of the story and tell its side of the story to the news media. The goal is to gain as much control of the story as possible by offering explanations and corrective actions. During a Coalition Provisional Authority news briefing General Kimmitt announced that CBS planned to broadcast a report on Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse. He recounted the investigatory work, the resulting charges brought against six military personnel, and the military's commitment to "treating all persons under coalition custody with dignity, respect and humanity." His statement also included the strategy of disassociation:

. . . this does not reflect the vast majority of coalition soldiers, vast majority of American soldiers that are operating out of Abu Ghraib Prison. We have had thousands, tens of thousands of detainees in Abu Ghraib. We have understood that a very, very small number were involved in this incident, and of the hundreds and hundreds of guards they have out there, a small number were involved in the guards.

I'm not going to stand up here and make excuses for those soldiers. I'm not going to stand up here and apologize for those soldiers. If what they did is proven in a court of law, that is incompatible with the values we stand for as a professional military force, and its values that we don't stand for as human beings. They will

be tried before a court, and then those decisions will be made (Swann, 2008, p. 274).

Two days later, Bush used a vocal commiseration strategy, the diversionary response strategy of dissociation and the rectifying behavior strategy of investigation, both of which were repeated throughout the crisis. When asked about his reaction to the photos, he said:

Yes, I shared a deep disgust that those prisoners were treated the way they were treated. Their treatment does not reflect the nature of the American people. That's not the way we do things in America. And so I—I didn't like it one bit.

But I also want to remind people that those few people who did that do not reflect the nature of the men and women we've sent overseas. That's not the way the people are, that's not their character that are serving our nation in the cause of freedom. And there will be an investigation. I think—they'll be taken care of (Swann, 2008, pp. 276-277).

Bush used the words “deep disgust” to characterize his response to seeing the abuse photos on television. This strategy recognized the severity of the problem without implying fault. Disgust does not equal an apology, another vocal commiseration tactic, and Bush never apologized directly during the crisis. According to Smith (2006, p. 109) “issuing an apology involves publicly accepting full responsibility and asking forgiveness.” This didn't happen possibly because the strategy was to disassociate the military and U.S. policy from the relatively few bad apples who were charged.

When Bush was interviewed on two Arabic television stations one week after the CBS story, he called the actions at Abu Ghraib “abhorrent” but never apologized to the Iraqi people. He also told Al Arabiya television:

. . . that what took place in that prison does not represent America that I know. The America I know is a compassionate country that believes in freedom. The America I know cares about every individual. The America I know has sent troops into Iraq to promote freedom—good, honorable citizens that are helping the Iraqis every day.

It's also important for the people of Iraq to know that in a democracy, everything is not perfect, that mistakes are made. But in a democracy, as well, those mistakes will be investigated and people will be brought to justice. We're an open society. We're a society that is willing to investigate, fully investigate in this case, what took place in that prison.

That stands in stark contrast to life under Saddam Hussein. His trained torturers were never brought to justice under his regime. There were no investigations about mistreatment of people. There will be investigations. People will be brought to justice (Swann, 2008, p. 281).

After Bush's interviews, reporters asked why he did not offer an apology to the Iraqi people. His spokesperson Scott McClellan told reporters that the president was “deeply sorry” that the abuse had occurred. But those words never came from Bush's own lips publicly. Apologies had been offered the day before by his national security advisor Condoleezza Rice and deputy

secretary of state Richard Armitage during interviews with Arab broadcasters. In Iraq, Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller and General Kimmitt also apologized to the Iraqi people (Alberts, 2004, p. 20). Apologies are a common tactic among errant celebrities and organizations faced with irrefutable evidence of their wrongdoing. It is the first step to reputation restoration. However, it took Rumsfeld nine days after the CBS story aired to offer his “deepest apology” to the Iraqi people during testimony to the Senate and House armed services committees on May 7, 2004.

Instead of stressing vocal commiseration strategies, particularly the apology strategy, the White House and military spokespersons chose to stress its actions in resolving the problem. They reminded their publics that it had acted transparently from the onset of the alleged abuse discovery by issuing a news release about the criminal investigation, holding subsequent press briefings in Baghdad about the investigations, adding additional investigations, bringing criminal charges, allowing Red Cross inspections of detention facilities, and the discussing the possibility of news media visits to Abu Ghraib.

These defensive rectifying behavior strategies of investigation and corrective action did show how serious the matter was taken by the military and White House. At the time of the CBS story, the incident had already led to six investigations. The first two investigations were completed by the end of February 2004. While the military’s response to the reported abuse and the accompanying photographic evidence had been swift, the cumbersome nature of the “chain of command” approval process prevented the investigations’ results from reaching the top of the chain – Bush and Rumsfeld. Neither had seen the photographic abuse evidence until the 60 Minutes II broadcast, although Rumsfeld admitted that he had “seen the executive summary” and read the conclusions of Maj. Gen. Antonio Taguba’s explosive investigative report (Swann, 2008, p. 280). Rumsfeld’s explanation did not reflect a military that clearly understood the immense national and international ramifications the incident could engender:

I guess the way to put it is that the department has been aware of it since it was first noticed, and up the chain of command we’re told that there were investigations into alleged abuses as long ago as last January 16th. It takes time for reports to be finished—correction—to be gathered. This is a very comprehensive report . . . (Swann, 2008, p. 280).

Rumsfeld brushed off criticism that Congress should have been informed sooner, saying:

Well, we informed the world on January 16th that these investigations were under way. It seems to me that that is a perfectly proper thing to do. The investigations were announced. The world knew it. It was briefed to the press and the world (Swann, 2008, p. 280).

However, many interpreted the limited amount of information disseminated prior to the CBS story April 28 from a short news release and Baghdad Coalition Forces news briefing as misleading or obscuring the issue.

Beyond its investigative strategy, military leaders and the White House stressed the corrective actions that would result from the investigations. As Rumsfeld said on May 4, 2004:

Have no doubt that we will take these charges and allegations most seriously . . . We’re taking and will continue to take whatever steps are necessary to hold

accountable those who may have violated the code of military conduct and betrayed the trust placed in them by the American people . . . (Swann, 2008, p. 280).

In an effort to quell growing Iraqi outrage Bush told two Arabic television stations on May 5, 2004 that he was committed to corrective action based on the results of the investigations:

It's also important for the people of Iraq to know that in a democracy, everything is not perfect, that mistakes are made. But in a democracy, as well, those mistakes will be investigated and people will be brought to justice. We're an open society. We're a society that is willing to investigate, fully investigate in this case, what took place in that prison.

That stands in stark contrast to life under Saddam Hussein. His trained torturers were never brought to justice under his regime. There were no investigations about mistreatment of people. There will be investigations. People will be brought to justice (Swann, 2008, p. 281).

Agenda Setting Theory

Beyond crisis communication response strategies, public relations students can examine this case study using familiar mass media theories including agenda setting and framing theory.

Agenda setting theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972, pp. 176-187) posits that the mass media's reporting of certain stories influences what an audience will pay attention to, although not necessarily what the audience will think about the stories. According to this theory, the media's agenda may become the public's agenda. From a public relations perspective, when the media have set the agenda the affected organization needs to make the issue a top priority with a reactive strategy that can include objectives such as gain public understanding, maintain and restore reputation, and build trust and support (Smith, 2006, p. 100).

In this case, the U.S. media made the Coalition force's treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib a top agenda item for public discourse. Shortly before and after the CBS story broke, the military responded to the media's interest by providing information on what the military was doing to ensure that those responsible would be punished and that corrective actions would prevent other incidents from occurring.

Just hours before the 60 Minutes II story was broadcast, Brig. Gen. Kimmit, at a Coalition Baghdad news briefing, recounted the military's response to the prisoner abuse scandal. He described how a soldier's initial report led to an immediate criminal investigation that was quickly followed up by another investigation on command policies and internal procedures related to detention operations. He noted that six military personnel had been charged with criminal offenses and that these soldiers did not "reflect the vast majority of coalition soldiers" (Swann, 2008, p 274).

However, two days passed before Bush, during a White House Rose Garden press availability with the Canadian prime minister, gave his first official comment on the scandal. He noted his "deep disgust" concerning the prisoner abuse photos and that "there will be an investigation" (Swann, 2008, p 276-277). White House spokesperson Scott McClellan, General Kimmitt, and a spokesperson from the U.S. Department of State also held press availabilities to answer reporters' questions. Waiting two days while the news media published and aired stories with the disturbing photographs indicated from a public relations perspective that White House

officials did not understand the magnitude of the crisis or were unprepared to respond. This was a lost opportunity to tell the White House and military's side of the story and convey that they did not have the situation under control. Instead, it was reported that Bush was unaware that the military had requested that CBS delay its Abu Gharaib story (Swann, 2008, p. 277).

During the first seven days of this crisis, the most obvious attempt to control the story followed Bush's interviews with two Arabic television stations. While this significant interview did attract journalists' attention, the media's agenda soon shifted from what the president said to why he did not offer an apology to the Iraqi people. All major news network morning shows interviewed Rumsfeld (ABC and NBC) and Gen. Peter Pace, vice chairman of the Joint Chief of Staffs (CBS) about Bush's remarks on Arabic television. Journalists, however, focused on the lack of a presidential apology to the Iraqi people. Two networks asked if Rumsfeld wanted to apologize and he did so indirectly:

[ABC]

Oh my goodness. Anyone, any American who sees the photographs that we've seen has to feel apologetic to the Iraqi people who were abused and recognize that that is something that is unacceptable and certainly un-American (Swann, 2008, p. 282).

[NBC]

Well, anyone who sees the photographs does, in fact, apologize to the people who were abused. That is wrong. It shouldn't have happened. It's un-American. It's unacceptable. And we all know that. And that apology is there to any individual who was abused (Swann, 2008, p. 282).

White House spokesperson McClellan also later apologized on behalf of the president that day:

Well, we've already said that we are deeply sorry for what occurred, and we "re deeply sorry to the families and what they must be feeling and going through, as well. The President is sorry for what occurred and the pain that it has caused. It does not represent what America stands for. America stands for much better than what happened (Swann, 2008, p. 283).

This case study showed the need for planned and managed communication in a crisis. While the White House and military's investigative and corrective actions were appropriate, the military's chain of command reporting policies did not work in a timely fashion. Without pertinent and timely information the United States' top leaders were not able to develop effective and appropriate communication responses to this international crisis.

Conclusion

This shared sense that students in different classes can come to similar understandings through different pedagogical styles can help us use instances of profoundly flawed communication to bring our students to a belief that we can/must/should do better. As we explain various types of communication theories from fields as seemingly diverse as public relations and

rhetorical criticism, students must understand that theory always evolves from real events – they do not float aimlessly in some rarified soup devoid of application.

The abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib was a real event. Photographs such as the one of the detainee who was made to stand on a box, with a hood over his head and wires attached to his outstretched hands (Swann, 2008, p. 268), have become horrendous icons of a very dark and very real event in American military history. To their credit, the military launched an immediate investigation into the real events at Abu Ghraib. Unfortunately, the attempts by the White House and the military to minimize the importance of this horror were very real events. By making statements that acknowledged the abuse but quickly pointed to the small number of troops involved and then moved to statements supporting “...the 99 percent of our men and women in uniform who are committed to upholding the values that America holds dear,” (Swann, 2008, p. 277) various officials attempted to minimize and misdirect public opinion. These attempts were unsuccessful. Unfortunately, the attempts to prevent the findings of a key early investigation from being made public were also real events: “Citing severe repercussions the story might cause for U.S. troops on the ground in Iraq, the Department of Defense and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff asked CBS to delay airing its story [about photographs of abuse at Abu Ghraib that the network had received]” (Swann, 2008, p.273). The upper echelon of the military even tried to suppress access to the Taguba Report by military personnel:

An email to Pentagon staff marked “URGENT IT (Information Technology) BULLETIN: Taguba Report” orders employees not to read or download the Taguba report on Fox News, on the grounds that the document is classified. It also orders them not to discuss the matter with friends. The email was leaked to TIME by a senior U.S. civilian official in Baghdad....”I do wonder how incredibly stupid some people in the Pentagon are,” he emailed TIME. “Not only are they drawing everyone’s attention to the report – and where it can be seen – but attempting to muzzle people never works.”

Perhaps realizing that, the email’s author in “Information Services Customer Liaison” said: “This leakage will be investigated for criminal prosecution. If you don’t have the document and have never had legitimate access, please do not complicate the investigative processes by seeking information.” As the type-face switched to high-alarm red, the 180 word email continues” “THE INFORMATION CONTAINED IN THE REPORT IS CLASSIFIED; DO NOT GO TO FOX NEWS TO READ OR OBTAIN A COPY” (Walt, 2004).

This communication is, perhaps, the ultimate example of failed communication in this sad series of failed communications – and serves as a fitting conclusion for this study. Whether or not the memo achieved its intended purpose of persuading military personnel to not read the leaked information from the Taguba Report (doubtful) is irrelevant. What is crucial to this study is the realization that, at every turn, the people in charge failed to provide the adequate and accurate information that was necessary to reassure Americans and people around the world that the United States would do the right thing. It is important for students to understand the failures that occurred in the very real communication events that surrounded Abu Ghraib. If they do not, we cannot hope to avoid these failures in the future – and that must be the ultimate lesson that we take to our students.

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