THE BANALITY OF ENHANCED INTERROGATION

A number of people have pointed out the auspicious timing of Philippe Sands' Green Light article, appearing as it did at the same time as the Torture Memo. I'm just as struck, though, by its appearance shortly after the publication of profiles of two of the women convicted for abuse at Abu Ghraib: a long Stern interview with Lynndie England and a New Yorker profile of Sabrina Harman. Within short order, then, we have profiles of three of the women who enabled torture.

Lynndie England

The England interview describes how England, who had joined the army to get out of her bleak West Virginia town, is stuck back there, unable to get a job and therefore a house of her own for her and her son (via Charles Graner).

> I'm just trying to get by. Trying to find a job, trying to find a house. It's been harder than I expected. I went to a couple of interviews, and I thought they went great. I wrote dozens of applications. Nothing came of it. I put in at Wal-Mart, at Staples. I'd do any job. But I never heard from them.
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> [snip]
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> I am starting to wonder if they realize who I am and they don't want the publicity. I don't want to lie. On my resume I have a brief little paragraph about what I did in the army and about being in prison and that I'm still on parole. I want to be totally honest. I have to find a job by September, that's part of the parole regulations. If you break the rules, then they can bring you back. That would be a big deal because I

> don’t want to leave my son.

England stays in her home town, she explains, because only there do people support her, some agreeing they would have done as she did, follow orders.

> They don’t treat me any different. I haven’t met a person yet that’s been negative to me. Not since I got home. Most of them back me up one hundred percent. They say, "What happened to you was wrong." And some even say they would have done the same thing.
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> [snip]
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> That they would have followed orders, just as I did in Abu Ghraib.

She stays in her home town, too, out of fear that elsewhere a stranger will come after her and her son.

> I know more people support me here than are against me. It’s that one crazy one that you don’t know that finds out where you live and comes after you.

There’s a part of me that regrets that the most public face of Abu Ghraib is this woman who has had so little in her life. But she’s a totally unsympathetic person, someone who repeatedly appeals to the orders she received, and ultimately cannot totally disavow what she did.

> Of course it was wrong. I know that now. But when you show the people from the CIA, the FBI and the MI the pictures and they say, "Hey, this is a great job. Keep it up", you think it must be right. They were all there and they didn’t say a word. They didn’t wear uniforms, and if they did they had their nametags covered.
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> [snip]

> To be honest, the whole time I never really felt guilty because I was following orders and I was doing what I was supposed to do. So I've never felt guilty about doing anything that I did there.
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> [snip]
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> Okay, I do take responsibility. I was dumb enough to do all that. And to think that it was okay because of the other officers and the orders that were coming down. But when you're in the military you automatically do what they say. It's always, "Yes Sir, No Sir." You don't question it. And now they're saying, "Well, you should have questioned it."

Sabrina Harman

England's biggest regret, it seems, is that the pictures they took in Abu Ghraib got publicized and exposed what they had done and probably endangered other Americans.

> I guess after the picture came out the insurgency picked up and Iraqis attacked the Americans and the British and they attacked in return and they were just killing each other. I felt bad about it, … no, I felt pissed off. If the media hadn't exposed the pictures to that extent then thousands of lives would have been saved.

At least in what Stern published, England doesn't blame Sabrina Harman, the woman who took most of the photos.

Harman comes off as a much more sympathetic person than England. In the profile, one after another person describes how sensitive she is.

> "Sabrina literally would not hurt a fly," her team leader, Sergeant Hydrue Joyner, said. "If there's a fly on the floor and you go to step on it, she will

> stop you.” Specialist Jeremy Sivits, a mechanic in the company’s motor pool, said, “We’d try to kill a cricket, because it kept us up all night in the tent. She would push us out of the way to get to this cricket, and would go running out of the tent with it. She could care less if she got sleep, as long as that cricket was safe.”
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> [snip]
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> Harman bought her Iraqi friends clothes and food and toys. She bought one family a refrigerator, and made sure it was stocked. Sergeant Joyner said, “The Iraqi kids—you couldn’t go anywhere without them saying, ‘Sabrina, Sabrina.’ They just loved themselves some Sabrina. She’ll get these kids balloons, toys, sodas, crackers, cookies, snacks, sweet rolls, Ho Hos, Ding Dongs, Twinkies, she didn’t care. She would do anything she could to make them kids smile.”
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> [snip]
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> [in a letter Harman wrote to her wife] I have watch of the 18 and younger boys. I hear, misses! Misses! I go downstairs and flash my light on this 16 year old sitting down with his sandal smacking ants. Now these ants are Iraqi ants, LARGE! So large they could carry the family dog away while giving you the finger! LARGE. And this poor boy is being attacked by hundreds. All the ants in the prison came to this one boys cell and decided to take over. All I could do was spray Lysol. The ants laughed at me and kept going. So here we were the boy on one side of the cell and me on the other in the dark with one small flashlight beating ants with our shoes. . . . Poor kids.
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> [snip]
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> “She is just so naïve, but awesome,”

> [Megan Ambuhl, the other woman punished for the abuse] said. “A good person, but not always aware of the situation.”

Along with her sensitivity, the profile describes Harman’s drive to capture everything in photos.

> She liked to look. She might recoil from violence, but she was drawn to its aftermath. When others wanted to look away, she’d want to look more closely. Wounded and dead bodies fascinated her. “She would not let you step on an ant,” Sergeant Davis said. “But if it dies she’d want to know how it died.” And taking pictures fascinated her. “Even if somebody is hurt, the first thing I think about is taking photos of that injury,” Harman said. “Of course, I’m going to help them first, but the first reaction is to take a photo.” first grenade go off. Fun!” Later, she paid a visit to an Al Hillah morgue and took pictures: mummified bodies, smoked by decay; extreme closeups of their faces, their lifeless hands, the torn flesh and bone of their wounds; a punctured chest, a severed foot. The photographs are ripe with forensic information. Harman also had her picture taken at the morgue, leaning over one of the blackened corpses, her sun-flushed cheek inches from its crusted eye sockets. She is smiling—a forced but lovely smile—and her right hand is raised in a fist, giving the thumbs-up, as she usually did when a camera was pointed at her.

That combination—Harman’s sensitivity and her fascination with images—is how she explained to her wife her decision to take pictures of the abuse in another letter.

> Okay, I don’t like that anymore. At first it was funny but these people are

> going too far. I ended your letter last night because it was time to wake the MI prisoners and “mess with them” but it went too far even I can’t handle whats going on. I cant get it out of my head. I walk down stairs after blowing the whistle and beating on the cells with an asp to find “the taxicab driver” handcuffed backwards to his window naked with his underwear over his head and face. He looked like Jesus Christ. At first I had to laugh so I went on and grabbed the camera and took a picture. One of the guys took my asp and started “poking” at his dick. Again I thought, okay that’s funny then it hit me, that’s a form of molestation. You can’t do that. I took more pictures now to “record” what is going on.

The profile shows, though, that Harman’s self-conception of her role "recording" the abuse is self-deception designed to preserve the fiction of her own innocence.

> In her letters from those first nights, as she described her reactions to the prisoners’ degradation and her part in it—ricocheting from childish mockery to casual swagger to sympathy to cruelty to titillation to self-justification to self-doubt to outrage to identification to despair—she managed to subtract herself from the scenes she sketched. By the end of her outpourings, she had repositioned herself as an outsider at Abu Ghraib, an observer and recorder, shaking her head, and in this way she preserved a sense of her own innocence.
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> “I was trying to expose what was being allowed”—that phrase again—“what the military was allowing to happen to other people,” Harman said. In other words, she wanted to expose a policy; and by

> assuming the role of a documentarian she had found a way to ride out her time at Abu Ghraib without having to regard herself as an instrument of that policy. But it was not merely her choice to be a witness to the dirty work on Tier 1A: it was her role. As a woman, she was not expected to wrestle prisoners into stress positions or otherwise overpower them but, rather, just by her presence, to amplify their sense of powerlessness. She was there as an instrument of humiliation.

Harman's discussion of taking the iconic picture from Abu Ghraib—the hooded and caped prisoner standing on a box with electrical wires attached to his fingers—captures the real self-deception of her position.

> "I knew he wouldn't be electrocuted," she said. "So it really didn't bother me. I mean, it was just words. There was really no action in it.

(The profile goes on to note that, after the military determined he was innocent, this particular prisoner became a favored prisoner. It also includes a meditation about why this image, of all the images taken at Abu Ghraib, proved so iconic.)

The New Yorker presents a much more ambivalent portrait of Harman than Stern does of England—but much of that derives from the subject. Even someone who, like Harman, went out of her way to be kind to some detainees at Abu Ghraib, invented fictions to distance herself from the role she played in the humiliation of the Iraqis.

Diane Beaver

Both Lynndie England and Sabrina Harman joined the army at least partly to earn money to go to college (though England says she was primarily attracted to military culture). Perhaps that's

why Diane Beaver joined up as well. She, like the two other women, started out in the Military Police. But when she wrote the memo the Administration blamed for the torture at Gitmo, Beaver had the benefit of a law degree and a prior visit to Nuremberg to give her the context that might help her understand her own actions. Even in spite of that relative advantage, Sands describes Beaver as nervous, having been hung out to dry.

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> In our lengthy conversations, which began in the autumn of 2006, she seemed coiled up—mistreated, hung out to dry.

Strikingly, Beaver conceives of the way her gender played into her role in authorizing torture; like Harman, she serves a particular role in the masculine violence directed at detainees.

> "Who has the glassy eyes?," Beaver asked herself as she surveyed the men around the room, 30 or more of them. She was invariably the only woman present—as she saw it, keeping control of the boys. The younger men would get particularly agitated, excited even. "You could almost see their dicks getting hard as they got new ideas," Beaver recalled, a wan smile flickering on her face. "And I said to myself, You know what? I don't have a dick to get hard—I can stay detached."

And like Harman, Beaver has a narrative she has developed to distance herself from the process. She **facilitated** the process of brainstorming torture, she describes, she didn't lead the process.

> Some of the meetings were led by Beaver. "I kept minutes. I got everyone together. I invited. I facilitated," she told me.

Ultimately, Beaver, like England and (to a lesser degree) Harman, appeals to the orders she received. Indeed, her memo exists largely because she insisted on documenting that those orders came from the top. But it also served primarily to confirm the orders she received.

> Talking about the episode even long afterward made her visibly anxious. Her hand tapped and she moved restlessly in her chair. She recalled the message they had received from the visitors: Do "whatever needed to be done." That was a green light from the very top—the lawyers for Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, and the C.I.A.
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> [snip]
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> Diane Beaver was insistent that the decision to implement new interrogation techniques had to be properly written up and that it needed a paper trail leading to authorization from the top, not from "the dirt on the ground," as she self-deprecatingly described herself.
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> In the end she worked on her own, completing the task just before the Columbus Day weekend. Her memo was entitled "Legal Review of Aggressive Interrogation Techniques." The key fact was that none of the detainees were protected by Geneva, owing to Douglas Feith's handiwork and the president's decision in February. She also concluded that the torture convention and other international laws did not apply, conclusions that a person more fully schooled in the relevant law might well have questioned: "It was not my job to second-guess the president," she told me.
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> [snip]
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> But in the end she concluded, I "agree

> that the proposed strategies do not violate applicable federal law." The word "agree" stands out—she seems to be confirming a policy decision that she knows has already been made.

From untrained reservists humiliating the detainees to the JAG officer who wrote the memo specifically authorizing torture at Gitmo, the dynamics are the same.

The Banality of Enhanced Interrogation

No matter how horrible were the things these three women did, these profiles still capture their ambivalence. You can't understand Lynndie England without understanding the environment from which she comes, in which some people say they would have done the same as she did. You can condemn what she did—and especially her lack of remorse—but you can't help but sympathize with this single mother who is completely unemployable, trying to raise a son in bleak circumstances. England's son did not abuse prisoners on the other side of the world, but it's hard to imagine how he won't pay for what his father and mother did for much of his life.

It's the ambivalence we see in all three profiles that strikes me. Particularly when you compare them to the glib snippets of two of the men who directed these acts. Sands describes, for example, David Addington, greeting Beaver after she wrote her memo with a smile.

> Once, after returning to a job at the Pentagon, Beaver passed David Addington in a hallway—the first time she had seen him since his visit to Guantánamo. He recognized her immediately, smiled, and said, "Great minds think alike."

And he describes Rummy, recording his own recognition that his behavior was wrong in a cocky note approving the torture at Gitmo.

> Rumsfeld placed his name next to the

> word “Approved” and wrote the jocular comment that may well expose him to difficulties in the witness stand at some future time.

I presume a good writer could write similar narratives that capture the ambivalence of these two men. Did you know, for example, that Addington takes the Metro to work? And think of the way the documentary The Fog of War captured some of the ambivalence of Robert McNamara’s life (though of course the documentary was made after McNamara had actually confronted his own ambivalence; I’m not sure Rummy will ever do so).

But for the moment, the record shows only the glib satisfaction with which the Addingtons and Rummys view their own actions.