

THE STARK FACE OF POWER

A Conversation with Mark Danner

by Jacob Parakilas

Mark Danner is the Henry R. Luce Professor of Human Rights and Journalism at Bard College and professor at the University of California at Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. Danner is author of The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War and Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror. Danner is also a staff writer for The New Yorker and a regular contributor to The New York Review of Books.

“The Abu Ghraib revelations were a tremendous propaganda victory for the insurgency because they undermined the American claim to be bringing a new, just, democratic world,” Mark Danner tells me. “The insurgency gets something valuable from it, especially in Sunni areas: that is, the people trust Americans less afterwards than they did before. If you’re not trusted, you don’t get any intelligence, and at the end of the day, to win a counter-insurgency, you need people. You can’t do it with high tech weapons. You need people to come up to you and say, ‘That’s a safehouse at the end of the street there.’”

Danner does a variety of things with his time. He teaches at Berkeley and Bard, and writes for *The New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *The New Yorker*, where he is a staff writer. He has recently written a book, *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror*, about the Abu Ghraib scandal. The book, which was published relatively quickly as these things go, is more of a collection than an analysis. The first fifth or so is Danner’s own writing on the subject, mostly culled from *The New York Review of Books*. The rest is a compendium of Abu Ghraib-related

documents, from the Taguba report to the ICRC's letters of protest about conditions at the jail. Danner jokes that the US government wrote four fifths of his book for him.

In person, Danner speaks at length and engagingly on the topic. As he talks, his hands sketch out invisible, intricate maps, as if to illustrate his words. Clearly, it fascinates and compels him, even as he acknowledges the brutal realities of the situation. His position on the scandal—indeed, on the war itself—is abundantly clear from just browsing the book, or reading his articles. But his opinions aren't those of an arm-chair quarterback. He spent several months in Iraq in 2003 studying the insurgency and the state of things in the country. Although he has contacts and friends within the US military, he worked independently, not embedded. Overall, he's not terribly optimistic about the situation but believes that the United States has to stand its ground to prevent the country from backsliding into civil war.

We are talking a few days after the Marine Corps had declared victory in its siege of Falluja. Danner, who visited Falluja in 2003 and “will not be going back,” told me, “If we're defining American success as the creation of a stable, democratic order,

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then pulverizing a city is not a good idea. But what else can you do? There's the argument that the new Iraqi government cannot have authority unless it controls its territory—and that's a legitimate argument.” But his perspective isn't that the insurgency was inevitable. “The US never had an idea of how to solve the underlying problem, which is the Sunni domination that stretches back into Ottoman times. How do you take power from the Sunnis without alienating them? How do you get them to participate in the political process?”

How, indeed? In 2003, when he visited Iraq, Danner was occupied with this essential question of how Iraq was going to translate into a democracy. His articles from the time (which can be found at his website, www.markdanner.com) are mostly wide-ranging examinations of that question. But then, in early 2004, came Abu Ghraib.

Danner tells me a joke he says he heard from Iraqis around the time: “We always knew the Americans would bring electricity back to Baghdad—we just didn't think they'd be shooting it up our asses.”

For most Americans, Abu Ghraib was a shock. The now-famous pictures of Iraqi prisoners being abused at the hands of American soldiers, officers, and dogs were totally out of touch with the relatively antiseptic, moral affair that the Administration had painted of the war up to that point. But not to Iraqis, Danner says.

“Before the pictures were released, Iraqis already knew about mistreatment of prisoners by Americans.” He explains how most of the detainees at Abu Ghraib were there as a result of so-called “cordon and capture” operations, in which American

troops would simply close off entire neighborhoods in which insurgents had attacked, and arrest as many people as they could. “Even the American military intelligence estimate was that 85-90% of the people held at Abu Ghraib had nothing to do with the insurgency. Iraqis knew this was happening—the pictures just confirmed their suspicions.”

I ask him about the specific propaganda value of those images, particularly the ones Danner refers to as “Hooded Man” and “Leashed Man.”

“There’s no way to quantify the propaganda value of images,” he replies, shaking his head. “But they’ve become almost the brand image of American oppression—the pictures convey something instantly. They’re good propaganda.” Particularly important, he says, is the role that sexual humiliation plays in the images, especially the ones in which the Iraqi men are forced to stand naked or masturbate in front of female American soldiers. This emasculation of Iraqi men plays directly into the hands of Islamists.

The result of all this is that the willingness of Iraqis to cooperate with the occupation authorities is constantly on the decline, according to Danner. “It’s ironic,” he notes, “given that the original intention of the operations at Abu Ghraib was to gain more intelligence from Iraqis. Instead, what you got was something very familiar to Iraqis: the idea that behind all the protestations of liberty and justice you find the stark face of power. This deception is something they’re very familiar with.” He doesn’t believe that the occupying Americans are anything like the regime of Saddam Hussein. But, to Iraqi observers, a ready context for this sort of deception exists. “The distance between the protestations and the ideals is very familiar to them.”

So, then, the big question. How does the United States win the war, win the peace, get the boys home, and not leave a great big mess behind? “You have to understand,” Danner says, spreading his arms as if to lift the concept up off the coffee table and show it to me from a different angle. “It’s a political war in the end. All the actions you take inflict damage on your own chances, but you have to take some of them to maintain control.” He maintains that heavy-handed American tactics such as the cordon-and-capture raids have caused a great deal of the problems that are now prevalent: “Rebuilding Iraq and winning the peace was always going to be like climbing a steep cliff. But doing things like handing the insurgency the propaganda victory of Abu Ghraib have made it like trying to climb a steep cliff with one hand behind your back.”

The now-inevitable comparison with another recent American counterinsurgency comes up, which, to Danner, has a few lessons left to teach us. “Americans are making one of the same fundamental mistakes we made in Vietnam: trying to see your enemy as yourself. We’re looking for headquarters, looking for a command structure and bases, when the insurgency doesn’t really have any of those things. Someone like [former Saddam aide] Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri is a key figure, and much of what’s happened was planned before the war, but most of what we’ve seen are groups that really don’t like each other finding ways to work together against us.”

As we wrap up and walk out into what’s a surprisingly warm and sunny day for upstate New York in late November, Danner comes up with one overarching

metaphor for the whole situation: “Think of Iraq as the creation of a new universe. Everything is being formed. There’s a substantial part in darkness—people who are engaging in armed politics—but they’re not that different from the part that’s in the light. The only way to get them to put down their arms, and move into their light is to give them some kind of incentive. We have to show them that the road they’re on isn’t going anywhere, and that working together is a better way. But we’re not doing that right now.”

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