The Naked, Stark images from Abu Ghraib prison fade from the news only to be displayed again as the next U.S. soldier is called forward to answer formal charges for what happened there. Meanwhile, the Army is ensuring it will not happen again—there, or anywhere else. Part of the repair process is determining the path that led to the situation at Abu Ghraib prison.

Geneva Conventions

In an effort to address shortcomings in the international law of land warfare exposed by the ravages of World War II, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) submitted four Geneva Conventions for delegates’ approval on 12 August 1949. These conventions are titled and abbreviated as follows:


The third convention, GPW, consists of 143 articles divided topically into six parts. Part I, “General Provisions,” contains 11 articles. Articles 3, 4, and 5, bear special mention. Article 3 establishes a basic standard of treatment rendered to persons no longer actively participating in hostilities because of sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause during armed conflict not of an international character. At the convention’s signing, article 3 was viewed as an attempt to offer a basic minimum standard of protection to those fighting in civil wars and insurrections.

Article 4 defines who is entitled to prisoner-of-war (POW) status under the convention and who, thereby, is afforded additional protections. Article 4 includes a four-part test that applies to members of militias and volunteer corps:

1. They must be commanded by a responsible person.
2. They must have a fixed sign visible at a distance.
3. They must carry arms openly.
4. They must conduct operations in accordance with the laws and customs of war.

Article 5 mandates that a tribunal determine the status of a detainee when a status question arises.

Part II, “General Protection of Prisoners of War,” consists of five articles (12 through 16) that list specific protections and rights accorded to qualifying persons who are POWs under article 4. Article 12 stipulates that a capturing power can transfer custody of POWs to another power only if the receiving power also observes the Geneva Conventions. Transfer of custody does not transfer responsibility.

Part III, “Captivity” (articles 17 through 108), regulates every aspect of the treatment of POWs during captivity. Soldiers often quote the portion of article 17 that requires them to give only name, rank, and serial number when questioned. Another portion of that same article prohibits the use of physical or mental torture or coercion against any detainee who refuses to give more than the required information.

Part IV, “Termination of Captivity” (articles 109 through 117), directs the repatriation of seriously wounded and sick prisoners during hostilities; the release and repatriation of prisoners at the conclusion of hostilities; and the disposition of remains of prisoners who die while in captivity.

Part V, “Information Bureau and Relief Societies for Prisoners of War” (articles 118 through 125),...
helps the parties of a conflict establish offices and agencies for tracking POWs and authorizes the ICRC to set up an international clearing house to receive and pass such information.

Part VI, “Execution of the Convention” (articles 126 through 143), provides tools for implementing the convention and also for denouncing it if a party wishes to do so. Although the United States was one of 54 nations that had signed all four of the Geneva Conventions by December 1949, the U.S. Senate did not ratify them until 2 February 1956.

**Korean War, 1950-1953.** On 23 July 1950, a month after the North Korean Army invaded South Korea, U.S. Army General Douglas MacArthur announced that the United Nations Command (UNC) had adopted and would observe the provisions of GPW. Republic of Korea President Syngman Rhee made a similar commitment on behalf of his government. These were tough promises to keep. By mid-1951, the UNC had captured approximately 165,000 enemy prisoners of war (EPW), who were a mixed lot. Some were North Korean communists; some South Korean anti-communists conscripted by North Korea during its forward march down the peninsula; some Chinese communists; and some Chinese nationalist anti-communists forced into military service after their defeat in the recent civil war.

For a number of political and practical reasons, the UNC decided EPWs would remain in-theater and be contained in camps administered by the U.S. Army using Republic of Korea Army guard units. Camps, including a hospital camp in Pusan, were constructed on the mainland and on Koje-do, a large off-shore island. Prisoners were evacuated to this camp network from holding facilities using ground transportation. The ICRC regularly visited UNC EPW camps and reported its findings to the UNC and the ICRC headquarters in Geneva.³

Life in the camps was difficult on both sides of the wire. Prisoners were kept in crowded tents and hastily constructed wooden barracks. The prisoner diet was “politically correct” in modern parlance—rice, fish, and other staples of Asian cuisine. Prisoners had access to a sophisticated medical treatment regime and were offered cultural and educational services. But political strife between the various factions of prisoners led to physical assaults, murder, and large-scale rioting. The North Korean Government infiltrated political agitators into the camp system to instigate and control prisoner unrest, to embarrass the UNC in the international political arena, and to tie down as many UNC troops as possible. North Korea was nearly successful in all aspects. Several times, the UNC had to commit infantry and armor units to camp duty to restore order.

The single prominent lesson in examining the Korean War experience is “no forced repatriation.” Thousands of prisoners did not desire repatriation to a homeland they did not claim as their own. These were primarily, but not exclusively, South Koreans forced into North Korean Army service and former Nationalist Chinese soldiers who preferred to be repatriated to Taiwan rather than mainland China. On the recommendation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, U.S. President Harry S. Truman established “no forced repatriation” as a principle of the armistice on which there would be no negotiation, except how to implement it.⁴ North Korea’s refusal to submit to this principle extended the talks, and the war itself, by approximately 2 years. In the end, the other side caved, and the principle was established. About 85,000 EPWs were repatriated to North Korea at the end of hostilities in 1953, half of the total
prisoner population. The remaining prisoners stayed in South Korea or were repatriated to Taiwan.

Another important lesson learned in Korea was that international shame or pressure did not compel North Korea to observe the provisions of GPW when handling UNC prisoners. Although nearly 13,000 UNC prisoners were released by the North Koreans at war’s end, thousands of others died in captivity because of malnourishment and mistreatment or are otherwise unaccounted for.

Vietnam War, 1965-1973. Because in many quarters the Vietnam War was viewed as an insurgency, early on the U.S. Government had to take a position on how and when to apply GPW. The South Vietnamese Government regarded captured Viet Cong as political prisoners, not EPWs, and imprisoned them in civil jails, sometimes without due process. South Vietnamese military units also did not observe GPW on the battlefield and often tortured or executed Viet Cong prisoners. Having made a policy decision at the highest levels of government to turn all detainees captured on the battlefield over to the custody of the South Vietnamese Government, and faced with the reality of more Americans becoming POWs as the level of troop commitment escalated, the United States announced in August 1965 it would apply the provisions of GPW in Vietnam. The South Vietnamese held over 35,000 prisoners in six camps, almost a third of those captured by U.S. forces.

Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), General Earle G. Wheeler, ordered that article 3 of the GPW would be the treatment floor for all battlefield-captured detainees. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), quickly drafted and issued implementing directives, including provisions for article 5 tribunals to determine detainee status. No detainee would be turned over to South Vietnamese custody before a status determination had been made.

With American materiel and advisory support, the South Vietnamese Government began constructing five camps—one in each corps tactical zone, the fifth in the Saigon area. U.S. Army Military Police (MP) advisory teams were assigned to these camps to ensure the South Vietnamese observed the provisions of GPW. By December 1971, the South Vietnamese held over 35,000 prisoners in six camps, almost a third of those captured by U.S. forces.

The United States and South Vietnam also combined their intelligence interrogation efforts, placing combined interrogation facilities in each U.S. separate brigade and division base camp and at a central location near Saigon. These facilities held sources for 1 to 7 days and up to 4 months in exceptional cases. By MACV directive, all interrogations were conducted according to GPW standards, particularly those prohibiting maltreatment. But, as in Korea, in Vietnam the United States could not obtain reciprocal treatment of its personnel held captive by North Vietnam or its proxies throughout the jungles of Southeast Asia.

Grenada, October 1983. In Operation Urgent Fury, a small contingent of U.S. Army Rangers and U.S. Marines landed on the island of Grenada to unseat a pro-Cuban government and protect several hundred American students at a medical training facility there. During several days of military operations U.S. forces took control of 1,500 detainees, half Cuban nationals, the remainder, members of the People’s Revolutionary Army (PRA).

Initially, combat units guarded their own prisoners; soon though, a small Caribbean peacekeeping
force (CPF) of policemen from Barbados and Jamaica arrived, followed by XVIII Airborne Corps MP elements from Fort Bragg, North Carolina. First the CPF and then U.S. Army MPs became responsible for detainees.8 The JCS and State Department decided to treat all detainees as EPWs without granting them that formal status.9 The predominant descriptor for EPW operations on Grenada is “makeshift” (housing, feeding, clothing, medical treatment, classification). The soldiers and their leaders made the best of a difficult situation.10 If resources were limited, so were the number of prisoners and the operation’s duration. When hostilities ended just days later, the Cubans were repatriated to Cuba with the ICRC’s help. The PRA members were turned over to the new government of Grenada.

Panama, December 1989. XVIII Airborne Corps planners for Operation Just Cause took note of lessons learned in Grenada and included detention operations in their planning. They selected the Empire Range training complex as a detention facility and pre-positioned the necessary logistical supplies to build and operate a camp.11 Approximately 4,000 detainees cycled through this camp in late 1989 and early 1990 under the watchful eyes of U.S. Army MP units from Fort Bragg, bolstered by MPs from Fort Lee, Virginia, and the Missouri Army National Guard.12 A military intelligence (MI) interrogation facility, also operated by a Fort Bragg unit, was collocated at the camp. An informal article 5 tribunal consisting of the MP camp’s commanding officer, the ranking MI officer, and the assigned judge advocate, who ruled on detainee status.13 GPW provisions were applied to all detainees early in the operation. They were afforded due medical treatment and permitted to notify and communicate with relatives, receive visitors, and in other ways exercise their rights under the Convention. As the new Panamanian Government took control, detainees were turned over to it for disposition. In January 1990, only a few remained in custody. Some were brought back to the United States for civil proceedings. The remainder stayed in custody in Panama.

Saudi Arabia, 1991. During Operation Desert Storm, the EPW detention mission was assigned to

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**Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions**

In the case of armed conflict not of an international character occurring in the territory of one of the High Contracting Parties, each Party to the conflict shall be bound to apply, as a minimum, the following provisions:

1. Persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed hors de combat by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause, shall in all circumstances be treated humanely, without any adverse distinction founded on race, color, religion, or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria.

   (a) Violence to life and person, in particular, murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment, and torture.
   (b) Taking of hostages.
   (c) Outrages on personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment [emphasis added].
   (d) The passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court affording all the judicial guarantees which are recognized as indispensable by civilized peoples.

2. The wounded and sick shall be collected and cared for. An impartial humanitarian body, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, may offer its services to the Parties to the conflict.

The Parties to the conflict should further endeavor to bring into force, by means of special agreements, all or part of the other provisions of the present Convention.

The application of the preceding provisions shall not affect the legal status of the Parties to the conflict.

Reprinted from the 1949 Geneva Conventions, Article 3, Appendix E.
the 800th MP Brigade, whose U.S. Army Reserve (USAR) headquarters was in New York.14 The brigade and its supporting MP units were assigned to the 22d Support Command soon after arriving in Saudi Arabia. Using their own supplies as well as those purchased by the Saudi Arabian Government, the units constructed four large EPW camps along main supply routes in two zones, east and west, and two joint interrogation facilities collocated with two camps in each zone.

Early in the operation, MP advisory teams trained the Saudi Army to take over the EPW mission. The war lasted only 100 hours but produced 70,000 EPWs, many of whom were taken into custody after the cease-fire agreement was signed. The GPW was applied to all of these detainees. The 800th MP Brigade conducted informal article 5 tribunals for many detainees who claimed to be Iraqi civilians.

Saudi Arabia bore all the expenses of logistically supporting the EPW operation. All the prisoners and some of the camps were turned over to Saudi control. Other camps were disassembled and hauled away. After the war, approximately 13,000 Iraqis who refused repatriation to Iraq were reclassified as refugees with the Saudi Government’s cooperation and the ICRC’s assistance.

**Haiti, September 1994.** Military police from the XVIII Airborne Corps operated a joint detention facility (JDF) at Port-au-Prince, Haiti, during Operation Uphold Democracy.15 Collocated with the JDF was a joint interrogation facility operated by an MI unit from Fort Bragg. The joint facility was constructed inside an empty warehouse and housed up to 200 detainees. GPW provisions applied when the operation began. ICRC representatives visited the facility early and often.

During the operation, several MPs complained to the MI unit’s judge advocate about certain interrogation tactics observed inside the warehouse. The judge advocate counseled both sides on their application of the articles of GPW. Analysis in an after-action report from the Judge Advocate Legal Center and School attributed the “dust-up” to a clash of cultures between MP and MI interrogators.16 The MP company commander, Captain Edward Armstrong, later observed: “It was an MP-run mission, despite the attempts of the MI to direct and provide orders to the MP guards.”17 Looking back now with new perspective because of the actions at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, the detention operation in Haiti might have been the “canary in the mine.”

**Common themes.** Several common themes emerge from an analysis of these case studies. First, GPW applied to every case, with the ICRC’s inspection and reporting assistance. Second, sensitive, critical decisions were always made at theater- and national command-authority levels. Every case study, except that of Panama, showed a lack of logistic preparation for EPW operations. All the case studies demonstrate the importance of Geneva Conventions training for those who administer or guard a detention facility. All EPW and detention operations, no matter how seemingly small or insignificant, have high international visibility. Finally, the Armed Forces’ strict adherence to GPW provisions never guaranteed reciprocal treatment of U.S. personnel in enemy captivity.

**Army Regulations**

Three Army regulations (ARs) on EPW and detainee operations were promulgated during the period studied: AR 633-50, Prisoners of War Administration, Employment and Compensation, in August 1963; AR 190-8, Enemy Prisoners of War—Administration, Employment, and Compensation, in June 1982; and AR 190-8, Enemy Prisoners of War, Retained Personnel, Civilian Internees, and Other Detainees, in November 1997.18 The 1963 regulation, which assigned staff responsibility to the
Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (DCSPER) and Provost Marshal General, contained no statement of a general protection policy of the United States and gave responsibility for control and treatment of interned EPWs to the EPW camp commander. The entire regulation had a World War II look and feel, showing great foresight as to how EPWs might be employed in various domestic, industrial, and agricultural enterprises.

In 1982, the Army became the Department of Defense executive agent for EPW and detainee matters, with DCSPER retaining staff responsibility. The new regulation contained a general protection policy statement that applied to “all persons captured, interned, or otherwise held in U.S. Army custody.” The statement was based on article 3 and other GPW articles, but the AR assigned no specific responsibility for “handling and treatment” of EPWs and detainees; it also recognized the ICRC as a protecting power.

The 1997 version of AR 190-8 is a multiservice regulation. The Department of the Army (DA) retains executive responsibility, with staff responsibility residing with the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans. The AR states that combatant commanders, task force commanders, and joint task force commanders must “ensure compliance with the international law of war.” The general protection policy statement contains article-3 words and phases, along with text from other GPW articles. If there is conflict or discrepancy between the AR and the Geneva Conventions, the AR concedes precedence to the Geneva Conventions.

**Doctrinal Publications**


A careful examination of these five MP detention FMs and seven of the eight MI interrogation FMs reveals that, over time, the American soldier has been increasingly well-schooled in the general protection articles of GPW. Article 3 first appeared as an explicit treatment floor in early 1967 and remained so in all the studied manuals of both branches until 1992 for MI and 2001 for MP respectively.

Both FM series strongly link violations of the Geneva Conventions to the *Uniform Code of Military Justice.*

**MI doctrine regarding MP personnel.** MI interrogation field manuals consistently acknowledged the MP detention mission. MP guards have always played important roles as reporters on detainee behaviors, attitudes, knowledge, and contact with other detainees. The 1992 interrogation manual subtly expanded the MP guard role from that of a passive reporter to an active facilitator of detainee screening, stating: “Screeners coordinate with MP holding area guards on their role in the screening process. The guards are told where the screening will take place, how EPWs and detainees are to be brought there from the holding area, and what types of behavior on their part will facilitate the screenings.”

In his *Detainee Operations Inspection* report, the DA inspector general cited this passage in pointing out the disconnect between MP detention and MI interrogation doctrine.

Particularly since 1978, MI interrogation FMs have placed MI interrogation prisoner-of-war (IPW) teams in MP battlespace, at EPW holding areas and at detention facilities. MI doctrine has consistently required IPW teams to coordinate with MP commanders in charge of these areas, listing specific...
matters in which coordination will facilitate the interrogation mission. Based in part on experience gleaned from Operation Desert Storm, the 1992 interrogation manual suggests that MI unit commanders seek joint training opportunities with MP EPW units to work out coordination issues.26

**MP doctrine regarding MI interrogators.** Before 1976, MP manuals posited “acquisition of maximum intelligence information” as the basic principle of EPW operations.27 In the 1976 manual, this principle was supplanted by “implementation of the Geneva Conventions.”28 The 1976 manual also contained a strong general protection statement, eliminated references to guards observing and reporting detainee behavior to IPW teams, and dropped a section describing support to external intelligence agencies. Since 1976, MP manuals have consistently acknowledged the MI interrogation mission, the passive role of MP guards with IPW and detention facilities. But MP detention manuals, even the 2001 version, do not address the details of or coordination MI activities require in MP detention facilities. Interrogation activity is the “elephant in the room” that MPs do not want to talk about.

Current U.S. Army detention doctrine is not broken so much as disjointed. MP guards and MI interrogators, if they are trained according to current branch doctrinal manuals and competently led and supervised, will treat detainees and sources with due respect to the Geneva Conventions. An inherent conflict exists between guarding and protecting the rights of detainees (the MI mission) and extracting the maximum intelligence from a source under the law (the MI mission). Those who seek to repair the damage done by the Abu Ghraib prison scandal must seek to resolve this conflict.

Having acknowledged the problem, the next step is to develop a clear general treatment policy at the Army staff level based on the Geneva Conventions. Then the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) can ensure the GPW and GC content of MP detention and MI interrogation doctrinal publications is nested in approved DA policy. TRADOC must also take steps to deconflict the MP and MI EPW and detention mission and battlespace. Finally, new doctrinal publications should more clearly define command responsibility for GPW and GC compliance for all levels of MP and MI command. With the recent publication of the DA Detainee Operations Campaign Plan, this work has already begun and will continue until the problem is resolved. **MR**

**NOTES**


3. For a sensing of the International Committee of the Red Cross inspection regime, see William L. White, The Captives of Korea (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1957), 25, 33.


11. The decision to use the Empire Range training site was made no earlier than a week before the operation began, and materials were pre-positioned and ready for use at D-3 (E-mail from LTC Kevin Govem to author, 19 July 2004). LTC (then Captain) Govem was the judge advocate for the 10th MP Brigade, the major unit responsible for this enemy prisoners of war (EPW) operation.


19. AR 190-6, 1 June 1982.

20. AR 190-6, 1 November 1997.


26. See FM 34-52 (1992), app. G.

27. See, for example, FM 19-40 (1967), para. 1-2.a.