

June 2, 2004 - [Democracy Now Radio](#) (US)

It Happened Here First: Exporting America's Most Notorious Prison Officials to Abu Ghraib

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With Amy Goodman

(Democracy Now is covering the connections between the abuse in the Iraq prisons and the abuse in the U.S. prisons.)

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AMY GOODMAN: This is Democracy Now!, Democracynow.org. I'm Amy Goodman. As we take a look at the group of advisers who were sent by the justice department to Iraq to set up the Abu Ghraib prison. We're looking at one who headed the Utah prison system, and where a 29-year-old schizophrenic man died after he was strapped naked to a restraining chair for 16 hours. Another of the men running the system in Arizona where 14 women were raped sodomized or assaulted by prison guards. Another was running Connecticut's prison system where two people died after being severely beaten. We turn now to Mayor Rocky Anderson, mayor of Salt Lake City. He was lead counsel in a 1997 lawsuit brought by Angie Armstrong, the mother of Michael Valent. She sued the state of Utah after her son died in custody. Can you tell bugs this case and about Lane McCotter who headed the Utah system and was recently sent to Iraq.

MAYOR ROCKY ANDERSON: Yes. Actually, Lane McCotter followed Gary Deland as Executive Director and they're now partners. Both of them were sent over as advisers to the United States government to help set up the prison in Iraq. Lane, when he was the executive director, oversaw a prison that I think was-had very, very serious human rights abuses taking place, and without any real effort to resolve them. In Michael Valent's case, he was a young schizophrenic young man. By the way, many of these-many of the worst human rights abuses I think took place with regard to mentally ill inmates. Michael had had been doing very well when he was held at the Utah state hospital, when he was medicated properly. When he had good psychiatric treatment, but once he

entered the Utah state prison, he started deteriorating rapidly. He went a number of days without having any medications. They didn't force medicate him as they could have done, and the guards, when they came up to his cell, he was unresponsive to them. He had been unresponsive for a number of days, but this time he had a pillowcase over his head, probably trying to keep out the voices that he heard. When Michael would not remove the pillowcase, continued to be unresponsive to prison personnel, instead of providing some treatment, instead of providing any sort of compassionate professional help for Michael, instead, they called in the S.W.A.T. team who came in, forcibly threw Michael to the floor, took him outside of his cell.

By that time, he had wrapped himself up in blankets. They cut the blankets and his clothing off with scissors, leaving him stark naked, had him shackled, handcuffed, and marched him down to a restraint chair where they tied his wrists down and tied his ankles back. This is all videotaped, by the way. This is not just somebody's account of this. It's all on videotape. You could see them on the video pull the strap on his ankles back as far as they could and he was held there for 16 hours without ever being examined by the psychiatrist that ordered him into the chair. After he was finally released, after the 16 hours, he was taken down to the shower where he collapsed, and he ultimately, having suffered from blood clotting during the 16 hours he was in the chair, threw a pulmonary embolus. This turns out not to have been a rare instance at all. We obtained affidavits of a number of inmates, many of them suffering from mental illness who were subjected to restraint in the chair, some of them for a number of days, and also other inmates who were strapped down on a metal board, they call it the board. It's "four-pointed." They had their wrists and ankles tied down. Some of them were tied for a number of days also. In some of the instances, it was reported to us that the inmates were held completely naked and left either sitting or lying in their own feces and urine.

AMY GOODMAN: We're talking to Mayor Rocky Anderson. What knowledge did Lane McCotter have of this, head of the Utah Department of Corrections?

MAYOR ROCKY ANDERSON: He not only knew of the use of the restraint chair and board but he defended their use. I'm getting a lot of distortion. You can hear me okay?

AMY GOODMAN: I can hear you fine. You're very clear.

MAYOR ROCKY ANDERSON: All right.

AMY GOODMAN: So what happened next? You brought a lawsuit against Lane McCotter. Were there other lawsuits?

MAYOR ROCKY ANDERSON: Yes. I brought a lawsuit on behalf of Eric Edwards, who experienced some horrendous treatment at the hands of prison personnel. In fact, Eric called me one evening. He didn't have anybody at the prison apparently that he could confide in or that showed any sort of compassionate treatment at all. He would slash his arms, or his eyelids, his tongue with a razor blade, obviously suffering from mental illness. He would be taken to the hospital, treated there and then brought back to the prison instead of seeing medical personnel. He would be strapped onto the board and left there to suffer further, again lying there naked. Lane McCotter's response in the chair case was that the chair was a useful device to restrain inmates when they were going to hurt themselves or hurt others, and I think it really became clear that they were using the restraint chair simply as a substitute for any kind of appropriate medical or psychiatric treatment. Michael Valent putting his pillowcase over his head was not hurting anybody. There were certainly other means of handling the problem, and the only contact with any medical personnel before he was taken to the restraint chair was when they called the psychiatrist at home, and he very casually ordered that they just go ahead and restrain Michael, and it wasn't until 16 hours that the psychiatrist, again without ever having seen Michael, ordered that he be taken out of the restraint chair.

AMY GOODMAN: We're talking to Mayor Rocky Anderson, mayor of Salt Lake City. Ultimately, Lane McCotter was forced out as head of the Utah Department of Corrections.

MAYOR ROCKY ANDERSON: Well, he denies that. He says the timing, I guess, was coincidental, but he left the Utah Department of Corrections shortly after the resolution of the lawsuit, but like his predecessor, Gary Deland, who has a record of real disdain toward inmates and their rights, and by the way, none of this is difficult to find. The State Department is saying that they didn't know this about these people. All one has to do is do the most casual of legal research to find, for instance, the case of Littlefield versus Deland, a case out of the United States Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit, where the court describes what I think could be characterized as absolutely medieval treatment of a mentally ill inmate at the Salt Lake County Jail while Gary Deland was commander of the jail. An inmate held naked without any bedding, without even a blanket, left lying naked on the concrete floor in his cell for 56 days without ever a hearing, and without any medical treatment. So, these things are fairly easy to find out about the record of these men, but instead of retiring or going into some other field after this record of civil liberties abuses, human

rights abuses, they went into the lucrative field of prison consulting in this country.

AMY GOODMAN: Mayor Anderson, when you heard that Lane McCotter had been sent to Iraq, what was your response?

MAYOR ROCKY ANDERSON: I actually ran into McCotter in the airport in Salt Lake City. He told me he was going over to do that. I guess my response was no different than when I had heard that Mr. Deland and Mr. McCotter had gone into the private business of consulting with other prisons. Frankly, my personal view has always been that it's hard for me to understand when people have the record of such disdain toward basic human civil rights of inmates, how it is that they're out making a living, and I understand they—they fared well financially consulting in the prison, unfortunately, it's taken the abuse of the Iraqi prisoners for much of our nation's media to focus on the abuse of American inmates, and especially the mentally ill.

AMY GOODMAN: We're talking to Salt Lake City mayor, Rocky Anderson. Before he was mayor, he brought a lawsuit on behalf of Angie Armstrong, the mother of Michael Valent, to sue the state of Utah after her son died while in custody. So, Deland leaves public corrections. So does McCotter, and they move on to management and training, a private Utah based corrections company, which is hired by Santa Fe, New Mexico system. McCotter is M.T.C.—that's management in training, Corporate Director of Business Development. In August, 2001, McCotter once head of corrections in New Mexico, goes to Santa Fe to get a three-year contract to operate the Santa Fe county detention sent person I'm reading from Dan Frosch's piece. "Less than a year later, a number of experts were in the jail investigating civil rights violations. In March, 2003, the report concludes that certain conditions violated inmates' constitutional rights and that inmates suffered harm or the risk of serious harm from, among other things, woeful deficiencies in health care and basic living conditions. The report documented numerous and horrifying examples and threatened a lawsuit if things did not get better. Amid the fallout, the Justice Department pulled its approximately 100 federal prisoners out of Santa Fe and MTC fired the warden and pressured the contractor to axe one of the medical administrators. This is the Justice Department that did this report." This is John Ashcroft's Justice Department, that then went on to announce that Mr. McCotter, among three other corrections experts, were headed to Iraq. We turn now to Mark Donatelli, Santa Fe, New Mexico's based attorney who specializes in criminal justice issues. You can talk about what happened in the Santa Fe detention facility at the time that M.T.C. The Utah-based corrections company, management in training corporation, was in charge?

MARK DONATELLI: There's been a public report released by the justice department that documents long-standing abuse. I must say that it was in existence before his company took over, but continued pretty much in the same manner it had before. Reckless disregard for serious medical and mental health needs of prisoners in some cases resulting in death, suicide, incredible neglect of mental health prisoners once again, and ironically, just a couple of weeks ago, the justice department team was back in town re-evaluating the prison while these revelations were coming out about McCotter having started this operation in Iraq. So, as Dan pointed out in his article, McCotter was no strange torte justice department. I don't want to fault the justice department people out here, because they're not-it's not the wing of justice department that was involved in setting up the Iraq operations. These are people in the civil rights division who were investigating the allegations of civil rights violations who had documented the involvement of McCotter's company here. But remember this is not New Mexico's first exposure to McCotter. He is no stranger. He had come here in the mid 1908's in the wake of our riot, and had acquired quite a reputation here even back then. It was surprising to many of us in Santa Fe that the county would consider doing business with McCotter's company, given the reputation he had in New Mexico from the mid 1980's that we knew he had problems in our jail. We knew things needed to be turned around. One would have thought that they would understand that McCotter's company would be the last place to turn to reform jail operations.