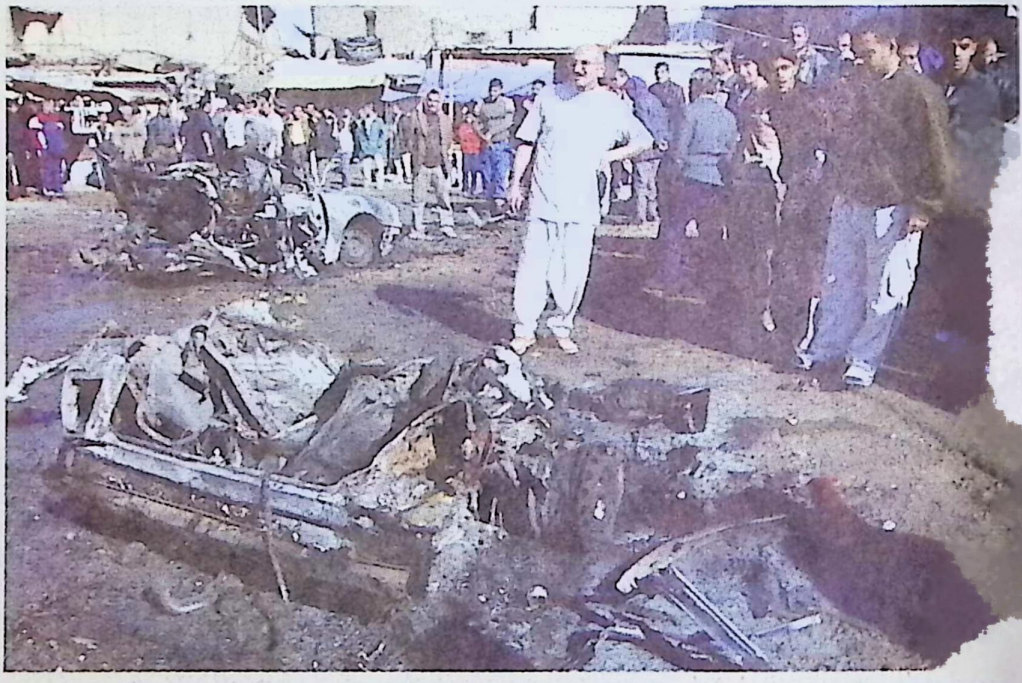
The Monster in

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The US-led occupation of Iraq has exposed serious flaws in the functioning of the world's dominant war machine. While the nature of war, and the consequent taking of human life, cannot but bring out the uglier side of human nature, human rights instruments such as the Geneva Conventions were designed to mitigate, as far as possible, the extent of abuse and destruction. In the view of many, the Bush administration's flagrant disregard for such international norms has done little to further its claims of leading the "civilised world".



Iraqis look at a car bomb in which one person was killed and five wounded in Baghdad 31 December 2006. Saddam Hussein was buried the next day after his hanging for crimes against humanity, as fears mounted of further sectarian violence in Iraq.

One of the most serious areas of fallout resulting from the Iraq war relates to the perception that now exists, that the lives of Iraqi civilians are significantly less valuable than those of coalition troops, or coalition nationals. The US Army's decision not to keep an official tally of civilian casualties was the first step in creating that perception. This sent a clear message about how seriously these losses were being taken (or not, as the case might be). General Tommy Franks, the US commander during the invasion, made matters worse by his unapologetic statement that - "We don't do body counts".

The legal and political black hole that was created by the setting up of the Guantanamo Bay facility, and the implied contempt for the rights of prisoners now termed "enemy combatants", and therefore apparently losing entitlements to any rights! - were hard to ignore, even for the US's European allies. The prisoner abuse scandal of Abu Ghraib that shocked the world served to further harden attitudes about the apparent callousness and double standards of the occupying powers. To date, a few low-ranking soldiers have been convicted for their part in the abuse. And while an investigation against the second-ranking US intelligence officer at the jail is ongoing, his superior, Colonel Thomas Pappas, has already escaped with only a fine and a reprimand!

That conviction about the lack of good faith on the part of the US military was in no way dispelled by the subsequent decision taken by the Army not to pursue charges against a Marine who shot dead an unarmed insurgent in Fallujah in November 2004...This in spite of the fact that the incident had been captured on film by an NBC cameraman, and broadcast around the world!

It could be argued that the combination of these events have effectively served to create an "enabling environment" for abuse by military personnel in Iraq. At the very least, incidents like these created the impression that certain kinds of abuses could be carried out with a degree of impunity. So when stories began to emerge about alleged abuses carried out by coalition soldiers against civilians, alarm bells rang in