

# The American Culture of Torture: A Review Essay

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Rebecca Lemov, *World as Laboratory: Experiments with Mice, Mazes, and Men*. New York: Hill and Wang/Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005.

Alfred W. McCoy, *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, from the Cold War to the War on Terror*. New York: Henry Holt/Metropolitan, 2006.

*America's idea of what constitutes torture is not the same as ours and does not appear to coincide with that of most civilised countries.* — Sir Andrew Collins, British high court judge, in condemning the treatment of detainees at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, on February 16, 2006 (Dyer, 2006).

**D**ESPITE BEING OUTLAWED BY INTERNATIONAL TREATIES, U.N. CONVENTIONS, AND the domestic statutes of most nations, torture is alive and thriving at police departments, prisons, hospitals, laboratories, and “therapeutic” and cultic communities throughout the world. Although torture is commonly associated with physical pain, the infliction of intense psychological and emotional suffering—including fear, anxiety, and guilt—is the more common torture tactic in interrogation and indoctrination today. In their classic study, researchers Ofshe and Singer (1986) identified two “generations” of coercive thought-reform programs employing psychological manipulation and punishment: a first generation, in which “peripheral” elements of a subject’s self-concept are targeted, and a more recent period, in which “central” elements of self are subjected to coercive influence and manipulation. Soviet and Communist Chinese “brainwashing” (or “thought reform”) techniques were the most notorious types of first-generation programs (Hinkle and Wolff, 1956). They were directed at the public conception of self—such as social status, political views, and role performance, which are incidental to core personality. The goal was to gain outward social conformity through group criticism. Indoctrination took place at prisons, training centers, reeducation camps, and revolutionary universities, from which cadres or comrades could leave after “rehabilitation.”

Second-generation behavior control programs—the primary focus of the two books under review here—differ substantially from the first-generation strategies. More sophisticated and scientific, they attempt to alter the subject’s self-perception

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or self-concept through relentless attack on his or her most intimate self (e.g., family, sexuality, and religious belief). By undermining the target's "core sense of being," these methods are capable of eliciting very intense states of emotional arousal. At their most extreme, these programs manipulate sleep and body temperature and inflict other physical discomforts to help prepare targets for the syndrome of "debility-dependence-dread." First-generation programs were the forte of Communist governments, but liberal democracies and right-wing dictatorships have favored second-generation coercive interrogation techniques. Perhaps to the surprise of many who believe in U.S. human rights superiority, the United States has a long history of developing and perfecting techniques of animal and human torture.

If Americans thought at all about the practice of torture before Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, perhaps the Inquisition or medieval blood sanctions came to mind—not U.S. military and intelligence operations. In different ways, Alfred W. McCoy's *A Question of Torture* and Rebecca Lemov's *World as Laboratory* powerfully document how the rationale and practice of torture are embedded in our nation's major social institutions. To borrow H. Rap Brown's famous quote concerning violence generally, torture is "American as cherry pie." Our political institutions, legal culture, scientific community in and out of universities, and, of course, popular culture have contributed to the development, refinement, and social acceptance of torture. Torture should be antithetical to our nation's liberal political philosophy of individual rights, with its emphasis on the inherent dignity and worth of each person. David Luban (2005) cogently argues, however, that our revulsion toward torture is only "skin deep." Prominent academics and mass media pundits—among them Charles Krauthammer, Alan Dershowitz, and Michael Ignatieff—find torture acceptable when used under the exceptional circumstance of the "ticking time-bomb" scenario.

Lemov's book locates the historical roots of today's coercive interrogation practices in the early 20th-century experimental research movement known as "human engineering." Working with the behaviorist principles pioneered by John B. Watson and Ivan Pavlov in their animal and human experiments, and refined during the 1930s and 1940s by Clark Hull and O. Hobart Mowrer, researchers at Chicago, Harvard, Yale, and Johns Hopkins fashioned an arsenal of behavioral control methods—centered on "aversive conditioning"—with which they hoped to "improve mankind" and socially engineer an ideal society. Human engineering experiments were supported by enormous sums of philanthropic foundation money and engaged leading U.S. and Canadian social scientists for over half a century. What began as a utopian (if not an entirely benevolent) project to modify the behavior of the poor, delinquent, the mentally ill, and small children through environmental conditioning (and eugenics, a special interest of the Carnegie foundation), soon found other applications. By mid-century, behavioral engineering informed the "human relations" school of industrial labor relations (Elton Mayo and the Hawthorne experiments), Madison Avenue advertising (the "scientific sell" and "emotional appeal"), and the

wartime propaganda machine. Then, after the Korean War, the U.S. intelligence community took interest. An “American science of interrogation,” Lemov argues, drew from the coercive techniques developed in North American psychology and social relations departments. Especially intriguing to intelligence officials was a specialty of Yale’s O. Hobart Mowrer, the “preparatory set”—a state of tense and anxious readiness in anticipation of a coercive stimulus (shock of pain). As a form of “self-punishment,” interrogators can induce “sets” symbolically—making this tactic a “hands-off” or “psychological” torture.

Beginning in the early 1950s, human engineering techniques were adopted by the U.S. military and the CIA<sup>1</sup> for interrogation and mind control projects. As the Cold War intensified, “coercive counterintelligence” was propagated to anticommunist dictators around the world through the School of the Americas and various training manuals sent via diplomatic mail. McCoy’s *A Question of Torture* documents in sad detail the postwar embrace of “torture lite.” A particularly sordid chapter was the 1950 through 1962 CIA mind control project. Bearing names like Operation Bluebird, Project X, Operation Paperclip, and Operation Artichoke, the CIA employed teams of psychiatrists using LSD, electroshock, psychosurgery, and sensory deprivation to break the resistance of involuntary subjects. By the mid-1960s, however, the CIA had come to prefer “noncoercive” methods centered on self-inflicted pain and self-punishment to induce regression and self-blame. Stress positions and various time-disorienting psychological tactics were combined with sensory deprivation to form a two-phase process of torture. This became the CIA’s preferred method of interrogation throughout the 1960s in South Vietnam, and then as Project X, in Iran, the Philippines, and Central America. Torture training was suspended in the 1970s during President Carter’s human rights campaign, only to resume with the return of Republican rule in the 1980s. The CIA’s direct involvement in coercive interrogation appears to have gone into a 10-year abeyance during the Clinton administration, although torture was outsourced to Third World security services.

Since September 11, torture has returned to U.S. interrogation with a vengeance. The U.S. military and its private contractors at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, as well as U.S. proxies at various secret “rendition” prisons around the globe, use some of the most odious coercive interrogation techniques developed by U.S. science. After initial outrage over the Abu Ghraib photos, the torture controversy quickly disappeared from the mass media and public debate. In fact, a large segment of the American public today endorses the limited use of torture. Moreover, several prominent academic and media pundits have tried to square torture with democratic values in the “war on terrorism.” What happened to the national sentiment that put the U.S. in the forefront of human rights after World War II?<sup>2</sup> Torture advocates claim that the circumstances and the adversary are unprecedented, nullifying our previous position on human rights. The Bush administration argues that the U.N.’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Conventions on prisoner

treatment—both of which the U.S. helped to champion—do not apply to “unlawful combatants.” Moreover, proponents of torture argue, this is a different kind of enemy. Heather MacDonald (2006: 85–86), an Olin Fellow at the Manhattan Institute and popular Fox News pundit, mused about Abu Ghraib: “Even more challenging was that these detainees bore little resemblance to traditional prisoners of war.” They appear to possess a nature and emotional makeup that differ from the rest of humanity. For instance, MacDonald quotes a “senior intelligence official” who contrasts the 1989 U.S. counterinsurgency operation in Panama with the “jihadists.” Panamanian insurgents were “more understandable,” and they responded to “love of family” as an interrogative manipulation. The family technique fails with Islamists. This reminds us of General Westmoreland’s observation that the “oriental doesn’t value life in the same way as a westerner.” In dismissing the Red Cross’ November 2004 report on Guantánamo, the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard Myers (in McCoy, 2006: 157), observed: “Let’s not forget the kind of people we have down there. These are the people that don’t know any moral values.”

Whatever their military status or human makeup, and trying to have it both ways, the Bush administration denies that the treatment of detainees by U.S. interrogators constitutes torture. Sensory deprivation, over stimulation, temperature manipulation, and isolation are among their “soft techniques” that are a necessary part of “effective interrogation.” Physical torture has long been rejected in counterinsurgency. “Crude physical torture weakens ‘the moral caliber of the [security] organization and corrupts those who rely on it,’” observes a CIA interrogation training manual from 1983 (quoted in McCoy, 2006: 91).<sup>3</sup> But, McCoy (*Ibid.*) points out, “psychological torture has a far more corrupting impact on perpetrators than its physical variant.” Part of President Bush’s megalomania is the torturer’s “seductive illusion of omnipotence” (*Ibid.*: 13). The torturer’s exaggerated sense of power and control extends all the way to the highest, most immediately removed, officials. Lemov (2005: 236) also observes that torture dehumanizes the torturer, rather than the tortured. It “decivilizes” the immediate torturer, as well as all citizens who are willing to live with this evil.

Why should we be surprised at public and official indifference toward torture when the U.S. is generally such a violent nation? Jimmy Carter (2005) poignantly elaborates on the social impact of America’s “culture of death,” with its military-industrial complex, high murder rates, gun obsession, support for the death penalty, a “pro-life” movement that opposes family planning, sex education, and safe abortions, and a president who shows contempt for international law and the environmental movement. Underpinning our culture of death is a new religious fundamentalism marked by dogmatic rigidity, self-righteousness, and an eagerness to use compulsion. Combine our violent and vengeful proclivities with a president who manipulates fear and stokes machismo, and we have the ingredients for “conservative totalitarianism.” Lemov (2005: 100–101) observes the milieu:

Inasmuch as American society has come to live more and more in conditions akin to his preparatory set, Mowrer contributed to the future. With his laboratory apparatus, he built a stressful world that predicted our own: a world in which a fearful shock may happen at any time and in which stress and its effects can actually be engineered, ratcheted up, and in some sense capitalized upon.

Bush's war on terrorism is creating "the ideal conditions for encouraging and cementing new patterns of behavior"—to wit, a paranoid world. Bush's talk of an "axis of evil," righteous Crusades, and his general anti-Islamic rhetoric have fueled hatred, fear, and animosity, even on U.S. college campuses. "Torture is an emotionally satisfying (not useful) form of counterterrorism because it *mirrors* terrorism itself," observes Stephen Holmes (2006: 132). But this "primitive reciprocity," or *lex talionis*, carries huge moral and political costs. U.S. citizens seem to be willing to allow *anything* that promises to avoid the pain of terrorist acts, including the current expansion of "executive power over the individual, not only the right to torture but the right to spy on citizens, [and] wage aggressive war while lying about it," warns Fred Branfman (2006: 64). Moreover, the bogymen of terrorism is distracting Americans from the many failures of the Bush administration that imperil our health, welfare, and freedom. Our political assent amounts to self-punishment, and the president controls the lever.

Lemov's biographical sketches of the scientists that invented behavioral engineering illustrate how their research was motivated and colored by their personal anxieties and phobias. Some historians might criticize this as psychohistory, but it helps to make an important point—that inhumanity is all too human. We are reminded of the ordinary human character of inhumanity. Enlightened and responsible political leadership, however, should work to discourage the worst impulses of the citizenry, as Jimmy Carter did with his human rights campaign. Yet the problem extends beyond the current political administration. There is no public or media pressure on our political representatives to debate torture. "Why can't we talk about torture," asks Louis Michael Seidman (2005)? His answer is that, although we cannot evade the question, we can't bear to ask it either because, when "it comes to it, we as human beings will do whatever it takes to stop the pain, just as societies will do whatever it takes to preserve our corporate identity." If we are prepared to torture, Seidman (2005: 886) concludes, then "we are prepared to do anything, and the restraint that law purports to impose upon us is a fraud." That is "torture's truth," according to Seidman. We can only hope that this is an overly pessimistic assessment of the human condition.

## NOTES

1. See also Harbury (2005).
2. Actually, concurrent with public proclamations promoting human rights and despite the signing of a number of international conventions by the U.S., the CIA and military intelligence secretly worked on their torture techniques (McCoy, 2006: 11–15; 157).
3. This Honduran counterinsurgency manual goes on to itemize specific methods with which to effect “a devastating assault on individual identity—disorienting arrest, isolation, manipulation of time, threats of physical pain, or drug injection” (*Ibid.*: 91).

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