

Psychology and U.S. psychologists in torture and war in the Middle East

Gerald Gray, LCSW*, & Alessandra Zielinski, researcher

Abstract

The involvement of U.S. psychologists and their influence on torture in Cuba, Afghanistan and Iraq provides previously unrevealed evidence of U.S. torture and military tactical policy, and points to probable military goals the U.S. Administration has denied. What is revealed is that current torture has been designed and used, not so much for interrogation as the Administration and the media insist, but for control by terror. Further, Iraqi civilian deaths may be deliberate and for the same purpose. That is, discovery of involvement of the U.S. psychological professions is a clue to torture, and perhaps killing, as policy, not accident.

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Introduction

To understand the current contribution of the psychological professions to U.S. torture, it is important to know some of their history in the military because particular facts in that presence reveal a current influence and a use previously hidden. The U.S. government denies it has a policy of torture; U.S.

psychologists have been major contributors to developing it, to hiding it, and to hiding its purpose in Iraq and Cuba.

First, U.S. psychologists and other professionals in the psychological fields have been involved in designing torture since at least the Vietnam War. The CIA's KUBARK manual, ostensibly written for interrogation purposes in the 1970s, contains such ideas and wording as the following, which is clearly not written by laypersons:

"All coercive techniques are designed to induce regression ... The result of external pressures of sufficient intensity is the loss of those defenses most recently acquired by civilized man ... 'Relatively small degrees of homeostatic derangement, fatigue, pain, sleep, loss, or anxiety may impair these functions'."¹ And at another iteration, about dread: "If the debility-dependency-dread state is unduly prolonged, the subject may sink into a defensive apathy from which it is hard to arouse him. It is advisable to have a psychologist available whenever regression is induced"^{2,3}

Second, the U.S. has also had an official (but nonpublic) military policy of torturing at least since Vietnam. At that time for instance, Interrogation Translation Teams visited military field hospitals and touched the wounds of enemy prisoners who were patients there in order to induce pain.⁴ The

*)

Institute for Redress & Recovery
Santa Clara University
San Jose
California 95128
U.S.A.
gerald.gray@aaci.org

torture seemed to be for interrogation at times (though tortured bodies were left out as lessons) but torture was policy in any case, even if hidden from the U.S. public.

Just as the present U.S. government denies torture has been policy, it also attempts to deny that present treatment of Iraqi and other prisoners is torture. It is either called “abuse”, or torture is redefined so as not to include methods now publicly acknowledged to be in use. It should be pointed out that in addition to knowing its own past policy of torture, the U.S. government knows the presently reported behavior at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo is torture. In legislation passed by the U.S. Congress and signed by President Bush before the Abu Ghraib scandal broke, there is a description of acts later reported by the media and by the military itself to have occurred at Abu Ghraib:

“Some specific examples of physical and psychological torture (are) systematic beating, sexual torture, electrical torture, suffocation, burning, bodily suspension, pharmacological torture, mutilations, dental assaults, deprivation and exhaustion, threats about the use of torture, witnessing the torture of others, humiliation and isolation”.⁵

Moreover, these and other behaviors reported from Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and elsewhere have been accepted of years as examples of torture in political asylum appeals in U.S. immigration courts. The Bush Administration only began to try to change the definition later, apparently as it anticipated public opposition to its public use of torture.

Torture in Guantanamo

Torture methods in Guantanamo have been widely reported and include methods of isolation, sensory deprivation, sleep deprivation, confinement in space, beatings, extreme temperature, painful forced positions, rape disguised as body searches, and nudity.

Equally important, however, are the conditions of prisoners at Guantanamo and some of their reactions to these conditions, notably self-destructive behavior in suicide attempts, which have long been predictable to psychologists. We know government psychologists read the torture treatment literature (e.g., see the bibliography on the Iraq War Clinicians Website,⁶). Thus they can be assumed to know that experiments with rats in similar conditions to Guantanamo have produced, for instance, self-destructive behavior.⁷ Knowledge of this clinical literature implies that Guantanamo is an experiment, but one with involuntary human subjects, not rats, and that the suicides were predictable and thus variously a form of murder, or extra-judicial killing, or criminal negligence. The further implication is that all this is policy involving the use of psychology.

Moreover, the Guantanamo prisoners were first interrogated at length in Afghanistan and apparently drained of most information there before any “interrogation” of them took place in Cuba.^{8,9} This, coupled with reports in the media that various military revealed the prisoners were low-ranking and knew little, again points to torture that is not for interrogation. The names, ranks, and service branches of psychologists and psychiatrists at Guantanamo have appeared in the press, revealing their knowledge of this experiment.¹⁰ That this is an experiment in torture methods makes sense of the fact that prisoners in Cuba know little, yet few are released. They are apparently not tortured for what they know, but for what they can teach.

Torture in Iraq

Media reports and photos of torture at Abu Ghraib show even more clearly that torture at Abu Ghraib and similar Iraqi prisons is not for information. Clinicians worldwide whose patients are torture survivors can

recognize this type of torture as being for political control. Masses of people who know nothing are tortured. They are not even questioned and are shown or released into the rest of the populace dead or alive to terrify others into submission. We have seen such torture closer to hand in the wars in Central America and elsewhere. This type of torture is also evidence of policy.

Moreover, the methods of torture used in Cuba and Iraq also indicate planning, and thus policy. Modern torture uses methods that leave little or no physical evidence (and no psychological evidence the public could be expected to recognize): rape, forced watching of torture, beating of soft tissue, suffocation, sensory deprivation, electric shock. These methods are used for the purpose of leaving little evidence for human rights groups, doctors, the Red Cross and others to easily see. Revelation of this sort of torture and its purpose comes of course from survivors as well as clinicians, but also from torturers who have been captured, from captured, leaked, or released documents, from writings, and from torturers in the U.S. and other countries who turn up at homeless shelters, drug treatment centers, veterans' hospitals, and elsewhere (torturers too, can be ruined).

There is other evidence from the field of psychology that torture in Iraq is a policy of control; military psychologists are again implicated. Psychologists have long known of the 1973 Stanford Prison Experiment, in which student volunteers, screened for pathology, were at random divided evenly into guards and prisoners in a secret mock prison. No instructions were given to either group as to how to behave. In a few days the experiment had to be stopped by the psychologists as the guards had become controlling and brutal, with the most brutal always establishing the norm for treatment.

Now we do not even have to deduce Administration knowledge of the Stanford experiment as a summary of it is contained in the report on Abu Ghraib produced by former U.S. Defense Secretary Schlesinger.^{11,12} The publication of information about this experiment in an official document, linking it to conditions in U.S. military prisons, further reveals chain of command responsibility for policy. The two experiment excerpts from the Schlesinger report make the point:

“The negative, anti-social reactions observed were not the product of an environment created by combining a collection of deviant personalities, but rather, the result of an intrinsically pathological situation which could distort and rechannel the behavior of essentially normal individuals. The abnormality here resided in the psychological nature of the situation and not in those who passed through it.”

And again:

“The use of power was self-aggrandizing and self-perpetuating. The guard power ... was intensified whenever there was any perceived threat by the prisoners and this new level subsequently became the baseline from which further hostility and harassment would begin. The most hostile guards on each shift moved spontaneously into the leadership roles ... Not to be tough and arrogant was to be seen as a sign of weakness by the guards and even those ‘good’ guards who did not get as drawn into the power syndrome as the others respected the implicit norm of never contradicting or even interfering with the action of a more hostile guard on their shift.”¹³

This appears to be the experiment that informs torture in Iraq and one of the original authors of this study may understand this.^{14,15} A situation is created – made worse by understaffing, danger, and no outside independent controls – and with a little

encouragement (never specific instructions to torture) guards do torture. This situation and this torture are now widely reported in U.S. prisons in Iraq (more than 50,000 went through these prisons as long ago as 2005;¹⁶ currently the U.S. has 10 known prisons and plans at least 7 more¹⁷). The U.S. administration's advantage in the Stanford experiment "situation" is that it provides deniability – there are no orders to torture, but the situation can be predicted to cause it. It is consistent with this process that only low-ranking staff are punished, and only a few and then lightly. To remove impunity from higher ranks would destroy the structure because they could protect themselves by preventing torture.

Note the Stanford experiment is an experiment with guards as well as prisoners. Since doctors and psychologists are now involved in carrying out torture at various sites, they too are subjects of this experiment. There is now evidence that clinicians at Guantanamo act as the guards do,^{10,18} and most recently doctors there have kept hunger strikers alive with the result they will be available for more torture.¹⁹ With the Stanford experiment in place, someone is monitoring conditions under which clinicians can be made to torture or accept torture, what they will do, how to silence those who may talk, etc.

The construction of this "situation" finally makes sense of the fact that Geoffrey Miller, the general in charge in Guantanamo, was put in command of the prisons in Iraq. Using torture mainly to ruin people, rather than to interrogate them, is an attempt to control politically through torture.

It is this experience of seeing types of torture (for interrogation or for control) over recent years that should keep us from another mistaken impression. That is, if in Cuba and Iraq we are not looking primarily

at interrogation and if current torture in Iraq really is for control, then it is a mistake for Schlesinger, the media, and human rights groups to use Abu Ghraib to argue for internal prison reform or clearer definitions of permissible interrogation methods. Only the intrusion of the outside world into prisons in the form of unannounced, frequent, complete inspections with penalties may guard against deterioration into the conditions of the Stanford experiment.

Civilian deaths in Iraq

Torturing large numbers of people in a country of 25 million is not sufficient for control even in a small area like Central America. Killing civilians in targeted areas was added.²⁰ In Iraq, U.S. soldiers are put into combat under the conditions of the Stanford experiment: young, inexperienced, fearful, undermanned, heavily armed troops are given a role and thrown into house-to-house fighting in a strange country with another language. The enemy looks like civilians. Without being ordered to kill civilians, soldiers predictably must do so in large numbers. Letting such killing occur in targeted cities and regions (e.g., the city of Fallujah) may be another tool for political control by terror; many militaries have used it elsewhere. This makes sense of a report in the *BMJ*, *The Lancet*, of 100,000 civilian deaths from all causes since the start of war into 2004.

The 2005 U.S. Department of Defense report is different and has its estimation of insurgent-caused deaths at about 6,475 in a later 20 month period.^{21,22} The estimate of deaths in U.S. Department of Defense figures is a necessary interpolation by Iraq Body Count; the DOD counted only insurgent-caused deaths and injuries and did not sort one from the other. It would be impossible to run a battlefield experiment like the

Stanford prison experiment, so the battlefield doubles as the experiment. Psychology can be used here as it is in torture for control. This would reveal some of the policy. Or are we to believe that the government of a military that massively tortures a populace will not also kill it?

What can be the intent of a policy of torture and killing, beyond the discovery that it is for control of Iraq? This part is not answered by psychology, but discovering the use of psychology leaves the question open. Political torture is always to support military power, and the U.S. is building its own large bases in Iraq which, like the prisons, suggest a long occupation and more torture. If in the case of Iraq we discard the Administration's successive claims about weapons of mass destruction, overthrowing a formerly supported tyrant, interest in democracy (under torture), then all other motives must be considered.

With this much evidence, we can now see the notorious "ticking bomb" argument that has been used for U.S. torture (that torture is justified to interrogate someone who knows of a death threat) must in fact be deliberately misleading. It is so because it is an argument for the use of torture for interrogation, and so leads the public away from discovery of the subtle use of a psychological experiment for the overriding real purpose of torture by the U.S. The real question is not, "What justifies torture?" but "What justifies the military occupation revealed by torture for control?"

Finally, the leaking in 2005 of a paper calling for invasion of Iraq well before evidence for invasion was alleged, written by policymakers now in the Administration, along with the torture and killing, suggests one specific reason why the U.S. opposed the International Criminal Court. That is, not fear of frivolous lawsuits as was said,²³

but the intent to torture, perhaps to kill, with impunity wherever it chooses.

Impunity for clinicians?

While change in U.S. policy requires a shift in the center of power, aided hopefully in part by education from the torture treatment movement, members of this movement are faced with their very own, immediate, political challenge. Is there to be no penalty for U.S. clinicians who participate in torture, whose names, rank, and branch of service are published, or whose job resumes or memberships reveal their history in torture? Will they be accepted at international symposia, will their papers be published, will they be given university posts, fellowships, or other jobs? Sorting this out will take work, particularly with American clinicians so ubiquitous. But so once were German troops in Norway, yet ordinary citizens refused to sit next to them in public transport, while other resistance grew. How to act against torture, not whether, is our only issue.

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