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A Pattern of (Not Deviation From) Empire

As Bush-era episodes of torture have became almost daily hand ringing fare for establishment politicians and the media, calls for national soul-searching and reform arrive with a predictable litany of myths and illusions. Mainstream scrutiny peaked with the April release of incriminating "torture memos" issued by the Office of Legal Council spanning the years 2002 to 2005 – memos that involved clear violation of the Geneva and Torture Conventions. The issue has touched a raw nerve in the political culture, with government and military leaders – echoed by media pundits – quick to parrot two comforting discourses: abuses were the product of a few wayward (low-level) military personnel, a violation of sacred U.S. practices and values including the "rule of law". The first myth necessarily disappeared from view after several reports (including one conducted by the U.S. Army) had shown culpability extending all the way to the summits of power. But the fiction about torture being a radical departure from American traditions persists.

In a recent speech at UCLA, former NATO commander and 2004 presidential candidate General Wesley Clark denounced torture as an evil blight conflicting with the well-known American dedication to international rules and laws. "Law is sacred to the American system", pronounced Clark. "A retreat from Geneva means nothing less than abandoning American values." In the aftermath of the 2004 Abu Ghraib revelations, President George W. Bush said that prisoner abuse was an embarrassing exception to time-honored national precedents, for "that's not the way we do things in America" – a sentiment repeated by politicians and commentators across the ideological spectrum. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, speaking in December 2005, claimed: "With respect to detainees the United States government complies with its Constitution, its laws, and its treaty obligations. Acts of physical or mental torture are expressly prohibited. The United States government does not authorize or condone torture of detainees. Torture, and conspiracy to commit torture, are crimes under U.S. law, wherever they may occur in the world." She described atrocities at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib as sickening aberrations from the norm, thus unlikely to be repeated. More recently, Rice denied altogether that the U.S. practiced torture in a heated exchange with Stanford University students.

In the midst of these platitudes, liberals, more troubled by the Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib events, have simply added their own myths. Media figures like Rachel Maddow, Randi Rhodes, and Ron Reagan have denounced Bush-era crimes as counter to the American character: the torture of detainees is a uniquely wicked invention of Bush, Cheney, and the neocons. A major problem, according to the liberals, is that harsh interrogation methods "never work" since they undermine intelligence-gathering, eliciting nothing but false information. This contention only reveals a shallow understanding of how torture has historically "worked". Commenting on her April 22nd MSNBC show, Maddow roundly condemned torture carried out by the CIA and Pentagon, intoning "We have been doing things [torture] we have never done before in the United States. We never did that stuff before. How did that ever happen?" Human-rights abuses, like the doctrine of preemptive war, were the brainchild of the Bush clique. "It was the Republican Party that gave us torture as practiced by the U.S. government", Maddow informed her April 27th audience, adding "either we have a Constitution or we don't".

It takes little investigation to see that such views have little basis in actual U.S. history. Torture has always been a staple of U.S. military interventions, built into its very logic of imperial agendas. A nation that has launched warfare dozens of times, repeatedly attacked civilian populations, destroyed entire societies, used weapons of mass destruction, and deployed massive armed force to crush popular movements around the world – killing millions and displacing tens of millions more in the process – could hardly be expected to shy away from smaller-scale criminality in its pursuit

of Manifest Destiny. Illegal detentions, denial of due process, kidnappings, assassinations, death-squad murders, and cruel interrogation techniques have long been just another valuable (if illegal) tool of imperial power. U.S. exterminationist policies against Native Americans throughout the nineteenth century, involving widespread torture, served as a prelude to later barbarism in the Philippines, Mexico, the Pacific Theater in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Central America, and the Middle East. Decades of Indian Wars brought not only the Sand Creek, Washita, and Wounded Knee massacres but unspeakable acts of everyday brutality: beatings, scalpings, mutiliations, sexual assaults, kidnappings, prisoner mistreatment, and shootings, often along with larger-scale attacks on civilian encampments. Captives were often summarily executed, including women, children, and elderly. Dwellings were routinely burned to the ground, food stores destroyed, ponies and buffalo slaughtered by the thousands. Dying Indians were frequently tortured, killed, and mutilated. Such atrocities reached new heights when General George Armstrong Custer attacked a defenseless settlement of Cheyenne women and children at the Washita River in Oklahoma in 1868, a massacre solidifying Custer's credentials as heroic Indian fighter.

At Sand Creek, Colorado in 1864 the carnage wrought by the fanatically pious Colonel John Chivington was especially savage. Reflecting on Chivington's God-ordained massacre, a lieutenant from the New Mexico Volunteers wrote: "Of from five to six hundred souls [killed] the majority of which were women and children . . . I did not see a body of a man, woman, or child but was scalped, and in many instances their bodies were mutilated in a most horrible manner – men, women, and children's privates cut out. I heard one man say that he had cut out a woman's private parts and had them for exhibition on a stick. I heard another man say he had cut the fingers of an Indian to get the rings on the hand . . ." According to this and many similar reports, soldiers used knives to rip apart bodies, and none were spared. Torture, butchery, mutilation – there seemed to be no limits to U.S. military barbarism on the frontier. Those horrors were repeated time and again, culminating in the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890 where hundreds of defenseless women and children were slaughtered, many tortured before the last fatal assaults.

Slavery? That was an institutionalized system of torture – indeed terrorism – from beginning to end. The "war to end slavery"? Well, the Civil War produced four years of unbelievable butchery and torture on both sides, both within and outside the many notorious prison camps maintained North and South.

As international law became refined since the early twentieth century, following the two Hague Conventions, prohibitions against torture and similar abuses were established and codified, but U.S. global behavior took no heed, persisting in its earlier criminal pattern. By the 1890s U.S. imperialism and outlawry was expanding outward, shifting its targets to Latin America, Asia, and later the Middle East. In World War II, the fabled "good war", torture became routine practice in the Pacific Theater were the U.S. carried out a war of attrition against the Japanese culminating in months of saturation bombing raids and two nuclear horrors. In what John Dower calls a "war without mercy" (on both sides) the Japanese were irredeemably evil, a monolithic race apart, so subhuman that the most extreme barbarism could be justified. Racial stereotypes of savage Asian hordes permeated U.S. media both in the military and home front, sustaining a racially-charged milieu in which rules of engagement were thrown to the wind. Aside from incendiary aerial bombardments of every Japanese city, repeated smaller atrocities were common: shooting of prisoners, torture, lifeboat strafings, attacks on hospitals, civilian abuse, wounded buried alive, mutilated corpses. When such criminality became known to general military and political circles, it was fiercely defended, even celebrated in an atmosphere of vengeful racial hatred.

In the aftermath of World War II and Korea (laden with even more atrocities), the Vietnam War produced near-total collapse moral and social constraints as U.S. criminality behavior achieved new records. Testimony of first-hand witnesses at the 1971 Winter Solider Hearings and elsewhere showed that rules of engagement applied only in military textbooks. There were no limits to the barbarism. Vietnamese running from combat, taking evasive action, or giving the "appearance" of combatants were regularly detained, kept captive, and more often than not tortured – when not immediately fired upon. American troops rarely tried to distinguish civilians from combatants, a difficult task in any event under conditions of guerrilla insurgency. The

prevailing idea was that, in the midst of combat and "free-fire zones", any Vietnamese encountered was a "gook" who, by definition, was the enemy. The Vietnam brutality was never-ending – burning homes, mass killings, torture, rape, murder of wounded prisoners, beatings, destruction of animals and life-support systems, use of chemical weapons, all fueled by some combination of revenge, sadism, combat stress, intimidation, and in certain instances sexual pleasure. Such practices were routinely tolerated or even sanctioned at the very top of the command structure.

In Vietnam ordinary troops, as well as military intelligence personnel, soon became well-versed in methods of harassment, intimidation, and torture as they detained, questioned, and punished North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops in the field. Methods included throwing people out of helicopters, electric shock treatment, severe beatings, and mutilation. Prisoners were often taken for "flying lessons" or "half a helicopter ride" as interrogators kept throwing people out until someone "cooperated". Other creative torture methods were employed to break down possible informants. When a captive proved stubborn, according to one U.S. soldier, "the answer is invariable, you take a field telephone, wire it around a man's testicles, you ring him up and he always answers. It's known as the Bell Telephone Hour. You won't find it in the curriculum." Torture could be randomly used, the assumption being that civilians were likely to be "VC supporters" or at least hostile to American troops. Those captured were tortured not only to gain information but more often out of hatred, sadism, or sexual pleasure. No U.S. military figure in Vietnam was likely to argue that torture somehow "didn't work".

Rape became a medium of combining sex and violence. According to one macabre account: " . . . maybe four or five of us would go into a village and take a girl and bring her out to the jungle. . . . Explain to her to lie on the ground and don't scream, otherwise she'll be killed immediately, and however many guys there are – well, they all do what they want. And if the guys are in a good mood, they let her go. If not they kill her." Sexual assault was often followed by torture. According to widespread testimony and reports, some women were burned to death after gasoline was poured over their body and troops stood around and sadistically watched. Routine sexual encounters between GIs and Vietnamese women frequently grew violent, leading to rapes, beatings, and murder.

None of this could be dismissed as the isolated or aberrant behavior of a few undisciplined soldiers, nor was it related manly to intelligence operations. Recycling racist imagery that gave wars against Native Americans, Japanese, and Koreans added savagery, military leaders called the Vietnamese gooks, thugs, and vermin, with General William Westmoreland preferring the label "worthless termites" – the same "termites", presumably, that were to be given the blessings of freedom and democracy. Extreme racist attitudes permeated the military culture from top to bottom, as would later be the case in Iraq. According to one participant in the field, "the voices of authority in the company – the platoon sergeants and officers – acknowledged that [executing prisoners] was a proper way to behave. Who were the grunts to disagree with it? We supported it."

By late 1960s the CIA Phoenix Program had been responsible for the illegal detention and torture of untold thousands of captives. Under this program U.S. operatives assassinated an estimated 21,000 Vietnamese officials in the South. As the war expanded, Navy SEALs and other units mounted raids to destroy homes, capture and torture people, and conduct summary executions at random. Many hundreds of thousands (mostly civilians) were rounded up, detained, and subjected to unspeakable brutality – all condoned or at least ignored all the way to the top of the military and government leadership.

The U.S. criminal record in Central America, while perhaps less egregious than that in Asia, spans a lengthier historical period during which the CIA, Pentagon, and U.S. proxy groups detained, tortured, and killed tens of thousands of people in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Panama, and Nicaragua. Such atrocities flowed from official policies at a time when U.S.-supported corporate and oligarchical interests were being challenged or overturned by popular forces. As Jennifer Harbury shows in her well-researched study of torture across Central America, *Truth, Torture, and the American* Way: "A review of the materials leads relentlessly to just one conclusion: that the CIA and related U.S. intelligence agencies have since their inception engaged in the widespread practice of torture, either directly or through well-paid proxies."

Counterinsurgency campaigns gave rise to regular kidnappings, detentions, torture, and executions. The U.S., often through its infamous School of the Americas and other domestic military bases, provided finances, training, logistics, and weapons – the work of mostly secret projects organized by the CIA. In Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua local atrocities reach their peak during the 1980s as the linkage between the U.S. and Central American agencies of death and destruction intensified, leading to a wave of abductions, torture, and murder.

As in Vietnam, torture and related atrocities in Central America were rarely the outgrowth of excesses, mistakes, or the work of a few renegade troops; nor were they usually motivated by the quest for reliable intelligence. They were rooted in the logic of control and repression. What was understood as necessary "dirty work" took years to plan and refine, much of it carried over from the Vietnam experience. Such methods as solitary confinement, beatings, electric shocks, stress positions, and sexual humiliation – to be replicated later at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib – had been de rigeur in Vietnam. One difference in Central America was that the U.S. chose to work through local military units and death squads, that is by proxy, so that atrocities could never be traced by the the guilty Washington operatives. Still, as Harbury points out, there were few doubts in the field as to who was calling the shots: "The Yankees in the torture cells were not working for local military officials at all. To the contrary, they were very much in charge, and had clear authority over the torturers themselves. The Americans were not taking orders, they were giving them. At times they were even supervising the entire torture session."

The postwar years witnessed a wide U.S. legacy of illegal detentions, torture, assassination, and other mayhem as tried-and-proven instruments of imperial power, from Latin American to Indonesia, Iran, Central Asia, and the Balkans as well as Korea and Vietnam – not only through the CIA but Special Forces units, Navy SEALs, Delta Force operatives, and other military actions. "Harsh interrogation methods" were always just one facet of this worldwide terror apparatus.

The events at Abu Ghraib were thus simply one more episode in the overall trajectory of U.S. imperialism, subordinate to a brutal military occupation bringing endless horrors to the Iraqi population. Prison abuse was built into the general mosaic of domination, set up in Washington and pursued with cruel rationality in the field where U.S. troops, as in Vietnam, were constantly surrounded by "enemies" or "terrorists". Not only detention centers but homes, checkpoints, urban neighborhoods, and roadways served as arenas of armed combat, leading to recurrent arrests, beatings, home invasions, shootings, bombings, and massacres (as at Hadditha in 2006). Reports of U.S. military officers ordering beatings of Iraqis were common from the 2003 invasion onward. Troops were ordered to "crank up the violence level" in the struggle to quell insurgency – violence that included assaults, torture, and random killings, both in and out of the many prisons – little of it designed to secure "intelligence". Following a procedure called "dead-checking", it was a recurring practice for American troops to murder wounded Iraqis according to the maxim "if somebody is worth shooting once, they're worth shooting twice."

One instigator of the Abu Ghraib torture, Pfc. Lynndie England, said in an interview that such practices were essentially business-as-usual – just troops behaving "normally" in a combat environment filled with stress, anger, and fear. No moral scruples or rules of engagement entered the picture. Others described the events as a matter of bored soldiers simply passing time, having fun. That so many prisoners were stripped naked, sexually intimidated or violated, beaten, hooded, shackled, handcuffed, and forced into stress positions – not to mention sleep and food deprived – provoked little if any outrage at the scene.

In the film *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib,* one convicted soldier, Specialist Sabrine Harman, spoke at length about the atrocities as if she were describing a movie or tennis match: it was all in a day's work, nothing special. Photographed laughing next to an Iraqi corpse, she was unapologetic, explaining that she *always* liked to smile for photos. What emerges from Abu Ghraib and other U.S. gulags like Guantanamo and Baghram Air Base in Afghanistan is a bleak and frightening picture of sadistic military behavior devoid of moral, legal, or social restraints, with virtually nothing to do with procuring information. (The CIA and military did try to force some prisoners to supply "information", under duress, that would justify the fraudulent basis of U.S. intervention in Iraq – a miserable failure – but that is another tale. Accused terrorist Khalid Shaikh Mohammed recently

admitted that he had lied to the CIA after being harshly treated.) Still, recent atrocities at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib – waterboarding, sleep and food deprivation, sensory abuses – hardly compare to the routine barbarism practiced in Vietnam and earlier U.S. wars.

History shows that present-day U.S. torture and other similar outlawry has deep roots in the past, the byproduct of an ever-expanding imperial apparatus of control and repression. In hundreds of pages of long-classified but recently-disclosed files, CIA documents alone describe an immense variety of illegal activities: secret holding cells around the world, unlawful detentions without due process, vast surveillance, plots to assassinate foreign leaders, severe interrogation methods. Such outrages are outgrowth of established *patterns* rather than deviations from (romanticized) historical norms, integral to the far greater savagery of aggressive warfare. U.S. militarism has routinely embraced criminal behavior sanctioned, more often than not, at the highest levels of Washington officialdom. The CIA torture networks in place across several decades, but only recently a focus of mainstream political concern, represents just one cornerstone of U.S. imperial efforts to maximize its global surveillance, intelligence, and control potential.

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