

A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, From the Cold War to the War on Terror, by Alfred W. McCoy (New York: Metropolitan/Henry Holt), 2006, 290 pages, \$25.

"We have met the enemy and he is us."

—Pogo

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At least two Pogo-truths apply to the content of this book. The first is that in the so-called war on terror it is often we who are acting terribly. I am disturbed and saddened by this truth. I am not a U.S. intelligence agent tasked with getting information from a person of interest, nor am I a soldier or reservist encouraged to "soften up" a detainee prior to interrogation. Nevertheless, as a citizen of a democracy, I am ultimately responsible for torture inflicted by representatives of my government.

The second Pogo-truth is even more difficult for me as a psychologist, particularly one who specializes in the psychology of interrogations and confessions. This truth is that not only is torture carried out in our name (by and "for" Americans) but the theory and techniques of modern CIA-style torture have their roots in North American Psychology and Psychiatry.

Some questions about torture:

- Is torture an efficient, accurate means for extracting information vital to national security? (Does it work?)
- Do the infamous photos of hooded prisoners in uncomfortable positions reflect the twisted imagination of a few bad apples – "sadistic hillbillies on the night shift" (Wolf, 2006) - or a carefully developed plan designed to facilitate the gathering of intelligence?
- How did the modern practices of psychological torture develop, and how did they drift from being used on a few spe-

cific targets in settings declared to be separate from the Geneva Conventions to widespread use on mostly innocent people (caught up in neighborhood sweeps and taken in for questioning) in places where there was no question that the Geneva Conventions applied?

- When people are captured and tortured, the resulting information is not admissible in court, so what do you do with those people after you've gotten all the information from them you're going to get - that is, if we don't just summarily execute them?
- Torture - what do we do, why do we do it, does it work, what does it do to those tortured, and how does it affect the torturers and the society that tortures?

This carefully documented book explores all these questions and provides answers to most of them. In *A Question of Torture*, McCoy describes the development of the art and science of torture, and he manages to do so clearly without writing luridly. This is essential reading for military service persons, reservists, civilian government employees, citizens, professionals interested in the psychology of interrogations and confessions, and anyone who wants to understand who we Americans are, including some things that everyone else in the world understands already.

In exploring the hidden history of torture in the USA over the past half century, McCoy notes that "Among the practices of the modern state, torture is the least understood, one that lures its practitioners, high and low, with fantasies of power and dominion" (pp. 12-13). He details "five intertwined aspects of [torture's] perverse psychology" (p. 13):

- Torture unleashes a profound capacity for cruelty in human nature.
- States that initially sanction torture of a few special targets often proceed to torture more and more suspected enemies.
- Perpetrators of torture focus on the initial appearance of quick, efficient information extraction. They may ignore evidence of torture's limited utility and high political cost.

- Torturers are rarely prosecuted for their crimes.
- Nations that sanction torture in defiance of democratic principles do so at a terrible price.

McCoy notes that from the very beginnings of the CIA in 1947, the agency was disturbed by the Soviet Union's ability to extract public confessions "in ways that hinted at secret mind-control techniques" (p. 22). Prominent North American psychologists, including Yale's Irving L. Janis and Stanley Milgram and McGill's Donald O. Hebb, conducted controversial research under government grants. "Through covert trial and error, the CIA, in collaboration with university researchers, slowly identified three key behavioral components integral to its emerging techniques for psychological torture" (p. 32): sensory deprivation, self-inflicted pain, and the use of social conventions to get normal people to accept authority and ignore a victim's pain.

McCoy describes the importance of North American psychologists and psychiatrists, including past-presidents of the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association, in research involving "a synergy of the covert and the overt" (p. 46). Researchers found that "esoteric" methods of mind control, including drugs such as LSD and physical stress such as electric shock, "simply did not work and more basic psychological techniques were, by contrast, devastatingly effective. As the CIA psychologist John Gittinger* later told the U.S. Senate, 'the general idea we were able to come up with is that brain-washing was largely a process of isolating a human being, keeping him out of contact, putting him under long stress in relationship to interviewing and interrogation, ... without having to resort to any kind of esoteric means'" (pp. 49-50).

USA's allies have been encouraged to use CIA-style torture. For example, "The School of the Americas and U.S. Southern Command had used improper instruction materials in training Latin American officers, including Guatemalans, from 1982

to 1991.” The training materials included passages that condoned “executions of guerrillas, extortion, physical abuse, coercion, and false imprisonment” (p. 105).

Nearly 30 years ago, in February 1977, the European Court of Human Rights found that Great Britain was guilty of “inhuman and degrading treatment” (p. 57) against suspects during the time of IRA terrorism. Britain’s attorney general vowed that the “five techniques” (which McCoy considers to be a hybrid combination of physical and psychological torture) used on those suspects “will not in any circumstances be reintroduced as an aid to interrogation” (p. 57). I will close by listing those “five techniques,” with the suggestion that the reader consider whether such techniques – long condemned by international courts on human rights – have been “reintroduced as an aid to interrogation” via CIA “renditions” and in interrogations in both infamous and secret prisons:

- **WALL-STANDING:** Forcing the detainees to remain for periods of some hours in a “stress position,” described by those who underwent it as being “spreadeagled against the wall, with their fingers put high above the head against the wall, the legs spread apart and the feet back, causing them to stand on their toes with the weight of the body mainly on the fingers.”
- **HOODING:** putting a black or navy colored bag over the detainees’ heads and ... keeping it there all the time except during interrogation.
- **SUBJECTION TO NOISE:** pending their interrogations, holding the detainees in a room where there was a continuous loud and hissing noise.
- **DEPRIVATION OF SLEEP:** pending their interrogations, depriving the detainees of sleep.
- **DEPRIVATION OF FOOD AND DRINK:** subjecting the detainees to a reduced diet during their stay at the centre and pending interrogations (p. 55).

These “carefully chosen and measured techniques ... cause intense physical, mental, and psychological suffering” (p. 58)

by the tortured, and they extract a heavy toll on the torturers and the countries, including the USA today, that sanction torture.

Note * Coincidentally, Gittinger developed the theory that formed the basis of my doctoral dissertation.

Reference Wolf, B. (2006). Author explores CIA connections to torture tactics. University of Wisconsin-Madison. Downloaded 5/2/06 from <http://www.news.wisc.edu/11995.html>.