

It's Torture-but Let's Not Call It That

By [Peter Hart](#)

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The Washington Post ([3/31/14](#)) got a big scoop on the massive Senate Intelligence Committee investigation into the CIA's Bush-era torture program. But they wouldn't call it.

Under the headline "CIA Misled on Interrogation Program, Senate Report Says," reporters [Greg Miller](#), Adam Goldman and Ellen Nakashima explain that the still-classified, 6,000-plus page report finds that the CIA misled lawmakers and the public about the effectiveness of torture.

But the piece doesn't call it torture. Readers learn about a "brutal interrogation program," "harsh techniques," "excruciating interrogation methods," "brutal measures," "harsh interrogation techniques," "coercive techniques," "previously undisclosed cases of abuse," "harsh treatment" and "enhanced interrogation techniques."

The descriptions were at times quite vivid. Readers learn of the treatment of one prisoner:

CIA interrogators forcibly kept his head under the water while he struggled to breathe and beat him repeatedly, hitting him with a truncheon-like object and smashing his head against a wall.

But they still won't call that "torture." The only time that word was used was in reference to critics: "methods that Obama and others later labeled torture."

It's important to understand that, as many critics have [pointed out](#), that these kinds of tactics would be labeled as torture if they were happening in another country (Extra!, [6/08](#)). The media's role in endorsing and excusing torture has been an issue as long as the US torture program has been public (Extra!, [6/04](#)). The press has done its part to justify torture, even pushing the false idea that torture was key to finding Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden (FAIR Media Advisory, [5/4/11](#)).

So while it's not new that some media outlets are still hesitant to call torture "torture," it's still revealing—and probably not an accident. Post reporter Miller appeared on the PBS Newshour ([4/1/14](#)) to talk about his piece. Host Judy Woodruff referred to "harsh techniques," and Miller explained that there was

very little evidence that these enhanced techniques, as they're called—we're referring to water-boarding, sleep deprivation, things like that—delivered any significant intelligence in the aftermath of 9/11.

What reporters call torture is important—even when they’re reporting illuminating and very useful information about the scope of the program.

The Post isn’t done covering the issue; today (4/2/14), columnist [David Ignatius](#) makes it sound like the Senate report is shocking—it “includes gruesome new details about interrogation practices in the first year after September 11, 2001, before the CIA’s program was formally established with the misplaced approval of President George W. Bush’s Justice Department.”

Ignatius uses the “T-word,” and suggests that some of the details “will shock the conscience in the same way that the Abu Ghraib and waterboarding revelations did.”

He also writes: “The heart of the dispute isn’t whether torture is immoral—nobody would argue that question today—but whether it was ever effective.”

Of course, there are still people who would argue that torture is, in some cases, perfectly moral. Like his Post colleague Charles Krauthammer, who wrote this a few years ago (5/15/09):

Our jurisprudence has the “reasonable man” standard. A jury is asked to consider what a reasonable person would do under certain urgent circumstances.

On the morality of waterboarding and other “torture,” Pelosi and other senior and expert members of Congress represented their colleagues, and indeed the entire American people, in rendering the reasonable person verdict. What did they do? They gave tacit approval. In fact, according to Goss, they offered encouragement. Given the circumstances, they clearly deemed the interrogations warranted.

Perhaps Ignatius thinks Krauthammer has changed his mind. I suspect not.

Hat tip: Alice Chan.

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