

Medical Doctor Who ‘Inspired’ Torture Program Gets \$31 Million Army Contract

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A psychologist whose research was used in constructing the US’s program to torture terrorism suspects has been granted a \$31-million no-bid Army contract to provide “resilience training” to US soldiers.

[Mark Benjamin at Salon.com reports](#) that University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin Seligman’s research “formed the psychological underpinnings of the Bush administration’s torture program.”

The Army awarded the “sole source” contract in February to the University of Pennsylvania for resilience training, or teaching soldiers to better cope with the psychological strain of multiple combat tours. The university’s Positive Psychology Center, directed by famed psychologist Martin Seligman, is conducting the resilience training.

Army contracting documents show that nobody else was allowed to bid on the resilience-training contract because “there is only one responsible source due to a unique capability provided, and no other supplies or services will satisfy agency requirements.” And yet, Salon was able to identify resilience training experts at other institutions around the country, including the University of Maryland and the Mayo Clinic. In fact, in 2008 the Marine Corps launched a project with UCLA to conduct resilience training for Marines and their families at nine military bases across the United States and in Okinawa, Japan.

In a 2009 article, the [New York Times described](#) Seligman’s small but crucial role in the establishment of the “enhanced interrogation techniques” used on terrorism suspects before the techniques were suspended in 2008.

In December 2001, a small group of professors and law enforcement and intelligence officers gathered outside Philadelphia at the home of a prominent psychologist, Martin E. P. Seligman, to brainstorm about Muslim extremism. Among them was Dr. [Jim] Mitchell, who attended with a C.I.A. psychologist, Kirk M. Hubbard.

During a break, Dr. Mitchell introduced himself to Dr. Seligman and said how much he admired the older man’s writing on “learned helplessness.” Dr. Seligman was so struck by Dr. Mitchell’s unreserved praise, he recalled in an interview, that he mentioned it to his wife that night. Later, he said, he was “grieved and horrified” to learn that his work had been cited to justify brutal interrogations.

Dr. Seligman had discovered in the 1960s that dogs that learned they could do nothing to avoid small electric shocks would become listless and simply whine and endure the shocks

even after being given a chance to escape.

According to Benjamin, Seligman is “most famous for his work in the 1960s in which he was able to psychologically destroy caged dogs by subjecting them to repeated electric shocks with no hope of escape. The dogs broke down completely and ultimately would not attempt to escape through an open cage door when given the opportunity to avoid more pain. Seligman called the phenomenon ‘learned helplessness.’”

In an [interview with Harper’s in 2008](#), author Jane Mayer said that in 2002, as the US was trying to extract information from Abu Zybaydah, Seligman was brought in by the CIA to speak on his research. But Selgiman asserted that his involvement had to do with helping soldiers resist torture, not carry it out.

It was completely fascinating to me to learn that Martin Seligman, one of the most esteemed psychologists in the country, a former head of the APA, was connected to the CIA after 9/11....

Seligman confirmed for me, by email, that in the spring of 2002, as the CIA was trying to figure out how to interrogate its first major high-value detainee, Abu Zubayda, he was brought in to speak about his theories to a high-level confab apparently organized by CIA officials, at the Navy’s SERE School in San Diego. He said his talk lasted some three hours. Seligman said his talk was focused on how to help U.S. soldiers resist torture—not on how to breakdown resistance in detainees....

Among the U.S. Government’s interrogation techniques that seem to echo these experiments are the uses of random maltreatment—taking away any predictable schedule from detainees so that they have no idea what time it is, no sense of when meals are delivered, no idea if it is day or night, as well as manipulating temperature, sound, sleep, and using isolation, all of which are meant to cause psychic stress that would erode a prisoner’s resistance to being interrogated and foster total dependency upon an interrogator. Perhaps just coincidentally, the detainees have described other ways in which they were treated like dogs—the use of dog cages and of a collar and leash.

Benjamin notes that Seligman in considered by at least some of his colleagues to be a social conservative. He points to an [online comment](#) Seligman wrote, urging scientists to use their knowledge to aid in the war on terrorism.

The civilized world is at war with Jihad Islamic terrorism. It takes a bomb in the office of some academics to make them realize that their most basic values are now threatened, and some of my good friends and colleagues on the Edge seem to have forgotten 9/11. If we lose the war, the laudable, but pet projects they endorse, will not be issues. Fighting fatwahs and no education for women will displace grousing about random assignment of schoolchildren to study education. If we win this war, we can go on to pursue the normal goals of science.

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