

Refusing to Take Sides, NPR Takes Sides With Torture Deniers

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National Public Radio, following the lead of the Washington Post (FAIR Blog, [12/9/14](#)) (and in contrast to the New York Times-FAIR Blog, [8/8/14](#)), tries to avoid applying the word “torture” in its own voice to the tortures described in the recent Senate Intelligence Committee report. Here’s host Robert Siegel (All Things Considered, [12/9/14](#)):

In the years after 9/11, the CIA conducted harsh interrogations, more brutal and widespread than many realized. And worse, those interrogations did not produce any intelligence that we could use in any significant way to fight terrorism. Those are the conclusions of a report partially released today by the Democratic chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee. Reactions to what’s known as the torture report show a country divided.

NPR correspondent [Tamara Keith](#) went on to refer to Sen. Dianne Feinstein discussing “a CIA program that used techniques she says amounted to torture.” In her own words, Keith reports that “the CIA program of secret overseas detentions and so-called enhanced interrogation methods began shortly after the September 11 attacks.”

Soon enough, “so-called” becomes just what they’re called. Says Keith: “The key finding: These enhanced interrogation methods didn’t make America safer.” When a critic of the report, CIA director John Brennan, is introduced, NPR describes the torture whose benefits he touts as “these interrogations.”



This is a longstanding practice of NPR’s. The network’s then-ombud [Alicia Shepard](#) (right) made it clear back in 2009 ([6/21/09](#)): “NPR decided to not use the term ‘torture’ to describe techniques such as waterboarding but instead uses ‘harsh interrogation tactics,’” she reported:

The problem is that the word torture is loaded with political and social implications for several reasons, including the fact that torture is illegal under US law and international treaties the United States has signed.

Yes—that’s why whether or not what the US did to prisoners was torture or not is a vitally important question for journalists to answer. But NPR thinks it can find a way not to answer it. Said Shepard:

I recognize that it’s frustrating for some listeners to have NPR not use the word torture to describe certain practices that seem barbaric. But the role of a news organization is not to choose sides in this or any debate. People have different definitions of torture and different feelings about what constitutes torture.

Now, if there’s a debate between people who think that waterboarding, forcing people to stand on broken legs, sleep deprivation for up to 180 hours, being shackled to a wall for 17 days, hypothermia to the point of death, “rectal rehydration and feeding,” [etc.](#) are what are generally and traditionally referred to as torture, and people who *don’t* think those things should be called torture, and you choose not to call them torture—you haven’t avoided taking a side. It’s pretty obvious which side you’ve taken, isn’t it?

Shepard recognized that some people will be unhappy regardless of how NPR talks about torture:

It’s a no-win case for journalists. If journalists use the words “harsh interrogation techniques,” they can be seen as siding with the White House and the language that some US officials, particularly in the Bush administration, prefer. If journalists use the word “torture,” then they can be accused of siding with those who are particularly and visibly still angry at the previous administration.

If that’s the way they look at it, it’s interesting that they chose to side with the Bush administration rather than those “particularly and visibly still angry” at the Bush administration, i.e. dirty hippies.

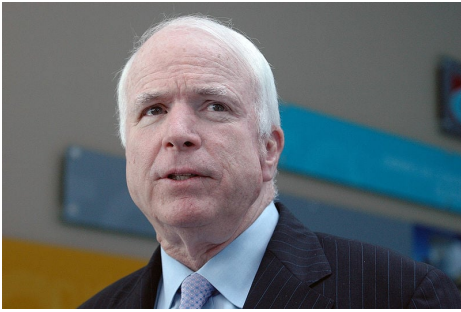
NPR News’ managing editor David Sweeney saw things similarly; Shepard quoted him:

“We understand that no matter what language we use, we risk taking one side or another in this debate,” said Sweeney. “To label techniques as ‘enhanced’ risks minimizing what was done. To call them torture suggests we’ve taken sides in the debate.”

It’s something of a word puzzle to figure out what Sweeney means, exactly: No matter what we say, we risk taking sides, but we’re going to accept the risk of minimizing what was done, because otherwise it would suggest we’ve taken sides?

This notion that the goal of journalism is to avoid “taking sides” is troubling; that’s how you get reporting that [pretends](#) it’s an open question whether or not humans are raising the temperature of the planet by putting greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. What torture is is not a physical fact like the greenhouse effect, but that doesn’t mean it’s unknowable; you can talk to historians of torture, specialists in international law, experts on human rights and medicine, and find out whether, say, [inserting a plate of pureed food](#) into a prisoner’s

rectum would typically qualify.



Or you can use common sense, which is what NPR does when introducing a supporter of the Senate report: Sen. John McCain is described as “a Republican from Arizona who was tortured during the Vietnam War.”

Does the government of Vietnam agree that McCain was tortured? Are there factions in that government that insist he was subjected to legitimate “stress positions,” and furthermore his interrogation produced valuable intelligence about the bombing campaign against their country (which, lest we forget, was [hundreds of times](#) more deadly than 9/11)? By using the word “tortured” in regards to McCain, isn’t NPR taking sides with the US prisoners and against Vietnam?

Or is it simply using the accurate word to describe what is patently torture—the practice it should follow whether it is reporting on the government that helps fund it or not?

In the report, NPR quotes Feinstein, “History will judge us by our commitment to a just society governed by law and the willingness to face an ugly truth.” If that’s true, history will judge NPR very harshly indeed.

* * *

P.S. Here are excerpts from a piece that NPR’s Morning Edition ([12/11/14](#)) ran about social science research into perceptions of torture, which was mainly a discussion between NPR host Steve Inskeep and correspondent Shankar Vedantam:

INSKEEP: Americans have talked about torture in different ways, including debating whether to call it torture at all.... Some research suggests this debate is difficult because it affects our sense of our own national identity....

VEDANTAM: ...The first response people have when they’re told about their own groups carrying out torture is the first response we often have to traumatic situations or situations involving grief, which is we deny the bad thing is actually happened. In the case of torture, this often involves changing the criteria for what’s considered torture....

INSKEEP: ...The Bush administration years ago argued for calling it enhanced interrogation. Maybe it wasn’t quite torture. It was something a little off to the side of torture.

VEDANTAM: That’s exactly right. We’ve had these semantic wrestling matches for several years now—is this technique torture, or is it a stress position?...

The interesting thing here, Steve, is that we do this selectively, we employ these strategies only when it’s our group that’s responsible.

Clearly, they're talking about NPR. What's not clear to me is whether they quite realized it.

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