

The Hidden History of CIA Torture: America's Road to Abu Ghraib

By [Prof Alfred McCoy](#)

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Introductory Note by Tomgram

Around the world — and in the United States — Abu Ghraib has become a byword for our disastrous war in Iraq. The photos of torture, abuses, and humiliations of every sort that seeped out of that prison shocked Iraqis, the world, and many Americans. But as is so often the case, images can't be fully interpreted without context. Below, Alfred McCoy, who in the Vietnam era wrote *The Politics of Heroin*, a now-classic exposé of Central Intelligence Agency tactics in Southeast Asia, and has been on the Agency's case every since, offers the necessary — and shocking — historical context. He fills us in on a truly shameful story most of us remember, if at all, only in bits and pieces (those Agency experiments with LSD, for instance): A taxpayer-funded CIA, using up to a billion dollars a year for its research, plunged into a universe of torture way back in the 1950s and emerged with a new set of “no-touch” torture techniques which were then codified in manuals, used in Vietnam, and for over two decades taught to allied police forces and militaries around the Third World. It turns out that many of these techniques, some over half-a-century old, have just been paraded before our eyes in the Abu Ghraib snapshots. In other words, the now infamous photos were evidence, for those who could interpret them, of CIA-influence in Abu Ghraib (as the recent report by Major General George R. Fay has confirmed).

In 2001, these CIA torture techniques were let loose again by a Bush administration intent on creating an offshore mini-gulag of “information extraction” in its zeal to pursue its “war on terror.” Overlapping CIA and Pentagon detention systems were set up worldwide where, beyond the oversight of anyone, the “arts of interrogation” could be practiced (and in which they could spread like some malign virus). Unfortunately, what we now call “Abu Ghraib” is but the tip of the iceberg and has largely proved a tale of Bush administration damage control. There have been or are now underway eight investigations of Abu Ghraib (and sometimes of detention practices in Afghanistan as well). All are Pentagon appointed and almost all are military staffed.

Now imagine that we let Enron investigate itself; that Scott Peterson conducted his own trial; that Halliburton could write its own Pentagon contracts (oh, sorry, that more or less happened). Imagine, to offer up an absurd example, that one official Pentagon investigator looking into abuses in Afghanistan actually commanded U.S. ground troops in Afghanistan during the period he was to investigate when the military was holding “ghost detainees” and in his “extensive review” didn't even mention the matter. Oh gosh, that actually happened in the case of Lt. Gen. Paul Mikolashek, now the Army's Inspector General. According to Elise Ackerman of Knight Ridder, “He commanded ground forces in Afghanistan at the time the policy was adopted, but didn't mention the policy when he told the Senate Armed Service Committee in July that his review had found no evidence of ghost detainees.”

The result of such investigations is clear: Responsibility for these horrors has largely been confined to the lowest ranks and kept close to Abu Ghraib itself. Bush administration accountability is next to nil. The bizarre, pretzeled justifications its best legal minds created, meant to narrow the definition of torture almost to the vanishing point, have been left in the dust. But perhaps most important of all, the attention to and focus on Abu Ghraib and the military has taken almost all attention away from the mini-gulag of prisons the CIA set up in Afghanistan, on aircraft carriers, in remote places like the Indian Ocean Island of Diego Garcia, and in the prisons of torture-friendly allies. This, as McCoy makes clear below, is where it all began and yet no public investigation of the CIA, its torture techniques, or its torture centers is underway.

Much of this, as McCoy demonstrates, was not beyond our power to know. I laid out a good deal of information about what I called “our Bermuda Triangle of injustice” last April with nothing more than a search engine at my command (Into the Shadows). Various human rights organizations have done the same far more authoritatively, as did Human Rights First back in June (U.S. Holding Prisoners in More Than Two Dozen Secret Detention Facilities Worldwide, New Report Says). Now, in a letter to the President, eight retired generals and admirals have most honorably called for a 9/11 Commission-style investigatory body to look into not just Abu Ghraib but “other U.S.-operated detention facilities”; while Human Rights First has just released a new report on all the Abu Ghraib investigations and their limitations. But first read McCoy; then look at those photos again and think about what you’re actually seeing. Tom

The Hidden History of CIA Torture: America’s Road to Abu Ghraib

By Alfred W. McCoy

From ancient Rome’s red-hot irons and lacerating hooks to medieval Europe’s thumbscrews, rack, and wheel, for over 2,000 years anyone interrogated in a court of law could expect to suffer unspeakable tortures. For the last 200 years, humanist intellectuals from Voltaire to members of Amnesty International have led a sustained campaign against the horrors of state-sponsored cruelty, culminating in the United Nation’s 1985 Convention Against Torture, ratified by the Clinton administration in 1994.

Then came 9/11. When the Twin Towers collapsed killing thousands, influential “pro-pain pundits” promptly repudiated those Enlightenment ideals and began publicly discussing whether torture might be an appropriate, even necessary weapon in George Bush’s war on terror. The most persuasive among them, Harvard academic Alan M. Dershowitz, advocated giving courts the right to issue “torture warrants,” ensuring that needed information could be prized from unwilling Arab subjects with steel needles.

Despite torture’s appeal as a “lesser evil,” a necessary expedient in dangerous times, those who favor it ignore its recent, problematic history in America. They also seem ignorant of a perverse pathology that allows the practice of torture, once begun, to spread uncontrollably in crisis situations, destroying the legitimacy of the perpetrator nation. As past perpetrators could have told today’s pundits, torture plumbs the recesses of human consciousness, unleashing an unfathomable capacity for cruelty as well as seductive illusions of potency. Even as pundits and professors fantasized about “limited, surgical torture,” the Bush administration, following the President’s orders to “kick some ass,” was testing and disproving their theories by secretly sanctioning brutal interrogation that spread quickly from use against a few “high target value” Al Qaeda suspects to scores of ordinary Afghans

and then hundreds of innocent Iraqis.

As we learned from France's battle for Algiers in the 1950s, Argentina's dirty war in the 1970s, and Britain's Northern Ireland conflict in the 1970s, a nation that harbors torture in defiance of its democratic principles pays a terrible price. Its officials must spin an ever more complex web of lies that, in the end, weakens the bonds of trust that are the sine qua non of any modern society. Most surprisingly, our own pro-pain pundits seemed, in those heady early days of the war on terror, unaware of a fifty-year history of torture by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), nor were they aware that their enthusiastic proposals gave cover to those in the Bush Administration intent on reactivating a ruthless apparatus.

Torture's Perverse Pathology

In April 2004, the American public was stunned by televised photographs from Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison showing hooded Iraqis stripped naked, posed in contorted positions, and visibly suffering humiliating abuse while U.S. soldiers stood by smiling. As the scandal grabbed headlines around the globe, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld quickly assured Congress that the abuses were "perpetrated by a small number of U.S. military," whom New York Times columnist William Safire soon branded "creeps."

These photos, however, are snapshots not of simple brutality or even evidence of a breakdown in "military discipline." What they record are CIA torture techniques that have metastasized like an undetected cancer inside the U.S. intelligence community over the past half century. A survey of this history shows that the CIA was, in fact, the lead agency at Abu Ghraib, enlisting Army intelligence to support its mission. These photographs from Iraq also illustrate standard interrogation procedures inside the gulag of secret CIA prisons that have operated globally, on executive authority, since the start of the President's war on terror.

Looked at historically, the Abu Ghraib scandal is the product of a deeply contradictory U.S. policy toward torture since the start of the Cold War. At the UN and other international forums, Washington has long officially opposed torture and advocated a universal standard for human rights. Simultaneously, the CIA has propagated ingenious new torture techniques in contravention of these same international conventions, a number of which the U.S. has ratified. In battling communism, the United States adopted some of its most objectionable practices — subversion abroad, repression at home, and most significantly torture itself.

From 1950 to 1962, the CIA conducted massive, secret research into coercion and the malleability of human consciousness which, by the late fifties, was costing a billion dollars a year. Many Americans have heard about the most outlandish and least successful aspect of this research — the testing of LSD on unsuspecting subjects. While these CIA drug experiments led nowhere and the testing of electric shock as a technique led only to lawsuits, research into sensory deprivation proved fruitful indeed. In fact, this research produced a new psychological rather than physical method of torture, perhaps best described as "no-touch" torture.

The Agency's discovery was a counterintuitive breakthrough, the first real revolution in this cruel science since the seventeenth century — and thanks to recent revelations from Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, we are now all too familiar with these methods, even if many Americans still have no idea of their history. Upon careful examination, those photographs of nude bodies expose the CIA's most basic torture techniques — stress positions, sensory

deprivation, and sexual humiliation.

For over 2,000 years, from ancient Athens through the Inquisition, interrogators found that the infliction of physical pain often produced heightened resistance or unreliable information — the strong defied pain while the weak blurted out whatever was necessary to stop it. By contrast, the CIA's psychological torture paradigm used two new methods, sensory disorientation and "self-inflicted pain," both of which were aimed at causing victims to feel responsible for their own suffering and so to capitulate more readily to their torturers. A week after the Abu Ghraib scandal broke, General Geoffrey Miller, U.S. prison commander in Iraq (and formerly in Guantanamo), offered an unwitting summary of this two-phase torture. "We will no longer, in any circumstances, hood any of the detainees," the general said. "We will no longer use stress positions in any of our interrogations. And we will no longer use sleep deprivation in any of our interrogations."

Under field conditions since the start of the Afghan War, Agency and allied interrogators have often added to their no-touch repertoire physical methods reminiscent of the Inquisition's trademark tortures — strappado, question de l'eau, "crippling stork," and "masks of mockery." At the CIA's center near Kabul in 2002, for instance, American interrogators forced prisoners "to stand with their hands chained to the ceiling and their feet shackled," an effect similar to the strappado. Instead of the Inquisition's iron-framed "crippling stork" to contort the victim's body, CIA interrogators made their victims assume similar "stress positions" without any external mechanism, aiming again for the psychological effect of self-induced pain

Although seemingly less brutal than physical methods, the CIA's "no touch" torture actually leaves deep, searing psychological scars on both victims and — something seldom noted — their interrogators. Victims often need long treatment to recover from a trauma many experts consider more crippling than physical pain. Perpetrators can suffer a dangerous expansion of ego, leading to escalating acts of cruelty and lasting emotional disorders. When applied in actual operations, the CIA's psychological procedures have frequently led to unimaginable cruelties, physical and sexual, by individual perpetrators whose improvisations are often horrific and only occasionally effective.

Just as interrogators are often seduced by a dark, empowering sense of dominance over victims, so their superiors, even at the highest level, can succumb to fantasies of torture as an all-powerful weapon. Our contemporary view of torture as aberrant and its perpetrators as abhorrent ignores both its pervasiveness as a Western practice for two millennia and its perverse appeal. Once torture begins, its perpetrators, plunging into uncharted recesses of consciousness, are often swept away by dark reveries, by frenzies of power and potency, mastery and control — particularly in times of crisis. "When feelings of insecurity develop within those holding power," reads one CIA analysis of the Soviet state applicable to post-9/11 America, "they become increasingly suspicious and put great pressures on the secret police to obtain arrests and confessions. At such times police officials are inclined to condone anything which produces a speedy 'confession' and brutality may become widespread."

Enraptured by this illusory power, modern states that sanction torture usually allow it to spread uncontrollably. By 1967, just four years after compiling a torture manual for use against a few top Soviet targets, the CIA was operating forty interrogation centers in South Vietnam as part of its Phoenix Program that killed over 20,000 Viet Cong suspects. In the centers themselves, countless thousands were tortured for information that led to these

assassinations. Similarly, just a few months after CIA interrogators first tortured top Al Qaeda suspects at Kabul in 2002, its agents were involved in the brutal interrogation of hundreds of Iraqi prisoners. As its most troubling legacy, the CIA's psychological method, with its legitimating scientific patina and its avoidance of obvious physical brutality, has provided a pretext for the preservation of torture as an acceptable practice within the U.S. intelligence community.

Once adopted, torture offers such a powerful illusion of efficient information extraction that its perpetrators, high and low, remain wedded to its use. They regularly refuse to recognize its limited utility and high political cost. At least twice during the Cold War, the CIA's torture training contributed to the destabilization of two key American allies, Iran's Shah and the Philippines' Ferdinand Marcos. Yet even after their spectacular falls, the Agency remained blind to the way its torture training was destroying the allies it was designed to defend.

CIA Torture Research

The CIA's torture experimentation of the 1950s and early 1960s was codified in 1963 in a succinct, secret instructional booklet on torture — the "KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation" manual, which would become the basis for a new method of torture disseminated globally over the next three decades. These techniques were first spread through the U.S. Agency for International Development's Public Safety program to train police forces in Asia and Latin America as the front line of defense against communists and other revolutionaries. After an angry Congress abolished the Public Safety program in 1975, the CIA worked through U.S. Army Mobile Training Teams to instruct military interrogators, mainly in Central America.

At the Cold War's end, Washington resumed its advocacy of universal principles, denouncing regimes for torture, participating in the World Conference on Human Rights at Vienna in 1993 and, a year later, ratifying the UN Convention Against Torture. On the surface, the United States had resolved the tension between its anti-torture principles and its torture practices. Yet even when Congress finally ratified this UN convention it did so with intricately-constructed reservations that cleverly exempted the CIA's psychological torture method. While other covert agencies synonymous with Cold War repression such as Romania's Securitate, East Germany's Stasi, and the Soviet Union's KGB have disappeared, the CIA survives — its archives sealed, its officers decorated, and its Cold War crimes forgotten. By failing to repudiate the Agency's propagation of torture, while adopting a UN convention that condemned its practice, the United States left this contradiction buried like a political land mine ready to detonate with such phenomenal force in the Abu Ghraib scandal.

Memory and Forgetting

Today the American public has only a vague understanding of these CIA excesses and the scale of its massive mind-control project. Yet almost every adult American carries fragmentary memories of this past — of LSD experiments, the CIA's Phoenix program in Vietnam, the murder of a kidnapped American police adviser in Montevideo who was teaching CIA techniques to the Uruguayan police, and of course the Abu Ghraib photographs. But few are able to fit these fragments together and so grasp the larger picture. There is, in sum, an ignorance, a studied avoidance of a deeply troubling topic, akin to that which shrouds this subject in post-authoritarian societies.

With the controversy over Abu Ghraib, incidents that once seemed but fragments should now be coming together to form a mosaic of a clandestine agency manipulating its government and deceiving its citizens to probe the cruel underside of human consciousness, and then propagating its discoveries throughout the Third World.

Strong democracies have difficulty dealing with torture. In the months following the release of the Abu Ghraib photos, the United States moved quickly through the same stages (as defined by author John Conroy) that the United Kingdom experienced after revelations of British army torture in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s — first, minimizing the torture with euphemisms such as “interrogation in depth”; next, justifying it on grounds that it was necessary or effective; and finally, attempting to bury the issue by blaming “a few bad apples.”

Indeed, since last April, the Bush administration and much of the media have studiously avoided the word “torture” and instead blamed our own bad apples, those seven Military Police. In July, the Army’s Inspector General Paul T. Mikolashek delivered his report blaming 94 incidents of “abuse” on “an individual failure to uphold Army Values.” Although the New York Times called his conclusions “comical,” the general’s views seem to resonate with an emerging conservative consensus. “Interrogation is not a Sunday-school class,” said Republican Senator Trent Lott. “You don’t get information that will save American lives by withholding pancakes.” In June, an ABC News/Washington Post poll found that 35% of Americans felt torture was acceptable in some circumstances.

In August, Major General George R. Fay released his report on the role of Military Intelligence at Abu Ghraib. Its stunning revelations about the reasons for this torture were, however, obscured in opaque military prose. After interviewing 170 personnel and reviewing 9,000 documents, the general intimated that this abuse was the product of an interrogation policy shaped, in both design and application, by the CIA.

Significantly, General Fay blamed not the “seven bad apples,” but the Abu Ghraib interrogation procedures themselves. Of the 44 verifiable incidents of abuse, one-third occurred during actual interrogation. Moreover, these “routine” interrogation procedures “contributed to an escalating ‘de-humanization’ of the detainees and set the stage for additional and severe abuses to occur.”

After finding standard Army interrogation doctrine sound, General Fay was forced to confront a single, central, uncomfortable question: what was the source of the aberrant, “non-doctrinal” practices that led to torture during interrogation at Abu Ghraib? Scattered throughout his report are the dots, politely unconnected, that lead from the White House to the Iraqi prison cell block: President Bush gave his defense secretary broad powers over prisoners in November 2001; Secretary Rumsfeld authorized harsh “Counter-Resistance Techniques” for Afghanistan and Guantanamo in December 2002; hardened Military Intelligence units brought these methods to Iraq in July 2003; and General Ricardo Sanchez in Baghdad authorized these extreme measures for Abu Ghraib in September 2003.

In its short answer to this uncomfortable question, General Fay’s report, when read closely, traced the source of these harsh “non-doctrinal methods” at Abu Ghraib to the CIA. He charged that a flouting of military procedures by CIA interrogators “eroded the necessity in the minds of soldiers and civilians for them to follow Army rules.” Specifically, the Army “allowed CIA to house ‘Ghost Detainees’ who were unidentified and unaccounted for in Abu Ghraib,” thus encouraging violations of “reporting requirements under the Geneva

Conventions.” Moreover, the interrogation of CIA detainees “occurred under different practices and procedures which were absent any DoD visibility, control, or oversight and created a perception that OGA [CIA] techniques and practices were suitable and authorized for DoD operations.” With their exemption from military regulations, CIA interrogators moved about Abu Ghraib with a corrupting “mystique” and extreme methods that “fascinated” some Army interrogators. In sum, General Fay seems to say that the CIA has compromised the integrity and effectiveness of the U.S. military.

Had he gone further, General Fay might have mentioned that the 519th Military Intelligence, the Army unit that set interrogation guidelines for Abu Ghraib, had just come from Kabul where it worked closely with the CIA, learning torture techniques that left at least one Afghani prisoner dead. Had he gone further still, the general could have added that the sensory deprivation techniques, stress positions, and cultural shock of dogs and nudity that we saw in those photos from Abu Ghraib were plucked from the pages of past CIA torture manuals.

American Prestige

This is not, of course, the first American debate over torture in recent memory. From 1970 to 1988, the Congress tried unsuccessfully, in four major investigations, to expose elements of this CIA torture paradigm. But on each occasion the public showed little concern, and the practice, never fully acknowledged, persisted inside the intelligence community.

Now, in these photographs from Abu Ghraib, ordinary Americans have seen the reality and the results of interrogation techniques the CIA has propagated and practiced for nearly half a century. The American public can join the international community in repudiating a practice that, more than any other, represents a denial of democracy; or in its desperate search for security, the United States can continue its clandestine torture of terror suspects in the hope of gaining good intelligence without negative publicity.

In the likely event that Washington adopts the latter strategy, it will be a decision posited on two false assumptions: that torturers can be controlled and that news of their work can be contained. Once torture begins, its use seems to spread uncontrollably in a downward spiral of fear and empowerment. With the proliferation of digital imaging we can anticipate, in five or ten years, yet more chilling images and devastating blows to America’s international standing. Next time, however, the American public’s moral concern and Washington’s apologies will ring even more hollowly, producing even greater damage to U.S. prestige.

Alfred W. McCoy is professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is the author of *The Politics of Heroin, CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade*, an examination of the CIA’s alliances with drug lords, and *Closer Than Brothers*, a study of the impact of the CIA’s psychological torture method upon the Philippine military. He will publish a fuller version of this essay in *The New England Journal of Public Policy* (Volume 19, No. 2, 2004).

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